



Bhangra workout is a sweaty fitness celebration

Class blends aerobics, Indian folk dance

NEW YORK (AP) -- Sarina Jain tells her students to pretend they are dancing at her wedding. And as her class steps, claps and sweats to the pulsating sounds of Indian drumbeats, she encourages them to "Celebrate! Celebrate! Celebrate!"

Jain is not getting married, and the T-shirts and workout pants worn to her class are nothing like wedding finery. But the moves she is teaching are usually seen in banquet halls and Bollywood films, not New York City gyms.

Jain is the creator of the "Masala Bhangra Workout," a fitness program that blends aerobics with Bhangra, a type of folk music and dance that developed in Punjab, a region now divided between northern India and Pakistan. It has morphed into a modern pop dance sensation.

"Its vigor and vitality just make you move," said Jain, a dark-haired, fit California native whose parents were born in India.

Jain -- dubbed the "Indian Jane Fonda" by her students -- teaches at several gyms in New York, adding Bhangra to an extensive list of dance-based fitness classes that draw upon genres as diverse as African dance, ballet, hip-hop, belly dancing, salsa and mambo.

Experts say incorporating music and dance into exercise routines can help people enjoy their workouts more -- and stick with them.

Music "helps people to feel more comfortable moving their bodies," said Mary Dedrick of the University of Buffalo's department of exercise and nutrition sciences.

"I always find that if you have good music, that is a huge motivating factor for people in enjoying a class," she said.

Dance has been a way for people to stay physically fit for thousands of years, according to Janet Hamburg, a professor of dance at the University of Kansas. She noted that even warriors used it to prepare for battle.

In the 1980s, "Jane Fonda's Workout" launched an American aerobics craze. Jain's own series of workout videos and DVDs builds upon Fonda's success. She recently released her fifth DVD, a Bhangra workout for children.

After years of teaching fitness classes and studying marketing and public relations, Jain took out a loan in 1999 to start her own company, Masala Dance & Fitness Inc., which she named for a Hindi word that means spicy.

Last year, her program was certified by the Aerobics and Fitness Association of America, and she is developing a training manual for other instructors.

Jain infuses her classes with elements of both Indian and American cultures, alternating shouts of "Balle Balle!" -- a Punjabi expression of joy -- with very American exclamations of "Sexy arms! Sexy arms!"

The steady beats of Bhangra and shouts of encouragement from Jain keep the energy level up, even as her students' faces turn pink. At a recent session in a Manhattan gym, they pulsed their arms and followed her footwork as she gave instruction over a headset microphone.

"Her enthusiasm is quite infectious," said Pradyot Dhulipala, a 26-year-old programmer and the only man in the class. Dhulipala said he mentioned Jain's workout in his blog and got 30 to 40 additional hits that day.

Jain is not the only one trying to coax people to exercise through dance. Hamburg, the Kansas professor, has developed a series of programs that set dance movements to specially composed music. Her Motivating Moves workouts have been used by people with Parkinson's disease.

"What's been demonstrated is that people stick with them longer," she said. "They actually look forward to doing them."

That is certainly the case for 26-year-old Aameeka Ahmed, who said the Masala Bhangra workout doesn't feel like exercise.

"I love it," she said. "I look forward to it every week."

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