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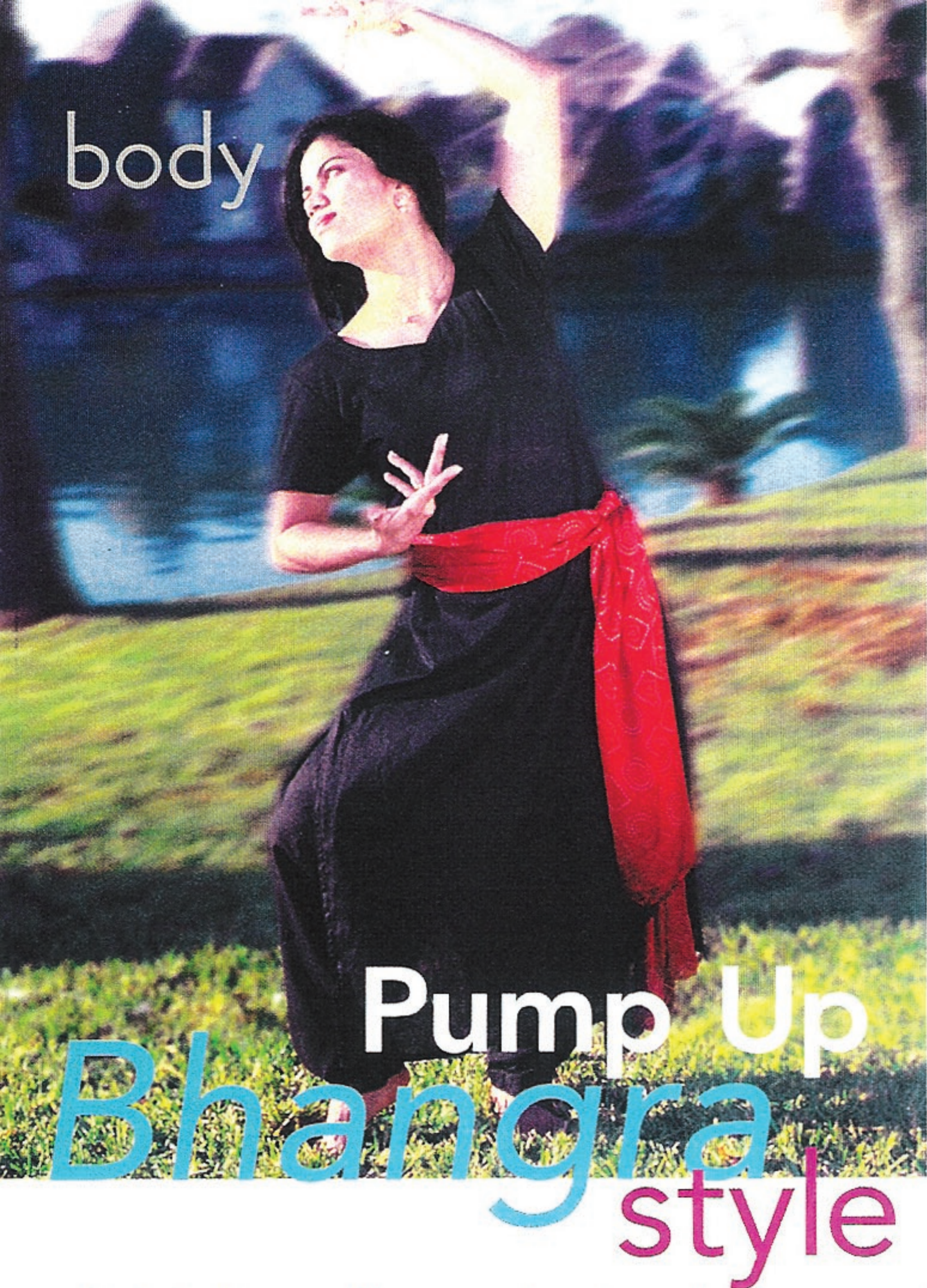
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the beauty issue

Masala
Dance & Fitness Inc.
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body



Pump Up Bhangra style

In the last few years, fitness gyms have witnessed the emergence of a new workout regime that beats to an entirely different drum. People all over are sweating to the hottest trend in fitness which has transformed an age-old traditional Indian dance into a rhythmic workout that has taken major cities like New York, Los Angeles and Houston by the pulse. Get ready for bhangra-style aerobics!

By Shabana Haq

Women today are constantly fighting the battle of the bulge. Unlike the early 20th century when wider hips meant ultimate physical beauty, the 21st century has seen beauty gauged, among other attributes, by the narrowness of the hips. Over the years, women have complied with these new standards of physical beauty and have tried all kinds of tricks to keep off those pesky inches. The old practices of quick diets and massages to reduce fat are still done today, but now, it is a well known fact that nothing works better than a combination of exercise and a balanced diet. In South Asia, much to the despair of the groom, it was expected of the bride to gain weight after the marriage. Her weight, oddly enough, signified marital bliss. That concept may still prevail in some traditional households (bless their hearts!), but modern women today have submitted to the notion that thinner is better. Before or after marriage, a woman keeps herself looking good at all times with a well-toned, healthy figure.

The image of beauty is well understood among young South Asians living in the United States. Fitness gyms around the country have their

fair share of these young men and women sweating to the beat of synchronized aerobic moves. But that's just it, it is only the younger generation that have taken the step towards taking care of themselves. Seldom are women in their thirties and forties visible in the local gyms. Most of them tend to do their exercise in the privacy of their own homes without any qualified supervision. Some may venture into the realms of video-boxed fitness routines that may quite often leave them with sprained muscles and aching backs. Admit it, high-impact routines are for the pros among us who are accustomed to grueling workout regimes. Every extra kick and jab for the pros is yet another challenge for us fitness-challenged amateurs. Yes, the old adage—no pain, no gain—aptly describes what keeping in shape is all about, but we South Asian women have a lot more issues to consider than just a sore back.

Clothing tends to be a problem for some women. More often than not, older women prefer to wear *shalwar kameez* while they work out rather than a sports bra and tights. Thus, these women stay out of gyms, citing unsuitable clothing as an obvious reason.

Next, aerobic workouts have to be stimulating and enjoyable. Most workouts can turn out to be quite a drag if all you have to listen to is the relentless drone of boxed, electronic beats. The monotony of the steps can make one lose interest in the routine day in and day out. We are South Asians. We prefer some spice!

This is the very reason why South Asian women like Sarina Jain and Regina Joseph have designed their own special brand of music and workouts that create a fun and spicy ambiance for us women to sweat in with joyful glee. The music is South Asian and the moves are as South Asian as can be. One can enjoy a good dance and not realize that a workout has occurred. Don't get me wrong, you still burn a good few hundred calories, but it all seems like a session of *garba* (Gujarati stick dance) rather than a monotonous hour at the gym.

They call their dance workout Bhangra Dance, and it is an adaptation of the age-old traditional music and dance of the villages of rural Punjab. This energetic ethnic dance, called bhangra, is traditionally performed as a call in the wheat-harvesting season known as *Baisakhi*. Dancers gather together in an open field and answer to the energetic beat of the *dhhol* (drum). The *dhhol* is the primary instrument used in bhangra, giving it its unique, recognizable beat. Bhangra, which is unlike any other dance movement, has spontaneity, vigor and vitality. There is plenty of shoulder shrugging and a whole lot of jumping, skipping and other heart pumping moves. This age-old traditional dance has evolved in its blend of rhythm and music. With its recent infusion of synthesizers and other elements of mainstream dance music—reggae, hip-hop, disco, techno, house and rap—this harvest dance has emerged into a new modern bhangra and has become one of the most popular dances in India and among South Asians in the United States.

Sarina Jain, the founder of Masala Dance and Fitness, has been passionate about choreographing dance moves since she was a teenager. Her



Fitness Gurus:
Sarina Jain
(top) and
Regina Joseph
(bottom).



interest in dance inspired her to learn other forms of dance such as salsa and hip-hop. She continued on to get proper certification as an instructor and at present, has her own studio in Southern California. Sarina has developed her version of Masala Bhangra as a way to infuse her love for South Asian dance with the benefits of a thorough aerobic workout.

"I made the routine to be in accordance with the fitness standards," says Sarina, who has cleared some of the presumptions that this was just a regular bhangra dance, "I am here to teach a fitness workout, and I want to teach people to be in shape."

In a recent survey of calorie burning workouts, Bhangra Dancing was calculated to burn 360 calories per hour. It is a total body workout, which covers almost all areas of the body

including the stomach, shoulders and biceps as well as the hips and thighs. Bhangra Dance includes typical aerobic movements such as

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knee-ups and the swiveling of hips, but there are also the typical bhangra arm movements with occasional clapping, stomping and squatting. Sarina has also given her bhangra moves her own Masala names.

Sarina has been teaching at her own studio in Yorba Linda, California, but she also gives classes at the Wooden Center at UCLA, and the Sports Club, LA. Her rhythmic, drum beat dance workout has had far reaching effects, as it has gained immense popularity on the East Coast as well. She now regularly teaches in New York City at the New York Sports Club, Crunch and Equinox. She is expected to open another studio of her own in New York. Her appearances on *The Ainsley Harriot Show*, a syndicated talk show in Los Angeles and *The View* have made Sarina visible to an even larger audience that has taken to her new workout instantaneously.

The Lifestyle Editor of *Fitness* magazine has said, "As a participant of Ms. Jain's class in New York City, I found her to be energetic, enthusiastic, clear, confident and fun." Workout enthusiasts that have joined Masala Bhangra have had nothing less to say about Sarina Jain, and they found her workout to be quite challenging.

Sarina Jain has plans of spreading her Masala Bhangra fever throughout the United States. Sports clubs in major cities like Los Angeles, New York and Boston have given her the opportunity to offer her courses since she is often invited to conduct classes. For those of us living in cities other than those mentioned, Sarina has made a *Masala Bhangra Workout Video Volume 1*, which is available at her website at www.masaladance.com.

Regina Joseph (Reji for short) has a workout routine, called TaAL Fusion, which is a combination of eastern and western moves. TaAL, which means the sound of hand-clapping or that of a drum in Hindi, is also an acronym in tribute to her deceased parents. TaAL Fusion's choreography is mostly inspired by the artistic dance moves of Indian dances and yoga and is combined with aerobics. To make her routine fun and diverse, Reji also includes popular Indian movie dances and ends her sessions with yoga, thus keeping the principles of modern and ancient fitness in her routines.

TaAL Studio, which opened in October of 2000 in Houston, was an answer to the call of many older South Asian women who found it difficult to exercise in an environment where they could not be comfortable. "I want the ladies who come to my studio to feel good about themselves and focus on their exercise rather than worry about their attire," asserts Reji. TaAL Studio's instructors also wear *shalwar kameez* while they conduct classes.

TaAL Fusion is designed for people of all ages and has a strong flavor of the ancient Vedic art of yoga. Yoga carefully interplays in all of the routines and is especially used for both the warm-up and cool-down session. Reji's students begin with the *talasana*, a posture that helps with coordination in the more muscle-intense routines. This is followed by *utkatasana*, a stretching exercise for the lower portions of the body. The high impact segment of the workout includes classic dances such as bhangra, dandia (a regional dance of Gujarat), bharatanatyam (a south

Indian classical dance) and kathak (a north Indian dance). After a rigorous workout, students cool down with more yoga postures such as the *utrasana*, which stretches the entire body from the neck down through the spine and legs.

Reji's students enjoy her routines immensely, and she keeps them enthusiastic with her distinct and changing choice of music and dance movements. She has adhered to the fusion theme by choosing a medley of songs from western music to Latin, African and popular South Asian remixes. "It is important to have the right kind of music," Reji says. "Otherwise it is very difficult to keep students motivated. Apart from their willingness to workout, the music also brings an energy to the workout." To learn more about TaAL, call 281.323.TaAL.

You can be assured that when working out with Sarina's Masala Dance or Reji's TaAL Fusion, you are not likely to get a backache or pull a muscle trying to high-kick. Their workouts can be quite grueling, but with an air of familiarity, these hot bhangra swivels and intense Indian classical dance movements will make working out feel more like a Bollywood blockbuster!