

Crossing borders, breaking boundaries: Enduring Indian cultural identity in Trinidadian Carnival

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Abstract: The 2011 census demographic report released by the Central Statistical Office of Trinidad and Tobago declared that a majority of their population comprised of Indians and people of Indian descent. Majority of them trace their association with the island nation to the times of Indentureship (1845-1917), when a sizeable population of Indians were uprooted and transplanted to the Caribbean to work on sugar plantations. Displaced from their homeland, these immigrants faced the difficult task of repositioning themselves in a new land. In such scenarios, culture becomes a vehicle for the diasporic community to establish a connection with the new land, maintain solidarity within the group and to gain a sense of self without severing all ties with their homeland. The Trinidadian Carnival is the greatest street parade in the world and an important emblem of Trinidadian culture. Often associated with the Afro-Trinidadian community, over the years it has grown to be a crucible of cross-cultural associations with elements from both African and Indian culture influencing the festivities. Inspired from Indian folk culture, chutney music now finds an increasingly stronger presence in the Trinidadian Carnival alongside its African creole counterparts of calypso and soca. Another important element of the Carnival is the steelband, which now witness a strong Indian presence. The Indian diaspora in Trinidad thereby continue to enrich the cultural space of Trinidad, often maintaining the rich culture of India alive and flourishing in the island nation. Indian cultural elements therefore take up the vital role of identity construction and value addition, even so far away from home. This paper intends to study the enduring presence of Indian cultural elements in the Trinidadian Carnival and how the Indian immigrants constructed, and continue to construct, their identity through social memory and popular culture. In discussing these questions, the paper refers to concepts of cultural identity and draws information from a repertoire of contemporary scholarly literature, governmental and non-governmental records, and news articles.

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Introduction

In 2025, the East Indian community will celebrate the 180th anniversary of their forefathers' arrival in the Caribbean Island nation of Trinidad. The 2011 official population census of Trinidad and Tobago placed the Indo-Trinidadians and Tobagonians as the largest ethnic group in the country comprising of 35.4% of the total population (Central Statistical Office 2011, 15). The history of Indian association with the island nation is a troubled one and can be traced back to the nineteenth century when the country was a major British colony. Post the emancipation of African-origin slaves, the British crown faced the dire predicament of labour shortage in their priced sugar and cocoa plantations. This paved the way for a new policy of indentureship in the year 1845 whereby labourers from India were transported to the Caribbean Island nations for a contract period, usually extending up to five years, after which they would be provided a return passage. The alternative was to continue their residence in the Caribbean on a piece of land offered by the government. A policy that was actively practiced till the 1917 resulted in a large population of Indians immigrating to the Caribbean, with a lot of them settling down and making it their new home.

One of the foremost concerns of a diasporic community is to renegotiate their identity and gain a sense of place in the new land. Cultural theorists have long established the significant role played by culture in renegotiation of individual and collective identity. Culture is fluid, ever changing and reorienting, not a complete product (Hall 1990, 222). Therefore, cultural elements – rituals, traditions, knowledge – become mediums through which ethnic identities could be continuously constructed and renegotiated. Over the years, the Indian community in Trinidad have moulded their unique identity in the land through continued association with practices rooted in the Indian cultural landscape. This paper intends to explore the enduring presence of Indian popular culture in the Trinidadian Carnival and their continuing influence on shaping Indian identity in the local and global context.

The Trinidadian Carnival

The Carnival is a significant popular cultural tradition of Trinidad and Tobago, and is celebrated in the month of February or March and

concludes on Fat Tuesday, just before Lent commences. Some call it “The Mother of all West Indian Carnivals” as it encompasses a grand celebration that weaves together the captivating beats of calypso, chutney and soca music, steelband performances, folk dances, and vivid costumes (Lawrence n.d.). However, its origin is subject to various speculations. Some historians trace it back to the European Carnivals during the Roman times which travelled to the Caribbean shores with the coming of the British, while others associate it with the Africans’ indigenous mas making and masquerading traditions (Liverpool 1998, 30). Despite these debates, the Carnival has flourished as a key symbol of Trinidadian culture.

The arrival of Indian community in Trinidad marked a new era for the Carnival festivities. A festival dominated by the Creole population now faced an influx of cultural elements from the immigrant Indian population. When two communities with their unique cultural backgrounds try and establish their identities in a defined space, conflicts and contestations are unavoidable. However, it also opens avenues of possibilities where each participates with the other in this shared cultural space leading to a communion of ideas and cultures (Sankeralli 1998, 206). So, by the 20th century, the Carnival had developed into this shared cultural space with a distinct Indian presence in several key elements of the festival like the steel band, mas, and the calypso. This paper is limited to exploring those cultural elements that are closely associated with, and enrich, the Carnival festivities and not the vast entirety of cultural additions from the Indian community that have shaped the Trinidadian cultural landscape.

Indian cultural traditions in the Trinidadian Carnival

Chutney music – origin and evolution

The Indians who migrated to Caribbean during the period of indentureship were mostly from the Bhojpuri-speaking North Indian states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. The then dominant Creole population and the newly introduced Indian immigrants in the Caribbean faced a common struggle against the Eurocentric hegemony of the West. Although vastly different in their cultural traditions, efforts to establish a sense of place and identity in the new land made both these groups turn to their native folk culture to assert their presence (Manuel 2006, 152). The African community gave birth to the Calypso music in the eighteenth century, largely derived from the West African satirical musical tradition of ‘kaiso’ which largely centred

around enslaved Africans mocking their white masters and deriding the inhuman system of slavery. Over the years, Calypso music has brought Trinidad & Tobago to prominence on the global cultural map and is a major constituent of the Carnival. On the other hand, the Indian community's significant and unique contribution to the dance and musical landscape of the Trinidadian Carnival festivities was the Chutney music:

In 1970, a young singer named Sundar Popo from Trinidad, catapulted to fame in the small Indian community of the Caribbean with a song called Nana and Nani. The droll and witty lyrics, a mix of Hindi and Trinidadian Creole, dwelt on the comical everyday affairs of a grandmother and grandfather living in a small town. Backed with the music of the dholak and dhantal (as well as the guitar and synthesizer), the song instantly became a chartbuster, giving birth to a new form of music known as 'Chutney' (Malhotra 2016).

The chutney music, as it developed in Trinidad and other neighbouring nations, was deeply rooted in Indian musical and dance culture comprising of variety of genres, such as wedding songs, birth songs (sohar), urdu/muslim qawwali and qasida, devotional Hindu bhajans, narrative birha, seasonal songs (chotwal, hori, chaiti) and idiosyncratic versions of Hindustani classical and light-classical genres. By the twentieth century, chutney music transformed itself into a fast-paced, single-refrain verse with Bhojpuri texts. Soon the Indian musical flavour blended with the local vernacular and culture giving birth to the 'chutney soca', with its distinct calypso influences. Originally sung to the sounds of dholak, dhantal and manjira, Indian percussion instruments, Chutney music has embraced harmonica, tassa and more over the years. 'Chutney', a name denoting a savoury condiment, truly defines the essence of this musical legacy.

"Chutney emerged from the rustic traditions of rural Caroni and Penal, rather than the bourgeois Indian community of Port of Spain" (Manuel 1998, 35). Its acceptance into the socially mainstream Carnival festivities, dominated by calypso and steelband, could be associated with the chutney musician Drupatee Ramgoonai. Her 1987 album, particularly the songs 'Roll up the Tassa' and 'Mr. Bissessar', were crucial in catapulting chutney music into the Carnival arena. This was followed by Rikki Jai and "the move of chutney into calypso space climaxed in 1996 when Sonny Mann's chutney 'Lotay La' was a major hit during the Carnival season" (Sankeralli 1998, 207). Indian participation in the Carnival which earlier took place within the

shadows of the Creole framework now had their own standing and space.

Chutney music in the 21st century

As a socio-cultural phenomenon, chutney and chutney soca music continues to represent the resilience of the Indian community and their ability to carve a unique presence within the larger national and international cultural landscape. Peppered with bhojpuri lyrics and, a fast tempo, the musical tradition is an enduring link for the community with their Indian roots. Ever since the popularity of the Chutney Soca on the Carnival stage, it has enabled the emergence of several fusion styles such as Chutney rap, Chutney jhumar, Chutney lambada and Chutney parang. While chutney jhumar is a mixture of chutney music with the famous folk dance of bhojpuri speaking regions, Chutney parang is an amalgamation of the music of the Caribbean and Latin American. “The present trend is the mix of the Indo-Caribbean theme with Indian film music and American popular music.” (Kumar Sahu 2020) This versatility of chutney music enables the performers to entice the Indian and the non-Indian community alike, without losing the Indian flavour all the same.

It is worth noting the importance of chutney music and its later derivative son Indo-Trinidadian women’s renegotiation of identity in a diasporic setting. A look into the origin of the art form reveals that its folk forerunners, the matikhor and musical nights at Hindu weddings, were rendered by middle-class and lower-class women (Sankeralli 1998, 207). Despite strains of conservatism, these spaces have provided women an opportunity to go beyond the boundaries of their home and express their selves. Now with the rising proliferation of chutney fame, women have carved their own niche, asserting independence and self-determination. “Singer Ramraji Prabhu proclaimed, ‘Chutney is modern and it is a liberation for women. We no longer have to hide behind doors to dance as we want.’” (Manuel 1998, 35) “Certain themes like ‘lack of control’ in the music and dance style echoes the “lack of control” that men have over women’s bodies as they are dancing chutney (Bergman 2008, 15). The year 2013 was unprecedented with four women artists proceeding to the Chutney Soca finals. The year 2023 marked eight-year old Katelin Sultan becoming the youngest artist to qualify for the semi-final round of the Chutney Soca Monarch (CSM) competition (Maraj 2023).

In close connection to the above matter, it is imperative to analyse the allegations of women activists who criticise chutney music with sexual stereotyping and a general disregard towards women. Many feminists discovered and believed that while culture was a powerful arena, it perpetuated and created sexist ideas and representations (Butler 1990; Doyle 2019). In the case of chutney music, women's sexuality has been a central concern since its origin. Traditional chutney music was sung by older married women during Hindu wedding preparations. While some songs were religious, some bore lyrics teasing the bride about her upcoming wedding night. A criticism often levelled against chutney music is the projection of women as objects in the songs. A section believes it is the injunction of soca music that is to blame for this trend (Soca, Chutney, Dancehall Lyrics Denigrate Woman's Body 2020). Notwithstanding the blame game, it is however a growing perception that Chutney music and its newer versions are perpetuating a culture of misogyny in Trinidad. This is a perception largely associated with the Creole dominated Calypso music as well. Moreover, chutney musicians are facing flak from the larger cultural community for their excessive focus on debauchery in latest music, some even proclaiming the death of Chutney music. In fact, Chutney icons have come forward in lamenting this trend. Raymond Ramnarine, in a 2013 article in the Trinidad Guardian expressed regret at how chutney music "has become a deluge of rum songs." This is justified when we recognise that "hits in the recent past have veered towards rum bottles. Hits like Ravi B's 'Ah Drinka', 'Rum is Meh Lover' and 'Rum in my Vein'; Ricki Jai's 'Barman', and Adesh Samaroo's 'Rum Tilli Die', all support this theme" (On Chutney Controversy 2023).

Culture is ever evolving and is susceptible to changes some of which could be questionable in nature. However, it is also imperative to contextualise a particular cultural practice or element within the reality of its social landscape. A leaning towards excesses and hedonism has always been the reality for not just chutney or soca or calypso, but is a defining element of the Carnival festivities at large in Trinidad. Allegations and criticisms read in line with this reality would suggest that claims like: "chutney is dead" is far-fetched, and the need for a culturally rooted understanding of the musical tradition is the need of the hour. As some critics point out, "the genre just needs to be sanitized; and it will survive" (Ibidem).

A matter of great pride for the Indian community in Trinidad was the introduction of the annual Chutney Soca Monarch (CSM) competition during the Carnival season, which has grown from strength to strength in contemporary times. CSM is considered to be one of the greatest Indo-Caribbean concert of its kind in the world. With each passing year, the Chutney Soca events continue to flourish and garner fame across millions within and outside the Caribbean. Despite the booming presence of Chutney, the music fraternity have raised concerns of low state funding and support. However, as per records, the prize money for the winner of the Chutney Soca Monarch 2023 competition was the biggest in three years at \$500000 of a total of \$1 million in prizes (Dowrich-Phillips 2022). The hike in the reward is emblematic of the rising significance of this musical tradition and its acceptance by the larger community. The finals of CSM 2024, which took place on February 10, witnessed a packed venue and a host of top entertainers from the island nation competing for the coveted Chutney Soca Monarch and Queen of Chutney Soca titles.

An interesting development is the gradual expansion of this Indo-Caribbean musical and dance art form to international arenas. The ‘Chutney Fest’ organised by the Indo-Caribbean Canadian Association is a case in point. An annual event, the chutney fest entered its 11th year in 2025 and attracts talents and tourists from across North America, the Caribbean, Europe, and Asia. It is a coming together of local and international artists who epitomize the culture of Indo-Caribbean community and showcase the instruments, music and dance forms attributed to the Chutney culture. The event even includes a competition for the local singers with the winner crowned the ‘ChutneyFest Champion’. It is stated that the event witnessed a footfall of “more than 3500 visitors annually, and over 3,30,000 online in 2021” (ChutneyFest n.d). The festival is rearing to grow into a prestigious event celebrating Indo-Caribbean culture and heritage in the coming years. Chutney music’s presence and reach in New York City is yet another example of its continued acceptance by the global community. It is true that “Chutney is evolving into a vehicle for Indian cultural aurality and visibility in Trinidad” (Mahabir n.d) and overseas.

A matter of concern however is the threat of commodification of this Indo-Caribbean popular cultural practice. There is fear that with recent developments, ‘the popular’ could lose its authenticity and become merely ‘populist’ in nature. The art form has already witnessed

several modifications with the latest of it being addition, and sometimes replacement, of traditional musical instruments with electronic instruments. Some lament this for it could mean a break away from the traditional Indian roots and a widening of cultural gap between the modern Indo-Trinidadians with their ancestral home of India. We cannot claim an essentialist view of culture as it is an ever-changing phenomenon, but if the ongoing changes continue to erode the very essence of a cultural practice and its constituent elements, then how laudable is this change is a question the community needs to grapple with.

Indian influence in Steelband – Tassa

Steelband is a Trinidadian music ensemble closely associated with the Carnival festivities. The Steelband is often spoken synonymously with the Steelpan. The Steelpan is a musical instrument akin to a drum and had its origin in the poverty-stricken Creole dominated Laventille hills where “a number of metal objects such as milk cans, garbage can covers and pots [were beaten] to produce musical sounds” (Steelpan History n.d.). Today the steelpans are mass produced from oil drums, played with a pair of straight sticks tipped with rubber, and are considered the national instrument of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

A significant contribution by the Indian community to this largely Creole dominated musical tradition is the introduction of ‘Tassa’. “The tassa is a medium-sized kettledrum, about eighteen inches in diameter, suspended at waist level and played with a pair of flexible sticks” (Manuel 2015, 136). We can trace the roots of tassa to the North Indian drumming tradition of dhol-tasha. The tassa bands become a central attraction for the annual Hosay/Muharram celebration that was brought to the Trinidadian shores by the Indian indentured labourers. It also became a mainstay in Hindu wedding rituals, and other cultural and national celebrations. Though the tassa music is partly derived from Local Classical Singing, “a unique Indian Caribbean genre built upon fragments and elaborations of North Indian devotional, folk, and classical music” (Ballengee 2018), but its presence in several celebratory events of national importance makes it crosscultural borders and carve a space in the larger Trinidadian cultural landscape. “In this way, tassa has become a music of national importance, one that is frequently evoked as a metaphor for Indian culture in Trinidad and Tobago” (Ibid.). It has reached a point where several cultural activists have

raised demands of including tassa as the second national instrument of the country alongside steelpan (Boodan 2009).

While the first national steelpan competition premiered in the Trinidad and Tobago in the year 1963, it was in 2001 the Tassa Association of Trinidad and Tobago (TATT) established an annual National Tassa Competition. This, along with the Tassa Taal, has become central sites of communion for tassa performers and fans. The competition is partially subsidized by the government. “Meanwhile, various smaller competitions are held on irregular base in different parts of the island at different times of year. Prominent among them is the “Junior Tassa Rama” held by Mere Desh, an organisation founded and led by Ajeet Praimsingh, an indefatigable and creative promoter of local Indian culture” (Manuel 2015, 164).

Tassa has been successful in bridging the cultural gap between the Indian and African communities. Several Afro-Trinidadians participate and join the tassa groups that play during Hosay festival. “Although overwhelmingly a product of the Indian community, tassa is commonly performed at racially mixed events, and Afro-Trinidadians do not hesitate to “wine” and “get on bad” to its thunderous rhythms” (Ibid, 233). The popularity of tassa is growing and has gained a unique international presence, with “nascent (or revivalist) tassa scenes” flourishing in Guyana and Suriname and even in New York, Toronto, and Florida “where it is widely played at Guyanese as well as Trinidadian functions” (Ibidem). With its neotraditional and contemporary style, tassa has adapted itself to shine on Trinidadian and global platform.

Conclusion

Cultural theorists have for years researched the implications of culture and its associated art forms on identity creation in various scenarios. The importance of cultural art forms in negotiation and construction of identity for a diasporic community is an oft explored area and a significant name amongst those is that of the renowned cultural theorist, John W Berry (1992). His model of acculturation strategies could be drawn on to understand the enduring cultural influence of Indian diasporic community in Trinidad and Tobago. Acculturation refers to the process through which an individual negotiates their identity in new cultural contexts. From Berry’s model, four paths of acculturation strategies emerge:

- Assimilation – when an individual or group adopts the host or dominant cultural norms over their own.
- Separation – when there is a rejection of the host or dominant culture in order to preserve their own culture.
- Integration – when individuals or groups are able to adopt the host or dominant culture, while sustaining their culture of origin.
- Marginalization – when there is a rejection of both the dominant culture and their own.

It can be argued that the Indian diaspora in Trinidad and Tobago have ‘integrated’ themselves into their adopted land through the cultural art forms of chutney and tassa. The Trinidadian Carnival has been crucial in bringing about this acculturation. The Carnival is not merely a celebration, but is the epitome of Trinidadian culture and unity. Chutney music and tassa, with their growing presence on the Carnival stage, has therefore upheld the Indian cultural traditions alongside their African counterparts, without complete assimilation or marginalisation of the other. The Indian diaspora has negotiated a presence in the national cultural landscape which was once a domain of Afro-Trinidadian contributions of Calypso, Steelband, and Soca and bridged the gap between the two dominant ethnicities in Trinidad and Tobago.

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