THE DEVELOPMENT OF INDIAN MUSIC IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

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Less than a year ago, a controversy arose after I judged the National soca-chutney competition. Many of the popular singers like Ricky Jai and Chris Garcia raised objections to the results and their placements. My integrity was not in question. They however felt that I was not the appropriate person to judge the competition since I am a classical musician. Of course the media picked this up and it became a national sensation. In an effort to solve the problem I challenged all the participants to an open debate on a national forum, the television. The presenter called on the artistes to state their cases. Not one of them was willing to come forward. Needless to say this quelled all the mauvais langue.

But that was not the only controversy which I was dragged into. There were several others, so much so that the Indian community and the non-Indian community branded me in several ways, both, mainly because of my innovations in music. I have never been satisfied to imitate other people's music. I am of the firm conviction that we must continue to strive to express our selves in the unique way that can only be Trinidadian. To do this we must utilize all the elements that are present here. My recently released CD is an effort in this direction.

I would like to present a picture of the development of music as it evolved in Trinidad and Tobago since the arrival of the indentured labourers to the present. I would also like to show the development of music in relation to its form - its structure, the use of melody, rhythm and the introduction of elements of harmony, and to demonstrate how this is affected by changing values. (If the dissatisfied contestants mentioned above did concede to my appeal, an explanation of form would have been the focal point of my arguments).

In this context, values would be viewed from two angles:

1) The changing moral values of the society from which the music emanates.

2) The value of the music itself, both the subjective and objective values, meaning the value of the actual music and the values existing in the mind of the composer that propels one to express oneself in a particular way.
The other factor that operated on the whole development is the changing functions of the music. As the functions change, the music also changes to satisfy the needs of its users. On taking a cursory look, the function and value of music appears to be the same. In Indian music, however, there is this definite difference.

From 1845-1917, the indentured labourers brought to Trinidad found themselves in a very hostile environment. The will to survive and a strong culture were the equipments which they brought. Their religion was part of their culture. For instance, music was seen as “na vidya sangeet para”, There is no knowledge greater than that of music. The word music (sangeet) refers to the entire gamut of the performing arts (songs, instruments, and dance). Music was seen as a means of communication with the Lord. Although a concept of classical musicians, it was also present amongst the folk as evidenced in the lyrics present in the “local classical” genre. Having this at the back of our minds, we shall now look at the indentured that came here and try to see how that music sustained them through the years.

As a musician with an ardent interest in ethnomusicology and culture, it is my opinion that the thing that sustained them was their culture and particularly their music. During that period, they would have brought with them their work songs which were prominent at that time. Grains were grounded on a Jata, two circular stones about two to three inches thick placed one on top of the other. The upper stone was fitted with a wooden handle. It also had a hole about three inches in diameter at the centre. Grains were thrown through the centre hole while two ladies would sit on either side turning the upper stone around by grasping the handle. The grains trapped between the two stones would be ground to power. Coinciding with these actions they would sing the pisowny songs. Those songs were very simple. If a stranger sat on the other side of the Jata, she should be able to repeat the lines without much effort.

The lyrics were quite simple like “every time ah passing gyal you grinding masala” etc. There were the huckster’s songs like “chana jor garam bahu my laya majadharhana jor garam” - the channa is very hot I have brought you happiness through my channa. Several other songs of this type were heard even during my childhood. I witnessed people selling gulab jamoon, a mauve berry like fruit, which grows on a big tree. The small fruit were put into an earthen jar in which masala was added. We think of masala as curry, but masala is not only curry but also any spice including salt and pepper. They would shake all of this in the jar until the skin of the fruit got bruised so that the salt and other masala would soak into the fruit thereby enhancing its taste. There were other songs associated with almost any task like drawing water from the wells, working in the fields etc.

There were other areas of singing and music, which included the bhajans, simple songs through which they prayed to God in moments of desperation and frustration. Everybody held an instrument in their hands and sang. Some of these religious songs were called keertan in which the songs were slowly built into fast tempo, which allowed for a kind of ecstasy. Religious songs of this nature are not peculiar to Hindus. Then there was the music of the Ramayan, the source of Caribbean Hinduism, which has survived the...
ages. These melodies remain intact keeping its integrity up to today. I was aghast a year ago when a pundit told me, "But boy I sang some Ramayan in chutney style and people went crazy over it". Well I couldn't take that, in spite of being the innovator and crossover artiste that I am, I felt that he was interfering with the integrity of my spiritual music.

Mention must also be made of the women's songs which have had a tremendous impact on the music of Trinidad, and which survive today as chutney. The early period saw a leveling off of the caste system as far as duties were concerned. [Neither] the kohar (potter), the chamar (leather related work) nor any of the other castes could function within their specialty because of being in the fields for long hours. The songs related to these functions were gradually lost. During the period 1917 to 1940 women's songs took precedence. These songs were associated with functions like chithee and barahee. Chithee is celebrated six days after a child is born, while barahee is celebrated twelve days after birth. These celebrations gave women the opportunity to sing, dance and enjoy themselves. At weddings, there were several celebrations that allowed women to enjoy themselves without the restrictions of having the males around. There were songs instructing the young bride about sexual rites, and what to expect on the suhaag raat (consummation night). These were done in gay and humorous tones in the presence of the blushing bride. It is a matter of pride when one thinks that these simple folks had a system in place for giving sex education to their young ones in such a natural way. This celebration is called the matkor and it took place three days before the wedding.

During that period, there was more freedom of movement, and Indians were able to congregate for weddings which were big affairs. The night before the wedding was a major celebration; the entire village was invited. Some of the villagers would cook while others would sing and dance. The men singing outside under the bamboo tents while the women sang and danced inside behind closed doors. In those days there were no microphones. My father was a singer and when he sang, one could have heard him almost in the next village. They used to sing very loudly. Up to now people like Mr. Ramuodit Maharaj, a veteran, who is present here today, still sings like this. He does not need a microphone to sing. But what we have to consider here is the changing form of the music, because that is what I was getting at when my standpoint as far as soca chutney was concerned [became the subject of criticism].

In 1940, the Taal, or the rhythmic cycle, which was usually played on the dholak or the tabla and by raga notes, determined the form of the song. Many scholars contend that classical music did not come to Trinidad with the indentured Indians. I however strongly contend that classical music and ragas did come but not necessarily in the form that is presently practiced in India. There is a difference in form, and form is what is causing everybody to argue and even quarrel. So when people said local classical music they were right to say so because many of the elements of classical Indian music like mukhri, gamak, zamzama and even ragas were present. The form of the taal which is used to accompany the local thumree is not commonly heard in India. The tunes of the original songs were definitely based on ragas; this is an entire discussion by itself and would take a few hours to elaborate. The problem was that many of the former writers and researchers never had an inkling of classical Indian music and as such
were not in a position to say that classical music never came to this country.

From 1940 things started to accelerate. Indian films were introduced to Trinidad. The film songs had a great impact on the music of Trinidad. Kamaludin Mohammed also got his first radio program during this period, and every Friday evening at 4.30 p.m., all villagers would put on their radios; those who could not afford a radio went to a friend, and even if they had to stand outside, they listened to the radio program. Kamal’s voice was like music to the ears of every Indian. There was a revolution in music listening. From 1940 to 1960 we heard bits and pieces of English lyrics coming into the music: “Rosie gyul wey yuh cooking for dinner, dalh and bhaat damadolwa ke choka”. Translated into standard English it meant; Rosie, girl what are you cooking for dinner. Perhaps dalh (peas) and rice and tomato choka (roasted tomato with garlic and other condiments). Or “shake mih hand gyul, mih finger full ah gold rings”. This particular song was indelibly impressed on my mind because my father used to sing it when it was fun time. This song was also established in the raga pilu. Many years later, when I was studying in India, one of my gurus taught the same melody as a classical composition for sitar. Today whenever I play this raga, I would invariably play this composition which no classical musician can say is wrong. Incidents like these demonstrate the fact that classical music did come to Trinidad.

During this period 1940 to 1960 here started a shift in the taste and aesthetics in Indian music. Form in the local classical singing remained. Singers like Sohan Gildhari, Haniff Mohammed and others maintained the form of the Thumari and the ghazals. But what started to happen was that the form of the film songs started to impinge on the Bhajans and other religious songs. Today many of the film bhajans like “hanwarie re” or “jai jai, jai trirparoie” have become part of the repertoire of the temples in Trinidad. Hindus and Muslims use the melodies of the film songs to carry the message of their lyrics.

The years 1960 to 1980 is the other period - a period in which we experienced the oil boom. There was more affluence and Indians started to break away from the stresses of the estates and started to look for other forms of work. In fact, many of them became well established in business. During this period, Shri H.S. Adesh came to Trinidad as a teacher of Hindi; he however saw a greater need for the propagation of music and established the Bharatiya Vidya Sansthaan, an institution to teach the elements of Indian classical music. In the period 1980-1988 we witnessed a breakaway from the music traditions that existed between 1940 to 1960. The women’s chulti and Barahee songs started to dominate the open stage, but with a new name ‘chutney’, which actually means hot and spicy. I can go on to give an analysis of its nomenclature and its emergence but time does not permit.

I would however like to make a point here; we have claysposianians in the audience like Gypsy, Luther and GB and I want to categorically state that SOKAH originated from an Indian tal called Koharawal. I can demonstrate this to you whenever the occasion demands. So soca-chutney is soca and chutney fusing together. Now when these artistes entered the competition and sang a calypso, and expected to win a soca chutney competition, then something is out of place.
One calypsonian sang the same song for calypso monarch, and soca monarch and placed in each. For the soca chutney, she sang the same song. How can that be categorized as a soca chutney. I mean common sense has to take over here.

End Note

Gypsy and Luther concurred openly at the conference that Soca originated from an Indian beat as told to them by the originator Ras Shorty I.