

The **Dances,** *the* **Firebomb** *and the* **Clash** *of* **Cultures**

AT 2 A.M. ON A COLD MORNING LAST DECEMBER, SOMEONE HURLED A BOMB AT SUPERSTARS, A MISSISSAUGA CLUB. IT WAS THE LOUDEST OBJECTION TO DATE TO THE DAYTIME DANCES HELD FOR THE CITY'S SOUTH ASIAN TEENAGERS

WHEN KUSAM GETS HOME FROM SCHOOL SHE'S USUALLY EXHAUSTED. WHEN SHE GOES TO her room for a nap, her mother gets annoyed. "Kusam," she says, "I want some help in the kitchen. Why are you so tired always? If you have no energy now, what will happen when you're married and have children?"

Kusam listens to her mother's voice until it becomes a distant, silky drone and she falls asleep. Later, after dinner, she may do some schoolwork, although she's been doing less and less of that lately. She used to be a consistent B student but now, in Grade 11, her average is around sixty per cent. She'd like to call her boyfriend but she's not supposed to even *talk* to boys, let alone date one. The family lives in a bungalow in Rexdale, and the phone's in the kitchen. The last time a boy called to discuss a school project, Kusam's father stood beside her listening to the whole conversation.

Before going to bed, Kusam sets the clock radio. It comes on at fifteen minutes before midnight. She gets up and lis-



tens carefully at the door. The house is silent. She dresses quickly, usually in a T-shirt, jeans and sneakers. Noiselessly sliding open the window, she lowers herself to the ground and makes her way down the street to where her boyfriend is waiting. He is 18 and has left school. Now he works nights driving a truck distributing flyers. It's virtually the only time that they can spend together. At around 4 a.m. she slips back into her room and sleeps until the clock radio goes off again at 7. She knows she's going to get caught sooner or later, but until then she's chosen to live on the edge.

This would be dramatically rebellious behaviour for any 16-year-old. In Kusam's case, her parents are Sikhs who came to Toronto from India's Punjab region twenty years ago. Many things about the way kids are brought up in the West confuse them and run counter to traditional ways. Indian children are expected to be passive and obedient, although a double standard

was her mother, playing the role of mediator, who talked him into it. "Look, it's a different culture here," she said. "Things are changing."

But for Kusam, they're not changing fast enough.

I FIRST MET KUSAM EARLY THIS SUMMER at a dance at Spectrum, a rock 'n' roll club located in the east end, on a down-at-the-heel strip of the Danforth near Main. A petite 16-year-old wearing a white T-shirt and jeans, she was leaning against a railing on the second-floor balcony watching about 500 kids mingling below. Above the dance floor, an elaborate, multicoloured neon lighting system was blinking and spinning and pulsating. Music thundered from a big sound system at around 120 beats per minute, and the dance floor was thick with bouncing bodies and colliding hormones. It was just like any Friday or Saturday at midnight, except it was 2 in the afternoon on a school day and the average age was 16. The make-

The girls UNDULATED THEIR ARMS

IN A MOTION FAMILIAR TO ANYONE WHO HAS SEEN TRADI-

TIONAL INDIAN DANCING IN **movies**

applies. Parents are inclined to indulge teenage boys, overlooking some of their youthful excesses, while girls are zealously protected until marriage. Kusam can socialize with friends during school hours but she's expected to come directly home after school; no hanging around the streets or at the local malls, mixing with boys, getting in trouble. With a few exceptions, she isn't allowed to go out at night on weekends or weekdays unless she's accompanying her mother to the mall, or the whole family is visiting relatives or attending a wedding.

Is this what it means to be 16? Kusam wonders. It's certainly not what it means to most of the girls and boys her age at school who enjoy so many freedoms that are apparently unquestioned in Canadian culture. Last spring, when Kusam was given a Canada's Wonderland pass by some friends, her father didn't want to let her go. It

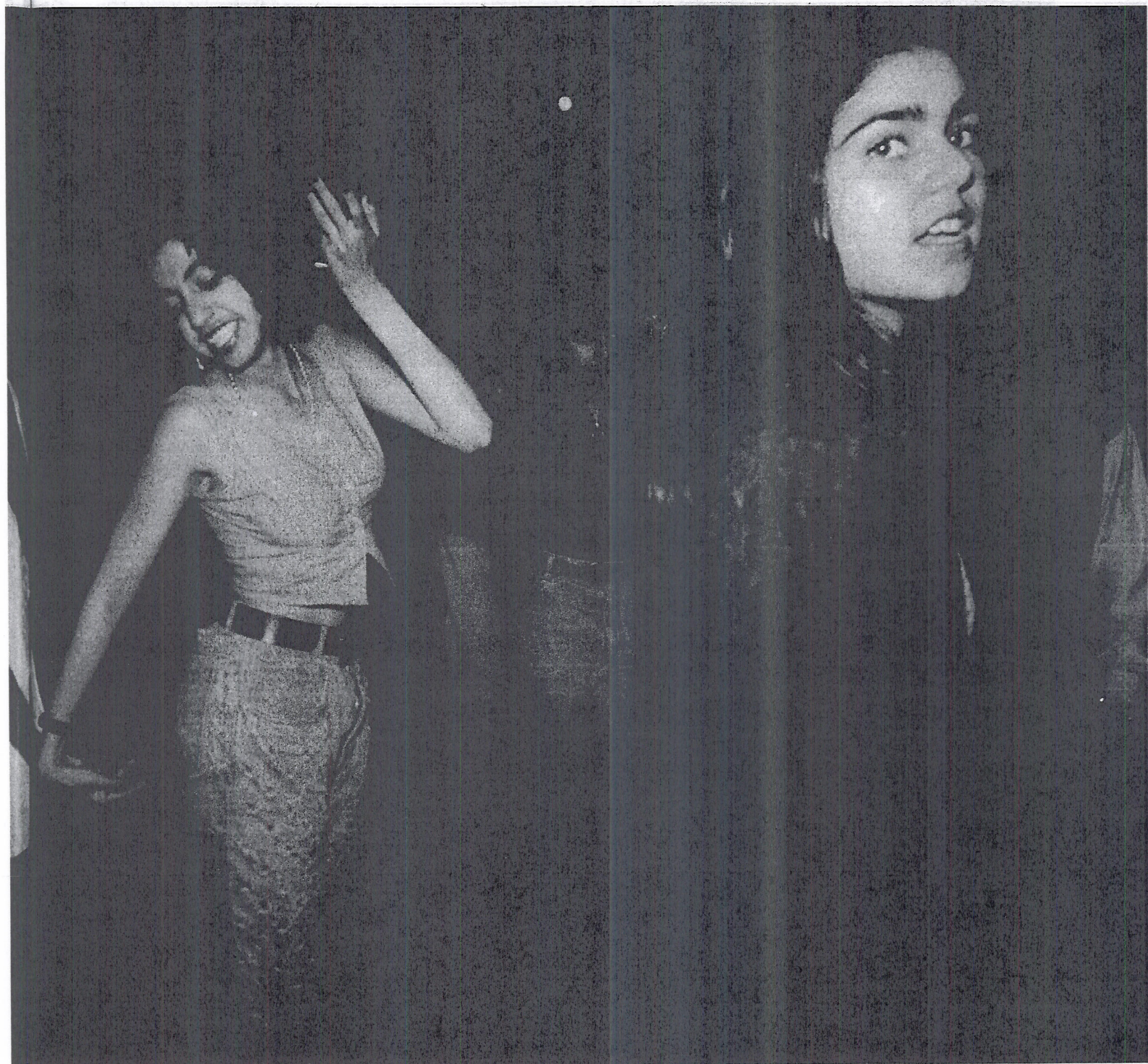
up of the crowd was distinctive too: almost everyone was South Asian, and a number of them wore traditional Indian shirts, satiny pants gathered at the ankle and turbans along with the usual baggy denims, miniskirts, hooded sweats and Raiders caps.

Kusam nodded toward the crowd on the dance floor. "Most of their parents don't know they're here. An afternoon dance is the only way they can get out and have some fun together."

Daytime dances, which mainly attract teenagers, have become the focus of an ongoing conflict between generations within the city's 120,000-strong South Asian community. At its core the conflict involves the usual parent-child issues—clothing, choice of friends, dating, parties, curfews—and dances serve as a powerful symbol representing them all. In part, the dances reflect an absence of activities geared to young people. Temples, for example, which

function both as religious centres and hubs around which community and political life revolve, are for the most part conservative institutions that sponsor traditional sports events and heritage language classes but create few programs relevant to teenagers. You could call it a generation gap, although that's a Western construct just like the term "East Indian," a relic of British colonialism that has fallen deservedly





out of favour. ("South Asian" recognizes everyone whose origins are in the Indian subcontinent, whether they're from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Africa, Fiji or the Caribbean.)

Complicating matters are several features peculiar to the culture. The most recent wave of South Asian immigration arrived in Canada in the late 1960s and 1970s and is at a stage where parents, most of whose values were

shaped twenty-five or more years ago in third world countries, are coping with first-generation adolescents whose formative years were spent in urban Toronto. The family unit is a tightly knit, interlocking network of immediate family and relatives. There is no tradition of dating in the Hindu, Muslim

or Sikh cultures. Arranged marriages, in which parents select mates for their sons and daughters and the couple meet for the first time on their wedding day, are still common, although a more liberal practice allows children to select their own partners (whom the parents rigorously vet) and even "date"

photography by russell monk

under supervised conditions. As a general rule, marrying outside one's religion or ethnocultural group is discouraged. For children growing up in Canada, these traditions come under daily assault everywhere from the schoolyard to the media, and many fathers and mothers respond by retreating deeper into their culture.

Daytime dances originated about ten years ago in the large South Asian community in London, England. In the peculiarly fluid way that these things happen, an entire youth scene emerged, at the heart of which were young musicians and dance club DJs—also called “mixers”—who produced recordings that combined bhangra, a traditional Punjabi folk music, and hit songs from Hindi movie sound tracks with high-tech synthesizers, electronic recording effects and the rest of the trappings of Western pop. By the 1990s, bhangra had been cross-pollinated with everything from reggae and rap to the jerky, mechanized dance music known as

kinds of restrictions. Some said their parents didn't object to dances in principle, as long as there was no drinking or drugs or gang fights. One of them is Sophie, who was staring intently at her reflection in the mirrored wall of Spectrum's lobby, touching up her lipstick. She is a slender 16-year-old from Markham with long, perfectly straight black hair. Her parents are Muslims—her father is from India and her mother from Pakistan. “They trust me so long as I don't abuse that trust,” she explained.

I asked her if that was unusual, and she admitted that her parents were more liberal than most. Then Sophie called her three friends over and introduced me as a writer. When I asked them their names they looked like fawns caught in a car's headlights. “Our parents will kill us if they find out we're here,” one said. Then they skittered away, dragging Sophie, shrugging apologetically, with them.

At the back of Spectrum's stage, 19-year-old Jitten Khatri, a baby-faced uni-

For the most part, boys and girls danced separately. The girls undulated their arms in a motion familiar to anyone who's seen traditional Indian dancing in movies, and a mob of boys thrust their arms upward in fierce movements while two participants appeared to be trying to out-dance each other in the centre. Khatri confirmed that this was a modern variation on the kind of segregated dancing that takes place at Punjabi weddings.

Aside from the volume of the music and the raw energy present anytime several hundred sweaty teenagers fill a dance floor, it was a pretty tame affair. There was no alcohol being sold, and burly security men searched everyone at the door. But what parents were mostly concerned about was reckless intermingling of the sexes, because that would encourage rebellion. There was unquestionably an erotic tension in the air, but for the most part the boys hung around the perimeter of the dance floor striking awkward poses, clearly too intimidated to approach the girls. And a great many of the girls were clustered together, talking about the boys and dancing among themselves.

Just then Monika Deol, an entertainment anchor for Citytv, stepped onto the stage, and an excited buzz rippled through the crowd. Deol also hosts *Fax*, a daily entertainment report on MuchMusic, and *Electric Circus*, a Saturday afternoon dance party on Citytv. She was wearing a traditional Indian *salwar kameez*—a jacket and pants, in this case in blue and gold—set off by gold high heels, and her manner was boldly confident and sexy. As an emancipated, first-generation, twentysomething Sikh woman in a glamorous rock 'n' roll profession, she was a cult hero to many South Asian teenagers.

“We're doing a story on the whole daytime dance phenomenon,” she said, standing in the glare of camera lights. “It's going to appear on *Fax*, so if you don't want to be on camera, because you may end up on TV...please stay at the back of the hall.”

A week later, Deol sat outdoors at a café across from the Citytv building on Queen Street West talking about how half of her community thinks she symbolizes the potential South Asians have to succeed in all professions, and the other half sees her as a potential threat. Her message suggests that she's both conservative and a feminist. “I tell kids that the best way to rebel, especially for

The city's

TOP SOUTH ASIAN DJ IS

JITTEN KHATRI, WHO PUT TOGETHER *BAD, MAD, AND WICKED*, A

Hindi remixes

TAPE OF

techno. The lyrics were usually sung in Punjabi, although often alternated with English and liberally sprinkled with Caribbean patois or Euro-Asian slang.

The first Toronto dances were staged about two years ago. They were popular because South Asians wanted to mix with other South Asians and hear bhangra, which wasn't possible at their high school dances even if they were allowed to go. Since then there have been dozens of dances held in banquet halls and clubs like Spectrum, which kids learn about by listening to *Bhangra Fusion*, an hour-long music and phone-in radio show aired Wednesday and Thursday nights at 10:30 on CHIN AM. It's the pulse of South Asian youth in Toronto.

In order to come to the dance at Spectrum this afternoon, Kusam had to tell her parents she was studying for exams in the school library. Not all of the kids I met at the dance faced these

versity student and the city's leading South Asian DJ, commanded a pair of turntables, expertly mixing one song into another so the effect was that of a seamless hypnotic groove. He was playing a track with a choppy bass line and punchy drumbeat over which a sitar blended with the high-pitched, nasal sound of a female Asian vocalist. When he segued into the signature opening of “Chok There,” the enormously popular dance club hit by the London-based bhangra artist Apachi Indian, a mighty roar rose from the dance floor.

Well, here we come again for a little shaktee

Indian raggamuffin posse—

How do I know say Apachi Indian is hotter than vindaloo curry?

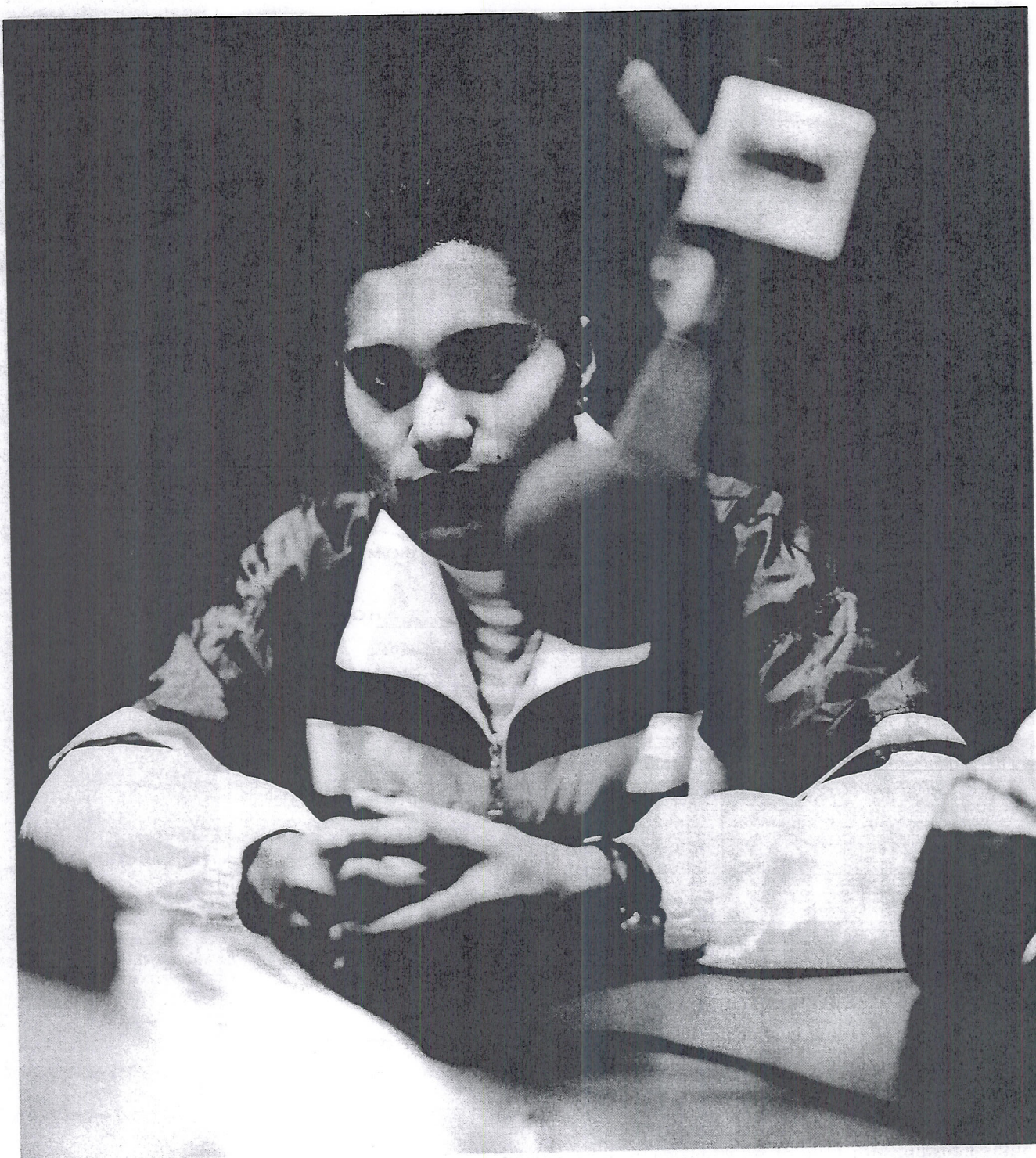
Number one on the Bombay charts—

In me hand me tear them apart—

When I come I bring a new stylee—

So listen crowd of people you know you want to follow me...CHOK THERE!

I asked Khatri about the dancers.



Indian women, is to empower themselves. The only way to do that is through education and a profession. Marriage is not an escape, and behaving badly and compromising yourself is not an escape. The only escape is economic independence."

Deol was born in India and grew up the second of three daughters on a dairy farm outside Winnipeg. Her parents were teachers by profession, although

in Canada her father divided his time between teaching and supervising the family's dairy operations. When Deol and her sisters were teenagers, her parents allowed them to attend a limited number of parties and dances so long as their school marks remained high. Another condition was that all three went together and came home on curfew. Later, when Deol was a young adult attending the University of Winnipeg,

her parents watched with mixed feelings as she briefly sang in a band and was a DJ in a nightclub. It was while she was hosting a local TV music show that she was recruited for MuchMusic.

Deol realizes this might sound wildly outrageous to many Indian parents, so she points out that her mother and father combined a strict yet progressive approach to child-rearing. Further-

more, she and her younger sister accompanied their father to India in 1983, where he observed the teenage kids of relatives and friends rebelling against their families and experimenting extensively with alcohol, drugs and premarital sex, unlike his daughters from the "permissive" West. That experience, Deol said, made her parents realize that life in India was not frozen in some idealized past.

"Young Indians here are like a 'third culture,'" Deol said. "They're caught between the traditions and expectations of their parents and modern Western culture. That's what the dances are about."

ACCORDING TO THE 1986 CENSUS, THERE are approximately 26,500 South Asians—about a quarter of the Greater Toronto Area's total South Asian population—concentrated in the region of Peel (although more recent estimates by community organizations suggest the figure may now be fifty per cent higher). More than half are Sikhs from rural backgrounds who have arrived within the past two decades. While many Hindu and Muslim parents of the same generation also wrestle with issues such as dating and dances, they have often been absorbed into older, more established communities that over time have integrated Western and traditional influences and become correspondingly more tolerant. Also, Toronto's Hindu and Muslim communities are widely dispersed throughout the city's suburbs and satellite cities rather than concentrated in one geographic area. So it's hardly surprising that when the conflicts between South Asian parents and youth finally exploded last December, it centred on the Sikh community and a daytime dance.

A group of promoters, who called themselves Punjab Culture Shock, were planning the dance for the afternoon of Friday, December 20, at Superstars, a now-defunct Mississauga nightclub on Dixie Road. Even though that was the last day before Christmas holidays and school hours ended at noon, many previous daytime dances had been held on afternoons when schools were in session. When parents had complained, they were told that holding dances didn't contravene any laws.

As a result, opposition, especially among community and religious leaders within the local Sikh temples, was building. At one dance that fall, a group of adults had videotaped young people arriving and screened it the following week at the temples so parents could

see whether their sons or daughters had been present. The December 20 dance became a target because Parmpal Sidhu and Parm Gill, two recent high school graduates who were the entrepreneurs behind Punjab Culture Shock, were bringing in Apachi Indian at considerable expense and had mounted an ambitious advertising campaign. Community leaders mounted a counteroffensive that included denouncing the event at the temples and in the South Asian media, and distributing flyers detailing the evils of teen dances.

For a bewilderingly complex number of historical and cultural reasons, the Sikh community is conservative and fragmented, its internal politics characterized by divisions and rivalries and, in some cases, bitter hostilities dating back generations. Although much of

As it happened, the firebombing of Superstars helped galvanized the community

the community's growth and development have been the result of initiatives and fund-raising programs originated by the temples, seats on the executive committee bring influence and social status, so power struggles are commonplace. Another aspect of Sikh politics revolves around the proposed creation of Khalistan, an independent homeland in the Punjab intended to reinforce the separation between Sikhs and Hindus. It has spawned an often violent international movement directed against the Hindu-dominated Indian government. Of course, these kinds of politics fall outside the lives of most South Asians. In Toronto, the most acrimonious disputes are confined to a relatively small number of politicians and fundamentalist extremists, but those individuals are disproportionately active within the temples.

Detective Mike Ambrosio, a senior member of the intelligence unit of Peel Regional Police, had dealt with the Sikh community for several years. He'd investigated violence that periodically erupted during temple elections as well as Khalistan supporters whose activities ranged from lobbying to arms purchases. Dances didn't normally fall under

his purview, but he knew that while the earliest dances had been staged by young people whose sole motive was to give South Asian teenagers a chance to mix together, dance promotion was becoming increasingly lucrative, and a few of the promoters had associations with established South Asian youth gangs such as Punjabi Mafia, Jat Boyz and PLW (*Panga Laan Walee*, a Punjabi expression that translates loosely as "shit disturbers").

Many so-called youth gangs, or posses, are no more than groups of friends who spend time together and like to travel in packs. Some, however, are involved in petty crime—breaking into homes or cars to steal stereo equipment, for example—and Ambrosio knew that serious criminals often sought recruits among the disaffected youth attracted to gangs. There had also been a few gang-related incidents in connection with dances. For the most part, these involved intimidating promoters into providing free tickets or payoffs, although in one case a 20-year-old Muslim youth in Scarborough was beaten up because he scheduled a dance on the same afternoon as a rival promoter. Besides, Ambrosio was aware that certain individuals within the temples had formed a committee to shut down daytime dances.

Early on the evening before the December 20 dance, the committee held a meeting at the Ontario Khasla Dhabar temple on Dixie Road. At approximately 2 a.m., someone firebombed Superstars, causing minor damage to the front entrance. As an arson attempt, Mississauga's chief fire inspector described it as "amateurish," and there was no evidence that the arsonist was a member of, or commissioned by, the committee, but the message was clear: at least some antidaytime dance activists were prepared to take extreme action. Because of the bombing, the promoters had increased their security measures but attracted only half the crowd they'd expected, and a second dance scheduled a few days later at Phoenix, a club on Sherbourne Street, was cancelled because of bomb threats.

Two weeks later, Ambrosio invited a dozen elders from the temples and several established dance promoters to Peel Regional Police headquarters to try to reach a compromise. He suggested to the promoters that to avoid these kinds of problems they should ensure that no dances take place during school hours, that an age minimum of 16 be imposed, and that they try alcohol-free events

CLASH OF CULTURES *continued*

whenever a significant number of high school-aged kids were likely to attend. To the temple leaders, he pointed out that Punjab Culture Shock had to be given credit for the way it organized the Superstars show. The event was licensed because Sidhu and Gill had expected a big turnout of university students, but drinking was restricted to the club's second floor, where identification was rigorously checked. Security officials searched everyone for alcohol, drugs and weapons. The promoters had even invited members of the committee to attend the dance.

One outspoken community leader and opponent of the dances was Harbajan Singh Pandoori, a 45-year-old teacher. Pandoori had been active in the provincial Liberal party and was the former president of the Khasla Dhabar temple. Sitting in the living room of his home near Square One plaza in Mississauga, he explained that he was a father of three teens and in touch with teenagers at the schools in which he worked. He said that many Punjabi youth wanted to embrace the worst Canadian values—"people drinking on Yonge Street, people picking food from the garbage, topless dancers"—and abandon their religion, language, culture and schoolwork. "They want rights without fulfilling the duties and obligations that go with them.

"Every weekend there's a marriage party or community event where kids can dance. You see grandparents dancing with grandchildren. When you talk to the kids who want to go to these Western dances, you should phone their schools and ask about their marks. Why are their marks only forty or fifty or sixty per cent instead of ninety per cent like the Chinese students? Because they're the cafeteria-sitters who'd rather wear a goddamn earring in their ear and go to dances, and who want to pull other kids out of class to go with them. Anyway, how can someone allow a 14- or 15-year-old girl to go out to a dance to drink and mix with people who are 21 or 22?"

When I suggested that surely many kids who were good students saw dances as nothing more than a chance to have fun and mix with their peers at what is a pretty common North American ritual, Pandoori said: "You think a 14-year-old girl just wants to go to dance? That's not true. When Sikh parents open *The Globe and Mail* or the *Star* or the *Sun* and read that in the Western world eighty-five per cent of students by the age of 18 have had sex, they say my

CLASH OF CULTURES *continued*

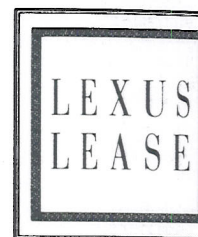
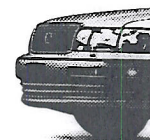
daughter is never going to any goddamn dance, no matter where it is."

THERE WAS SOMETHING UNEASY IN the air at Club Marquee, a big, gloomy night spot located on a seedy stretch of Coxwell Avenue around the corner from the Gerrard Street East shopping strip known as Bombay Town. It was mid-afternoon on a humid Friday late in June, a few days after high school students had finished final exams. I was standing near the pool table talking to an 18-year-old Sikh who had left his family's home that morning with his unshorn hair neatly coiled under his turban but was now sporting a waist-length ponytail and pirate's head-scarf. As a bhangra tune blasted from the sound system, he excused himself to join the 100 young South Asians jammed onto the dance floor.

There were another 100 or more kids hanging around the club's perimeter, and the turnout might have been twice that had it not been for another dance taking place that afternoon at a Richmond Hill club, an accident of planning that was hardly surprising considering the haphazard way most dance promoters operate. The Marquee event, for example, was being staged by a group of under-16-year-olds (with a little help from Punjab Culture Shock) whose ambitions had exceeded their organizational grasp. Neither of the advertised British stars—popular mixer Mick St. Clair and singer Cheshire Cat—would be appearing. As a last-minute replacement, they'd hired an unknown local reggae-rap group to perform, even though many kids had paid \$12 a ticket expecting to see international bhangra acts. The reason I'd come to Club Marquee was that I'd figured at least some of Pandoori's misgivings about dances were probably grounded in fact. A week earlier, the two dominant youth gangs, Punjabi Mafia and PLW, had an altercation at Krush, a Richmond Street dance club, and I'd heard persistent rumours they were planning to mix it up today.

I was surveying the crowd with Arvinder Sahota and Jesse Padda, co-hosts of CHIN radio's *Bhangra Fusion*. Sahota is a gregarious woman in her mid-20s with an angular face and curly black hair. She met the stocky, soft-spoken Padda in England, where he had grown up immersed in the South Asian youth scene. Together they are radio personalities and community boosters, roles that come naturally to Sahota, whose father, Darshan, is a prominent

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businessman and impresario who stages hugely popular traditional shows featuring Indian film and singing stars at venues such as Maple Leaf Gardens, Exhibition Place and Roy Thomson Hall. I told Sahota that it seemed to me there was a mix of kids at the dance. "The majority of kids," she said, "come to dances just to have a good time and mix with other Indians, regardless of religion or caste. On *Bhangra Fusion* we definitely preach unity."

During a transition between songs, the DJ announced: "PM is here." The crowd didn't seem to react, but I saw Sahota and Padda exchange glances. Later a song was dedicated to PLW. I asked a young man standing beside me whether that was unusual.

"Sort of," he said, speaking loudly over the music. "It doesn't usually happen, but sometimes gang members go to a DJ and threaten a disruption unless their announcement is read."

A few minutes later nearly a dozen youths, most of them wearing grim expressions and oozing attitude, snaked behind us in single file and gathered in a knot around two young men. "Something's happening," the young man

next to me whispered. "They're PLW." The barometric pressure in the room dropped several points, the way it does before a barroom brawl.

A young Sikh, one of two South Asians responsible for providing security services, elbowed his way into the centre of the circle. Several members of the security team—beefy young men in navy blue T-shirts with biceps the size of Thanksgiving turkeys—moved into strategic positions, but as quickly as it had developed the incident was defused and the crowd dispersed.

More smoke than fire, a minor bit of chest-beating that certainly didn't reflect on the couple of hundred kids who danced, mingled and later made their way peacefully home. But it was a fleeting glimpse at the rough edges on the margins of the South Asian youth scene, and an indication that at least in some circumstances parents had legitimate reasons to worry about where their children were going and who was going to be there.

THE FIREBOMBING OF SUPERSTARS galvanized the community. In April 1992, the Ontario Council of Sikhs and

the Peel board of education held a conference at a Malton high school that attracted 200 youths and fifty adults. (Because it was planned on short notice by a Sikh organization in a predominantly Sikh section of the city, there was little representation from the Hindu and Muslim communities.) Workshops dealt with subjects such as dating and arranged marriages, daytime dances, youth gangs, racism and family communication. None of the organizers was surprised that the gulf between parents and children was as wide as it was deep.

I ran some of the community's more conservative views about teenagers and dances past Baldev Mutta, a conference organizer and community development worker with the Peel health department. "Culture is not something inscribed in stone," he told me. "We're living in Canada, not the Punjab. Our children's views have to be considered, and then we have to be prepared to negotiate and compromise." That was beginning to happen, he added, pointing to one offshoot of the conference: the creation of a support group for parents and youth.

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Malton Neighbourhood Services is a three-storey, redbrick building on Goreway Drive, across from Westwood Mall. On a Saturday morning last summer, I met Mutta and several other facilitators as they ushered a group of concerned parents and their children into separate meeting rooms. In one, about fifteen men and women in their 40s and 50s, several of them wearing traditional garb, were nervously introducing themselves and explaining why they had come. As the first few spoke in Punjabi, the group leader wrote on a green chalkboard: "Future of children"; "Freedom of girls"; "Failure as role models...." They were, I was told, part of an enlightened vanguard; it's not considered culturally acceptable for South Asians to acknowledge social problems privately, let alone stand up among their peers and admit that their children are out of control.

In the second room, five girls and three boys, ranging in age from 7 to 23, were gathered around several large tables. Typically, the girls chose to sit on one side, the boys on the other. Gurpreet Malhotra, a good-natured and outgoing social worker in his late 20s, introduced a role-playing exercise in which he impersonated a conservative Indian father discussing arranged marriages with his daughter.

"Why do you want to do things differently?" he asked one young woman, a university student named Hardev Sohi. "We know what's best for you, we'll pick out the right boy for you."

"Why do we have to do things the same way because that was the way in the older days?" she asked. "This is modern times, and we're in Canada now—"

Malhotra interrupted her. "We love you so much we'll make sure you're happy in a good marriage with a nice boy who will have a good job so you'll have a nice family."

"But what if I don't like him? I want to have time to get to know someone—"

"How can you know what you want?" Malhotra broke in. "We know these things because we've been through it. We have the experience to make the right choices for you."

"We're living in Canada now," Sohi persisted. "I've been in the school system six hours a day, year after year. My ideology has changed—"

"Change it back," snapped Malhotra. "Don't I love you? If I didn't love you I'd make you pay rent to live here, like some parents. I'd tell you to leave this house."

"But I've experienced new things

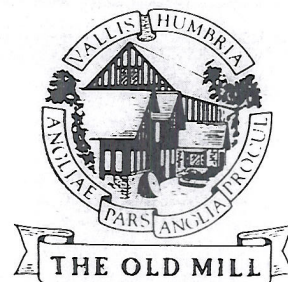
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growing up here—"

"What experience do you have?" Malhotra demanded accusingly. "How do you know about boys? You sit beside them in class but you should be doing math, not talking to boys."

There was a ripple of nervous laughter at what was apparently a familiar scenario. Malhotra turned to the teenage boys next to him. "What about your brothers, they're very quiet." Then he looked sharply at one of them: "You're in the same school and you're a good boy. Is she seeing someone? *Is she?*"

I was impressed by Hardev Sohi, who had so gamely tried to reason with Malhotra's portrayal of the rigidly uncompromising father. She was articulate and seemed to have worked through many of the conflicts bedeviling other South Asian teenagers, like Kusam, whose nocturnal life would probably catch up to her. A few weeks later I met Sohi in the cafeteria at Ryerson. She had just completed the third year of the nursing program and was past-president of Ryerson's Indian Student Association (RISA). The second of four children, she was a compact, engaging 22-year-old with café au lait skin, a Roman nose and strong cheekbones. Her teeth were bright white and her brown eyes so dark they were almost black. She said everyone at the workshop had agreed that the role-playing exercise had been eerily accurate, right down to the father enlisting his sons to spy on their sisters. The only thing missing was the additional pressure that came when relatives expressed their opinions, which carries enormous weight in South Asian families.

She said that like many immigrant parents, hers had come to Canada as adults and made the stressful adjustment to life in the urban West—which often involved language and cultural barriers, job discrimination and racism—in part by retaining familiar traditions at home. They expected their children to behave the same as they did when they were growing up in India four decades ago, so they imposed many restrictions. They were also wary of doing anything that would generate disapproval among the extended family in Canada and India.

Throughout most of her childhood Sohi was a typically passive Indian girl who learned to cook and do housework. As a teenager she was often invited out to movies and parties, but declined because she knew her parents rarely approved. They permitted her to go out with girlfriends from time to

time, so long as they knew where and with whom she was going and when she'd be back. She'd never been allowed to stay overnight at a friend's house. Although the local mall was a popular hangout, she could go there only if there was something she needed to buy, and then she was expected to come directly home. Her older brother, a quiet, respectful boy who took part in an arranged marriage with a girl from India, was held up as a role model.

When she started classes at Ryerson in 1989 and attended meetings of RISA, Sohi experienced a personal and political awakening. Though she'd thought most Indian teenagers were more or less like her, she discovered students with widely varying experiences, including many who were successfully becoming independent yet maintained a connection to their culture.

Sohi, who was not inclined toward radical rebellion, elected to gradually educate her parents. They didn't approve that boys had begun calling her at home, and her sister-in-law, who following Indian tradition lived with the family, expressed disapproval concerning Sohi's behaviour. When her father demanded an explanation, Sohi told him firmly the boys were calling about RISA; she didn't mention they also called for social reasons. "Indian parents don't understand platonic relationships," she explained. "They think that if a boy and girl are seen together they must be intimate."

In her second year, Sohi went a step further. One day she invited some friends from RISA—two girls and six boys—over to her house. Since they were familiar with Indian families they were understandably nervous, but Sohi told them to relax and be themselves (although she coached them on how to react if her father exploded). Sohi's father kept out of sight while her mother tentatively met the visitors and offered drinks. Later, he reluctantly ventured into the living room to be introduced, then quickly retreated.

"It was a very stressful experience for my parents and for me," Sohi recalled. "But I wanted to let them see that these people, boys as well as girls, were simply friends. My father knows that now, but knowing it is different from accepting it."

Although it wasn't easy, today Sohi has established her independence while maintaining a good relationship with her family. She plans to go to graduate school and will probably move out of the family home. She suspects

her parents haven't entirely given up hope on an arranged marriage, even though Sohi has made it clear she prefers to let those matters take their own course. Now the attention has turned to her younger sister, who is 20.

"My sister is more rebellious than I am," Sohi told me. "She wants to go to dances and move out of home, and she doesn't care about losing her Indian culture. *Control* is an important word. My father said to me, 'Help us, we're losing control of your sister.' I said, 'You want control, and she wants control but nobody's compromising.'"

"Many Indian parents use force and guilt trips to control their children. They don't realize that love, respect and trust are a lot harder to rebel against."

ON A WEDNESDAY EVENING IN JULY, I sat with DJ Jitten Khatri at the Second Cup on the ground floor of the CHIN radio building on College Street, in Little Italy. Khatri was to be Sahota and Padda's guest on *Bhangra Fusion*, and we were waiting for them to arrive. He had a copy of his first cassette, an independently produced collection of Hindi remixes called *Bad, Mad and Wicked*.

"If you ask me, I think daytime dances are on their way out," he said. "There were 1,500 kids at the first ones. Then there were 1,000. Then 800, then 600. Lately they've only been drawing three or four hundred."

I'd heard this prediction from others. Daytime dances started out as a reaction against a host of social attitudes toward youths within the South Asian community. Gradually, as the dances forced these issues into the open, families came to terms with them.

"Logically, who wants to go to a dance during the day?" Khatri said. "And some of the parents who wouldn't let their kids go out at night are allowing more freedom."

"Nobody's outlawing the dances," he continued. "It's not the influence of parents or religious leaders. It's the invisible hand that makes things work. It happened the same way in the Italian community. There used to be all kinds of 'Gino dances,' but now they're virtually nonexistent because Italian kids have assimilated. The same thing's happening to Indian kids. That's the way it works."

David Hayes, a contributing editor to this magazine, is the author of Power and Influence: The Globe and Mail and the News Revolution, published this month by Key Porter Books.