

City University of New York (CUNY)

CUNY Academic Works

Publications and Research

John Jay College of Criminal Justice

2012

The trajectories of transplants: Singing Alha, Birha, and the Ramayan in the Indic Caribbean

Peter L. Manuel
CUNY Graduate Center

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/jj_pubs/310

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).
Contact: AcademicWorks@cuny.edu

The Trajectories of Transplants:
Singing Alhâ, Birhâ, and the Râmâyan in the Indic Caribbean

Peter Manuel

Abstract: Indo-Caribbean music culture includes a stratum of traditional genres derived from North India's Bhojpuri region. This article discusses three such genres: Alhâ-singing, an archaic form of birhâ, and an antiphonal style of singing the Tulsidas Râmâyan. Despite the lack of supportive contact with the Bhojpuri region after 1917, these genres flourished until the 1960s, after which the decline of Bhojpuri as a spoken language in Trinidad and Guyana, together with the impact of modernity in general, undermined their vitality. A comparative perspective with North Indian counterparts reveals illuminating parallels and contrasts.

Indo-Caribbean music culture is a rich and heterogeneous entity, comprising syncretic commercial popular hybrids like chutney-soca, unique neo-traditional forms like tassa drumming and local-classical singing, and traditional genres like chowtâl which are essentially identical to their South Asian forebears. In this article I examine a particular stratum of Indo-Caribbean music, in the form of a set of narrative folk song genres transplanted from North India's Bhojpuri region during the indentureship period (1845-1917). After the termination of the indentureship, contact with the ancestral Bhojpuri region ceased, leaving these genres to flourish for several decades in complete isolation from their homeland roots. Perhaps because the three genres have declined dramatically in the last half-century, they have been poorly documented; however, they merit study for at least three reasons. First, in their heyday two of them were among the most popular, important, and dynamic components of Indo-Caribbean music culture. Second, their study can shed much light on their Bhojpuri-region counterparts, which they so closely resemble, and which themselves have been inadequately documented. And finally, it is hoped that their examination may yield broader insights into the diasporic dynamics not only of the Indic Caribbean, but of other diasporic cultures as well.

Most of the North Indian music heritage brought to the Caribbean—primarily Trinidad, Guyana, and Suriname—consisted of folk genres that were predominantly text-driven, in that their expressive interest lay primarily in

lyric content rather than purely musical dimensions. Hence, for example, the preponderance of melody-specific genres, each of which relies on a simple stock tune to which diverse lyrics are set.¹ The vitality of such genres in Trinidad and Guyana has been gravely undermined by the dramatic decline of Hindi language comprehension since the 1960s, coupled with the complete lack of supportive contact with the Bhojpuri region since the 1917, when the last ship bearing indentured workers arrived. And yet, the fate of these music idioms has not been one of uniform decadence. This article discusses three genres of Bhojpuri-region narrative song, exploring how diverse factors have conditioned their trajectories in the diaspora. The three genres are (1) an archaic form of *birhâ*, which took on a new life in the diaspora, (2) an antiphonal style of singing the *Râmcharitmânas* of Tulsidas, and (3) the *Alhâ-khând*, a martial epic.

In the Caribbean diaspora a variety of factors conspired against the vitality of traditional folksong genres. Mechanization of domestic tasks undermined the performance of work songs such as *jatsâr*, which accompanied the grinding of wheat. Caste-specific songs either entered the generalized repertoire or else, like the boatmen's *mallah gît*, disappeared along with the caste identities that had sustained them. In the tropical latitudes of the Caribbean, the relative absence of distinct winter and summer vitiated seasonal genres like *ghâto* and *kajri* (although some vernal *phagwâ* songs, associated with the still-popular Holi festival, have survived vigorously). Commercial popular musics—whether Bollywood threnodies or reggae and hip-hop—have further marginalized folk songs, literally drowning out women's songs at weddings and other events. In Suriname, the sheer smallness of the population and its ongoing dispersal to the Netherlands and elsewhere have weakened traditions that require a certain demographic critical mass for sustenance. However, by far the gravest challenge to the vitality of Bhojpuri folksong has been the inexorable decline of Hindi (in its various dialects) in Trinidad and Guyana and its wholesale replacement by English.

In the latter nineteenth century, a version of Bhojpuri mixed with Avadhi had become a standardized colloquial koine in Trinidad, Suriname, and British Guiana. The predominance of this lingua franca—which even South Indian immigrants felt obliged to learn—was reinforced by the insular nature of Indo-Caribbean society, as the first generations of indentureds tended to cluster in ethnically homogeneous villages, avoiding contact with sometimes

hostile blacks, arrogant whites, and proselytizing missionary schools. As in India's *purab* ("eastern") regions whence most of the immigrants had come, many Indo-Caribbeans for whom Bhojpuri served as a mother tongue would also acquire some familiarity with related forms of Hindi, especially since Bhojpuri itself lacked the status of a written language. Thus, for example, many Indo-Caribbeans, like their cousins in the Bhojpuri heartland, would acquire a certain passive familiarity with medieval literary Avadhi through hearing and, in many cases, singing Tulsidas' *Râmcharitmânas*, which was cherished as a pre-eminent devotional text. Meanwhile, pandits visiting from India and locals who managed to receive some sort of formal training in Hinduism would occasionally revert to a form of Sanskritized standard Hindi in their dilations on scriptures, especially in formal functions called *bhâgvat*, *kathâ*, or *pûja*. From the latter 1940s, a more colloquial standard Hindi would be promoted by the popularity of Bollywood films and their songs. Collectively, these sources provided for many a mutually reinforcing set of resources for Hindi competence extending beyond the Bhojpuri dialect itself.

In Suriname, the relatively late commencement of Indian indentureship in 1879, together with the polyglot, multi-ethnic milieu of Javanese, blacks, whites, and East Indians generated a situation in which Sarnami—the local Bhojpuri/Avadhi dialect sprinkled with Dutch—has continued to be widely used among the Indian population. Most Indo-Surinamese ("Hindustanis") are also competent in standard Hindi, which is used in broadcast media, imported Bollywood films, and local language schools. However, many young Indo-Surinamese nowadays eschew Sarnami, which they see as a relic of their grandparents' rustic "coolie" culture.

In Trinidad and Guyana, the decline of Bhojpuri was more inexorable, as Indians were increasingly immersed in the English-speaking world of schools, politics, trade, the media, and their creole neighbors. While many elders were competent in Bhojpuri through the 1950s-60s, since that period hardly any young people have learned the language. The effective demise of Bhojpuri followed the conventional pattern of a language unsupported by family transmission not extending to the third generation. While the Hindu religion has flourished, most Indo-Trinidadians and Guyanese of the current generations know only a limited lexicon of miscellaneous Hindi terms pertaining to cuisine, religion, kinship, and Hindu festivities.

The decline of Hindi/Bhojpuri comprehension, as might be expected, has irreversibly eroded the vitality of much

of Indo-Caribbean Bhojpuri song, especially since so much of that repertoire is text-driven. In my previous book *East Indian Music in the West Indies*, I discussed the deleterious effect of language loss on Trinidadian and Guyanese local-classical music, whose texts—mostly derived from century-old songbooks—are no longer understood by most listeners. At the same time I noted that Trinidadian local-classical singing remains reasonably vital, although cultivated and appreciated more for its purely formal musical qualities than for its lyric content. Indeed, local-classical music continues to be performed at various events in Trinidad, including *bhâgvats* and *pûjas*, Râmâyan-singing sessions, nuptial “cooking-night” parties, and competitions, which may draw dozens of competent performers, young and old, out of the woodwork. In a previous article in this journal (2009), I discussed one Indo-Caribbean genre, *chowntâl*, that has thrived in spite of the decline of Hindi. The survival of these art forms illustrates that the erosion of the Hindi linguistic base need not constitute a mortal blow to an Indo-Caribbean song genre. Further, even where impact of language loss is manifestly deleterious, the particular downward trajectory of a neo-traditional genre is conditioned by a variety of other factors, which are best illuminated by examination of specific genres. In the Trinidadian context, also noteworthy are two quite distinct genres—Orisha worship songs and *parang*—which have fared quite well in spite of the decline of spoken Yoruba and Spanish, respectively.

Birhâ

In 1886 the erudite folklorist, linguist, and civil servant George Grierson published an article, “Some Bhojpuri Folk-songs,” much of which was devoted to an unpretentious North Indian rural genre called *birhâ*. Given the evident popularity of this form in the Bhojpuri region during the heyday of the indentureship period, it is not surprising that it was transplanted to the Caribbean, where it flourished as a vehicle both for traditional lore as well as contemporary expression. Meanwhile, in India *birhâ* evolved after the indenture period into an entirely different musical genre. As with twins separated in childhood and reared in remote milieus, the disparate trajectories of the two genres reflect how socio-cultural surroundings—especially those of the Caribbean diaspora—condition the style, lyric content, and relative vigor of a musical form.

The most rustic and presumably primordial form of Bhojpuri birhâ is essentially what Henry characterizes as a field holler, called *khari birhâ*, consisting of one or more couplets sung *fortissimo* to a simple "tumbling strain," quintessentially by an Ahir peasant seeking to commune with brethren some distance away (see Henry 1988:150-53). (Ahirs, who nowadays in India prefer to be called Yâdavs, are a traditional cowherding caste, low-to-middle in rank but proud of their traditional image as virile and martial.) The term *khari birhâ* can also comprise a somewhat more ample form, in which a solo amateur singer, perhaps aided by one or more accompanists who shout out the final verse words, sings a narrative text of indeterminate length for entertainment at various social events (see, e.g., Prasad 1987:95-96). While Grierson does not use the term *khari birhâ*, the genre he describes seems to correspond to latter this form of the genre. Prefacing his presentation of forty-two song texts, he remarks:

I cannot say that they possess much literary excellence; on the contrary, some of them are the merest doggerel; but they are valuable as being one of the few trustworthy exponents which we have of the inner thoughts and desires of the people. The Bir'hâ is essentially a wild flower. To use the language of one of them, "it is not cultivated in the field, nor is it borne upon the branches of the fruit-tree. It dwells in the heart, and when a man's heart overflows, he sings it." (1886:210-11)

As to birhâ's musical form, Grierson merely relates that it is a typical Bhojpuri folk song genre in having a single stock tune, to which all texts are set. As we shall see, familiarity with the Caribbean transplant enables us to identify this tune.

In the first half of the twentieth century, after the indentureship period, when modernity began to vitiate various folk genres, Indian birhâ, rather than declining, underwent a dramatic metamorphosis. As Scott Marcus (1989) has documented, under the leadership of a few energetic innovators, birhâ assumed the form of an extended narrative song, accompanied by percussion and, eventually, the ubiquitous harmonium. As performed by professional or semi-professional singers organized in formal *akhâras* (clubs), it became a vehicle for competitive poetic-musical duels (*dangals*), performed on stages at weddings and other events both in the countryside and in cities like Banaras, while retaining its use of colloquial Bhojpuri. Most

strikingly, from the 1940s its melodic resources were exponentially expanded by the practice of omnivorously borrowing tunes from all manner of sources, whether *kaharva gît* (water-carrier's songs) or the latest Bollywood hits. The cassette boom of the 1980s afforded birhâ a medium for wide and unprecedented mass media dissemination (Manuel 1993), which has continued in 2000s as cassettes gave way to MP3 discs and VCDs (video compact discs). The birhâ described by Grierson and sung in the Caribbean represents a sort of intermediate sub-genre, more extended than the field holler, but shorter, less elaborate, and melodically far more limited than the modern professional birhâ.

In the Bhojpuri region, short birhâ fragments—akin to the more musical version of *khari birhâ*—may also be sung to accompany Ahir dance (*Ahîrvâ kâ nâch*) or, or more properly, during interludes between dancing. However, more essential in accompanying this genre is the venerable nagâra (*nakâra*, *naqâra*) drum pair, consisting of a large rounded kettle-drum and a shallower partner, played with a pair of wooden sticks. The nagâra is found throughout North India, and in the Bhojpuri region is also played at temples (especially dedicated to Devi, the mother goddess), funeral processions, and other events. In that area it is particularly beloved by the Ahirs (and *kurmis*), although they themselves generally do not play it, but reserve that task for Chamârs, the untouchable caste traditionally associated with leather-working. At rural weddings and other festivities, Ahir men may dance energetically, invigorated by the thunderous drumming, by the consumption of spirituous liquors, and, it may be said, by their own self-image as a physically vigorous race. The Ahir dance can include pneumatic pelvic pumping, athletic leaps, and even cartwheels, with some of the movements being associated with particular drum patterns, such as *khari kilaiya*. During breaks in the dancing, someone might informally shout out a short birhâ, typically with one hand cupped over his ear and the other arm raised theatrically.²

Birhâ in the Caribbean

Prior to the emergence of professional narrative birhâ in India, the many Ahirs (perhaps over thirty thousand³) who emigrated to the Caribbean brought their cherished birhâ with them. Living in their insular village and plantation communities, and striving to maintain their culture in the unfamiliar surroundings, the Ahirs cultivated birhâ both as a link to tradition and as a vehicle for merrymaking and original lyric creation. Moreover, just as Bhojpuri became

a lingua franca for Indians from various parts of the subcontinent, so did birhâ extend its popularity beyond the caste boundaries that were, in any case, steadily evaporating. As Usharbudh Arya noted in his 1968 study of Bhojpuri folk music in Suriname, "The *Ahîrs* seem to have created the Indian *birahâ* which was for long particularly their form of song but has now become the vehicle of creative poetry for all the Hindus of Surinam" (1968:28).

As a musical form, Indo-Caribbean birhâ is the epitome of simplicity, consisting essentially of a simple stock tune to which verses are set. As Grierson (1886:212-23; 1884:199) noted, each pair of lines should ideally follow a prosodic meter of 6+4+4+2, 4+4+3 (or 4), but this convention is perhaps more honored in the breach than in the observance. Elderly singers stressed to me that many different texts could be twisted to fit in the birhâ form, as long as the rhythm and the setting flowed smoothly. Rupnarayan Gayadeen (b. 1932), one of the few birhâ "stalwarts" surviving in Trinidad, told me in 2009, "You could take anything and put it in a birhâ tune, as long as it fits."

A proper Caribbean birhâ rendition commences with a *dohâ*, or Hindi couplet in a standardized meter, which is sung free-rhythmically, essentially to the same tune as the birhâ proper. Then, upon the entrance of the nagâra, follows the birhâ itself, invariably in its simple "air" which descends from the fourth degree to the tonic, rising again to the third and then subsiding; subsequent lines center around the tonic, starting with the 6th scalar degree below and continuing indefinitely. Elderly Surinamese vocalist Mangre Siewnarine, the country's most knowledgeable and respected birhâ exponent, designated these subsequent lines as *lâchâri*, in a manner evidently corresponding to that suggested by Arya (1968:30), who, however, did not provide any transcriptions. Example 1 illustrates this form, which is standard—indeed, strikingly so—among Indian exponents throughout Suriname, Guyana, and Trinidad.

Ex. 1: Indo-Caribbean standard birhâ tune.

♩ = 168

Râ - ma - ji ki ba - gi - ya Si - ta ke phu - la - vâ - ri

La - chi - ma - na de - va - ra bai - th ra - kh - vâ - ri

Indo-Caribbean birhâ is ideally accompanied by the nagâra drum pair, which, as mentioned, is traditionally associated, like birhâ itself, with Ahirs. While accompanying singing, the nagâra typically plays a pattern which could be schematized as ta tika ta ta ta tika ta ta ta etc.; between verses it plays more varied patterns. In some situations, as in a solo which might precede the singing, a knowledgeable nagâra drummer may play in a distinctively capricious manner, flitting from one tempo and pattern to another. During these breaks, the singer, or one or more men, may dance in the athletic “bare-back” *Ahîrvâ kâ nâch* style, ideally wearing the characteristic three-quarters pants and a sash which the dancer might twirl in one hand. In place of nagâra, accompaniment could be provided on the common dholak or even tassa drums, if the latter are played with restraint so as not to drown out the vocalist.

Indo-Trinidadian music savant Narsaloo Ramaya described birhâ in its heyday:

On such a night large crowds of people from the village would gather to witness the entertainment. The Ahir dance seemed to have been the most popular. This style of dance was forceful and virile with well coordinated steps and movements. The participants were only men and the combination of drummers, singers and dancers, presented a fascinating scene in which the dancers with naked backs and willows on their feet made rhythmical movements of the body to the beating of the Nagâra drums while the singer, with fingers in his ears sang his Biraha songs with great gusto, the total effect of the performance giving much pleasure to the spectators. The Ahir dance has always been one of the main attractions on wedding nights and its performance survived until quite recently. (1965, in Myers 1998:119)

On other occasions, birhâ could serve as a vehicle for two individuals, perhaps with assistants, to engage in a lyric

duel, typically testing each other's knowledge of Krishnaite (*Krishna-autâric*) or Râmâyan (*Ram-autâric*) mythology, as related by Arya in reference to Suriname:

[Birhâ] is a topical song, sung by both sexes, like the calypso of Trinidad. It may be composed instantaneously by any person on any subject. It may break all bounds of propriety and social rules. It may protest against any practice, custom or person, or may praise these. The author has heard long *birahâs*, composed on the spot to celebrate an occasion, for example, the presence of an honoured guest. ... It may be sung on a *dholak* or without any instrument at all. There are, now fewer and fewer, all-night competitions of *birahâ* composition and singing in which two parties may compete with questions and answers ... or discussions on any topic, in a challenging manner ... until one party accepts defeat ... The fame of a good *birahâ* singer travels far and wide. (1968: 29)

Trinidadian folk singer Sagar Sookhraj also recalled such events:

Yes, birhâ is simple, but sometimes the two people clash, without stopping, and if they singing on Râm-autaric you have to stay on that til you finish up and then you know who has won, like if you ask me a question and I can't remember. They makin' up the wordin's. And if you the winner, then you can change to Krishna autaric or whatever. (p.c.)

Boodram Jattan (b. 1933), a Trinidadian pandit and Râmâyan singer, also recalled birhâ in its mid-century heyday:

In a wedding, on Sunday, after the tassa groups had their jassle [duel], the birhâ will start, the dulhan's side competing with the girl's side. Is anyone can sing, not professionals. Question and answer, and you have to know Hindi, you have to respond, and if you can't, you lose. And everyone knew Hindi. But it was all in good humor, though the competition would be fierce. Also in every village, on farewell night they'd play the nagâra and sing birhâ. The elders, my father and all, they knew birha, they were great singers. (p.c.)

Indo-Caribbean Birhâ and its South Asian Counterpart

A comparison and contrast between birhâ as it has evolved in India and the Caribbean can afford insights into both incarnations, as well as into the dynamics that have conditioned the genre's course in the Americas. The most obvious difference, of course, is that Indo-Caribbean birhâ bears no resemblance whatsoever to modern Bhojpuri birhâ, with its precomposed narratives set to medleys of miscellaneous film and folk tunes sung in night-long stage performances by professional troupes. In effect, Bhojpuri-region birhâ, as a popular secular song form not limited by association with any season, sect, or ritual, became a suitable vehicle for elaboration by professionals, with both its narrative and melodic content exponentially expanded. In Bhojpuri-speaking Suriname (and Fiji), insofar as conditions favored the cultivation of a narrative topical song form, the more suitable genre for such purposes was qawwâli, which was never constrained by being associated with a particular stock tune. By contrast, Caribbean birhâ, while remaining a vehicle for amateur versification, never abandoned its traditional stock tune. It thus remained, in Grierson's terms, a "wild flower," unlike the cash crop that its Bhojpuri twin has evolved into since the 1940s; in that sense, and especially in its reliance on a sole traditional stock tune, it constitutes a striking example of a marginal survival.

The fact that the same stock tune is used, with only minimal variation,⁴ throughout the three Caribbean countries, strongly suggests that this was the standard tune used in the Bhojpuri region during the indentureship period, and is precisely the fixed tune mentioned, but not notated, by Grierson in 1886.

In 2009 I interviewed a few elderly folk music performers in Banaras, the stronghold of modern professional birhâ. One of these was a musical instrument shopkeeper and folk music patron named Rishi Guru, who had an extensive if somewhat uneven knowledge of Bhojpuri folk music. Upon hearing my sung version of "Ramaji ki bagiya," he opined that it was a tune more characteristic of *lâchâri*, a term which designates a variety of genres, but most typically in the Banaras region denotes a women's folksong genre. I suspect that Guru was familiar only with modern Banarsi birhâ, and not with older versions that still employ the "standard" tune heard in the Caribbean; meanwhile, however, his identification of that tune with *lâchâri* was of interest insofar as it cohered with Surinamese usage of that term to denote the melody used in birhâ verses. (None of my Trinidadian or Guyanese birhâ informants were familiar with that term.) However, it is

difficult to make much of Guru's observation, as the ambiguous term *lâchâri* in fact denotes a handful of folksong genres, which themselves use a variety of tunes.⁵

Laxmi Prasad Yadav, a retired Banarsi birhâ singer with a keen interest in birhâ history and other genres, offered more specific perspectives on the Caribbean tune, which I sang for him. First, he plausibly noted that it roughly corresponds to the archaic birhâ melody called *jorni*: "First came the original birhâ tune [presumably, the *khari birhâ* field holler]; then came *jorni*; what you sang is *jorni*." He then sang some examples of *jorni*, which were similar to the Caribbean ditty. He went on to demonstrate how the same tune can be found in other genres, including renderings of verses from Tulsidas' *Râmcharitmânas*.⁶ A variant of the tune also appears in a responsorial birhâ sung by a rural entertainment troupe, recorded by Henry in the 1980s.⁷

In fact, the "standard" tune of Caribbean birhâ, in slight variants, is fairly common in the Bhojpuri region. Although the modern professional birhâ has adopted other melodies, what may be regarded as old-fashioned birhâ renditions still employ versions of it, perhaps sung responsorially.⁸ The tune is also nearly identical to a standard Bhojpuri *dhobi gît* melody (which is also often sung responsorially, with the chorus sustaining the final tonic note of a line), and to versions of *âchâri*,⁹ and it appears, with variants, in genres like the *phaguâ* documented by Henry (1988:298-99). In general, it is clear that the tune has been common in Bhojpuri folksong, and was the stock tune for birhâ during the indentureship period. Certainly there is no reason to believe that the Caribbean birhâ tune originated in that region; Siewnarine, for example, assured me that the same birhâ tune was sung by his father, an Ahir who immigrated from Bihar.

Grierson does not mention the use of birhâ in competitive duels, and some evidence suggests that it was not until the early twentieth century that such events (called *dangal* or *muqâbila*) became popular in North India. Such was the case with birhâ, chowtâl, Mirzapuri *kajri* (*kajli*), and with Hathrasi (Braj-region) *rasiya*, all of which came to be sung by semi-professional teams called *akhâras* (see Marcus 1989, Manuel 1993:207-12). In the Caribbean, the terms *akhâra*, *dangal*, and *muqâbila* did not enter popular usage, but the duel format became common in birhâ and Surinamese *qawwâli* (see Manuel 2000:47), suggesting that it was present in India prior to the end of indentured emigration in 1917. The diverse sub-genres of Indian birhâ described by Prasad (1987:94-109) and Hiralal

Tiwari (1980:142-50) are found neither in Grierson's account nor in the Caribbean, suggesting that they developed in India after the indentureship period.¹⁰

While as we have seen, Ahirs in India dance to the nagâra but do not play it, in the Caribbean milieu this caste distinction evaporated, presumably in accordance with both demographic necessity and the general relaxation of caste conventions. Hence, in the 1960s in Suriname Arya found nagâra masters who were Ahirs (1968:9), and by the 1970s most Indo-Caribbeans had ceased to identify with any particular caste. As Trinidad's Rupnarine Gayadeen (b. 1932), an Ahir, told me when I asked about his caste's identification with birhâ, "Plenty Brahmin sing birhâ."

Birhâ as Vox Populi

Both Grierson and Arya, writing of India and Suriname, respectively, stressed how birhâ served as a vehicle for a wide variety of lyric themes, ranging from the pious to the prurient, and from the traditional to the spontaneously composed (see also Henry 1988: 150-54). The most popular single category in Caribbean birhâ has consisted of "*Râm-autaric*" verses, narrating events and scenes from the exploits of Ram, especially as derived from the *Râmcharitmânas*. Four of the five birhâs presented in Laxmi Tewari's anthology of Trinidadian song texts (1994) are in this category, as are a few of those presented by Arya (1968). One of these texts (as sung in Example 1 above) is the most popular verse throughout the Caribbean:

Doha: *Râm nâm ki dor meñ bañdhe raho din rain*
 Kripa kareñ Sri Ram ji sadâ karoge chain

Birhâ:

Rama-ji ki bagiya Sita ke phulavâri
Lachimana devara baitha rakhavâri
Chori chori nebulâ pathâveñ sasurâri
Ohî nebulâ ke banâveñ tarakari
Jeñvan baithe Kuñjbihâri bhajale man Sitârâm

Doha: Remain attached to the name of Ram day and night
 With Ram's mercy you will always be at peace.

Birhâ: In the garden of Ram and the flower garden of Sita
 Her *devar* [husband's younger brother] Lakshman is
 keeping watch
 He steals lemons and sends them to his in-laws' home
 A curry is made from the same lemons

Krishna sat to enjoy that meal; O mind, recite
"Sitaram."
(adapted from Tewari 1994:71)

The popularity of this text is remarkable and curious. Aside from Tewari's citation, a slight variant of it is also presented in Arya (1968: 146), and I have encountered it on several occasions from different Surinamese, Guyanese, and Trinidadian singers (including Suriname's erudite Mangre Siewnarine, who identified it as the most popular text he knew). Indeed, it constitutes a sort of default lyric, employed to accompany Ahir dance, or comprising the only text that an dilettante might know. Remarkably, it is also one of the few birhâ texts presented in Hira Lal Tiwari's study of Bhojpuri-region folk music in India, attesting to its current popularity there as well (1980:149)—in addition to its evident popularity during the indentureship period.¹¹ The ubiquity of this bit of doggerel is enigmatic, as there is nothing particularly extraordinary, memorable, or excellent about it. (Its jumbled insertion of Krishna into Ram's story is not atypical of folk versification.) It is difficult to imagine what circumstance may have accounted for its ubiquity; in general, its appeal may serve to remind us that the travels of cultural entities may sometimes have their own inscrutable logic, which may confound the scholar's attempts at explanation.

Arya provides a few other examples of birhâs on traditional topics, including a young bride fearing leaving her parents' home for her husband's house, and a woman praying to Kali for her elderly husband's death. While many birhâs adhere to traditional stock themes, and others describe incidents that occurred in the ancestral homeland, the convention of singing birhâs about contemporary life inspired many birhâs dealing with the reality of life in the Caribbean. Arya portrays Surinamese birhâs as documenting a series of attitudinal stages toward the new homeland, commencing with the migration experience itself, and gradually moving towards a reconciliation with and even patriotic attachment to the new homeland (Arya 1968: 29-31, 140-58). Some of the texts he presents resemble those I collected in my own research in that country, including lyrics about working on the Marienburg estate, which was the only one to persist until the 1960s. In Trinidad, Ramdeen Chotoo (1917-ca. 2004), a revered exponent of chowtâl and other folk genres, recorded a similar birhâ about clearing land for the train built by the "firangiyas" (i.e., the British).¹² Other birhâs I encountered comment

sardonically on the decline of Hindu traditions, perpetuating a hoary convention dating back at least to Kabir's sixteenth-century laments about the "topsy-turvy" world of his time. Mangre Siewnarine sang a few such birhâs for me, including this fragment:

*Dekho sir se odhani le utâr
Aur lahanga pahire gher ke koto misi ho
Okar edia na karkar ghisarâye
Aur hamâro sirimati devi ji ke deb
Okar theu na theu par dekhe
Main kyâ karu ...*

See how they remove their headscarfs
While the [black] "missies" wear skirts down to the floor,
So that you can't even see their ankles
See how our own "srimati devis" [Indian women]
Wear skirts above their knees
What can I do?...

In another birhâ (which he performs in my video *Tassa Thunder*), he sings of a traditionalist Indian couple whose children take the names "Maricha Luisa" and "Honey Johnny Wimpy." Other birhâs comment with pride on the diasporic experience and Indian achievement therein, as in this song text composed and recorded by Sadho Boodram Ramgoolam, one of the few professional birhâ singers still active in Trinidad in 2009:¹³

*Aja âji tâta tâti Bhârat desh se âi hai
kâli pâni pâr karke Trinidad men âi hai
Trinidad men âke dekho bharke (?) basâya hai
mehnat karke âji âja larke ko padhâya hai
koi teacher-lawyer koi business chalâya hai
koi doctor judge koi magistrate banâya hai
vidya-van prime minister banâya hai
koi pandit koi mullah bhi banâya hai*

My parents and grandparents crossed the *kâla pâni*
(black waters)
To come from India to Trinidad
They settled in Trinidad, worked hard, and educated
their children
Some have become teachers, lawyers, and businessmen
Some are judges, some are magistrates
Some scholars, and one became prime minister
Some are pandits and some are even mullahs.

Caribbean Birhâ in the New Millennium

Birhâ continued to enjoy considerable vigor in the Indic Caribbean through the 1960s, sustained by a critical mass of Bhojpuri speakers and its own resilience as a simple but catchy musical vehicle for traditional and newly composed verse. Since that period, however, its attenuation has been severe. In Suriname, the persistence of Bhojpuri as a spoken language has served to sustain birhâ in a limited capacity, such that it can be occasionally encountered in weddings, temples, and stage shows.¹⁴ However, the Surinamese birhâ tradition has been crippled by the dispersal of musicians and the general lack of a local Indian cultural revival such as has enlivened Indo-Trinidadian culture. Even Arya, writing of the 1960s, noted the rarity of once-common all-night birhâ sessions (1968:29). In Guyana, the problems found in Suriname have been compounded by the decline of Bhojpuri and a generally dismal economic and cultural scene; however, the odd birhâ fragment might occasionally be heard on various occasions, whether in Guyana or in the secondary Guyanese diaspora in New York or elsewhere.

In Trinidad, as in Guyana, Bhojpuri has ceased to be a living language, but the general vigor of the local Indian cultural milieu has sustained a certain afterlife for birhâ in diverse contexts. By the 1990s Ahir dance no longer flourished as an amateur pastime, but a handful of troupes have continued to perform it, with birhâ and drum accompaniment, as invited entertainment at weddings and other events. Sadho Boodram Ramgoolam, for example, still leads a troupe that incorporates birhâ, Ahir dance, and comedy into a "Sarvan Kumar" show, based on an episode from Tulsidas' *Râmcharitmânas*. This obscure theatrical tradition, also formerly perpetuated in Guyana, is presumably of subcontinental Indian derivation, though in my finite experience I have not encountered it in the Bhojpuri region.¹⁵

Rupnarine Gayadeen, whose father came on the last ship from India to Trinidad in 1917, also performed in a birhâ and Ahir dance group, as he related to me in 2008:

Our group was the Aranguez Agriculture Chowtâl and Nagâra Group. And we sang Râmâyan too. We were the only group of that kind, that did everything, but there were twenty-four of us and twenty-two have died. My father was mostly a dancer but he knew plenty birhâ and could play nagâra.

Despite the attrition of singers related by Gayadeen (and his disparagement of younger singers), I was impressed to occasionally encounter younger singers who included a few birhâs in their repertoire, whether or not they might satisfy the standards of a veteran like Gayadeen. Rawatie Ali, who leads a women's troupe that sings traditional songs at Trinidadian weddings and other events, told me:

Yes, I do some birhâ, I have a few in my head. At a wedding, after we do the folksinging, while the haldi [application of turmeric to the bride's forehead] is goin' on, for entertainment I might sing it. You'd laugh, but I sang it at a wake on Sunday night. This lady died, and she had taught me a lot of songs, so after the bhajan and thing, I sang it and said now we gonna get up and dance a little bit, because when she was teaching us she used to get up and dance. Something was inside me to please her, that she was not around but her soul was around, to hear.

Singers like Rawatie Ali may have memorized a few birhâs, but more typically, they have a notebook in which they have written a few that they have acquired from one source or another.

Birhâ has also been perpetuated, in diverse forms, by Ajeet Praimsingh, who has been Trinidad's most energetic and inventive patron of Indo-Trinidadian neo-traditional music and culture. Praimsingh owns a store in Chaguanas, one half of which—the profitable half, he tells me—is devoted to miscellaneous Indian goods, and the other half of which proffers musical paraphernalia, including Indian and local CDs, song books, and other items. His store serves as a meeting place for the island's Indian musicians. Through his organization "Mera Desh" (Our Country), he has with remarkable entrepreneurial energy organized a steady stream of stage shows and competitions promoting all manner of traditional Indian cultural practices, from tassa to the making of local culinary staples of "doubles" and roti. He has also produced several recordings, whether of relatively remunerative genres like chutney, or of traditional styles with less commercial viability. Aware of the need to preserve, or possibly even revive, the formerly vigorous arts of birhâ and Ahir dance, in 1991 he staged a competition for these genres, almost all of whose participants have since passed away. He has also showcased these arts in other cultural festivities and released a few CDs of local birhâ performers, singing in both traditional and modernized styles. Prominent among

the latter are items—including the warhorse “Ramaji ki bagiya”—sung by veteran local-classical vocalist Sam Boodram and younger singer Rasika Dindial, enlivened by soca-style accompaniment. These enjoyed some ephemeral popularity around 2004, with birhâ serving in this case essentially as a simple, catchy melody suitable for soca/chutney-style dance. In Suriname, versatile singer Kries Ramkhelawan recorded a similar soca-style rendition of the “Ramaji ki bagiya” chestnut.¹⁶ Meanwhile, if knowledgeable nagâra players no longer exist in Trinidad, the “nagâra” hand (composite rhythm)—based on birhâ accompaniment patterns—has become one of the three or four most popular and familiar tassa drum rhythms, especially for accompanying dancing at weddings and other festivities.

Thus, even if birhâ’s heyday passed a century ago and its linguistic basis is thoroughly eclipsed, in Trinidad, and to a lesser extent elsewhere, the genre continues to survive, albeit in a reduced and transformed capacity. No longer does it serve as a vehicle for erudite lyric duels, nor for versified commentary on quotidian experience. Rather, insofar as it survives, it has been demoted to the status of a nursery-rhyme-like ditty, which is at once catchy and redolent of a certain venerable rusticity, and with a largely unintelligible text. Rather than being a featured item, it functions more typically as an accompaniment to dance (whether by a stage performer or “wining” revelers). Further, it has gone from being a quintessentially oral idiom to one preserved, for singers’ purposes, in handwritten notebooks.

The Râmâyan

Sometime around 1580 CE a Brahmin poet named Tulsidas, evidently residing in Banaras, completed a lengthy reworking of the Râmâyana (colloquially, the Râmâyan), the tale of Rama. A shorter partner to India’s other great epic, the Mâhâbhârata, the Râmâyan narrates the travails of the righteous prince Râma (colloquially, Râm), who, unjustly exiled to the forest, was obliged to wage war against the demon-king Râvan, who had abducted Râm’s wife Sita; upon eventually killing Râvan, Râm returned to his rightful throne in Ayodhya (and banished Sita to the forest). The story of Râm had circulated in various forms in the subcontinent for centuries, with its canonic written recension being the Sanskrit version attributed to the sage Valmiki. What was unprecedented about Tulsidas’ version, aside from its literary merit, was that it was penned not in Sanskrit, but in a regional dialect—a literary version

of Avadhi, the idiom spoken to the west of the Bhojpuri area.

Tulsidas' epic--called the *Râmcharitmânas*, or more concisely, the *Mânas*—came to permeate Hindu culture in the Avadhi- and Bhojpuri-speaking regions in the subsequent centuries. The *Mânas* is a literary opus, penned by a poet well-versed in the (primarily Sanskrit) poetic and religious literature of India. At the same time, it soon came to be widely—and perhaps even primarily—disseminated via various forms of oral tradition, and especially song. Written in rhymed and metered verse (primarily *dohâ* couplets and *chaupâi* quatrains, totaling 12,800 lines), the *Mânas* lends itself well to being chanted or sung, and accordingly, various styles of musical rendering emerged in the Bhojpuri region and elsewhere. The spread of printed versions of the *Mânas* from the mid-1800s further promoted amateur singing of the text.

Philip Lutgendorf's book *The Life of a Text* (1991) provides a thorough and insightful ethnography of *Mânas* performance traditions in Banaras, including *Râmlîla* theater, *Mânas-kathâ*, and some of the prominent chant and song styles. Some of these styles took root in the Caribbean, where popular fondness for the *Mânas* has continued unabated since the indentureship period. In my own fieldwork I have been repeatedly impressed to meet individuals with an encyclopedic knowledge of the *Mânas*, which they regard as a fount of wisdom, entertainment, and ethical precepts, aside from providing a connection to Indian tradition. The tale of Râm's exile may have had particular poignancy for the early generations of indentureds, in their own state of self-exile from India. In Trinidad, the economic boom dating from the 1970s has promoted a prodigious revitalization of popular Hinduism, much of whose activity has been centered around the *Râmâyan* (see Vertovec 1992: ch. 4). Particularly noteworthy are the nine-day events called *yagna* (*yajna*, *yaj*, *jag*), or the one-day *Râmâyan puja* (or *kathâ*), both of which feature discourses and rituals by a hired pandit, communal meals, and songs—whether devotional bhajans or renderings of the *Mânas*—by invited neighborhood ensembles, local-classical singers, or the pandit himself. Families expend considerable resources and energy hosting such events, which are attended by neighbors and friends who enjoy the collective socializing and eating, and to various degrees, the singing and the pandit's lengthy speechifying. Bhajans based on *Râmâyan* themes, preceded by a pandit's discourse, may also be sung in temples at weekly *satsangs*, which can acquire the character of neighborhood amateur music

soirees. Most of the songs at these events are in a somewhat generic North Indian mainstream bhajan style, with simple, familiar tunes accompanied by the standard format of harmonium, dholak, and dantâl (a metal rod struck with a clapper). Stylistically, they can be said to derive from contemporary North Indian models, as disseminated via cassettes from the 1980s, and via conventions introduced by pandits who have visited North India, as well as the visits to the Caribbean of subcontinental pandits, godmen, and bhajan-singers.

The Bhojpuri region, however, was the direct source for some of the forms of rendering the *Mânas*. Of particular interest, in terms of relating Caribbean genres to Bhojpuri counterparts, is a format called "jhâl Râmâyan" in Trinidad and "Râmâyan bâni" in Guyana. This subgenre derives directly from a format popular in the Banaras area (and presumably elsewhere in the Bhojpuri region), insightfully described (albeit without musical analysis or notation) by Lutgendorf (1991:97-110). The genre in question has no particular name, such that he aptly refers to it simply as "*Mânas*-singing," a practice I shall follow in these pages. *Mânas*-singing is an antiphonal style, involving either two singers, or, more typically, two groups of singers, who may repeat a given line several times before moving to the next. (A third format, which I witnessed in the Banaras region, is responsorial, i.e., involving a skilled leader and a chorus, which may only approximate the flourishes sung by the leader.) Lutgendorf estimates that there may be at least a hundred such groups in Banaras alone. Like the Banaras *kirtan-mandali* clubs studied by Slawek (1986), the groups typically pride themselves on being democratic (at least while singing), in that participants are welcomed regardless of caste. Aside from being devout Hindus, they also tend to hail from the less Westernized and secularized social strata, who seek entertainment in personal participation in localized groups rather than in Bollywood cinema (Lutgendorf 1991:103). Typically, they might meet one evening every week, taking great pleasure in the vigorous collective singing, the devotional fervor, and the atmosphere of camaraderie and shared enthusiasm.

Lutgendorf highlights two distinctive features of this form of *Mânas*-singing. One involves the rhythmic modulations, in the "progression from meditative opening to frenzied climax, lapsing back into quiescence" (p. 89). As he notes, this sequence is typical of other local folksong styles; it is especially similar to that of chowtâl, which I discussed in my 2009 article. The other conspicuous

feature of *Mânas*-singing is the practice of weaving a non-scriptural refrain into the *Mânas* verses.

This form of *Mânas*-singing, brought by the indentured immigrants, flourished in the tightly knit Indo-Caribbean communities, animated by the persistent fondness for the *Mânas* and for communal singing, and by the desire to maintain tradition in spite of isolation from India. In accordance with its lack of a specific name in India, the genre acquired different designations in the New World; Trinidadians came to call it "jhâl Râmâyan," after the small cymbals played by the singers,¹⁷ while Guyanese labeled it "Râmâyan bâni"—"bâni" being the term for the inserted verse fragment. Whatever its designation, its musical form and social practice are essentially the same as those witnessed by Lutgendorf in Banaras in the 1980s. Veterans like Boodram Jattan related to me that in their childhood, groups in which they sang included elders raised in India, who sang in the same style. It is also safe to assume that most of the melodies used also derive from Bhojpuri tradition, especially since innovation is not prized for its own sake in the genre. One common Trinidadian tune is roughly identical to the *lîlâ vâni*, the single most common tune in Banaras *Mânas*-singing.¹⁸

The typical *Mânas*-singing group is called a Râmâyan *gol* or *mandali* (both meaning group, party, circle). The participants are often associated with a Hindu temple (of the Sanatanist mainstream, as opposed to Kali worship or Arya Samaj), though they might meet either at the temple or at an individual's house. An active group might convene regularly on a weekday evening, and also perform at various other occasions. The session might to some extent have the character of a rehearsal or practice, although participants should generally both enjoy the singing as well as feel that they are perfecting their rendition. In such quasi-practice sessions, the group might work its way slowly through the entire *Mânas*, completing two or three pages in an evening and resuming the next session where they had left off. At other occasions, the group would sing a passage appropriate to the event in question. Thus, a group might be invited to sing at a Râmâyan *satsang*, *kathâ*, or *yajna*, in which the pandit, after dilating on some *Mânas* passage, would invite the music group—a bhajan ensemble, a local-classical group, or a Râmâyan *gol*—to sing an appropriate song, dealing with the same passage. (Knowledgeable singers disparage how incompetent youngsters with small repertoires and poor command of Hindi often sing songs unrelated to or even thematically incongruent with the *kathâ* being discussed.) A group might also be invited

to a private home to commemorate some family or religious event. As discussed below, formal competitions were also a lively part of the Trinidadian scene.

A *Mânas*-singing ensemble consists of two rows of at least four singers (who also play *jhâl*) and a *dholak* player. Trinidadian and Bhojpuri-region groups freely add a harmonium, but the Guyanese prefer an austere traditional format with no melodic instruments. In both India and the Caribbean, many temples nowadays have simple amplification systems with a few microphones, which might on occasion be deployed, but usually the sound of the raised voices, *jhâls*, and *dholak* is ample, and even thunderous, such that amplification is superfluous.¹⁹

In subsequent pages I describe a typical song session, including its musical form, in some detail, partly in order to convey some of the complexity of the style; at this point a brief description of a stanza rendering may suffice. At a *gol* meeting, the participants sit facing each other in two lines, with the *dholak* player at one end. The leader commences with a two- or three-line *bâni*, which may or may not be familiar to the other singers. The group, after hearing the *bâni* a few times, and perhaps recognizing it, then joins in, playing their hand-held *jhâls* and being accompanied by the *dholak* player. After the *bâni* is repeated several times, the *Mânas* verse is intoned, in the same primary tune and rhythm that have been established. The group proceeds through the stanza, with a conventional set of line repetitions and *bâni* reiterations. Generally near the end of the penultimate couplet, the meter shifts from a medium-tempo seven-beat rhythm to a faster quadratic meter (which some drummers call "*chaubola*," I term I shall henceforth use). From this point, the singing and drumming intensify dramatically, enlivened by excited shouts as the group races through text lines, trying to render the verses in proper rhythm; then stanza is abruptly concluded with a shouted cadential tag.

As in Banaras, participants sing with great zest and relish, especially when the singing goes well. While an unambitious group might satisfy itself with merely getting through the *Mânas* passage, most groups strive for a cleaner rendition and for the pleasure that it affords. There are several factors that make for collectively skilled singing. Ideally, the participants have strong voices and can sing in tune, while playing the *jhâls* in time. A talented drummer can add a great deal of excitement and vigor. If singers must be looking down at the text in front of them, they will be unable to project their voices; hence the best singers are able to recall a verse merely by glancing at

it, and can sing with their heads up, facing each other. The true "stalwarts" have practically memorized the entire *Mânas*. Meanwhile, the group must be able to negotiate the rhythmic and textual transitions smoothly, instantly following the leader's cues even at fast tempos. Hindi pronunciation must be uniformly correct, and must follow conventions of oral-tradition articulation which may differ from the printed version. Some of these variations are familiar and standard, as in the rendering of "brahmâ" as "bramhâ," and "mo so" as "mo se," and the separation of consonant clusters (*dharm* and *Lakshman* becoming *dharam* and *Lachiman*, respectively), as is typical of colloquial speech. What is perhaps most important is the proper setting of the verse to the rhythm of the melody, a task that is particularly challenging for the row of vocalists that sings a line for the first time. Essentially, they must be able to glance at the line and instantaneously sense exactly how it is to be set. At fast tempo, there is a clear difference between a ragged and disjointed group rendering of a line, and one that is crisp and tight; for singers, when done properly the effect is a bit like a group collectively steering a bus at high speed through sharp turns and corners.

In general, it might be said that there are two distinct approaches to *Mânas*-singing, with groups or sessions occupying points on a continuum between these antipodes. In many cases, a group may sing for the simple pleasures of making music collectively, of expressing religious devotion, and of perpetuating a hoary (and in some cases family-based or neighborhood) tradition. The singing in such groups may be cheerfully ragged, with jumbled renditions of phrases and a parallel-organum effect created by tin-eared singers chanting a given contour at different pitch levels. Meanwhile, other groups, while sharing these motivations, may also take a special pleasure in trying to hone their singing so that it sounds clean and skillful, with tight and synchronized text renderings and modulations. In the process, a competitive spirit may emerge, providing a new dimension of zest for singers and arguably reinforcing its primarily secular rather than devotional nature.

Elderly informants describe how *Mânas*-singing flourished vigorously in Trinidad and British Guiana until around the 1960s.²⁰ Tej Singh (b. ca. 1920), a venerable expert on Râmâyan and chowtâl singing, talked of his early years in Guyana:

I was taught by an India man how to read Hindi. Then I became leader of a Râmâyan group in 1959. Back then we learned the Râmâyan from the book and put it in the head [i.e., memorized the verses]. There were two, three, four groups in every village, and every two hundred yards there's a village (p.c.).

As Singh and other Guyanese informants relate, while there were no formal competitions in their homeland, there was a strong but friendly spirit of rivalry between groups. British Guiana in this period was a stronghold of *Mânas*-singing and chowtâl (and of the regional variety of local-classical singing). Meanwhile, however, Trinidad's lively cultural ambience seems to have lent a special vigor to *Mânas*-singing, along with other genres. In particular, the fondness for organized competitions—inspired at least indirectly by the calypso competitions—extended to *Mânas*-singing by the 1930s. Boodram Jattan, leader of the Sumati Sabha Râmâyan Gol in the genre's heyday, spoke to me nostalgically about the excitement and rivalry surrounding the competitions:

The competitions were so intense. One thing is that the wording has to be concrete, with no error; any error and points will be deducted. The jhâl and everything has to coincide, and there is a panel that's judging the language, the rhythm, the timing. In the north, those groups were no match for us in quality. There was one group who had a little bit of flair — Ramdeen Chotoo of Aranguez. But the others were marking time; they did it for love, knowing they probably wouldn't win. But in the south, Tulsa Trace and Suchit Trace were always in stiff competition. Tulsa Trace had won the jhâl Râmâyan singing for twenty-four years in succession; they had some stalwarts. When my group would lose, I used to cry, but I was always learning from the elders, and from the mistakes we made.

The climax of Jattan's *Mânas*-singing career was the competition held in Arouca in 1962:

1962 was the last big jhâl Râmâyan competition. There must have been sixty or seventy groups then. Now there are just two or three. In Arouca, the judges were a group of pandits. These guys were my main target. When this competition was announced, I got the group together. I took it so seriously, it was

make or break. I made very strict rules for the group, for success. For one month, I told them, we have to practice every day ... So we sang in an order; there's a basket, and every group pulls a number and sings according to the number. Tulsa Trace was the first group to sing. They had a strong side, they were well prepared. But this day, I don't know--they started the first chaupai and made a mistake in the wordin ... The competition was so fierce, and by the end, people became so agitated that the judges couldn't give a decision, they held off. So they announced the decision over the radio three days later. And we got first. That was a big victory.

Jattan recalled the trials and tribulations he experienced in learning the art:

The people who taught me – I used to read Râmâyan, before an audience, and if I'm reading, if I slip, the slightest error, they'd never spare me. They'd say *chup raho, chaupâi phir se kaho!* [Quiet! Now read the *chaupâi* again!] I would get so embarrassed in front of the audience, I'd swear I'd never read it again. And those elders weren't even looking at the book, they knew it so well, they'd read it so many times. But if they'd correct me, and I walk away, they could see that I'm dejected, and they knew that I might drift away from it, so they will get me and talk to me, yes, to encourage me. And I remember the sacrifice I'd make, the rain would be fallin', but I have to go to practice, I'd wrap up the Râmâyan, sometime I'd go home with wet pants, but I'd have to go to the practice.

As Jattan noted, the 1962 Arouca event was one of the last large jhâl Râmâyan competitions in Trinidad, and in subsequent years the art as a whole declined precipitously. While sixty or seventy groups competed in that event, at present there are only two jhâl Râmâyan groups in Trinidad, in Tulsa Trace and Suchit Trace. In Guyana, a handful of groups remain, and three or four Guyanese groups are active in the New York area. The decline is especially conspicuous when compared with the remarkable popularity of chowtâl groups, whose style, antiphonal format, use of Hindi texts, and social function are so similar to those of *Mânas*-singing. Chowtâl also involves the same sort of tight group coordination in negotiating Hindi texts through rhythmic modulations at fast tempos. Indeed, traditionally,

chowntâl and Râmâyan were often performed by the same groups, who simply switched to chowntâl during Phagwa season. (In formal terms, the two genres are distinguished primarily by their texts, and by the typical melodies used in each.)

Certain factors contributed to the decline of *Mânas*-singing without undermining the ongoing vitality of chowntâl. Most importantly, the attenuated literacy in Hindi weakened *Mânas* singing more severely than it did chowntâl. As discussed in my earlier article, chowntâl lyrics are indeed in Hindi, but the smaller repertoire, together with the use of handouts or pamphlets with romanized texts, allows singers to render a dozen or so familiar songs in spite of illiteracy in Hindi; through repeated rendering of individual songs, group members can well learn how to fit the words to the intricate rhythms. However, *Mânas*-singing involves proceeding slowly through the entire lengthy epic, rather than simply perfecting a few stanzas; vocalists not skilled in Hindi would have considerable difficulty in properly rendering the lines, many of which are sung merely once before segueing to the next. In general, the survival of the genre depends on the presence of erudite elders and younger enthusiasts motivated to perpetuate the tradition. Such individuals, although rare, are not entirely lacking, and it may be instructive to look more closely at one outstanding "captain" and his group.

The New York Youth Chowntâl and Râmâyan Gol

When I commenced my research on Indo-Caribbean music around 1993, I had the good fortune to meet one Rudy (Ramnarine) Sasenarine, a Guyanese-American dholak virtuoso and a unique sort of vernacular intellectual. Born in Guyana, in adolescence Sasenarine moved with his family to Queens, New York, home to a burgeoning Indo-Guyanese community. By this time a keen student of traditional music and an avid reader and collector of old Hindi songbooks, he returned to Guyana frequently to learn dholak, chowntâl, Râmâyan bâni, and local-classical music, while also imbibing all he could from veteran singers in New York. After singing for several years in a temple-based chowntâl and Râmâyan group, in 2010 he decided to form his own group, with the explicit aim of transmitting the art to the younger generations. By year's end, the group was thriving, with around a dozen regular members who met weekly to rehearse. Although it had become common for men and women to sing together, Sasenarine felt that the presence of women in his gol might constitute a

distraction, so instead of mixing genders he formed an all-female group parallel to the first one. Although irregular in attendance, devoid of Hindu fervor, and cursed with a nasal and weak tenor voice, I was welcomed by Sasenarine and the group as an occasional participant and performer, both of chowtâl and Râmâyan, and was able to acquire some sense of the challenges involved in singing them. A vignette of a typical rehearsal may provide some flavor of the socio-musical practice of *Mânas*-singing in the secondary diaspora.

On a Monday evening, I arrive at a house in a middle-class suburban neighborhood in Hollis, Long Island. Walking to the door, I encounter Yogesh Dhanram, a young virtuoso dholak player, singing enthusiast, and son of Jeevan Dhanram, a skilled Guyanese local-classical singer. I ask Yogesh why he isn't carrying his dholak, and he informs me that he prefers to use a borrowed drum to accompany Râmâyan and chowtâl, rather than subjecting his own instrument to the merciless battering and whacking that these noisy choral forms require. Entering the house, we see that the host, a Guyanese-American Râmâyan enthusiast, has pushed back the furniture in his ample living room and laid down sheets and mats to accommodate the group. About fifteen people are present. Most, like Yogesh, are in their twenties, but the group also includes a few elders, including Ricky (Ramnaresh) Rajdhani, a veteran singer and former group captain, and Cecil, an Afro-Guyanese longtime friend and enthusiast of chowtâl and *Mânas*-singing. Rudy is seated on the floor, poring over two large editions of the *Mânas*, noting some of the discrepancies in wording between them. The others are chatting about where to get good jhâls, some insisting that Trinidad is the place. I tell them that the last time I was in Trinidad, the leader of a top chowtâl group implored me to buy him some jhâls in New York, which was, he believed, the only place to find good ones. Meanwhile, the singers are unwrapping their copies of the *Mânas* from their red cloth covers and setting them up on folding wooden racks before them. The preferred edition is a thick tome with large print, designed for use in song sessions; it provides the text both in Hindi script and in roman. Eventually, all have found the page in the *Mânas* where they left off the previous week, and someone has passed around a photocopied sheet containing a few bânis typed in roman.

Rudy then convenes the session, leading them in singing a short invocatory prayer. Turning to the evening's *Mânas* passage, he guides them in pronunciation by reading each verse and having them repeat it. Then he

commences singing one of the *bânis* on the handout, with a simple tune, in medium-tempo seven-beat meter. The two lines of singers trade off singing the verse a few times, and then, following a glance from Rudy, they chime in with their *jhâls*, and Yogesh joins on *dholak*. After a few renditions, Rudy switches to the *bâni*'s second line; his neighbors are ready for this transition and are awaiting his visual or auditory cue; those in the opposite row have the simpler task of repeating what the first group sang. The next transition, cued by a shout from Rudy, is the switch from the *bâni* to the *Mânas* verse, sung to the same tune. From this point, the rendition of verses follows a fairly standard sequence that should be known to the singers, but they nevertheless look to Rudy for cues. About midway through the set of verses, he raises his *jhâl* and glances at Yogesh, who dramatically shifts the meter to the quadratic *chaubola*, with the group changing their *jhâl* and melody patterns in tandem. After moving through another verse, he signals again, and the tempo accelerates and the singing intensifies.

I am able to sing the *bâni* lines without mishap, as they are repeated several times, and recur as refrains between the *Mânas* verses, but the latter lines themselves come and go quickly, without any repetition (save that by the second row of singers), and here the singing becomes genuinely difficult, especially for those in the leading row, in which I have injudiciously sat. One must be able to glance at the text line and instantly know how to fit the words to the tune's rhythm, with the proper settings of long and short syllables. As Yogesh commented later, "The line comes by once and you don't see it again!" On several occasions, the collective rendering of a line is disjointed and ragged, and I am able to appreciate the difference between such a rendering and a tight and cohesive one. Meanwhile, the tempo increases again as we approach the last line in the section, and then the stanza abruptly concludes with the shouted cadential tag, "RAM-a-CHAN-dar KI JAI!" There is a moment of silence, as if we are all recovering, and then laughter and chatter ensue.

Rudy wants every member to be able to lead, which involves commencing with an appropriate *bâni* and then directing the group through all the transitions. To that end, he asks Arjun, another elder, to commence with a *bâni*, but Arjun begs off, saying, "Me forgot me specs, me cyaan see for readin'." Democratic to a fault, he even offers me the chance to lead, but I demur with a laugh. He then turns to Ricky, who starts singing one of the many *bânis* he has in his head. This one is not on the handout, so the

group must simply learn it by hearing him sing it, with Rudy echoing, a few times. Notation-dependent as I am, I quickly scribble the verse in my notebook to look at while singing; I notice that a few of the singers, with their tenuous command of Hindi, are mumbling or at best approximating some of the unfamiliar words. Nevertheless, at the signal the drum and jhâls enter, and off we go. Ricky is in the opposite line from Rudy, so that those who in the last stanza could comfortably repeat whatever the first group sang, must now lead the way. The rendition is again rough at spots, but spirited, and I appreciate how the group is singing this passage with an unfamiliar *bâni* and a fresh *Mânas* passage. When the song is finished, Rudy has the members take turns in reading through an English translation of the verses they have sung.

Then the *Râmâyans* are wrapped up and put away, and the host family brings out plastic plates and spoons and serves us a Guyanese meal of roti bread and vegetarian dishes. I chat with Rudy, who informs me of some of the personal continuities that the group reinforces by singing. The *bâni* which Rudy sang was composed by the grandfather of two of the youths, who appreciate having their family contribution perpetuated. Meanwhile, the elderly Ricky hails from Rudy's village in Guyana and constitutes a link to the tradition of their shared ancestral neighborhood.

Mânas-singing: Style and Structure

Most of the *Râmcharitmânas* consists of stanzas comprising one or two *dohâs* (couplets) and around four or five *chaupâis* (quatrains), set in their respective standard prosodic meters. The individual line is called a *pad* (rhyming with English "bud"). In *Mânas-singing*, a given rendition usually consists either of a given set of *chaupâis*, or else one or two *dohâs*. The inserted *bâni* precedes and frames the *Mânas* *chaupâis* or *dohâs*. The practice of inserting extraneous *bânis* is in some ways curious, especially since the *Mânas* is so revered for its literary perfection. In effect, the *bâni* can be said to serve a number of purposes. It embellishes the text; it is often a familiar verse, perhaps being in simpler Hindi, or deriving from a familiar source like the *Hanumân Chalîsa*, thus rendering the textual passage more "listener-friendly" than the *Mânas* alone, with its archaic dialect. Further, the *bâni* personalizes the rendering, since it often consists of an adaptation by a group member, or a relative thereof.²¹ Lastly, it serves as a textual and melodic refrain that punctuates the *Mânas* verses.

The typical *bâni* is of two to four lines, and can derive from various sources. Some are composed by elder Caribbeans competent in Hindi. Lutgendorf noted that groups in Banaras often used lines from seasonal folksongs like *kajri*. In the Caribbean, the declining folksong repertoire has occasioned a greater reliance on songbooks, for *bânis* as well as other practices. Hence the *bânis* might be adapted from bhajans, from a chapbook like the *Bhajan Râmâyan* (a nineteenth-century adumbration of the epic in simple Hindi), from the *Hanumân Chalîsa* (a prayer to Hanuman, attributed to Tulsidas, and memorized by many millions of Indians), or other books. The theme of the *bâni* should either cohere with that of the *Mânas* passage or be sufficiently general that it does not conflict. Knowledgeable singers have a repertoire of several *bânis* which may be used for different *Mânas* passages.

The tunes are generally unremarkable, being plain, syllabic, and simple, with stepwise movement in familiar diatonic "major-" or "minor"-type modes. In general, the musical interest for performers lies less in the tunes *per se* than in the tightly coordinated setting of sequential text lines to the proper rhythm and in negotiating the metrical and textual segues. In theory, a *bâni* verse could be set to any tune, but a given vocalist will generally be accustomed to singing the *bânis* he knows to certain melodies. The *bâni* melody then becomes the tune of the subsequent *Mânas* verses. That is, the chorus hears the leader sing the *bâni* a few times; whether they have heard the *bâni* and its tune before, both are simple enough that the singers can join in after a few renderings; a bit of floundering may occasionally occur until everyone has settled on the right pitches. The group then proceeds to sing the *dohâ* or *chaupâis* to that tune.

In Guyanese singing, the *bâni-chaupâi* set commences in a medium-tempo meter which could be counted in seven or fourteen beats (3+4 / 3+4). Sasenarine designates this meter by the Hindustani term *dîpchandi*; although that term is not known to other Caribbean musicians, I use it here for convenience, with the caveat that it is not identical to the *dîpchandi* of North Indian light-classical music (especially *thumri*). At a certain point—usually the last *pad* of the second- or third-to-last *chaupâi*--the leader gives a signal for a modulation to the *daur*, that is, an accelerated section in quadratic meter. (As Sasenarine commented, "You don't want to start the *daur* too early, because people will get a heart attack, and also some of them maybe can't read that fast.") North Indian classical musicians might call the *daur*'s meter *kaharva*, but that

term is not known in the Caribbean, where instead, it might be called *chaubola*.²² In the *daur*, the same melodies are adapted to quadratic meter. The singing and drumming intensify, especially as the tempo further increases. After the last *chaupâi*, the entire *bâni* is sung, and the passage concludes with a shouted "RAM-a-CHAND-ar KI JAY!" The entire stanza rendition might take about ten or twelve minutes.

Example 2 below schematizes a typical Guyanese-style rendering of *bâni* (transcribed from a session by Sasenarine's group). This *bâni* consists of three *pad*s of text; after the first *pad* is sung, the second half of it ("umiri rahe tori") is sung twice as an additional *pad*; the second text *pad* is then rendered in the same way. The simple "*svar*" (tune) consists of an initial line centering around the tonic, and another ascending to the fourth and above, and thence down to the tonic. For convenience, I refer to these two melodies by the Hindustani terms *sthâi* and *antara*, respectively, although Caribbean musicians do not use or know these designations, and the terms do not adequately describe their function. Every line is sung at least twice, that is, by the first and second rows of singers; subsequent repetitions are at the discretion of the leader, who may shout cues to his neighbors, e.g., "chaupâi!" to proceed from the initial *bâni* to the *Mânas* verse, or "bâni!" to return from the *chaupâi* to the first line of that insertion, or "*adhâ*!" (half) to repeat the second half of the *chaupâi*'s third *pad*. The *chaupâi*s themselves generally proceed in a standard fashion, so there may be no need for such instructions. Mistakes of various sorts may happen. During one informal session I attended, after the initial *bâni* the leader mistakenly led the group to the second *doha* rather than the first. Realizing the error, he then tried to decelerate and direct them back to the first *doha*, whereupon general chaos ensued.

The rendition of the *bâni* may be schematized as follows, with "*adhâ*" (half) indicating a verse line consisting of a twofold repetition of the concluding words (the second half) of the preceding line.

<u>text</u>	<u>tune</u>	
1 st <i>pad</i>	<i>sthâi</i>	(Ab Shiva sumiri umri rahe tori)
<i>adhâ</i>	<i>antara</i>	(umri rahe tori, umri rahe tori)
2 nd <i>pad</i>	<i>sthâi</i>	(bin Shiva gyân dhyân nahin hoi)
<i>adhâ</i>	<i>sthâi</i>	(dhyân nahin hoi, dhyân nahin hoi)
3 rd <i>pad</i>	<i>antara</i>	(yatan karo man lâkh karori)
1 st <i>pad</i>	<i>sthâi</i>	(Ab Shiva sumiri umri rahe tori)

(Now sing Shiva's praise ceaselessly; without Shiva there is no knowledge, no wisdom; let a trillion hearts persevere.)

Example 2: Setting of three-line *bâni*.

♩ = 220

(*sthai*) (antara)

6 A - ba Shi - va su - me - ri u - mi - ri ra - he to - ri u - mi - ri ra -

11 he to - ri u - mi - ri ra - he to - ri bi - na Shi - va gyâ - na dhyâ -

16 na na - hin ho - i dhyâ - na na - hin ho - i dhyâ - na na - hin

ho - i ya - ta - na ka - ro ma - na lâ kha - kha - ro - ri

D.S. (sthai) D.S. (antara) D.S.

After several renditions of the *bâni*, the leader cues the group to proceed without pause to the *Mânas chaupâi*. As mentioned, each *chaupâi* comprises four *pads*. The passage in this example consists of six and a half *chaupâis* (bracketed in the text by *dohâs*), near the beginning of the introductory *Bâlkhând* chapter.²³ The first *chaupâi* is sung essentially as follows, closely resembling the manner of singing the *bâni*:

<u>text</u>	<u>tune</u>
1 st <i>pad</i>	sthâi (daras paras majjan arû pânâ)
2 nd <i>pad</i>	sthâi (hare pâp kah bed purânâ)
3 rd <i>pad</i>	sthâi (nadi punît amit mahimâ ati)
<i>âdhâ</i>	sthâi (amit mahimâ ati, amit mahimâ ati)
4 th <i>pad</i>	antara (kahi na sake sârdâ bimal mati)
<i>bâni</i>	sthâi (Ab Shiva sumiri umri rahe tori)

(The very sight and touch of the river, a dip in its stream or a draught from it cleanses one's sins; so declare the Vedas and the Puranas. Even Saraswati,

unfamiliar *Mânas* text, together with the musical challenge inherent in the form, appears to render the genre simply too difficult for it to survive in any substantial form in the diaspora. *Mânas*-singing had already declined by the 1970s, perhaps too soon to be revived in the vigorous flowering of Hindu identity and culture took place in Trinidad from that decade. The *Râmâyan* played a significant part in this revival, especially in the form of Ramlila theater and Ram *yajnas* and *kathâs*, which feature prayers, pandit's perorations, and devotional songs offered over the course of several evenings. As mentioned above, however, these songs tend to be either simple bhajans led by the pandit or an invited group, or else local-classical songs rendered by a professional vocalist and party.

The *Alhâ-khand*

Thus far in this essay we have looked at two distinct sorts of traditional narrative genres and their similar, though not identical, downward trajectories in the Caribbean. If *birhâ* is still encountered in a few contexts, and *Mânas* singing thrives in a few isolated pockets, the epic of *Alhâ* represents a narrative tradition whose definitive demise is clearly imminent, and is not likely to be postponed by some trendy fusion with soca. Hence our discussion of *Alhâ* in the Caribbean need not be lengthy, and may serve primarily as a point of comparison and contrast with *birhâ* and *Mânas* singing.

The *Alhâ-khând*, or tale of *Alhâ*, is a quintessential oral-tradition narrative ballad. As disseminated by amateur and professional bards, it has been the most popular heroic epic of the Hindi-speaking Gangetic plains, its domain encompassing the Bhojpuri region on the east and Kannauj, Avadh, Bundelkhand, and Haryana in the western and southwestern Doab. Although the history of the ballad *per se* is undocumented, it narrates, with much fanciful embellishment, the heroic exploits of the brothers *Alhâ* and *Udal* (*Udan*, *Rudal*) in the conflicts of three Rajput kingdoms on the eve of Muslim conquest in the late twelfth century.

The *Alhâ-khând* is sung throughout these regions in a variety of styles, contexts, narrative variants, and local Hindi dialects. Singers might be professional or semi-professional bards able to perform the entire saga, or they might be amateurs who can only negotiate one or two favorite battle episodes. Some singers rely on inexpensive chapbooks containing episodes of the written recension (see, e.g., Henry 1988:159). Narrative content in their

renditions might vary considerably, while remaining faithful to the core events of the "lay." An Alhâ-singer, or *alhet*, might perform in a histrionic style, waving a sword about, or in a straightforward, unpretentious manner. Performance contexts also vary, encompassing stage competitions, formal renderings at weddings or festivals, or informal sessions by a villager for his friends and neighbors.²⁵ In recent years, video picturizations of the ballad have been produced by regional VCD entrepreneurs, some of whose output can be seen in YouTube postings.

Generally, Alhâ is performed in India by a solo singer, accompanied by dholak and some sort of metallophone—typically manjira chimes or a metal rod variously called *gaj*, *sariya*, or *dandtâl* (dantal).²⁶ The dholak maintains a straightforward quadratic meter, while the metallophone plays a steady *ching chickaching chickaching* pattern (which is also the basic Indo-Caribbean dantal pattern). Some performers acquiesce to modernity by incorporating a harmonium in their accompaniment. Since the aesthetic interest lies in the narrative rather than in the purely musical aspects, the verses are set to a simple, repetitive stock tune, which varies according to region, discipular tradition, and individual preference. Example 4 presents the tune used by Trinidadian singer Lalram Jaggernath, which presumably derives from South Asian practice:²⁷

Example 4: Alhâ tune.



The Alhâ-khând is a secular tale of battles, treachery, and heroism; although traditionally enjoyed by members of all castes, it embodies the martial valor that Ahirs and Rajputs in particular consider to be part of their clan character. In modern times, performances have been arranged for Indian Army units to stimulate their fighting spirit. The tale, which its vivid descriptions of quasi-historical battles and other events in specific towns in the Doab, has special resonance for residents of those areas, who enjoy picturing the thundering of cavalry over the plains they now till, centuries later. Traditionally, Alhâ is sung only during the monsoon season (July–August).

In typical oral-tradition fashion, Alhâ singers over the generations freely elaborate, forget, reinvent, compress, and expand various episodes in accordance with their abilities, local traditions, and the tastes of their particular patrons. However, like many oral epics, the Alhâ-khând also acquired a written counterpart when in 1865 one Charles Elliott compiled a recension by collating various oral versions, leading to a Hindi publication of the tale in 1871. This printed version has been used in various contexts, but it remains an inherently idiosyncratic and fixed recension of a ballad that has always thrived as a living and changing set of organisms in the oral tradition.

The fate of the Alhâ-khând in modern India is akin to that of many traditional folk arts. On the one hand, its popularity has been fundamentally, gravely, and irreversibly eroded by the new forms of mass-mediated entertainment, as television and now commercial VCDs seem to pervade rural as well as urban India. Hence most North Indians, bred on Bollywood and its musical hit parade, would have little interest in listening to some wizened bard chant endlessly, to the accompaniment of a wheezy harmonium, about the squabbles of petty medieval chieftans. At the same time, however, modernity has also brought new sorts of performance contexts and even new sorts of meanings to the genre. Hence, versions of Alhâ have been marketed on cassettes (see Manuel 1993:156), on VCDs, and on the radio, and it is still performed at various quasi-folkloric events that promote local folk arts. The mass media, while undermining the genre in various ways, offer performers new means of dissemination as well as exposure to other singers' practices.

While there is no documentation of the transmission of the Alhâ-khând to the Caribbean, elderly informants of mine attested to its popularity as recently as the 1960s, and the genre is still recited by a handful of Hindi-speaking elders. Hence it is clear that the ranks of the indentured immigrants included several alhets, whether they were learned bards with extensive repertoires or amateur enthusiasts only able to recite a few battle scenes. In the days before television and radio, such singers were much valued for their ability to entertain Indians in villages and plantation barracks, while providing a sense of cultural connection to the towns whence they or their parents had emigrated. (Continuity was further enhanced by retaining the tradition of singing the epic only in July and August, and some believed that proper renditions could cause rain.)

Given the lack of a critical mass of singers, not to mention of professional alhets, it was natural that the printed edition of the tale would acquire a new importance in perpetuating the tradition. In India, the thick tome would have been of limited interest to the hundreds of alhets who were steeped in narrations of the tale since childhood, and whose ability to memorize verse was not yet undermined by the mixed effects of the printed word. In the Caribbean, however, possession of the volume enabled any Hindi-literate individual to perform the entire ballad, using whatever simple stock tune he knew.

Boodram Jattan, quoted above, recalled of his youth in Trinidad:

Yes, I used to read Alhâ. We used to do it when there would be a scarcity of rain. One thing I still remember: in Alhâ, you have some of the best *sumirans* [introductory sung invocations]. People enjoyed Alhâ because it's very rhythmic, and the old people understood the language back then. Because of the style in which it was written, sometimes people were tempted to become violent. It's about war. Usually there would be one or two people reading, from the book. No dholak, no instruments [though in some cases dholak might be used]. I myself used to have a copy of the book. They were very old books. Whether it was fact or fiction, there was something about Alhâ, it generates this kind of fighting spirit in people. It has a lot of vigor in it, and people would get agitated. Like, it says, just as a dog can only live twelve years, so Alhâ says that a kshatriya who lives beyond the age of eighteen is useless, because they're a warrior caste. That kind of spirited thing. Long before TV, when there was not even a radio, that was village entertainment. Anyone could do it--you don't have to be an entertainer or a pandit. As long as you could read Hindi. But then, as people lost the ability to understand, the whole sense of it was lost. (p.c.)

By 2009, when I commenced my inquiries into Alhâ in the Caribbean, Jattan's explanation of the genre's decline could be interpreted as an autopsy. In Trinidad, I encountered a few elderly birhâ performers—including Sadho Boodram Ramgoolam and Lalram Jaggernath—who had crumbling copies of the 1870s recension and still occasionally read it. In our meeting that year, Jaggernath mentioned that he had been "reading" the book just the night before, adding,

"and people were enjoying it."²⁸ Jaggernath was referring to an archaic form of "reading" which, while using print as an aid, remains essentially in an oral tradition—indeed, in accordance with the oral narrative nature of the ballad itself. To "read," in this sense, is not a solitary, silent act, but a chanted performance of a text done for an audience—in this case, a few of Jaggernath's peers who knew enough Hindi to follow and enjoy the narrative.

While I was impressed to meet learned individuals like Jaggernath, there is no doubt that the Alhâ-khând's decline is terminal, and its conclusive demise imminent.

(Jaggernath himself passed away in 2010.) As we have seen, both birhâ and *Mânas* singing have managed to survive in niches, despite the decline of Hindi comprehension, and chowtâl—another Hindi-language antiphonal folksong—continues to flourish vigorously in the diaspora. But the various factors that enable birhâ and *Mânas* singing to limp along do not obtain with respect to Alhâ. As a purely musical genre, Alhâ is too simple and plain to sustain aesthetic interest, and it offers little scope for being innovatively syncretized and enlivened, as a few performers have attempted to do with birhâ by setting it to soca rhythms; instead, Alhâ is a thoroughly text-driven entity, with the repetitive stock tune serving merely as a vehicle for the narrative. Birhâ—aside from having a more catchy tune—can traditionally be combined with dance and lively nagâra playing, in which context a singer might recycle a familiar snippet like the "Râmaji ki bagiya" doggerel. While Alhâ audiences may have favorite chapters, there are no comparably familiar passages known to such a wide spectrum of lay enthusiasts. Nor can Alhâ be a vehicle for collective performance, in which a group of moderately competent singers responsorially echoes a knowledgeable leader.

Alhâ also lacks the sort of broad-based cultural presence of the *Mânas*, which enjoys wide popularity outside of its being sung by formal mandalis. As a cultural entity, the Alhâ-khând has no such support, and even its importance to subcontinental Ahirs and Rajputs as an expression of their martial vigor has not survived in the Caribbean, where such caste identities have faded.²⁹

Ultimately, the Alhâ-khând, as a Hindi narrative epic, is simply too dependent on linguistic comprehension to survive in a monolingually Anglophone society; it is precisely the sort of text-driven genre least likely to persist in a situation of diasporic language loss. To reiterate Jattan's post-mortem, "As people lost the ability to understand, the whole sense of it was lost."

Conclusions: Narrative Ballad in the Age of Powder and Lead

Is Achilles possible side by side with powder and lead? Do not singing and reciting and the muses necessarily go out of existence with the appearance of the printer's bar, and do not, therefore, disappear the prerequisites of epic poetry?

Karl Marx³⁰

Music genres in diasporic communities can follow a variety of trajectories, depending on their intrinsic features and the cultural ecology in which they are embedded. Several of these possible trajectories cohere with diverse responses of culture contact in general, which have been discussed by various scholars. Nettl, for example, enumerated a set of such responses, including: abandonment of a given genre, consolidation of assorted features into a standardized composite style, syncretism and/or Westernization, and modernization (1978). Kartomi supplemented Nettl's list with other possible process, including compartmentalization and pluralistic coexistence (1981). Further responses could be added, including orthogenetic evolution of a given genre along neo-traditional rather than overtly syncretic lines. Diasporic situations provide particular contexts for cultural contacts, with Indo-Caribbean culture constituting a particular form of diaspora. Hence, diverse genres of Indo-Caribbean music can be seen to correspond to the various typologies proposed by Nettl and others; chutney-soca, for instance, can be regarded as an idiosyncratic exemplar of modernization and Westernization (in the form of West Indian creolization), and tassa drumming can be regarded as an instance of orthogenetic neo-traditional elaboration.

The genres discussed in this essay (like the chowtâl documented in my earlier article) fall largely into the category of "compartmentalized" traditional idioms; aside from the handful of soca-style settings of birhâ, they have not been stylistically creolized, nor have they, like tassa, been creatively elaborated and developed along neo-traditional lines. The ability of these genres to resist conspicuous formal syncretism has been enhanced by the distinctive isolation of Indo-Caribbean culture from its Bhojpuri homeland culture. Thus, although there has been considerable flow of Indian cultural products to the Caribbean, especially since the 1940s, there has been hardly any contact with the ancestral Bhojpuri region since

the last ships of indentured workers arrived in 1917. This isolation has entailed diverse and sometimes contradictory musical ramifications; on the one hand, it has allowed the perpetuation of various marginal survivals, such as the stock birhâ tune that has been largely forgotten in modern North Indian birhâ. Such marginal survivals are largely atypical of most diasporas, which enjoy ongoing contact with their ancestral homeland cultures. On the other hand, isolation has also deprived text-driven genres of linguistic sustenance, exposing them to the danger—albeit not the certainty—of terminal decline. In general, text-driven genres may be able to survive in a linguistically unsupportive ecology only under certain conditions, such as their transformation into genres cultivated for abstract musical qualities, or their resignification as icons of traditional religion or ethnic identity.

In this article we have looked at three narrative folk-song traditions transmitted from North India to the Caribbean; each of these has declined dramatically in the last half century, yet the degree to which they have done so has been conditioned by their distinct qualities and their subsequent abilities to adapt in the changing diasporic milieu. Birhâ, *Mânas* singing, and the Alhâ-khând came to collectively confront a set of grave challenges in the diaspora. One of these has involved the process—noted pithily by Marx above and discussed more expansively by Ong (1982)—in which literacy and print erode not only the popularity of oral epics like Alhâ, but also the entire worldview that generated and sustained them. A related and equally broad and inexorable sort of menace to the survival of the three genres has been modernity itself, whose various ramifications—from mass-mediated entertainment to globalization—have combined to erode traditions dependent on static, isolated, provincial folkways. Meanwhile, the most overt and palpable blow to the three genres in Trinidad and Guyana has been the decline of Hindi—a wound which, as the case of chowtâl illustrates, need not in itself be mortal, but in combination with other factors may indeed prove to be so.

As we have seen, birhâ, *Mânas* singing, and the Alhâ-khând have each been undermined by these developments, but their trajectories, although collectively downward, have not been identical. Birhâ flourished through the mid-twentieth century, as long as it could be sustained by a critical mass of Hindi-speakers. Even after that audience largely passed away, birhâ could eke out a meager afterlife as an accompaniment to Ahir-dance shows, as an ephemeral trad-pop fusion enlivened by soca-style drumming, or as a

rustic but feisty curio sung at odd occasions in a fragmented form. For its part, *Mânas* singing, like *birhâ*, thrived until the 1960s, reaching a sort of apogee in Trinidadian competitions; insofar as these were essentially modern in form and conception, they illustrate how modernity can in fact reinforce traditional musics. However, the competitions and the art form in general then declined dramatically with the passing away of the last generation of people raised in Hindi-speaking households. The genre, nevertheless, is not yet dead, and the handful of groups that perform it include at least one youth *gol*, some of whose members may go on to lead their own *mandalis*. Despite the formidable challenges that *Mânas*-singing confronts, its amateur participatory nature does cohere with the democratic form of *bhakti* devotionism—rather than orientation toward caste and ritual—that animates Indo-Caribbean Hinduism. Regarding the *Alhâ-khând*, there is perhaps less to be said, as its decline is more definitive and irreversible, and its significance here is more as an illustration of the kind of oral tradition that stands little chance of survival in any form once its linguistic basis has vanished.

The diasporic trajectories of these genres exhibit a few trends that merit mention. As has often been noted (e.g., Bohlman 1988:28-30), many oral traditions acquire a written dimension (as in the case of the Homeric epics), such that a dialectic relation between the two forms of transmission develops. This process has been especially conspicuous in the Indic Caribbean, where a dramatic decline in Hindi comprehension has been paradoxically accompanied by an equally dramatic increase in literacy—albeit in English rather than Hindi. In this situation, written texts came to acquire a considerably greater importance than they possessed in the oral-tradition counterparts in India. Hence, while the octogenarian, Hindi-speaking Mangre Siewnarine kept all his *birhâs* in his head, the Trinidadian and Guyanese vocalists who might be able to sing a few *birhâs* generally need to consult their hand-written notebooks of song lyrics. Similarly, alheths able to sing passages of the *Alhâ* epic from memory have long since passed from the scene; even those of the mid-twentieth century described by Jattan had to rely on the printed text. In my study of local-classical music (2000:77-82), I commented on the prodigious importance of old songbooks, published in the decades around 1900, not only as sources for lyrics but also as guides to performance. Accordingly, it might be difficult or impossible to find in India anyone with the sort of

knowledge of and fascination with old bhajan, chowtâl, and folk-song books that Rudy Sassenarine exhibits. Parallels with other isolated transplant diasporas could be found, as in the importance that songbooks and drum transcriptions have acquired for performers of Yoruba-derived Santería music outside Cuba.

Another concomitant of the decline of Hindi is a process of "musicalization," in which, insofar as the genre admits, the more purely musical features are foregrounded, instead of or at the expense of textual features. Such a process can be said to be operant when the ubiquitous "Râmaji ki bagiya" fragment is repeatedly sung to accompany an Ahir-dance or Sarvan Kumar show, where the birhâ serves essentially as a catchy folk tune rather than a vehicle for narrative content. In such a context, as in the odd soca-style setting, birhâ survives, but functions as a ditty with a driving beat designed for the dance floor, not as a lyric idiom. A different sort of musicalization occurs when tassa drummers adopt and elaborate the typical birhâ drum accompaniment pattern in the form of the popular and basic "nagâra" hand (composite rhythm). Related sorts of musicalization processes are also evident in other diasporas where language decline has been a factor; hence, to again cite the case of Santería music, while *batá* drumming in Afro-Cuban communities has lost the lexical "talking-drum" dimension it had in Africa, the rhythms, rather than being discarded, have come to be cultivated and appreciated for their purely musical qualities. For its part, the ability of *Mânas* singing to survive even in its limited capacity has no doubt been enabled partly by the purely musical interest and rewards that it offers, with its lively rhythms, its dynamic ebb and flow, and the socio-musical interaction inherent in its antiphonal format. By contrast, *Alhâ* singing is simply too plain and simple in musical terms, and too reliant on its textual dimension to afford any scope for being elaborated, reinvented, or syncretized as a musical genre.

The isolation of Indo-Caribbean culture from its Bhojpuri ancestor allows illuminating comparisons and contrasts with variously contradictory or parallel developments in North India. Language decline—including of medieval Awadhi and regional sub-dialects of Bhojpuri—naturally occurs in India as well as in diasporas, and even Grierson commented in 1886 on the unintelligibility of several archaic words in folksongs sung by villagers.³¹ Further, Western influence, rather than being a purely diasporic feature, has come to pervade much of North India as well, in various forms. Thus, musical and cultural

"compartmentalization" also occurs in North India, allowing traditional genres like Mânas-singing to flourish alongside Bollywood filmsong.

A more overt and significant parallel between India and the Indic Caribbean has been the impact of modernity in general, encompassing, among other things, the advent of mass media, commercial popular musics, intensified urbanization, and the dissolution of many traditional practices and attitudes. In India, as in the Caribbean, many traditional music genres have declined, or have survived only by syncretizing or modernizing in various ways. North Indian birhâ has demonstrated one musical response to modernity, declining in its traditional form while adapting to mass media (especially cassette) dissemination and changing urban soundscapes by omnivorously borrowing tunes from filmsongs and other sources.

In the Caribbean, as we have seen, modernized forms of birhâ have also enjoyed ephemeral popularity, in the form of soca-style renditions designed for dance, but on the whole, traditional birhâ seems doomed to extinction. For two or three generations, however, the Indic Caribbean constituted a lively regional center for such transplanted genres.

Acknowledgments

While taking full responsibility for the contents of this article, I extend my gratitude to the many performers and informants who assisted me, including all those I have quoted above. Particular gratitude is due to Rudy Sassenarine, whose generosity has been as extraordinary as his erudition. Also especially helpful were Ajeet Praimsingh, Philip Lutgendorf, Narinder Mohkamsingh, Suresh Kalladeen, members of the Mahatma Gandhi Satsang Society, and Pritha Singh and the Rajkumari Centre. Useful comments were provided by the anonymous reviewers of an earlier version of this article. Research was funded in part by a PSC-CUNY grant.

John Jay College, and the Graduate Center of the City
University of New York

References

- Arya, Usharbudh
1968 *Ritual Songs and Folksongs of the Hindus of Surinam*. London: E. J. Brill.
- Bohlman, Philip
1988 *The Study of Folk Music in the Modern World*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Grierson, George
1886 "Some Bhojpuri Folk-Songs." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 18:207-67.
1886b "Some Bihari Folk-Songs." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 16:196-246.
- Henry, Edward O.
1988 *Chant the Names of God: Music and Culture in Bhojpuri-Speaking India*. San Diego: San Diego State University Press.
2001/2002 "Melodic Structure of the *khari biraha* of North India: A Simple Mode." *Asian Music* 33(1):105-24.
- Kartomi, Margaret
1981 "The processes and results of musical culture contact: a discussion of terminology and concepts," *Ethnomusicology* 25(2):227-50.
- Lutgendorf, Philip
1991 *The Life of a Text: Performing the Râmcaritmânas of Tulsidas*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Manuel, Peter
1993 *Cassette Culture: Popular Music and Technology in North India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
2000 *East Indian Music in the West Indies: Tan-Singing, Chutney, and the Making of Indo-Caribbean Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
2009 "Transnational Chowtâl: Bhojpuri Folksong from North India to the Caribbean, Fiji, and Beyond." *Asian Music* 40(2):1-32.
2010 *Tassa Thunder: Folk Music from India to the Caribbean*. Documentary video.
- Marcus, Scott
1989 "The Rise of a Folk Music Genre: Birhâ." In *Culture and Power in Banaras: Community, Performance, and Environment 1800-1980*. Ed, Cynthia Frietag, 93-113. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Myers, Helen

- 1998 *Music of Hindu Trinidad: Songs from the India Diaspora*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Nettl, Bruno
 1978 "Some aspects of the history of world music in the twentieth century: questions, problems, and concepts," *Ethnomusicology* 22(1):123-36.
- Ong, Walter
 1982 *Orality and Literacy*. New York: Methuen.
- Prasad, Onkar
 1987 *Folk music and Folk Dances of Banaras*. Calcutta: Anthropological Survey of India.
- Ramnarine, Tina
 2001 *Creating their own Space: The Development of an Indian-Caribbean Musical Tradition*. Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press.
- Schomer, Karine
 1992 "The audience as patron: Dramatization and texture of a Hindi oral epic performance." In *Arts Patronage in India: Methods, Motives and Markets*, ed. Joan Erdman, 47-88. Delhi: Manohar.
- Slawek, Stephen
 1986 "Kîrtan: A Study of the Sonic Manifestations of the Divine in the Popular Hindu Culture of Banaras." Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.
- Smith, Raymond
 1961 *British Guiana*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Tewari, Laxmi Ganesh
 1993 *Alhâkhând ki Parampara* (The Tradition of Alhâkhând). Lucknow: Uttar Pradesh Sangeet Natak Akademi.
 1994 "Folk Songs of Trinidad Indians." Self-published.
 2011 *Music of the Indian Diaspora in Trinidad*. Coconut Creek, FL: Caribbean Studies Press.
- Tiwari, Hiralal
 1980 *Gangaghâti ke Gît* (Songs of the Ganges Valley). Varanasi: Vishvavidhyalaya Prakash.
- Tulsidas, Goswami
 1990 *Tulasidasa's Shri Ramacharitamansas*. Edited and translated by R.C. Prasad. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

Author's bio:

Peter Manuel has researched and published extensively on musics of India, the Caribbean, Spain, and elsewhere. His publications include the books *Cassette Culture: Popular Music and Technology in North India* (1993), *East Indian Music in the West Indies: Tan-singing, Chutney, and the Making of Indo-Caribbean Culture* (2000), and *Creolizing Contradance in the Caribbean* (2009), along with two documentary videos, including *Tassa Thunder: Folk Music from India to the Caribbean*. He teaches ethnomusicology at John Jay College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

Peter Manuel
127 Park Ave.
Leonia NJ 07605

¹ The use of stock tunes in Bhojpuri folk music was commented on by George Grierson in 1886 (p. 210). See also Marcus (1989:99).

² Henry (2001/2002:106) describes a similar posture used by Bhojpuri-region birhâ singers. The performance of birhâ, Ahir dance, and nagâra drumming at Ahir weddings was described to me by Rishi Guru and nagâra ensemble leader Nate Ustad of Banaras. The performance traditions, however, are clearly less than ubiquitous, as Scott Marcus relates that he never encountered them in the several Ahir weddings he attended in the 1980s (p.c.).

³ Vertovec cites statistics suggesting that Ahirs numbered around 8% of immigrants, who numbered around 420,000 in Trinidad, Suriname, and British Guiana.

⁴ On occasion I have heard the major third degree replaced by its minor counterpart.

⁵ Tiwari (1980:124-25) describes a distinct form of North Indian *lâchâri*. Examples of *lâchâri* are sung by men on the CD *Folk Music of Uttar Pradesh* (Musicaphon 55 802 ADD), and by women on the website beatsofindia.com, all to melodies distinct from the Caribbean birhâ. One of the members of Nate Ustad's ensemble also sang for me a distinct *lâchâri*, while giggling and smirking, as it is a women's genre in the Banaras region. Since some form of *lâchâri* has existed long enough to be mentioned in the sixteenth-century *Ain-i-Akbari*, it is perhaps not surprising that the term has come

to denote a variety of distinct genres in India, not to mention the Caribbean.

⁶ See my documentary video *Tassa Thunder: Folk Music from India to the Caribbean* (2010).

⁷ On *Chant the Names of God: Village Music of the Bhojpuri-speaking Area of India* (Rounder Records 5008), side 2, track 2. However, the “field holler”-style khari birhâ on the same record (side 1, track 7) is quite distinct, as is that transcribed by him (1988:305). See also Henry 2001/2002.

⁸ Examples can be heard on the [beatsofindia.com](http://www.beatsofindia.com) website, especially:

http://www.beatsofindia.com/beatsofindia/babunandan_dhobi/3-babunandan-sasure_patoiyan_mein.mp3

Onkar Prasad, in his survey of Banaras folk music, also notates a similar birhâ tune (1987:96, item, IV), while providing further data on contemporary Bhojpuri birhâ.

⁹ Various YouTube postings illustrate the *dhobi gît* tune, including:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0yOqLfQuk1I&feature=related>

For a similar responsorial version of *achâri* (*sic?*: *alchâri?*=*lachâri?*), see the aforementioned CD *Folk Music of Uttar Pradesh*, track 7.

¹⁰ These sub-genres include *bandha birhâ*, *phûldâr birhâ*, *chaukaria birhâ* and other types.

¹¹ Hiralal Tiwari provides this text as an example of a *binphûliâ* birhâ, that is, an extended birhâ with only one simple melody (*phûl*, lit., flower, or *kari*, verse—a term also used in Suriname).

¹² On *Praimsingh Presents Biraha Singing Trinidad Style*, track 6.

¹³ On *Praimsingh Presents Biraha Singing Trinidad Style*, track 5. Both this birhâ and the aforementioned one by Ramdeen Chotoo, on the same CD, are in simple standard Hindi rather than Bhojpuri per se.

¹⁴ My video *Tassa Thunder* depicts one such rendering, in a Paramaribo temple, by Ramoutar Ramkhelawan.

¹⁵ In *Tassa Thunder* I incorporated a YouTube posting of Ramgoolam’s group, with dancing to the perennial favorite “Ramaji ki bagiya...” In the *Mânas*, Sarvan (Shravan) Kumar is a model son mistakenly killed by King Dasrath, who is then cursed by the youth’s parents. The use of this lachrymose episode as a frame for song, dance, and comedy is in some respects odd.

¹⁶ On *Dodo Popo: Hot Caribbean Dance Tracks*.

¹⁷ A jhâl is slightly larger than a manjira, typically around 3-1/2 inches in diameter.

¹⁸ Lutgendorf (1991:69) discusses the *lîlâ vâni*, and also demonstrated it for me.

¹⁹ At a satsang I attended in Suchit Trace (south Trinidad), the session commenced with a solo lead vocalist (with microphone) and a responding chorus; later, another singer joined the leader, such that the format became properly antiphonal rather than responsorial; in any case, as with Lutgendorf's descriptions of Banaras groups, the style is the same.

²⁰ Although extant in Suriname, *Mânas* singing is not mentioned by Arya in his 1968 study, though as his title (*Ritual Songs and Folksongs...*) suggests, he was more interested in documenting songs per se rather than styles of singing the canonic *Mânas*. Laxmi Tewari (2012:75-79) briefly comments on the *Mânas* singing he heard in south Trinidad, and includes an example in his recording from that island, *Trinidad & Tobago: Music from the North Indian Tradition* (Unesco D8278, 1994).

²¹ Platts (1888) defines *vâni* (Sanskrit) and *bâni* (Hindi) as "sound, speech, voice," with *bâni* additionally meaning "sectarian verses of mendicants... (used in compounds) voiced, tongued (e.g., *amrit-bâni*)." Hence, perhaps, the Guyanese compound "*Râmâyan-bâni*." Lutgendorf, while not encountering the term "*bâni*" in Banaras (p.c.), observed that in some styles of chanting, the recurring insertion is called a "*sampût*" (wrapper) (1991:69-70). Tewari, in the notes accompanying his 1991 recording of a Trinidadian *jhâl Râmâyan* group, calls the *bâni* the "*sampût*," although neither my Trinidadian nor Guyanese informants were familiar with that term.

²² Both terms *daur* and *chaubola* may come to Indo-Caribbean music from folk music theater such as *Gopichand* and *Raja Harichand*, which came to be generically called *nautanki* in twentieth-century India; see Manuel 2000:19-20, 29-30.

²³ P. 25 in the Motilal Banarsidass edition (1990).

²⁴ Transcribed from track 6 of Laxmi Tewari's aforementioned recording.

²⁵ See Henry 1988:155-59 for further discussion of *Alhâ*-singing in the Bhojpuri region.

²⁶ See Tewari 1993:16, and Schomer 1992:67. The origin of the *dantâl* has been the subject of much speculation (e.g., Ramnarine 2001:63), given the instrument's ubiquity in the Bhojpuri diaspora—including Fiji as well as the Caribbean—and its rarity in India. The use by *alhets* and other musicians of essentially identical instruments, however named, strongly suggests an origin in India rather than elsewhere. Indeed, one need only rhythmically strike an

elephant prod-hooked on one and sharpened on the other—with a hand tool, and the dantal is complete. What is distinctive about the dantâl, as opposed to objects like the *gaj*, is, first, that its name designates it as a musical instrument, and second, that it is specifically constructed for such use. The mystery, then, lies not in the origin of the instrument per se but rather in the fact that as specially manufactured and thusly named, it is so common in the diaspora while remaining or becoming so obscure in India.

²⁷ Jaggernath's tune is not identical to any of those presented by Schomer (1992) and Tewari (1993), but both authors note that many tunes are used in singing the genre. It does resemble one of the tunes recorded by Henry, on *Chant the Names of God: Village Music of the Bhojpuri-speaking Area of India* (Rounder Records 5008), side 1, track 8.

²⁸ Jaggernath can be seen singing the epic in my film *Tassa Thunder*.

²⁹ Raymond Smith cited an illustrative anecdote from the 1950s: "A group of Indian men were standing around talking when one of them declared, 'Me a Kshattriya; me got warrior blood,' whereupon another man gave him a blow which sent him sprawling into a ditch and taunted him with, 'Where you warrior blood now?'" (1962: 121).

³⁰ From "A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy," in *Marxism and Art*, ed. Maynard Solomon (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1979), p. 61.

³¹ He wrote, "many an obscure word is retained, simply because it is not understood, and finally after generations of ignorant attrition becomes a sound and nothing more, having no meaning in itself, but interesting simply for its unintelligibility" (1886b:198).