Indo-Caribbean ‘Local-classical Music’: A Unique Variant of Hindustani Music

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As cosmopolitan South Asians are well aware, several Indian performing arts, from Bharatanatyam to Bhangra, have come to flourish outside of India, especially as cultivated by non-resident Indians and Pakistanis. Most of these art forms, like Bharatanatyam, either adhere closely to models thriving in India itself, or else — like the British-based Bhangra — although differing from counterparts in India, are nevertheless familiar to interested urbanites in South Asia, who can buy recordings and cultivate an interest in them if they desire. Among the ethnic Indian populations of the Caribbean, a unique sort of Indian music has come to evolve and flourish, which, although originally derived from India, has developed into a distinctive art form essentially unknown in India. Today, at weddings and other functions in Trinidad, and to some extent in Guyana and Suriname, one can hear performances of what musicians refer to as Thumri, Dhrupad, Tillâna, Ghazal, Bihâg, and other forms that are quite different from their namesakes in India. In this article, I provide a brief descriptive overview of this music form, illustrating how North Indian music has taken root and evolved into something quite unique in a land far away from Asia itself.

The Indian population of the Caribbean, now numbering about one million, comprises descendants of indentured workers who migrated to the region between 1845 and 1917. Indo-Caribbeans constitute a majority of the population of Guyana and are the largest ethnic groups in nearby Suriname and Trinidad. Most of the indentured immigrants were from the Bhojpuri-speaking regions of what is now Bihar and Uttar Pradesh; as a result, Bhojpuri became a lingua franca among Indo-Caribbeans and remains widely spoken in Suriname, although only the very elderly speak it in Guyana and Trinidad, where English dominates.

Descendants of the colonial-era Bhojpuri diaspora, which also extends to Fiji, Mauritius, and elsewhere, are in some ways distinct from other non-resident Indians. Unlike most overseas South Asians, the Bhojpuri communities were largely cut off from their regional homeland after indentured emigration ceased in 1917. After that date, Indians in the Caribbean welcomed the steady trickle of records, films, and holy men coming from India, but all these largely represented aspects of mainstream Hindi-based North Indian culture rather than Bhojpuri culture per se. As a result, the expressive art forms brought by the immigrants tended to evolve in their own directions. In accordance with the spread of the English language and pressures to acculturate to the norms of the dominant Afro-Caribbean society, some traditional aspects of Indo-Caribbean music culture declined or creolized. At the same time, however, the relative isolation of many Indo-Caribbean communities, and the determination to perpetuate Indian culture, allowed certain forms of Indian music to remain vital and evolve in neo-traditional forms.
took the fragments of Hindustani music knowledge available to them and combined them in a manner which subsequently evolved in a thoroughly idiosyncratic fashion. By the 1950s this art had developed into a relatively stable and established idiom, with its own body of theory and conventions, and its combination of marginal survivals, jumbled bits of Hindustani music theory, and thoroughly unique innovations. Although coming to differ dramatically from Hindustani music, local-classical music did not incorporate any particular influence from non-Indian sources; rather, it evolved along wholly Indian aesthetic lines, although in a quite distinct form. Henceforth, on the rare occasions where Indo-Caribbean musicians had opportunities to hear ‘authentic’ Hindustani music, they generally found it alien and dull; and, conversely, on occasions where visitors from India heard local-classical music, they were generally flabbergasted at what was announced to be “Thumri”, “Dhrupad”, and the like. In effect, local-classical music had evolved into its own distinctive art form, with its own rules, vitality, and legitimacy.

Local-classical music is typically performed by an ensemble of solo vocalist, who also plays harmonium, accompanied by Dholak and a struck metal rod called Dantal. The Dantal appears to be an obscure Bhojpuri-region instrument which, for some reason, became widespread in the Indic Caribbean. To a North Indian ear, much of local-classical music might sound more or less like a solo Qawwāl or stage Bhajan — although with certain structural peculiarities — as rendered by an accomplished group of professional folk musicians, and with a particularly animated and virtuoso Dholak player. Local-classical vocalists, or tānsingers, are usually semi-professionals who perform at weddings, puja sessions, and jāgarans (or “jags”). Although unable to speak Hindi, most have learned the Nagari script well enough to read books like the Brahmānand as sources for lyrics.

Typically today, tānsingers will be hired by the bride’s father at a wedding, if he happens to be an enthusiast of that music. A small stage with microphones and loudspeakers will be set up, and the audience, consisting mostly of elderly people, will sit in folding chairs to enjoy the music, while other guests chat and mill about outside. Tānsingers commence around ten in the evening with an invocatory Dhrupad, which is followed by a Tillāna, and then a variety of other genres, of which the most common is Thumri. Typically, after a few hours, the younger guests start clamouring for chutney, at which point the ensemble begrudgingly obliges, and a vigorous and often ribald social dancing takes over, and a general mood of hilarity and fun prevails until the wee hours.

The term ‘tānsinging’ is typical of the sorts of processes by which this local classical music evolved. In tānsinging, oddly enough, the singers do not sing any tāns, but instead render songs in a more straightforward fashion. Moreover, tānsingers are unfamiliar with the Hindustani meaning of the word ‘tān’. However, they are familiar with the name Tansen, and a generation ago it was common to refer to a skilled vocalist as a “Tansen”. In accordance with the more common Kshatriya surname, ‘Tansen’ was corrupted to ‘Tan Singh’, and thence to ‘tānsinger’, affording the term ‘tānsinging’. Other music terms used by Indo-Caribbeans are similarly idiosyncratic. Like many folk musicians in India, tānsingers use the term ‘rāga’ to mean melody or tune, rather than mode. ‘Tāla’ designates not metre, but tihāi, simple versions of which are played by drummers. Although many songs are rendered in a metre which Hindustani musicians would call Kaherva, that name is largely unknown;
instead, the rhythm is called “Chaubola”, if a name is used at all. Sargam is largely unknown, and drummers are unable to specify how many mātras are in the metres they play. Thus there is no name for the seven-beat tāla used in song-types like Bihāg and Dandak, nor is it understood as having seven beats. Standardized terms, however, are used for sections of songs.

Most songs have a structure (“dhab”, or mould) akin to that of the bol-banāo Thumri, in which a few verses (padas) are sung, with some elaboration, after which the song segues to an extended laggi section, over which the first line of the song (the “tek”) is reiterated and varied while the drummer plays flashy virtuoso improvisations. After a short return to the original tempo (the “thēkā”), the song concludes. The laggi section is referred to as daur, chalti, or barti (perhaps from ‘barhnā’, to develop, grow). In general, the terminology is perhaps more systematic and extensive than what would be used by a typical North Indian folk musician, although less so than by a classical performer. The degree of terminological laxity does not, however, imply a haphazard and indifferent attitude to musical performance, as musicians are quick to criticize performers who incorrectly render song-types, with their intricate rhythmic modulations and conventions.

Some distinctions exist between the variants of local-classical music heard in Trinidad, Guyana, and Suriname. In Suriname, where Hindi and Bhojpuri are spoken by most Indians, song lyrics are accordingly more important, and formal distinctions between genres less so; Surinamese local-classical music thus has a bit more of the flavour of a living folk music. The Guyanese and Trinidadian styles are more formalized, with clear distinctions between genres. Although the Guyanese style is practised only by a handful of musicians, Trinidadian local-classical music is still performed frequently; its vitality, however, is weakened by the decline of Hindi/Bhojpuri comprehension and other factors.

One of the features distinguishing local-classical music from a typical folk repertoire is the recognition of a variety of song-types or subgenres which are distinguished from each other by formal musical features. These song-types have diverse sorts of relationships to their namesakes in North India, as the following brief descriptions suggest.

Dhrupad

Any formal performance of local-classical music commences with a Dhrupad, which functions as a sort of invocatory prelude. On first hearing, an Indo-Caribbean Dhrupad would seem to bear little resemblance to its classical Hindustani namesake, as the former is a short song of around three or four minutes, preceded only by a few ālāp-like phrases and a dohā, and with very little development of rāga or tāla. The composition itself is sung not to the Dhrupad tālas used in India, but to a metre which could be counted in either four or eight beats (and which is less bouncy and syncopated than Kaherva/Chaubola). However, even in North India, Dhrupad is best understood as comprising a family of genres, which would include congregational Samāj-gāyan, Pushtimarg Haveli Sangeet, and other temple-based relatives. These tend to share certain musical and textual features which are also common to Indo-Caribbean Dhrupad, which thus should be understood as a bona fide member of the Dhrupad family.
Among the affinities with Hindustani Dhrupad are the texts for Indo-Caribbean Dhrupads, which adhere to the standard four-line form of their Hindustani counterparts, since they derive from Dhrupads in song anthologies like Anek Sangraha. Further, Indo-Caribbean local-classical Dhrupad, like its Hindustani namesake, is regarded as a serious and stately genre, whose devotional, invocatory character coheres with the religious inspiration foregrounded in North Indian temple Dhrupad traditions. More significant is the structural resemblance of rendition styles. In many Caribbean renderings, more or less as in Hindustani Dhrupad, the composition is first sung in a straightforward manner, in a relatively slow tempo. With the return to the sthāyi, the bārti/daur commences and accelerates, and the text is again rendered once, but in a faster, syllabic style. Although there is no particular layakārī or bol-bānt, the basic format of Hindustani Dhrupad and Haveli Sangeet — a slow first rendering, followed by one or more faster, more syllabic and rhythmic renderings — is often retained. Further, in both Caribbean and Hindustani Dhrupad, the drummer improvises fast patterns in the second, accelerated section. The brevity of the Indo-Caribbean alāp is also a feature not only of temple-based Dhrupad, but also of the court tradition of Darbhanga in Bihar. The use of the Dantal in local-classical music also corresponds to the role of the Jhānjh in temple Dhrupad.

The most popular Indo-Caribbean Dhrupad text is ‘Pratham mān onkar’, which is also familiar in India. In the Dagar family tradition of North India, it is sung in rāga Bihāg, while Darbhanga musicians sing it in rāga Ahir Bhairav’, whose scale is not found in the Caribbean. In the Caribbean, this text is most often sung in a mode loosely resembling the North Indian rāga Bihāg (see Example 1, p.15), although that rāga per se is not recognized in the Caribbean. It seems quite likely that the melody came from Indian oral tradition.

The roots of Indo-Caribbean Dhrupad may lie both in temple- and court-based traditions, especially since both appear to have existed in Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh. The princely court of Darbhanga in northern Bihar was an important centre of Dhrupad patronage, and varieties of temple-based Dhrupad traditions have flourished in Ayodhya, Banaras, Kanpur, and elsewhere in the region. Finally, of course, a single influential immigrant musician from any North Indian region could well have initiated the Caribbean Dhrupad tradition.

Tillānā

Tillānā is one of the more enigmatic Indo-Caribbean genres, differing quite markedly from its South Indian namesake. As readers of this journal know, ‘tillānā’ is the common South Indian cognate term for ‘tarānā’. The Indo-Caribbean use of the term ‘tillānā’ instead of the more familiar Hindustani ‘tarānā’ is not in itself markedly anomalous. The word ‘tarānā’ is occasionally used by tām-singers, and, likewise, the term ‘tillānā’ is recognized in North India. Even classical treatises like the seventeenth-century Tohfat-ul Hind identify the terms as equivalent. More conspicuous is the distinction that the Indo-Caribbean Tillānā employs a lexical Hindi text, in which typical Tarānā syllables (‘dim-tanana’, etc.), if appearing at all, occur only briefly. My initial assumption on encountering this variant was that it represented yet another Indo-Caribbean idiosyncracy — or, less charitably, a ‘corruption’ — of an otherwise standardized and well-documented Hindustani tradition. However, Tillānās with Hindi texts in fact turn out to constitute an established North Indian
tradition, albeit an obscure one, represented in the appearance of a handful of such songs in turn-of-the-century anthologies like the Anand Sagar.

The Tillāṇās in such anthologies are somewhat enigmatic in themselves. It is possible that they may have existed as dance pieces in music-dramas like the Indar Sabha, and Nautanki in general. Thus, one tattered anthology shown to me contained a song text labelled (in Nagari) “Tarāṇā nātak kāt kshohar” (sic — presumably ‘qatl-e shohar’, i.e., ‘Tarana from the drama Qatl-e Shohar’, ‘The Murder of the Husband’). In ‘intermediary’ idioms like Nautanki and Rāsīlī, which combined folk-derived and semi-classical styles, it is quite conceivable that dance items might have been performed to pieces labelled tillāṇā/tarāṇā, which perhaps bore that label because of the use of melodies derived from classical Tarāṇā. Performers of relatively word-oriented genres of ‘intermediate’ dance-drama and folk musics would have had little use for classical Tillāṇās, with their meaningless texts, but could have employed hybrid Tillāṇās using features of the classical idiom. It is precisely such Tillāṇās, i.e., with lexical texts, that would be included in song anthologies, rather than standard Tillāṇās whose texts consist solely of meaningless syllables. And, in fact, the Tillāṇās found in anthologies are very few in number, suggesting that this tradition — now effectively extinct in India — was not widespread to begin with. Accordingly, there are only a small number of Tillāṇā texts that recur in local-classical music. Most of these follow a certain format, which evidently constituted something of a norm in India. They generally concern Indian musicology (like some Dhūraps); in the manner of the obscure Chaturang, they include passages of sargam and non-lexical syllables (‘tanana’, etc.), such as would generally dominate classical Tarāṇā texts. These features are evident in ‘Bhalā koi rang yukti se gāve’, which is the most popular local-classical Tillāṇā text, and is found in the Anand Sagar:

Bhalā koi rang yukti se gāve,
samagamamamagama sudhā sudhārāng
 tum tananana man bhāve,
pratham rāga Bhairo ke drutiya Mālkos Bhairavi
 Nat Tori aur Sārāng gāve, Sorath aur Vibhās Jhanjhoti
 Kānha Alhaiya Dipak Dhanā Desh Kedār Praj Sōhini sunāve
ghazal rekhta trāṇā gāve tum tananana man bhāve
 apne man se gunt kāhīye, tān sur ka bhed na pāye
 kahe Miān Tānsun sunhau Braj Baura
 koi chhatrapati ko tān sunāve

The marginality of such Tillāṇās to modern Hindustani music practice is reflected not only in the presence of lexical texts, but also in oddities in the texts themselves. ‘Bhalā koi rang’, aside from citing the archaic rāga Nat Todi, ambiguously mentions “trāṇā” (sic — tarāṇā), “Braj Baura” (sic — Baiju Bawra), and rāgas “Dhanā” and “Praj” (sic — Dhānī and Parāj?). While the most popular Tillāṇā texts resemble this one, tān-singers can and do employ any text for rendering as a Tillāṇā. A typical local-classical music session, such as a wedding, might include three singers, each of whom is obliged to sing one Tillāṇā. If the first two vocalists have sung the one or two familiar texts like ‘Bhalā koi rang’, then the
third singer must naturally have another one ready, which can be taken from a book like the
Brahmanand and set to the standard Indo-Caribbean Tillana melody.

Although the Indo-Caribbean Tillana may come to resemble a Bhajan more than the
Hindustani Tarana, it retains a certain aura of classical rigour, and is accordingly sung
immediately after the invocational Dhrupad. (If more than one singer is present — for
example, at a wedding — each will sing a Dhrupad and a Tillana before passing the mike to
the next vocalist.) The ‘classical’ nature of this Tillana is manifest in its specific affinities to
Hindustani music. One of its ‘classical’ features is the distinctive Tillana accompanying
rhythm, which sounds somewhat like a medium-tempo Tintal pattern without any khali
section. Given the lack of exposure to modern Hindustani music, and the possibility that the
modern form of Tintal thekā did not crystallize until the late nineteenth century, it would in
fact be surprising to encounter in local-classical music a pattern more closely resembling
standard North Indian Tintal.

Tillana melodies also reflect marked parallels to Hindustani music. In Trinidad, most
Tillana use the tek melody shown in Example 2 (p. 15). This tune closely resembles the
most common medium- or fast-tempo vocal or instrumental composition pattern in the
familiar Hindustani raga Kafi. It was a particularly popular stock tune in the nineteenth
century. Bandish Thumri composer Lallan Piya (d. 1925), a few of whose verses are
encountered in the Caribbean, set at least twelve texts to this melody, which also became a
popular Sitar gat. The most common melody of Kafi Hori can also be seen as a seven- or
fourteen-beat variant of this tune; this Hori/Holi melody is sung not only in semi-classical
music, but in ‘intermediate’ genres like the Braj-region Rāśilā and temple Samāj-gāyan. In
North India, during the indentureship period, this was probably the single most popular and
familiar of classical and light-classical melodies, and it is entirely likely that it would be
known to more than a few indentured immigrants. Somehow it came to be associated in
Trinidad with Tillana texts.

In conjunction with this tek melody in local-classical music, the most common tune
used for the padas can be regarded as following a very typical antara pattern of Hindustani
medium- and fast-tempo compositions. In particular, as illustrated in Example 3 (p. 16), its
commencement roughly resembles standard antara patterns in rāgas like Jaunpuri, Asāvari,
Bhairavi, and Darbāri. Used together with the tek tune, this pattern gives Tillana the character
of a very typical madhya-laya Hindustani cheez, loosely compatible with the North Indian
rāga Kāfi and the other rāgas named above, although not cohering perfectly to any of them.
Typically, each line might be sung a few times with some variation, and interspersed with
brief melismatic passages. Note that in singing the sargam line (‘saregama . . .’), the vocalist
in Example 3 makes no attempt to match his pitches to those named.

Other melodies are also encountered. The text ‘Bhalā koi rang’, for instance, is usually
sung as shown in Example 4 (p. 16), in what Hindustani musicians might regard as a typical
medium-tempo composition in rāga Khamāj.

Indo-Caribbean Tillana can be seen to exhibit some of the idiosyncratic results of
elaboration and combination of a few specific elements derived from oral tradition —
especially, the stock Hindustani Kāfi and antara tunes — and from written texts, in particular,
the obscure, marginal, and now extinct tradition of Tillana with Hindi lyrics.
Thumri

Thumri is the single most popular and important subgenre of Trinidadian and Guyanese local-classical music. At a typical song session (e.g., a wedding) in these countries, once the obligatory Dhrupad and Tillanā have been dispensed with, most of the subsequent pieces consist of Thumris, interspersed with Ghazals, Bhajans, and other miscellaneous items. As such, Thumris may be said to constitute almost half of the local-classical music repertoire, both in live performances as well as on recordings. Moreover, Thumri's particularly idiosyncratic and distinctive form makes it quintessentially representative of the sorts of transformative and generative processes which have animated the evolution of local-classical music. Understanding the evolution of Thumri, in many respects, would provide a key to reconstructing local-classical music history in general. Unfortunately, much of its development remains obscure, although analysis can reveal certain insights.

The modern North Indian Thumri, although stylistically and technically 'semi-classical', rests fully in the social milieu of Hindustani classical music. Despite the democratization of certain aspects of North Indian arts culture, Thumri in India is little heard outside of urban concert halls attended by bourgeois arts patrons. However, during the period of indentured emigration to the Caribbean, Thumri - whether in simple or evolved form - may have enjoyed a somewhat broader-based dissemination. In geographical terms, fine arts patronage was not limited, as it is today, to large cities (especially Delhi, Bombay, and Calcutta), but extended to many smaller regional towns like Gaya and Darbhanga which hosted provincial courts. Further, courtesan performers, with their inherently ambiguous social status, were able to disseminate 'light-classical' Thumri and Ghazal beyond the rarefied domain of the court. Thumri thus found its way into 'intermediate' idioms like the Nautanki and Rāslilā dance-dramas. We may also recall Sharar's observation of "bazaar boys" in nineteenth-century Lucknow singing light-classical pieces*. There is thus every reason to assume that a few immigrants to the Caribbean might have had some exposure to and perhaps even basic training in some style of Thumri. However, there is no evidence that subsequent tānsingers had any exposure to the Hindustani Thumri, whether via imported recordings or visiting artists. Thus, once the initial seeds of Thumri were transplanted, the genre was free, indeed obliged, to develop in its own wholly idiosyncratic form.

Such conditions would explain the thoroughly distinctive form the Indo-Caribbean Thumri has taken. The modern local-classical Thumri bears only general structural affinities with its North Indian namesake. Specifically, the Caribbean Thumri, like the modern Hindustani Thumri, commences with a tek/sthāyi, which subsequently punctuates more extended renderings of a few lines of verse, which may take the form of an antarā ascending to the upper tonic. After a few minutes, the singer uses a return to the tek to signal the drummer to commence the daur/barti/laggi section, during which the drummer plays fast virtuoso patterns while the singer reiterates the tek and/or verses, often in a more syllabic manner. There is then a short return to the tek in something like the original tempo, and the piece ends.

In other respects, however, the Indo-Caribbean Thumri is quite distinctive. It has no particular association with dance or eroticism, and its texts are more likely to celebrate Rama than Krishna, perhaps in accordance with the special emphasis on Rama worship in
Bhojpuri culture. Local-classical Thumri is also distinctive in its formal features. Instead of the folk-derived fourteen- or sixteen-beat Dipchandi/Châncar metre, Indo-Caribbean Thumri uses what could be considered a four- or eight-beat tālā. Improvised passages roughly akin to bol-bānt and bol-bañao occasionally occur, but there is little self-conscious cultivation of these techniques, and these terms are not known in the Caribbean. Most conspicuous is the way Indo-Caribbean Thumri has acquired its own set of typical melodies, rhythms, and sub-styles; these are particularly marked in the Trinidadian Thumri, with its rigorously standardized formal structure. On the whole, it seems likely that a simple and early form of bol-bañao Thumri was introduced by a few immigrants in the early decades of the twentieth century. Lacking strong roots in either oral folk tradition or temple-based music practices, and not being reinforced by imported records (unlike Ghazal and Qawwâlî), the Indo-Caribbean Thumri subsequently developed in its own distinctive forms, possibly as shaped in particular by a very few influential musicians.

The formal structure of the Trinidadian Thumri is highly standardized, including not only the general format but also the placement of specific tālā/tihāi cadences. This structure can be schematized as follows:

- Doha (sung in free rhythm);
- tek renderings (with thekā accompaniment), leading to a tālā/tihāi;
- first pada, usually involving a metrical displacement;
- return to tek and thekā, leading to a tālā/tihāi;
- second pada, rendered like the first;
- return to tek and thekā, leading to a tālā/tihāi;
- daur/barti, during which the tek, and the first, second, and possibly a third pada may be sung;
- return to tek and thekā, leading to the final tālā/tihāi.

Most Trinidadian Thumri refrain melodies use a finite set of stock tunes, or slight variations thereof. These typically descend to sa, and incorporate a syncopated tihāi-like figure in the mukhrā which leads to the sam (in Example 5, p. 16, in the phrase ‘Ram ko bha-jo’). The tek melody of Example 5 is the most common stock refrain tune; any Thumri using this tune is referred to as a “Bhajan Thumri”. This term is not used in modern Hindustani music discourse, although it does occur in old song anthologies.

The ‘metrical displacement’ referred to in the chart above is a particularly distinctive feature of the Trinidadian Thumri, and must be heard to be appreciated. From a Hindustani perspective, it sounds as if the song is essentially in Khererva, but at the beginning of the first pada the Dholak player renders a short tihāi landing not on the sam, but on the beat after the sam, and the entire tālā, with its pattern of downbeats and upbeats, shifts back a beat. The singer then follows this new pattern in his phrasing of the pada until returning to the sthāyi/tek pattern, with its tihāi-like mukhrā; this, however, he renders a beat too soon, as it were, such that the tālā shifts again, in effect removing the extra beat that had been added a minute or so earlier. As one accustomed to the metrical regularity of most musics, I found this rhythmic modulation to be quite mind-boggling and disorienting. My attempts to understand it were confounded by the fact that Indo-Caribbean musicians do not count beats and could not acknowledge that anything peculiar was taking place. (Eventually I
found one drummer who said, “Yeah, it shifts, and then it shifts back.”) In the Guyanese Thumri style, the sense of metre is even more slippery and unstable, as the singer can cause a metrical shift at any point by singing the tek/sthāyi, with its clear cadential pattern, such that the sam occurs on any beat; the drummer and the Dantal player — and listeners who are tapping their feet — must quickly adjust to the new pattern. The entire song is rendered in such a syncopated manner, with the Dholak providing non-stop fireworks, that the concept of sam or downbeat is relatively unimportant. In effect, in their Thumri, Indo-Caribbean musicians have perpetuated the Indian fondness for linear syncopation, while leaving behind in India the concept of a strong sam or downbeat.

Some Trinidadian Thumris do not contain these distinctive metrical modulations; these are referred to as “Mārfat Thumri” — a term which is yet another enigmatic and idiosyncratic Indo-Caribbeanism. The word ‘mā’rifat’ (Urdu: mystical knowledge) does not occur in Hindustani music discourse, but a few Trinidadian singers insisted to me that they had seen designations like ‘mārfat ghazal’ in old songbooks. We can envision an influential Trinidadian singer in perhaps the 1920s popularizing a song which he describes as “mārfat ghazal”, in accordance with its designation in his songbook. The melody to this song, subsequently understood by other singers as ‘mārfat’, then becomes detached from the Ghazal format and gets applied to Thumri. Somehow, the term then comes to be applied to a few other Thumri melodies, and more specifically to a certain rhythmic format.

Ghazal
Ghazal is one of the most popular and common subgenres in the Indo-Caribbean local-classical repertoire, accounting for a large portion of a typical song session’s items, and one being well represented on commercial recordings. In most respects, the Indo-Caribbean Ghazal resembles its subcontinental counterpart, especially as flourishing in the early twentieth century. At the same time, its differences are illustrative of the distinctive formative processes that have shaped local-classical music as a whole.

Like Thumri, the light-classical Ghazal acquired a special popularity in urban Awadh (especially Lucknow) in the mid-1800s, particularly as performed by courtesans, regional Nautanki troupes, and others. As such, although Ghazal (both as poetry and song) has been primarily an urban cultivated form rather than a rural folk one, it is safe to assume that quite a few indentured immigrants were not only familiar with it but were able to sing it in some fashion.

Ghazal’s popularity in the Caribbean was greatly reinforced in the 1930s and ’40s by the importation of commercial 78-rpm records from India, most of which consisted either of Ghazal or Qawwālí. Especially popular were the Ghazals of K.L. Saigal, K.C. Dey, and other Indian vocalists who sang in a somewhat simplified light-classical style. Some tānsingers still perform the Ghazals of these crooners. Even more common has been the practice of setting book-derived Ghazal texts to Saigal and K.C. Dey melodies, which have thus acquired the character of stock tunes. Since hardly any Indo-Caribbeans read Urdu, they derive their Ghazal texts from verses thus labelled in Hindi anthologies like the Brahmanand. The Hindi ‘Ghazals’ in these books are curiosities in themselves, with their Hindi diction, their Hindu devotional content, and their frequent lack of either the distinctive verse form
or prosodic metres of the Urdu Ghazal. They seem to represent an earlier performance practice now largely eclipsed in India.

Aside from the frequent use of such atypical Hindi texts, the Indo-Caribbean Ghazal has in fact come to differ from its subcontinental counterpart in certain conspicuous ways. South Asian Ghazal settings closely adhere to their poetic structure, having a refrain melody on the rhymed lines, semi-improvised passages on the non-rhyming lines, and instrumental interludes (traditionally in the form of laggi) in between the couplets (shers). However, as comprehension of Hindi-Urdu declined in Guyana and Trinidad, the logic for this formal structure eroded. Consequently, by the 1970s, it became increasingly common to assimilate the Ghazal form to the typical structure of local-classical song, involving a progression in mid-song to a daur/barti section, which continues essentially to the end. One singer explained the rationale as follows:

Yea, we do it this way in Trinidad, with the barti straight through once it starts. We do it this way because it becomes boring, with the drumming, with the same up and down, up and down, slow-fast, so instead, we do two verses slow, and then the rest fast. The old singers, they would take half an hour to sing a Ghazal, up-down, up-down, fast-slow, fast-slow, but for today’s audience it becomes boring. Ninety per cent of the people don’t understand the words. They just want to hear the rhythm.

From a South Asian perspective, the Indo-Caribbean format disregards the formal structure of Ghazal poetry and turns most of the song into a relatively shapeless entity; it can also lead to the text of the final couplets being drowned out by obstreperous drumming.

Bihāg and Other Genres

In Indo-Caribbean local-classical music, Bihāg is a “rāga”, but only in the folk sense of ‘rāga’ as connoting a fixed tune rather than a complex melodic mode. This tune, moreover, bears no particular resemblance to the Hindustani Bihāg. Example 6 (p. 16) shows the sthāyi/tek melody of the Indo-Caribbean Bihāg, which is set to a seven-beat tāla, divided three-plus-four (but not really identical to Hindustani Rupak). The melody and verses are sung a few times, with some variation, and then the song proceeds to a barti/daur in a Kaherva-like metre, returning at the end to the sthāyi in the original metre.

The text ‘Anhad nād baje’ comes from the Brahmanand, where it is in fact labelled “Bihāg”. It is easy to imagine how the Indo-Caribbean Bihāg evolved. We can envision a likely scenario: perhaps around 1920 an influential but untrained singer finds a verse labelled “rāga Bihāg” in a songbook and sets it to a catchy tune, describing his song as “rāga Bihāg”. This tune then becomes popular among other singers, who interpret Bihāg as denoting the new tune. They then disseminate the tune under this title, and lo, a new Bihāg is born. Singers in subsequent generations find other lyrics labelled “Bihāg” in songbooks and, in the interest of upholding tradition, set them to the tune of Bihāg — not, of course, the Hindustani Bihāg, which they do not know, but the new Indo-Caribbean Bihāg.

It is probably in this manner that other distinctive Indo-Caribbean song-types like Lāvani, Dandak, and Bidāpāt arose. ‘Bidāpāt’ may be assumed to be a corruption of ‘Vidyapati’, the sixteenth-century Maithili poet; a few singers told me that in that tune the word ‘Bidāpāt’,
whose meaning they did not know, should appear in the last line. Other song-types in local-classical music include Khemta (which has a distinctive syncopated rhythm), Dādārā (often in six beats, like its Hindustani namesake), Bhajan (a generic term, as in India), and Hori. The most popular tune used in Hori is the one sung in India in temples and other contexts in rāga Kafi, typically in Dipchandi tālā. This is one of the most widespread traditional melodies heard throughout North India, and probably travelled to the Caribbean by oral tradition (and was reinforced by Saigal’s recording of it).

Tān-singers also perform their own version of Qawwālī, which appears to derive primarily from the solo Qawwālī style popularized by the 78-rpm records of Pyaru Qawwal, Kalloo Qawwal, Fida Hussein, and others in the 1920s–40s. As such, it bears little resemblance to the modern Qawwālī of the Sabri Brothers or Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, or even to that heard in Muslim shrines in South Asia today.

Conclusions: The Legitimacy of a Variant Tradition

One might be tempted to regard Indo-Caribbean local-classical music as simply a corrupted degeneration of Hindustani music, assembled in a jumbled way by amateur musicians with only a fragmentary knowledge of the classical art. However, over the generations, local-classical music has evolved into a distinctive art form, with its own conventions and its own sort of legitimacy and aesthetic charm. In many ways, it can be seen as comparable to certain regional North Indian genres, like the light-classical Kajri of Banaras or Rajasthani Mānganiār/Langā music, which have thrived in a sort of intermediate public sphere between folk and classical traditions. Like local-classical music, Langā/Mānganiār music evolved in a geographically isolated locale, containing a mixture of local, regional elements and vestigial features (“marginal survivals”) derived from an earlier and incomplete exposure to Hindustani music. Like tān-singers, Langās and Mānganiārs have their own repertoire of rāgas and tālas, use Hindustani terms in their own way, and sing sargam passing to the ‘wrong’ notes.

Most importantly, the sorts of generative processes animating local-classical music, including its ‘distortions’ and ‘corruptions’ of Hindustani music, are processes which appear to have been basic to music evolution in India itself, especially on the margins — whether geographical, social, or temporal — of the modern classical tradition. Most Indian rāgas have undergone dramatic changes over the generations, and there is no point in insisting, for example, that the rāga Todi found in sixteenth-century treatises, so different from our ‘correct’ form. Further, much of the content of Indian classical music has come from its socio-musical borders, whether in the form of regional traditions (the deshi rāgas of yore) or the idiosyncratic practices of only partly-trained musicians. We might say that tān-singers are certainly ‘confused’ when they label songs by the rāga designations (e.g., “rāga Bihag”) that they find in their books. However, such resignifications do not occur only among ill-informed diasporic musicians. Much musical terminology in India, including rāga names, has always evolved through borrowings from other, often only partially understood languages, whether regional ones, foreign ones (like Persian), or dead ones (like Prakrit) transmitted through written texts. The “tillānās” with Hindi texts in old songbooks represent another kind of vernacular idiosyncracy, which has now taken on a
new life in local-classical music. Indeed, the margins of the ‘Great Tradition’, where such non-canonical inconsistencies abound, are best seen not as sites of confusion and degradation, but as fertile breeding grounds which both enrich canonic practice as well as produce their own unique hybrids.

Local-classical music can be regarded as one unique product of the margins, evolving through a particular synthesis of oral, written, folk, classical, and mass-mediated traditions into an independent genre with its own idiosyncratic expressivity, beauty, and legitimacy. Unfortunately, a marginal genre like local-classical music typically lacks the institutional and elite support of canonic genres, such that, as music genres go, its life span may turn out to be relatively brief. While local-classical music is far from dead, its future is uncertain, since its linguistic base has eroded and the traditional social milieu that sustained it is rapidly disappearing.

NOTES


MUSICAL EXAMPLES

Example 1. Dhrupad sthayi: ‘Pratham mān onkar’

Example 2. Tillāna sthayi: ‘Koi khoti jatan se’
Example 3. Tillānā antārā (first line): ‘Koi khoti jatan se’
- M - P D D N | S - S S S - S | N N N N N N | N - N R S N D P
- Bhai ro rā g gu ni pan di t gā - ve - sa re ga ma pa dha ni sa | gā ke su nā - ve

Example 4. Tillānā sthāyī: ‘Bhalā koi rang’
M GR S N | S - S S G | MP M | P P - M GR S N | S
Bha lā- ko i | ra - ng yu k ti- se | gā ve - bha lā- ko i | rang . . .

Example 5. Bhajan Thumri sthāyī: ‘Ab man Tulsi’
- M D D D D P MGRGRS |
- a b ma n | Tul si --- |

Example 6. Bihāg sthāyī: ‘Anhad nād baje’ (7-beat tāla)
M D - P - M | GR | S - N | S - - - - P | P MGR R - G | M D - A n - ha - d | nā- - d - ba | je - - - - o | sa khi - re - - - a n . . .
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