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## **Retention and Invention in Bhojpuri Diasporic Music Culture: Perspectives from the Caribbean, India, and Fiji**

PETER MANUEL

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It has become commonplace to observe that diasporic cultures, rather than constituting miniature or diluted versions of their ancestral homeland counterparts, possess their own independent character, vitality, and legitimacy. In pointing out these distinctive features, scholars and others generally celebrate the syncretic and innovative dynamism of diasporic and border cultures. Hence, for example, chutney-soca is often hailed as a reflection of the more creative and inclusive aspect of Indo-Caribbean music culture, as opposed to genres like birha or chowtal that are merely derivatives of Indian predecessors, or as opposed to local amateur renditions of Bollywood hits. The dynamism of a genre like chutney-soca, and the way in which it makes Indo-Caribbean culture distinctive, are typically seen as located precisely in the way that it embodies creolization, or syncretism with a local non-Indian genre.

While not challenging the accuracy or importance of these perspectives, in this paper I wish to focus on the more traditional and neo-traditional stratum of Bhojpuri diasporic music culture in the Caribbean, with passing reference to Indo-Fijian music culture. Looking briefly at birha, chowtal, and the dantāl, I wish to suggest ways in which this music culture, despite its close affinities to sources in India, can also be seen to exhibit features which are in fact distinct from Old World South Asian practices and counterparts. Extending the paper's focus to Trinidadian tassa drumming, another neo-traditional entity, I briefly explore how evident processes of retention and invention offer perspectives on diasporic dynamics and role of creolization therein.

While I would hope that some of the points suggested in this paper may have relevance to other global diasporic cultures, it is also useful to bear in mind some of the distinctive features of the Indo-Caribbean diaspora, in its socio-musical dimensions, when situated in a broader taxonomy of global migrations. One category of the latter would comprise ancient Diasporas dating back two millennia or more, such as that of the Jews from the Levant, in which the scattered diasporic communities cease to have any relation with the music of those in the ancestral homeland. A related category consists of what could be called amnesiac Diasporas, in which, despite the more recent nature of the dispersal, continuities with ancestral homeland music cultures are dramatically disrupted and lost; much of the Afro-American musical experience could certainly be characterized this way, without belittling the importance of the continuities that can be found with ancestral African practices. Perhaps most diasporas tend to fall into a third, more 'standard' category in which the rhizomatic emigrant communities maintain a degree of ongoing contact and perhaps even dynamic interaction with the ancestral homeland music culture; the chain migrations of Punjabis to the US and the UK constitute cases in point, with their lively bhangra dance and music scenes. Some such diasporas acquire a distinctively transnational nature, in situations characterized by constant and regular contact between old and new homelands, dual senses of identity, and extensive bi-directional flows of people, money, goods, media content, and, last but not least, music. Such relations certainly characterize the secondary diasporas of Indo-Caribbean people in the US (especially, for example, Indo-Guyanese in New York City).

On the whole, the Indo-Caribbean diaspora – including the Bhojpuri musical diaspora which I focus on here – constitutes a category distinct from all these, representing instead what could be seen as a set of isolated transplant diasporas, almost completely cut off, as of 1917, from the ancestral homeland – that is, the Bhojpuri region – and in the case of the Fijian and Caribbean communities, from each other. However, instead of amnesia occurring, the communities were able and indeed determined to nurture and cultivate the traditional culture – including many forms of Bhojpuri folk music – that they brought with them. As I shall suggest, in the fertile but qualitatively distinct soils of the new homelands, some of these seeds were able to flourish, in some cases as hybrids but in others as transplants that exhibited a vitality beyond that evident in their ancestral homeland counterparts. A complicating factor – at once

enriching and impoverishing to traditional Bhojpuri diasporic traditions — was added when influences from mainstream Indian culture started arriving, whether in the form of Sanskritic Great Traditions or Bollywood kitsch.

Bhojpuri diasporic music culture can be seen to exhibit different sorts of relations to its ancestral South Asian counterpart. In many ways, for example, Indo-Caribbean music culture can be seen as a microcosm or cross-section of the Bhojpuri-region music culture whence it came. Such affinities are especially evident in tiny Suriname, where Bhojpuri Hindi is still widely spoken, and where the range of folk music genres documented, for example, in Usharbudh Arya's 1968 survey of Indo-Surinamese folk music closely corresponds to what might have been found in Bhojpuri folk music in India as well. However, it should be kept in mind that the traditional Bhojpuri music culture found in the diaspora corresponds less to its contemporary counterpart in India than to Bhojpuri-region music culture as it existed during the period of Indentureship. Hence we find the persistence of some archaic forms, or marginal survivals, in Indo-Caribbean music culture.

### **Birha: A Marginal Survival**

One conspicuous example in this category is the form of birha which was common in Trinidad, British Guiana, and Suriname until the mid-twentieth century, and which is still sung by handfuls of elders and specialists in the region. This birha — whether rendered as a topical song or an accompaniment to Ahir dance — is a simple, repeated tune, to which diverse lyrics are strophically set, typically with accompaniment on nagara or dholak. Given the stylistic uniformity of birha renditions throughout the Indic Caribbean, one might well expect to encounter the same style to be common in the Bhojpuri region today, where something called birha is in fact extremely popular. However, birha in the Bhojpuri region has evolved into a genre dramatically different from its nineteenth-century ancestor, now consisting of an extended narrative tale sung to a medley of tunes borrowed from diverse sources, whether *dhobi gīt* (washer men's songs) or the latest Bollywood threnodies. The Indo-Caribbean form of birha, by contrast, corresponds to the nineteenth-century antecedent (identified as *jorni* by one elderly birha singer and folk historian), constituting a particularly clear case of a marginal survival. In 1886 British Indologist George Grierson published an article, "Some Bhojpuri Folk-Songs," in which he described birha

and noted that it was invariably sung to the same stock tune. While he did not notate this tune, there is no doubt that it was in fact the same tune that is invariably used in Indo-Caribbean birha.

It should scarcely need to be pointed out that folk music in India is continually changing, as songs, genres, and styles are variously forgotten, revitalized, transformed, syncretized, modernized, or resignified. Hence there are undoubtedly many folksongs still encountered in the Indic Caribbean that have been lost in the ancestral homeland, and when one is able to locate the same entities in both cultures, such correspondence indicates persistence in both ancestral and diasporic cultures. Inclusion of data from Indo-Fijian culture affords a triangular perspective that can illuminate such correspondences, including aspects of music history both in India and the diaspora. When one is able to encounter the same entity in Indo-Fijian music culture as well as the Caribbean and Bhojpuri India, then an origin in nineteenth-century South Asia can be inferred.

### **Chowtal: A Marginal Triumph**

The genre of chowtal reveals a number of distinctive features of the Bhojpuri diaspora. Chowtal, as most readers of this essay may know, is a folksong genre, derived from the Bhojpuri- and Awadhi-speaking regions, sung by amateur choruses during the vernal Phagwa festival, in which two lines of vocalists, playing *jhâl* cymbals, with *dholak* accompaniment, antiphonally render a set of verses, with a standard sequence of rhythmic modulations and alternating sections of repose and exuberant climax. Although elderly chowtal singers in the Caribbean may opine that the genre has declined in recent generations, there is no doubt that chowtal is, in its way, flourishing, both among Indo-Fijians and Indo-Caribbeans. One can find a considerable variety of distinctive chowtal tunes and subgenres sung by diverse Fijians, Trinidadians, Guyanese, Surinamese, and Bhojpuri-region Indians, but one can also find some of the identical tunes and texts in all three regions. Given the almost complete absence of contact between these three communities since 1917, the existence of shared tunes can certainly indicate a nineteenth-century South Asian origin. At the same time, one can again identify marginal survivals in the diaspora. Thus, for example, while sub continental chowtal groups do not hesitate to add harmonium and other accompanying instruments, Indo-Caribbean groups prefer an austere, purist aesthetic that accommodates only *jhâl* and *dholak*, and

undoubtedly derives from an era when the harmonium had not been widely used in the Bhojpuri region.

Another sense in which chowtal represents a marginal survival—indeed, a marginal triumph—involves its disproportionate degree of popularity in the diaspora, as opposed to in its crucible of India. Chowtal is prodigiously popular in Indo-Caribbean and Indo-Fijian society, being avidly performed every spring by innumerable groups comprising young and old, men and women, and beginners as well as seasoned veterans schooled in erudite sub-genres like *jhūmar*, *baiswāra*, and *rasiya*. Meanwhile, however, in India itself chowtal is in serious decline. When in Phagwa season in 2007 I commenced Indo-Caribbean-related fieldwork in the Banaras (Varanasi) region—the heartland of the Bhojpuri area—, I naturally expected to have no difficulty finding chowtal groups and knowledgeable informants. To my surprise, it was only after considerable searching that I was able to locate any people who had even heard of the genre. Even among elderly folk musicians and patrons, the typical response to my inquiries was, “Chowtal? There is no such thing; you must mean *chaita*,” or, “You must mean *chaupāi*.” Eventually, I did manage to find a few elderly former singers, and I was able to hear and film some spirited sessions in a market town a few hours outside of Banaras (as documented in my video *Tassa Thunder*). Further research revealed that chowtal is indeed still sung in villages here and there throughout the Bhojpuri region, but it has declined dramatically in recent generations, and most people in the region have never heard of it. It is thus safe to say that in the diaspora—especially Indo-Fijian and Indo-Caribbean societies—chowtal is exponentially more widespread on a per capita basis than it is in the Bhojpuri region. This popularity has been maintained despite the dramatic decline of Hindi comprehension among Trinidadians and Guyanese since the 1960s. Clearly, other factors make chowtal resilient and appealing enough to remain vital. Chowtal has proven to constitute an effective vehicle for community music-making; despite singers’ generally tenuous command of Hindi, participants can easily use photocopied handouts with Romanized settings of texts. And lastly, chowtal coheres well with the sentiment and socio-musical practice of the congregational bhakti-oriented Hinduism that prevails in the diaspora (see Manuel 2009).

The case of chowtal illustrates a point suggested earlier, that the traditional or neo-traditional stratum of diasporic Bhojpuri music cultures—even in the remote sites of Fiji and the Caribbean—shares

certain common features which, though derived from India, in fact differ from India in terms of their relative vitality and, perhaps to some extent, their socio-musical significance. That is, one can speak of a Bhojpuri diasporic traditional music culture that is in some ways distinct from that of the Bhojpuri region itself, in ways that have nothing to do with creolization, decline, or dilution.

### The Enigmatic Dantāl

Another example of a “marginal triumph” common to the remote Bhojpuri diasporic sites is represented by the dantāl, whose origins have been a subject of considerable speculation. The word “dantāl” derives from the Hindi compound of an (stick, rod) + *tāl*, in this case a suffix denoting a percussion instrument (as in *kartāl*, a pair of short wooden or metal sticks struck together). The dantāl, as most Indo-Caribbeans know, is an indispensable member of the standard Bhojpuri diaspora Ur-trio also comprising the harmonium and the dholak. This ensemble constitutes the conventional accompaniment for bhajans, film songs, local-classical music, “classical” chutney, and other miscellaneous folksongs. Indeed, it is perhaps simpler to specify the genres in which dantāl is *not* employed; these would include chowtal and *Mānas*-singing (in which the more portable and easily accessible jhāls are instead played), tassa drumming (using a larger jhāl or jhānjh), the South Indian-derived drum ensemble used for Kali worship, and of course, creole/Westernized or classical Hindustani ensembles. Strikingly (as it were), the dantāl is equally common in Indo-Fijian music, in the same range of contexts. While the dantāl is not exactly a “home-made” instrument, it is easily enough fashioned at a basic machine shop, using readily available material for the rod. Many percussionists do in fact shape the rod and *tāli* (clapper) themselves, if they have access to requisite materials and tools.

The ubiquity of the dantāl in the Bhojpuri diaspora obviously suggests a Bhojpuri-region, or at least North Indian origin. However, the instrument is in fact almost unheard of in the Bhojpuri area, not to mention the rest of India, and therein lies an intriguing enigma, whose examination is revealing, in its way, of the dynamics of the Bhojpuri diaspora. While I shall make here some passing observations and speculations about the dantāl’s origin, I am more interested in the implications of its disproportionate popularity – akin to that of chowtal – in the diaspora.

Several Trinidadians have claimed that the dantāl was invented in their country, and thence spread to Guyana, Suriname, Fiji, and even back to India. However, there is strong evidence suggesting the prior existence of counterparts and predecessors in the Bhojpuri region. Further, even if the diaspora were to be claimed as the instrument's birthplace, there would be no particular reason to favor Trinidad as the cradle rather than British Guiana (Fiji and Suriname being somewhat less likely sites given the later commencement of their Indentureship programs). It may be impossible to arrive at a definitive answer to the enigma posed by the dantāl. However, some progress can be made by, at the very least, framing and posing the appropriate questions, with requisite attention to the status – past and present – of the instrument in India itself.

An initial point is that the dantāl, by that same name, although decidedly obscure in India, is not entirely unheard of. In Banaras in 2009 (as depicted in my film *Tassa Thunder*) I interviewed two elderly singers (of birha and chowtal) who were well familiar with the instrument, attesting that until recently it was not uncommon in the Bhojpuri region, being used to accompany various sorts of folksong. Other scholars have also encountered the instrument, by that name, as used in accompanying Alhā-singing and other genres, in the 1980s (e.g., Tewari, 1980, p. 369).

Equally significant is that an essentially identical instrument, whether called *gaj*, *sīnk*, *jhīk*, or *sariya*, has been used in the region, especially to accompany Alhā-singing (whose proper provenance extends to the west of the Bhojpuri area) (Tewari, 1993, p.16; Schomer, 1992 p. 62&67). These four terms designate implements designed for primary purposes other than music-making. Platts' 1884 Urdu dictionary defines *gaj* (from Persian *gaz*, "a yard") as "a yard measure, a ramrod" (p.897); *sīnk* is "the hooked iron instrument with which bread is drawn from ovens" (p.714); and *sariya* is "a thin iron rod (used in making bars or fences, &c)" (p.658). Schomer's definition of *jhīk* as elephant prod might conceivably have derived from her informants, but more typically the elephant prod is called *ānkush*, while *jhīk* or *jhīkā* denotes a wooden-framed idiophone. (The elephant prod might roughly resemble a dantāl, but more typically, the sharpened point and the hook are both at the same end.) When struck with a U-shaped *tāli*, the *gaj*, *sīnk*, or *sariya* could provide a metallic timbral supplement to the dholak, harmonium, and voice, and, unlike cymbals (*jhāl*, *jhānjh*, *manjīra*) can play crisp



sixteenth-notes as well as resonant longer tones. It is highly improbable that the musical use of these diverse traditional implements in the Alhā zone could have derived from a differently named instrument invented in the Caribbean. In other words, evidence strongly suggests that the instrument was invented in India, if by “instrument” we mean to denote an extant implement played as an idiophone, with the same technique and the same typical rhythm as those of the *dantāl*. What was new about the *dantāl* was, firstly, the practice of constructing it specifically for use as a musical instrument, and second, the corresponding designation of it by the term *ḍantāl*, a term akin to and obviously modeled on the extant instruments *kartāl* and the *jhik*-like *kamhtāl*. (The *kartāl* also appears in Platts’ 1884 dictionary).

The essential questions regarding the *dantāl* are thus: Firstly, when and where did the practice of constructing the instrument and naming it “*ḍantāl*” emerge? Secondly, and more importantly, why did this instrument become so common in the diaspora (especially the Caribbean and Fiji) while remaining (or becoming obscure in India?)

It may be impossible to answer the first question, though I do consider it likely that the invention and spread of the *dantāl per se* was in some way associated with the diaspora. Quite possibly it disseminated through the embarkation depot in Calcutta, which might also well have been the locale for the instrument’s “invention,” that is, its deliberate construction as an instrument and its new name. At any given time during the Indentureship program, a few hundred people would be residing, in some cases for several months, in this encampment, awaiting transport to whichever colony was their assigned or chosen destination. As there was no work to be done in the camp, the indentureds must have indulged in a considerable amount of collective music-making to pass the time. Neither in the camp nor in their destinations would there have been any need for elephant prods, nor is it entirely likely that in those sites *sariyas* and *sinks* were not available in such quantities as to fulfill the demand for metal idiophones in the evening song sessions. It is easy enough to imagine an enthusiastic *sariya* player, who has not brought such an implement to the depot with him, and who does not envision obtaining one in the colony, where he will be cutting cane rather than baking bread. In order to contribute more actively to the song-sessions during the unanticipated months of waiting, for a modest fee he engages a nearby blacksmith to fashion a *sariya*-like object, which he, or someone else, baptizes with the neologism “*ḍantāl*” Meanwhile,

in India, the *dantāl* per se might find its way back to the Bhojpuri region, but players might just as easily prefer to adapt a *sariya* or *sīnk* for use as a musical instrument.

Of course, this scenario remains conjectural, and it still fails to answer the more significant question, viz., why should the *dantāl* in Fiji and the Caribbean come to be considerably more widespread than are the *ḍantāl*, *gaj*, *sariya*, and *sīnk* combined in India? I suspect that the question may never be resolved, though the adoption of the *dantāl* can be seen to represent a typical process of diasporic consolidation of resources. The preference of the more rhythmically versatile *dantāl* over the *manjira* might also reflect the predilection for rhythm in diasporic music-making (especially as the decline of Hindi shifted aesthetic emphasis to abstract musical aspects in genres like local-classical music). More significant is the qualitative link between *chowntal* and the *dantāl* as diasporic entities, and their implications for Bhojpuri diasporic music culture. As we have seen, both *chowntal* and *dantāl*-type instruments derive from India, and have been perpetuated essentially in their traditional forms in the Bhojpuri diaspora, including Indo-Fijian culture. Neither has undergone any particular process of creolization. Strikingly, both have become more widespread, on a per capita basis, than their counterparts in India have. As such they represent a distinctive feature of the Bhojpuri diaspora — from Fiji to the Caribbean —, in which traditional, India-derived musical entities come to occupy greater proportional prominence than in the ancestral homeland. Clearly, certain factors — whose identification may be difficult — have made these entities particularly well suited to flourish in the diaspora. Hence they illustrate a sense in which even the neo-traditional stratum of Bhojpuri diasporic music culture constitutes neither a microcosm of its North Indian ancestor, nor a diluted or creolized version thereof, but a distinct entity in which certain traditional elements have, for various reasons, flourished to a greater extent than in the ancestral homeland.

At the risk of digression, a striking parallel may be noted, outside the realm of music, in the conspicuous diasporic proliferation of another Bhojpuri-derived entity, viz., the *jhani* (that is, the triangular flag mounted atop a bamboo pole, typically associated with Hanuman). In the Bhojpuri diaspora, *jhandis* are nearly ubiquitous features in front of the homes of Sanatanist Hindus. Thus they abound not only in Fiji and the Indic Caribbean, but also in Queens (New York), Sacramento (California), and wherever Bhojpuri secondary diasporic communities

exist. Since jhandis are so prevalent in the diaspora, when I revisited the Banaras area in 2007 with eyes and ears newly attuned to the quest for diasporic roots, I naturally expected to see them fluttering in front of homes throughout villages and towns. However, I was surprised to see no domestic jhandis at all; further, informants from other parts of the region – such as hotel menials from Bihar – assured me that there was no tradition of erecting domestic jhandis in their areas. Jhandis, it emerged, are maintained primarily at Hanuman temples, rather than at private homes. It is likely that jhandi flags, although uncommon throughout most of the Bhojpuri region, came to be widely adopted in the diaspora because Hindus found in them a convenient way of proudly asserting their social identity in a new situation in which they had to coexist with other ethnic groups. Whatever the reason, their abundance constitutes another instance of the phenomenon noted with chowtal and the dantāl, in which a traditional entity brought from the Bhojpuri region acquires new popularity and vitality as well as new meaning in the diaspora.

#### **Tassa: Creole Hybrid or Neo-Traditional Koine?**

The phenomenon of Trinidadian tassa drumming can be seen to illustrate a related but distinct set of diasporic dynamics. Tassa drumming, like chowtal and the dantāl as an instrument type, is an evident transplant from the Bhojpuri region and/or its environs that has flourished in Trinidad's musically fertile ambience. However, if chowtal and the dantāl have retained their original forms, tassa drumming has evolved dramatically, becoming quite different from its North Indian counterparts – which themselves have been changing as well. Trinidadian tassa does in fact exhibit some aspects of marginal survivals, but in other ways its development is best seen as an orthogenetic evolution occurring largely along neo-traditional Indian aesthetic and formal lines, with some superficial accretions from Afro-Trinidadian music. The nature of these innovations raises questions about the meaning of “creolization” and the appropriateness of equating it with Afro-Creole influence.

The tassa drum ensemble, which incorporates *dhol* bass drum and *jhāl* or *jhānjh* cymbals, became popular in Lucknow and its surroundings in the mid-1800s. At present, variants of the ensemble are common throughout North India, where they are heard at Muharram processions, weddings, and other outdoor festivities. In the Bhojpuri region, which

may have constituted the main source for the Trinidadian drummers, *tassa* ensembles often consist of amateurs, percussionists who are specialists primarily in other drums, or low-status semi-professionals. Although my own research has been far from exhaustive, I believe I can safely assert that Lucknow and Bhojpuri-region ensembles compare poorly with their Trinidadian counterparts. Only a few rhythms are played, and the drummers exhibit little of the extraordinary virtuosity that Trinidadian cutter-men cultivate. (The most common rhythms are the ubiquitous *kaharva*, a rudimentary beat called “disco,” and “bhangra,” borrowed from Panjabi music). There is no mass media presence, no organized competition, and none of the sense of lively connoisseurship, rivalry, and innovation that animate the Trinidadian scene. Even the drums tend to be of flimsy and inferior construction.

Trinidadian *tassa* drumming, despite its obvious innovations, does embody some manifest marginal survivals. Obvious among these is the use of the traditional *dhol* bass drum, instead of the Panjabi-style *dhol* now preferred in the Bhojpuri region. Another archaism is the “hand” (composite rhythm) name *tīkora* – a now extinct term used in nineteenth-century Indian drumming discourse. (Platts’ 1884 Urdu dictionary defines the word as “the sound of a drum; the treble end of the Moorish kettle-drum.”) Other developments may represent a sort of “musicalization” process in which drum patterns that once had lexical, textual meaning are now appreciated and cultivated purely for their abstract rhythmic qualities; such may be the case with “*tīn chopra*” and “wedding hand,” whose distinctive, non-metrical sections probably derive from an archaic North Indian tradition of rendering the *kalma* (“*La ilāha illa Allah...*”) on the bass *dhol*. Some specific rhythmic features appear to derive from other North Indian drum repertoires, especially of the *nagāra* drum pair. Also similar to North Indian *nagāra* drumming is the general tradition of freely borrowing rhythms from typical accompaniment patterns in other song genres. Hence, the *tassa* repertoire of “hands” includes items freely and idiosyncratically adapted from local-classical music (e.g., “*thumri*”), from devotional musics (“*Kabirdas bhajan*,” “*Madrasi*” hand), from *birha/nagāra* drumming (“*nagara*”), and, it is generally assumed, from Afro-creole musics, as in the case of “*steelpan*,” “*dingolay*,” and “*kalinda*” hands. Some terms may be of West African origin, via Afro-French Creole, including the drum names “*foulay*” (Anglicized as “*fuller*,” also denoting a bamboo-bamboo instrument) and even “*cutter*,” possibly deriving from or being

etymologically reinforced by the Afro-Caribbean drum name *katá* (used, among other contexts, to denote a drum in Orisha/Shango music).

Tassa drummers like Lenny Kumar speak openly about deriving inspiration from Afro-creole musics, and the hand-names “dingolay,” “steelpan,” and “kalinda” might certainly suggest such syncretism. However, it could also be argued that these names suggest a greater degree of syncretism than has actually occurred and that these rhythms remain fundamentally Indian rather than Afro-creole in character. (Further, there is no Afro-creole rhythm called “dingolay,” and even steel drum music is not distinguished by any particular uniform rhythm). Quite possibly the adoption of these names reflects a certain *spirit* of innovation and openness, even as the rhythms they denote are easily accommodated into the extant tassa style, and they lack the features which are particularly distinctive of Afro-Caribbean drumming (pervasive syncopation, temporary polyrhythms, two-vs.-three cross-rhythms, etc.). In linguistic terms, it might be less appropriate to see tassa drumming as a Creole than as a koine, that is, an orthogenetic entity that, although syncretic, incorporates elements primarily from related (in this case, Indian) traditions rather than from external (Afro-Creole) ones.

Such considerations call for further interrogation of the concept of “creolization.” In the Indo-Caribbean context, creolization has been traditionally understood, both in academic and lay discourse, as assimilation to Afro-West Indian values and practices. However, analytical problems emerge when “Creole” is understood not in purely racial terms, as “syncretic Afro-Caribbean,” but as a general cultural disposition characteristic of mainstream Caribbean society over the centuries. Mintz and Price (1976, p. 26), for example, persuasively identify Caribbean creolism not merely with racial and cultural hybridity, but with a spirit of dynamism, creativity, and an expectation of and openness to change.

An interpretive challenge emerges when this broader, attitudinal sense of the “creole” is applied to multiracial Trinidad, where local discourse identifies the term specifically with the erstwhile “mainstream” culture of a specific race, viz., Afro-West Indians. Thus, on one discursive level, the celebrated Trinidadian trinity of calypso, carnival, and steel band is Creole partly because of its overwhelming association, especially in terms of historical origins, with Afro-Trinidadians rather than East Indians. Meanwhile, in the broader, more

conceptual terms of Mintz and Price, calypso, carnival, and steel band are creole less by racial affinity than because of their embodiment of the values of dynamic openness and innovative creativity. Much of Indo-Caribbean culture, it could well be argued, is fundamentally conservative and traditional, and is thereby comfortably contrasted with "Creole" culture, both in terms of racial affiliation and attitudinal disposition. However, insofar as other aspects of Indo-Caribbean culture, such as tassa drumming, reflect a sense of dynamism, creativity, and openness to change, must these features be automatically interpreted as deriving from Afro-Creole culture? Is it not possible for Indo-Trinidadians to be dynamic, innovative, and "Creole" without necessarily being douglarized?

Inspired by these concerns, Sri Lankan anthropologist Viranjani Munasinghe (2001, p. 135-140) argues that the concept of creolization be dislodged from its racial moorings and instead be identified, *a la* Mintz and Price, with general cultural orientations so that it can be detected in East Indians without necessarily involving assimilation to any Afro-Trinidadian mainstream. On a mundane level, the distinction is terminological: if, following Munasinghe, we use "Creole" to connote a general sensibility rather than a socio-racial feature, then we are not only at odds with established Trinidadian discourse but are also obliged to use a different term from that standard "creolization" to denote "Afro-West Indian syncretism" (aside from the value-laden "douglarization"). However, the contradiction involves an interpretive level aside from the lexicographical one. Tassa drummers of recent generations have certainly been animated by a spirit of creativity and openness. Must this sensibility be interpreted as deriving from "creole" – that is Afro-West Indian – influence, or should it be seen as reflecting, *pace* Mintz and Price, a general disposition characteristic of Caribbean culture as a whole (whose mainstream, in most of the region, happens to be primarily black or mulatto)? Or, lastly, should it not be ascribed either to any particular Caribbean or Afro-Trinidadian inspiration, but instead be seen as something that could have comfortably emerged from East Indian society itself, which has perhaps never been as inherently static and conservative as some may have argued? Is it not insulting, and perhaps even racist, to presuppose that any sort of innovative creativity in Indo-Caribbean culture must be attributed to Afro-Trinidadian influence? What, then, is the best way to interpret the dynamism of tassa drumming? As Afro-Trinidadian-inspired, or as essentially *Caribbean*,

or as orthogenetically East Indian? While I shall not attempt to answer these challenging questions here, at this point I will suggest that all three dynamics may be operant – regardless of how we choose to deploy the term “creolization” – and that, following Munasinghe, it may well be appropriate to speak of an Indo-Caribbean Creole sensibility that is not dependent on Afro-West Indian inspiration.

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