

THE DEVELOPMENT OF PITCHAKAREE IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

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The word *pitchakaree* needs explaining. I have a photograph of this instrument here, made out of PVC pipe, in which you are drawing up the *abir*, the colored fluid, in the belly of the *pitchakaree* and then squirting it out on people. That is the form today, the most popular form. When there [was] no *pitchakaree*, (the original *pitchakaree* was made out of brass), we used bottles and crown corks, and put it there and shake it as part of the dance. Today, however, *pitchakaree* is the form of a song that is unique to Trinidad and Tobago. The word *pitchakaree* came to us, apart from in films, and those who remember the *pitchakaree* tool, from India. One of the most popular Phagwa songs is "In the hand of Rama, there is a golden *Pitchakaree*".

That song, probably written 2000 years ago, froze that word *pitchakaree* and brought it through the indentureds to us today. And from there the word *pitchakaree* started to be used in this form. *Pitchakaree* was not the first name for it; it was just a local *Phagwa* song until people started to use the word *pitchakaree* for obvious reasons. The seeds of *pitchakaree* came from the folk songs, which our forefathers brought; there were different type[s] of music with different types of functions, as Mungal was saying. And all of that was harvested into the persona of *pitchakaree*. So for example, the *Bidahar*, which is a very contestual type of song, did not have that contextual origin; it really

origin[ated] from separation; the word *Vidahar* [for] instance, which could mean separation, was really a romantic type of song where when the cow herds left home, their wives would sing these songs, and their husbands would also be singing songs in the fields, and it developed into a very strong type of folk song. But later, it developed into a contestual type of song.

If you go to Benares, you will see poets singing *pitchakaree* in the middle of the road. The people would be sitting down [to listen]. After half an hour, they would turn [in] their direction as another person begins to sing. And they contest and give picong. Actually, the word that they use is *vieng*, [which] is just like picong in our own Trinidadian way. So that *videha* is one of those.

The next thing is *Phagwa* songs. One of the criticisms of *pitchakaree* is that it was not *Phagwa* because it wasn't *chowtal*, which was really a big mistake. *Chowtal* was not the only type of song in *Phagwa*. A whole genre of songs belong to *Phagwa*. *Chowtal* is one rhythmic cycle which we have preserved more than anything, and we have come to believe that only *chowtal* belongs to *Phagwa*. The *jumar* and the *jaiti* [were also incorporated] into the *pitchakaree*. In the folk drama, they used to go from home to home during weddings and do these things. Certain interesting things were happening in those dramas as the language

developed. While there were scripts, the performers would use English words or *Hindiize* English words, which we call *Hinglish*, and would give picong to the *dulaha*, and the *dulahin* and their family; and the politicians of the day also integrated it as part of the story of *Harechandra* which really was something about India. So you can see that within the folk drama, this phenomena of responding to the environment was occurring.

In the period 1930 to 1960, something interesting was taking place, with the fall of the Indian language especially *Bhojpuri* (because we spoke more *Bhojpuri* than Hindi). With the fall of that language, people began to use English words that were *Bhojpuriized*, or *Bhojpuri* words that were Anglicized. This type of language which was jokingly called *Hinglish*, was integrated into the songs that were being sung. That now found expression a lot in what was called the rum shop type singing, where people beat the drum and sing these type of songs; another type of song were the 'excursion songs'. So we find a kind of singing was developing.

One of the most important specimens which *pitchakaree* looks upon as a mother, as a great exemplar is this little fragment that has come to us over the years, that is "Rosie gyal, what yuh cooking for dinner?" Here, we have a good example of a snap shot of the Indian society being escorted throughout these years, through the music and through this formulation that people were using at that time. All of these were harvested into the *pitchakaree* format. Language was also a critical thing. Take the word *peacaen*.

Rosie gal wha yu cooking for dinner?
dahl and *bart* and *damma dola wa ka*
choka
 Anytime I passing girl you *peacaing*
massala.

The infinitive *peasna* is Hindi and *Bhojpuri*, but these simple people who had no linguistic tools and did not know language formally, Anglicized it and used the 'ing' to formulate a verb. That was happening when our people were hardly lettered. So it was a natural way in which they were using the language. So that also forms a part of the development of *pitchakaree*.

Pitchakaree therefore started a long time ago. What happened is that the coming of the film songs destroyed the role of the folk songs. The film songs started [to] displace these songs that our forefathers brought, and even the classical singing later gave way to the orchestras and the film songs. That [displaced] the folk songs that our forefathers brought. Chutney harvested the folk songs, and brought them back into the society as a very powerful musical format. But it did not bring it back as it was originally. Now the people are influenced by the musical environment in which we live, and these influences were integrated into chutney, which moved finally into the area of Chutney Soca. So that with the coming of chutney, and the fall of film songs, we find the people like Sundar Popo and Lakan Karri especially, whom I consider one of our best composers at that time, started to compose certain new songs and calypsos using the format of the folk songs. "*Nanni and Nanna*" is of that age and that type. But despite the need within the Indian community, there was no ideological base to any of these chutney songs. As a matter of fact, the lyrics that were being interpreted through those songs were still basically of a very primary and simple nature. It was not contesting space and expressing itself and recording its history and function for the society. It was mere entertainment. So in came the *pitchakaree*.

Pitchakaree started off very, very simply in Londonville somewhere [in the] nineties. I had a group of students, and one of the basic things which all the students had to do

was to compose. Because, when I went to India it seemed very clear to me that Indian civilization was really nurtured by poets, and not by warriors, politicians and commerce [not that there was not any of these], but basically by poets. They intuited concepts and ideas and pass it down, so much so that most of the literature with which we are familiar in Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean and in India also, are basically written in poetry, from the Vedic period. So poetry was a very critical feature of our civilization, but because of language, it had basically fallen off, and if it remained, it remained only to preserve, not to create. So we continued singing about *Ganga* and *Yeomana*, and about *Harechandra*. But we were not singing about Sieudas Sadhu or the great singers like the *Gildharries*. We were not singing about a Mungal Patassar. So we were not creating, and through that creative process we were not expressing the presence of our people. And this need started to express itself through a group of students that I had. One day somebody asked, "What are we going to do about all of these songs that we have created? Should we only have them in class?" *Phagwa* was conveniently close, and we put them in the Savannah to sing with a *dholak* and some *charl*. They sat down there and started singing these songs.

What we found is that the number of people from the neighborhood increased every year. People were being told about these exciting songs and interest increased until Mr Alwin Chow of [the *Trinidad*] *Guardian* visited the *pitchakaree*, and said that this is something that was indeed exciting and sponsored it. From then to 1995, it nurtured itself and went public. The radio stations started to come; the television started to come, and this trend went on until this year when two radio stations and Trinidad and Tobago Television (TTT) carried it live. So this is the basic history of *pitchakaree*.

The other move we are planning for *pitchakaree* this year for the month of May is something called "Under Bamboo", because our music concepts were really preserved under the bamboo tent in the wedding space on Saturday nights and in the *yagnas*. This is really where Indian music was preserved and sponsored basically. Most importantly, 'bamboo' was a way to legitimize weddings. When Hindu weddings were not legitimized, somebody would say "I married under bamboo you know", and that gave it legitimacy. So in May *pitchakaree* would now formally go "Under Bamboo" to create a kind of continuity because all we have so far is an opportunity to sing once a year. Gregory Ballantyne (GB) and somebody else was talking about Indian radio stations that didn't play pan and calypso. *Pitchakaree* is not playing on the Indian radio either. I want you to know that, and probably because it is too volatile.

The functions that we found *pitchakaree* fulfilling is the recording of events. It is interpreting oneself and one's history as was the case with 'Mission to the Caribbean'. It is demonstrating in that song that there is a mystery behind indentured history. We really came here by the will of God, that is the interpretation, beyond history, a purpose beyond history. It celebrates itself and festivals and it interprets the festivals. Interestingly, *Phagwa* is about *Holika* who sits on a pyre to destroy *Baharad* and that imagery is used again and again in the *pitchakaree* to demonstrate and to contest one's sense of understanding of oppression and the society, how it formulates itself, how it is alienating people. So that imagery is used within *Phagwa* to express and escort one's idea.

It also responds, and probably the responsive element of *pitchakaree* is becoming much more pronounced, because of the heated

debate that is going on today. So 'Mr. Democracy' is a very political song. There are many songs which respond to calypso. One song by Gita Ramsing, again this year, talks about a response to [the calypso] '2010': "Prowler has a right, or GB has a right to screele and scream, but is only for him just a dream, when since Independence, we were in the dog house, while you have to wait until 2010". So it interprets and goes on to say "using national culture for a therapy for your slavery and we getting the beat-up". I cannot remember the words, but these are some of the interesting responses and argument as part of that discourse and debate that is going on.

Issues are being held out like Gita Ramsing's 'Letter to Chalkie' and a song sung by a former champion of *pitchakaree*, Gilharry Gay who sang a very powerful song on issues that year. When Panday went to India, there was a great parody. That song 'Panday in India', talks about Panday carrying his *Argee* on the plane to India and says, "Beta you cannot go with *kurta* and *paja*, you cannot go with jacket and tie, you going to your Fatherland so you have to wear *dhoti*". And when Panday came out in India and presented himself and meet the diplomatic corps, everybody from India was dressed up in jacket and tie and Panday alone in *dhoti*. It was a very critical thing. When they went to the banquet, and Panday said "we are going to get *doubles* here, we going to get *kchowrie* here", there was only Pizza and macaroni, and the disappointment grew. So that type of thing is coming about. There was a song

this year which did not make it to the final, which criticizes the Hindu community for the kind of conversion that is going on and the organization, and leaders received a lot of stick for it. So these are the roles and functions of *pitchakaree*.

There was a very hostile reaction to *pitchakaree* from the community itself. That is still going on, but it is more and more being accepted. The Calypso Showcase invited *pitchakaree* and [Alvin] Daniel was roundly cursed on the air ... "why yuh giving space to them..." And then *pitchakaree* was roundly criticized for bringing English Language in a traditional forum. When Gita went to sing 'Letter to Chalkie' in Port of Spain, she was booed. As a matter of fact I have never heard a growl of hate like that. It wasn't a boo; it was something else expressing itself. When she sang in that same song, "since Independence we living in a Balisier patch, and we have worked hard in spite of snake and rats", she was picking up from Shadow. And on the radio programs, it was really war with Gita for saying that snakes and rats are in the Balisier patch, and everybody conveniently forget that she really borrowed and extended somebody who is considered an elder in our nation. So that type of response is happening. In retrospect, I would say that *pitchakaree* has a contribution to make. And I thank Dr. Ryan for not inviting me, as he first did, to talk about Chutney and Soca Chutney, and also gave a space to *pitchakaree*. And I want to suggest that *pitchakaree* has an idea of its own and proposes one thing: always to have a serious message.