Ethnic Identity, National Identity, and Music in Indo-Trinidadian Culture

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Much of the literature regarding race and culture in the Americas, including the English-speaking West Indies, has focused on the struggles of Afro-American peoples to establish cultural identity in the face of white discrimination. While this theme is not irrelevant to Trinidad, Guyana, and Suriname, race relations in these countries have a distinct dynamic due to the presence of substantial East Indian communities seeking to legitimize their own identity within traditionally black-dominated political and socio-cultural frameworks. As these East Indian populations grow in size, self-awareness, affluence, and political power, they find themselves engaged in complex processes of cultural reorientation. These processes involve, first, reformulating their own senses of culture and identity in relation to mainstream Indian contexts; and, second, pressing for a multicultural framework that would accommodate both their East Indian ethnic identity and their West Indian national identity. Both processes have been the subject of intense negotiation and controversy, on national levels as well as within the East Indian communities themselves.

In Trinidad and Guyana, while a sense of distinct ethnic identity remains important to most East Indians, changing conditions have eroded some of the most important traditional emblems of Indianness, such as caste consciousness and, more importantly, the Hindi language (or Bhojpuri Form), which is now known only to a few elders, pandits, and other learned persons. In such circumstances, music has acquired an unprecedented significance as a symbol of ethnic identity (La Guerre [1974: 1985: xiv]), as reflected in the extraordinary amount of musical activity in Trinidad, among East Indians as well as others. Music's importance is also manifested in the series of ongoing and spirited socio-musical polemics, waged in private and, more overtly, in public forums like newspapers, Parliament sessions, and calypsos. These controversies, aside from their inherent interest, often serve as remarkably concrete articulations of broader, more abstract socio-cultural processes.

Aside from studies of calypso, such socio-musical issues have received only passing reference in the otherwise considerable body of scholarly literature devoted to race relations in Trinidad, which, indeed, has been described as a "social science laboratory" for the academic attention it has received (Yelvington 1993: 15). Despite the value of this literature, dramatic developments within recent years have substantially altered the cultural and political situation in Trinidad, calling for an updating and revising of prior paradigms. This article explores aspects of the most prominent music-related ethnic controversies in Trinidad, with passing reference to Guyana. In particular, it aims to illustrate how these issues can be seen as key texts in the complex negotiations involved in the legitimation of new socio-cultural paradigms based on pluralism rather than assimilation. Given the fratricidal ethnic conflicts currently raging elsewhere in the world, and the lingering possibility of real violence in the Caribbean, the study of West Indian progress toward multiculturalism may be of more than academic interest.

EAST INDIANS IN THE WEST INDIES

After the emancipation of West Indian slaves in 1834–40, British colonists sought to replenish the supply of cheap plantation labor by importing indentured workers, especially from India. Under this program, between 1843 and 1917 some 143,000 East Indians came to Trinidad, 240,000 to British Guiana, and lesser numbers to other parts of the West Indies. While some of these workers returned to India, most stayed; their descendants now constitute a majority of the population of Guyana and the largest ethnic groups in Suriname and Trinidad, where they surpass the "creole" (black and mixed-race) population; together, East Indians account for around twenty percent of the English-speaking West Indian population.1

While most free blacks in colonial Trinidad and British Guiana spurned the arduous life of the sugar plantations, in many cases moving to the towns and cities, the first generations of East Indian laborers tended to remain concentrated in agricultural regions even after indentureship. Living in their insular, rural communities and shunning schools for fear of proselytization, most colonial-era Indo-Trinidadians...