

From Roots to Rhythms: The Development and Musical Diversity of Chutney Music

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Abstract

Chutney music reflects the Indo-Caribbean experience, shaped by a complex interplay of historical, socio-economic, and geographical forces. This paper defines the genre and traces its evolution from the indentureship-era sugar plantations to its emergence as a global diasporic phenomenon. By examining the transition from traditional *Maticoor* rites and Hindu devotional roots to contemporary “rum song” and “wedding house” anthems, this study positions Chutney as a sonic archive of cultural survival. Central to this analysis is the genre’s distinctive sound, particularly the role of traditional instrumentation—dholak, dhantal, and harmonium—alongside modern influences. Through comparative lyrical analysis, the paper explores how musical hybridity and syncretism enabled Chutney to absorb elements of Bollywood, Soca, and broader Caribbean traditions. Ultimately, this research demonstrates how processes of cross-cultural exchange reshaped Indo-Caribbean identity, offering new perspectives on gender, ethnicity, and sexuality within the West Indian diaspora. By mapping these rhythmic and thematic shifts, the paper highlights Chutney’s role as a dynamic medium for negotiating postcolonial identity.

Keywords: Chutney, Maticoor, Hindu, Indo-Caribbean, Trinidad, Guyana

De Raíces a Ritmos: El Desarrollo y la Diversidad Musical de la Música *Chutney*

Resumen

La música chutney refleja la experiencia indo-caribeña, conformada por una compleja interacción de fuerzas históricas, socioeconómicas y geográficas. Este artículo define el género y traza su evolución desde las plantaciones azucareras de la era del contratismo hasta su aparición como un fenómeno diaspórico global. Al examinar la transición de los ritos tradicionales de *Maticoor* y las raíces devocionales hindúes hacia los himnos contemporáneos de “rum song” y “wedding house”, este estudio posiciona al chutney como un archivo sonoro de supervivencia cultural. En el centro de este análisis se encuentra el sonido distintivo del género, particularmente el papel de la instrumentación tradicional —*dholak*, *dhantal*, and *harmonium*— junto con influencias modernas. A través de un análisis comparativo de letras, el artículo explora cómo la hibridez y el sincretismo musicales permitieron que el chutney absorbiera elementos de Bollywood, el soca y tradiciones caribeñas más amplias. En última instancia, esta investigación demuestra cómo los procesos de intercambio intercultural transformaron la identidad indo-caribeña, ofreciendo nuevas perspectivas sobre género, etnicidad y sexualidad dentro de la diáspora antillana. Al mapear estos desplazamientos rítmicos y temáticos, el artículo

destaca el papel del chutney como un medio dinámico para la negociación de la identidad poscolonial.

Palabras Clave: Chutney; Maticoor; Hindú; Indo-Caribeño; Trinidad; Guyana

Das Raízes aos Ritmos: O Desenvolvimento e a Diversidade Musical da Música Chutney

Resumo

O estilo musical Chutney reflete a experiência indo-caribenha, moldada por uma complexa interação de forças históricas, socioeconômicas e geográficas. Este artigo define o estilo musical e traça sua evolução desde as plantações de açúcar da era da servidão por contrato até sua emergência como um fenômeno diaspórico global. Ao examinar a transição dos ritos tradicionais Maticoor e das raízes devocionais hindus para os hinos contemporâneos de “canções de rum” (*rum song*) e “casas de casamento” (*wedding house*), este estudo posiciona o Chutney como um arquivo sonoro de sobrevivência cultural. Central para essa análise é a sonoridade distintiva do estilo, particularmente o papel da instrumentação tradicional—*dholak*, *dhantal* e *harmonium*—ao lado de influências modernas. Por meio de uma análise lírica comparativa, o trabalho explora como o hibridismo musical e o sincretismo permitiram que o Chutney absorvesse elementos de Bollywood, da música Soca e de tradições caribenhais mais amplas. Em última análise, a pesquisa demonstra como processos de intercâmbio transcultural reformularam a identidade indo-caribenha, oferecendo novas perspectivas sobre gênero, etnicidade e sexualidade na diáspora das Índias Ocidentais. Ao mapear essas mudanças rítmicas e temáticas, o texto destaca o papel do Chutney como um meio dinâmico para a negociação da identidade pós-colonial.

Palavras-chave: Chutney; Maticoor; Hindu; Indo-Caribenho; Trinidad; Guiana

Indo-Caribbean North Americans define and interpret chutney music through diverse musical, historical, economic, and social lenses. Described as “hot, spicy, fast beat drumming” and variously as wedding, rum-shop, or Indian music, chutney has evolved into multiple subgenres, including chutney soca, chutney parang, Bhojpuri chutney, chutney reggae, and tassa-driven chutney. Its development reflects factors such as Trinidad’s 1935 musical comedy *Bala Joban*, migration, and cultural practices, blending Indo-Caribbean and West Indian influences while preserving Indian heritage. Central to festivals like Trinidad and Tobago Carnival and Toronto Carnival, chutney stands out in the Caribbean for its distinct Indo-Caribbean identity. This paper examines chutney’s historical and social contexts, musical features, and evolving styles, drawing on historical sources, musical analysis, and an interview with chutney artist Mukesh Mahabir of the National Indian Orchestra. Understanding chutney’s evolution requires first understanding the movements and experiences of Indians and Indo-Caribbean communities.

As Indian and Indo-Caribbean communities migrated globally, their music travelled with them. Today, modern chutney is performed in major cities across North America, the United Kingdom, and beyond. Its subgenres reflect cultural syncretism within the Caribbean, with Trinidad and Guyana leading production, distribution, and innovation due to their large Indo-Caribbean populations. Chutney emerged during the indentureship period (1838–1917), when Indians migrated to the Caribbean following the emancipation of enslaved Africans. Laborers from northern and eastern India endured months-long voyages, often under harsh conditions, with five-year contracts promising wages and basic necessities that were frequently unmet. Return passage to India required additional labour or payment. By the mid-19th century, planters lobbied to replace return passage with land grants of approximately ten acres, citing the high cost of repatriation and the impracticality of investing in laborers only to send them home shortly thereafter (Roopnarine 2009).

Indian indentured labourers brought their musical traditions to the Caribbean, particularly to Guyana, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago. During the voyage, they performed folk songs, Hindu devotional music, and European sea shanties, and continued singing and dancing after long workdays on the plantations. With a large Muslim population, these gatherings evolved into the Hosay procession. “The first noted observance of Hosay was in 1847 in the streets of San Fernando, in South Trinidad, and there is evidence of Hosay celebrations in Chaguanas and St. James from as far back as 1865” (Ramnarine 2023). Over ten days, labourers marched with tadjahs and tassa drums to commemorate Imam Hussein during Muharram (the first month of the Islamic calendar), fostering unity. Colonial authorities viewed this solidarity as a threat, violently suppressing the procession on October 30, 1884—an event now known as the Hosay massacre. Despite this, their music, chanting, and tassa drumming traditions endure in chutney music and Indo-Caribbean wedding traditions.

The East Indian community, who came to work as indentured labourers on the plantations, also contributed to the diversity of Trinidad Carnival. Chutney music, tassa drums, and Hindi made an impact on calypso/soca music, inspiring the creation of the chutney soca genre.

Some songs which celebrated Indian culture . . . became mainstream and were embraced across the region. Indian dress has also influenced costume design for masquerade” (Ramsay & Murray, 2024). The development of carnival in Trinidad and Tobago stemmed from the emancipated African community celebrating the Canboulay festival.¹ Carnival, rooted in Afro-Trinidadian Canboulay traditions, evolved into a multicultural festival through twentieth-century contributions from Indian and other communities, including musical fusion and costume design. Indo-Caribbean music gained . . . visibility on parade trucks and later on main stages with the emergence of subgenres like chutney soca and chutney reggae. Soca music, created in 1941, started to gain prominence in Trinidad. Soca is described as a mix of calypso music and traditional Indian rhythms . . . One of the most prominent East Indian developments under this era . . . was the emergence of chutney soca— incorporating secular music from East Indian plantation communities with calypso, suggesting further the integration of Indians into the world of calypso and Carnival. (Bahadoor, 2023). Modern chutney, including chutney soca, evolved from classical roots and is a Carnival staple. It features stepwise, repetitive melodies on harmonium and vocals, with lyrics reflecting Caribbean life or devotional themes. Traditional dholak–dhantaa rhythms are adapted with drum machines, creating the dense, danceable textures that make chutney central to social gatherings. “The rhythmic structure is simple. The taal (cycle of beats) is usually kaherwa (simple quadruple time 4/4)” (Ramnarine 2002, 61). Harmonically, chutney is straightforward, relying on triads around a single key, and “the overall structure of many chutney songs is that of the verse and chorus format” (Ramnarine 2002, 61).

Chutney music is influenced by local classical Indian music,² and Hindu devotional Bhajans. This genre is rooted in Indian classical and folk traditions developed within the Indo-Caribbean community, which includes both religious and cultural songs performed at ceremonies, celebrations and gatherings. The difference in names reflects distinct functions, style, and contexts, but are all under the umbrella term “traditional chutney music.” Local classical Indian music refers more specifically to the Caribbean adaptation of Indian classical musical practices. It emphasizes traditional melodies, scales and vocal techniques preserved orally within Hindu communities, rather than formal North Indian or South Indian classical systems. Hindu devotional Bhajans are religious songs dedicated to Hindu deities. Their primary purpose is worship and spiritual devotion. Both classical Indian music and devotional Bhajan music have influenced the sound of chutney music.

¹ This was a creole carnival tradition rooted in emancipated Africans’ celebration of harvest and their freedom. It involved burning sugarcane stalks and parades with drums, bamboo music, stick fighting and costumes. Tensions arose in 1881 because colonial authorities tried to suppress the noisy and rowdy celebrations, particularly the drumming, masked dancers and fire. This festival later developed into the festival we now know as Carnival in Trinidad and Tobago.

² “Local” referencing Guyana, Suriname and Trinidad and Tobago.

Traditional chutney (80–100 BPM) features dense textures, complex rhythms, and dynamic contours. Taan singing—rapid melodic flourishes and sustained vowels from North Indian classical music—ornaments melodies, giving the genre its Indian character. Women performing at weddings employ a “full-throated” style with a low tessitura, characteristic of South Asian village singing (Myers 2001). Traditionally confined to ritual contexts, this vocal power is extended in the Caribbean diaspora to public performance, amplifying its political resonance. In chutney, women’s full-throated singing asserts bodily presence and sexual agency, challenging Indo-Caribbean respectability norms and patriarchal ideals. By combining taan techniques with female vocal expression, chutney bridges Bhojpuri and classical Indian traditions while integrating Caribbean percussion, defining the genre and its subgenres.

Traditional chutney music features vocalists accompanied primarily by harmonium, dholak, and dhantal, with modern subgenres incorporating additional or electronic instruments. These instruments were introduced to the Caribbean by South Asian indentured laborers between 1838 and 1917. The harmonium—originally a European instrument adapted in India by Dwarkanath Ghose—became central due to its portability and capacity for melodic and harmonic support. The dholak, a North Indian double-headed drum, contributes rhythmic patterns rooted in Bhojpuri folk traditions, while the dhantal, derived from estate tools during indentureship, represents a distinctive Indo-Caribbean rhythmic innovation (Maharaj 2011). Chutney draws heavily from Bhojpuri folk music traditions through the dholak while incorporating the dhantal as a uniquely Indo-Caribbean rhythmic innovation.

Chutney and Indian music often use a Hindi adaptation of the Western movable sol-fa scale for pitched instruments. In Hindustani (North Indian classical) music, a lowered note is called *komal* and is indicated by a solid line below the note or sol-fa syllable, while a raised note is called *tivra* and marked with a dot above the note or syllable. Showcased below, is a visual representation of the Hindi version of the Western sol-fa scale in C Major.

Figure 1: Hindi Sol-Fa Scale



Traditional chutney lyrics often tell stories or devotional texts about Hindu gods, with the Ramayana and Sita as popular themes. Passed down orally, songs reflect Caribbean life and are performed at cultural celebrations, family ceremonies, and community gatherings in languages like Hindi, Urdu, Sanskrit, and Bhojpuri. Originally a women-led tradition performed in domestic and devotional spaces, chutney allowed socialization away from the male gaze. Over time, especially in India, Trinidad, Suriname and Guyana during the colonial and post-independence periods, male performers were incorporated to adapt to changing audiences and performance contexts.

Today, chutney music is most prominently performed within Caribbean Hindu weddings and associated pre-wedding rituals. In the days preceding marriage, songs accompany ceremonies such as maticoor or dig dutty night, which involve prayers for the couple and the honouring of Mother Earth, including the Haldi rite, symbolizing fertility, prosperity, and renewal. Musical performance typically consists of drumming and traditional chutney songs, often led by women, whose repertoire includes bawdy and ritual songs that are recognized as precursors to contemporary chutney compositions. Music continues throughout multi-day wedding ceremonies and extends to lifecycle rituals such as chatti and barahi, where women perform sohar songs. In Trinidad and Guyana, these Bhojpuri-derived wedding and birth traditions significantly shaped the development of traditional chutney music.

While traditional chutney in Trinidad and Guyana retained its folk foundations, the emergence of chutney soca introduced expanded instrumentation, including synthesizers, brass, drum kits, keyboards, and electric guitars and bass. Contemporary performances may substitute traditional instruments such as the dhantal and dholak with manjira (jaal), tabla, dhol, or tassa, reflecting ongoing stylistic reinvention that has also produced subgenres such as tassa-driven chutney and chutney reggae. Despite these developments, chutney remains governed by established conventions emphasizing fast, danceable rhythms, animated vocals, and memorable refrains, and its dissemination has historically been limited by its primary performance contexts in weddings and live fêtes, resulting in restricted radio airplay largely confined to privately owned Indo-Caribbean stations (Mahabir 2009).

As chutney music became popular within the West Indies, “European and American scholars . . . (who) have categorized this “local classical” music of Trinidad as a corrupted or distorted version of the classical music of India (even taunting it as “tattered rags”), have missed the charm of New World transformation and mistakenly assumed that Trinidadian composers knew of Indian classical music before it hit the Americas in the 1960s” (Myers 2001). In modern chutney music, the inclusion of Bollywood film music and many other Caribbean rhythmic styles, such as soca, tassa drumming and reggae rhythms, are utilized to enhance the sound. Chutney music became a powerful way for Indian settlers to preserve their cultural identity while also celebrating the fusion of cultures within the Caribbean, fostering unity and strengthening inclusive communities; today, it continues to bridge the gap for modern listeners born in the Caribbean but living in North America, connecting them to their roots through sound. Myers notes that, “In 1947, Radio Trinidad (the island’s first station) opened, and by September of that year a regular programme of local Indian music was aired. By the 1960s dozens of Indian orchestras played film music arrangements at weddings, parties, and bazaars, on radio and on a weekly television programme” (Myers 2001).

Modern chutney frequently adapts Bollywood melodies while substituting English lyrics that reflect Caribbean social contexts rather than the original narratives. Performed by both male and female artists, these songs often reuse shared riddims with new lyrical or melodic layers. The 1960 Bollywood song “Shaadi Ke Liye Razamand Kar Li” exemplifies narrative-driven

wedding music through Hindustani-influenced vocals and orchestration combining Indian and Western instruments.³ Indo-Caribbean artists rework these elements in Ravi B and Andy Singh’s “Tek Meh Gul” (2012), which incorporates classical-style vocal ornamentation while shifting lyrical themes toward playful Caribbean romance. The song fuses traditional chutney instruments with electronic beats at an upbeat tempo (110 BPM), creating a dance-oriented style that retains Bollywood melodic and rhythmic structures. Its melodic and lyrical relationship to the original is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Chutney and Bollywood Melodic Comparison

Transcribed by Shelisa Cameil Akbar

Shaadi ke liya razamand kar li

♩ = 100

Shaa - di ke li - ye ra - za - man - d ka - r li ra - za -

man - d ka - r li Ma - ine ik la - da - ki pa - sa - nd ka - r li

Tek Meh Gul

♩ = 100

Yes meh best fren try tuh tek meh gul from meh yes meh gul from meh.

De fel - la name is rat, but deh call him Ra - vi B

The lyrical narratives within modern chutney music were initially stories about the way of life, the family dynamics of the countries within the Caribbean islands. Vocalists such as Sundar Popo, Terry Gajraj, Babla and Kanchan held the lyrical content within their modern chutney music. An example of this lyrical content can be heard in Sundar Popo’s song “Mother’s Love” (1979). “Mother’s Love” is widely popular across the Anglophone Indo-Caribbean world for portraying mothers as the emotional, moral, and economic anchors of the household. The lyrics reflect working-class realities—physical labour, financial struggle, and personal sacrifice—while emphasizing obedience, gratitude, and respect for elders. Sundar Popo’s song highlights how chutney music preserves social values, transmits intergenerational memory, and documents lived experience, serving as both cultural expression and social commentary in Trinidad and Guyana. The chorus lyrics are showcased in Figure 3.

³ The lyrics under the Hindi song “Shaadi Ke Liye Razamand Kar Li” (1960) are an English transliteration of the Hindi pronunciation of the words.

Figure 3: Your Mother's Love

*Your mother's love,
should never forget
The wrong things you do child,
You're bound to regret.*
— Sundar Popo, *Your Mother's Love*, 1979

As chutney and its subgenres gained popularity among Caribbean diasporic communities, particularly Trinidadian and Guyanese immigrants in North America, the music shifted in language, performers, and content. Lyrics became predominantly English, men came to dominate performances, and themes turned toward parties, gender roles, and social issues such as alcohol, dancing, and infidelity. Aisha Mohammed notes that marriage, sex, and family remain central themes, but chutney soca articulates them differently, serving as “a form of public dialogue on what is and is not acceptable behaviour for women and men” (Mohammed 2007). The shift to male-dominated performance occurred as chutney moved from private, women-centred spaces—weddings, childbirth ceremonies, and domestic gatherings—into public venues like village stages, rum shops, recording studios, radio, and Carnival tents. Colonial and post-colonial patriarchal norms discouraged women from performing publicly, associating public singing and dancing with impropriety, while men pursued commercial opportunities. As a result, women's contributions remained largely informal and undocumented, reflecting broader Indo-Caribbean dynamics in which gender, commercialization, and colonial moral frameworks reshaped cultural expression and public representation of chutney music.

Adesh Samaroo's “Rum Till I Die” (2003) exemplifies chutney's male-dominated turn, highlighting public, alcohol-centred spaces such as rum shops, street fêtes, and Carnival venues—historically masculine performance settings in Trinidad and Guyana. Its lyrics celebrate drinking, endurance, and carefree revelry, reflecting working-class Indo-Caribbean masculinity as chutney moved into commercial and public circuits. This contrasts with earlier songs like Sundar Popo's “Mother's Love,” which centre on domestic life, maternal sacrifice, moral guidance, and family responsibilities. While “Mother's Love” situates music in private, women-centred spaces and uses lyrics for emotional reflection and social instruction, “Rum Till I Die” emphasizes leisure, excess, and audience participation. The shift in lyrical themes illustrates how commercialization and public performance reshaped chutney, reinforcing male dominance by privileging masculine experiences and values over women-centred narratives (See Figure 4).

Figure 4: Rum Till I Die

*Rum til I die, Is rum til I die.
She tell meh she don't love me
and that's the reason why.*
— Adesh Samaroo, *Rum Till I Die*, 2003

Chutney music and its sub-genres began gaining popularity between the 1960s and 1990s when chutney music was performed and played during Carnival season. The dissemination of the genre strengthened the many sub-genres that already existed on an international level. “The popular hot songs of the 1990s youth culture are chutney, also known as Indian soca (soul plus calypso); they draw on the old local classical repertory and traditional instruments but with a disco beat and accompany drinking and dancing in a nightclub setting” (Myers 2001). Caribbean bands such as National Indian Orchestra of Trinidad and Tobago started their band by playing Bollywood film songs in 1967 and then began creating their own modern chutney music in 1969. The leader of the band, Harry Mahabir, studied music in India around the 1940s. Once he returned to Trinidad, he began forming this band which included his son Mukesh Mahabir.

In a phone interview with Mukesh Mahabir on December 1, 2022, valuable insights were gained on the development, migration, and evolution of chutney music. Mukesh explained that percussion is central to chutney, with arrangements created by layering and omitting instruments to make the music cohesive and conversational. Early songs were learned by ear, though later musicians increasingly used recordings and sheet music. Discussing the interplay with Bollywood, he stated: “Yes. In 1967 that band used to play film songs. But then after 1969 we only performed original chutney music. In fact, many Bollywood films borrowed our songs for their productions. Bollywood would borrow from chutney and vice versa. Then, in 1975 we started performing all around the world . . . We started getting these gigs from the promoters distributing the records we made back home. We would use a recording studio in St. James, Port of Spain, called Semp Studios. But some early chutney recordings took place at people’s houses. For example, the song by Sundar Popo “Nani Nana” was recorded at my wife’s uncle’s house” (Mukesh 2022). He concluded by highlighting differences between traditional and modern chutney, including faster tempos and a lyrical shift from everyday life in Trinidad and Tobago to themes of alcoholism and infidelity.

In the 2000s, chutney music evolved into chutney soca, combining traditional instruments like dholak and dhantal with synthesized sounds, including drum kits and horns. This fusion blended Indian melodic structures and Bhojpuri lyrics with Afro-Caribbean soca rhythms and performance aesthetics, appealing to both Indo- and Afro-Caribbean audiences. Situating the music in public spaces such as Carnival, road marches, fetes, and music tents, chutney soca transformed dance into a communal celebration, allowing cross-cultural interaction and challenging traditional social norms. Its popularity in North American diasporic spaces, particularly Toronto’s Caribana and other Caribbean festivals, reinforced its role as a cultural mediator. Manuel notes, “Although controversial, chutney soca has become popular among many Creoles as well as Indo-Caribbeans, and its appeal has spread to the Indo-Caribbean communities in North America” (Manuel 2001). Key artists who popularized the genre include Drupatee, who coined the term in 1987, Raymond Ramnarine, Ravi B, Hunter, and Anil Bheem. Today, modern chutney music remains the largest Indian musical contribution to the Caribbean world music scene, heard in major cities like New York City and Toronto.

Considering the musical, economic, historical, social, and gender factors that shaped its evolution, it is evident that the indentured Indian population in the Caribbean successfully preserved and transformed their cultural heritage through chutney music. Although the genre has shifted from its traditional, women-centred roots toward male-dominated, public, and commercial spaces, it continues to retain its Indian melodic, rhythmic, and lyrical foundations. Chutney has developed multiple subgenres, including chutney soca, chutney parang, chutney reggae, and tassa-driven chutney, reflecting the dynamic interplay of Indo- and Afro-Caribbean cultural influences, migration, commercialization, and festival culture. Its popularity remains strong in the Caribbean due to the large Indo-Caribbean population, and has spread internationally to diasporic communities in Toronto, London, and New York, where it fosters cultural identity, unity, and community. Through shared performance spaces, festivals, and musical gatherings, chutney music enables collective celebration, cross-generational connection, and engagement with cultural heritage, even far from the Caribbean. By adapting instrumentation, lyrical themes, and performance style, chutney has remained relevant while promoting social cohesion and communal pride, serving not only as a repository of Indo-Caribbean history but also as a living, unifying, and meaningful musical expression across generations and geographies.

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Shelisa Cameil Akbar is an up-and-coming Canadian vocalist, composer, and educator who is located in the Greater Toronto Area. Her unique sound stems from influences in genres such as Jazz, RnB, Soca, Bollywood, Chutney and Reggae. Her research influences include world music, more specifically related to Caribbean culture and history, gender studies and vocal pedagogy. Shelisa holds a Masters of Arts degree in music composition at York University, and a Bachelor Degree in Music- Voice from Humber College. Shelisa is a certified PYP International Baccalaureate teacher who teaches small group classes and private lessons. Shelisa has recently had the honor to perform at the World of Jazz Music Festival in Brampton, and The Bollywood Monster Mashup Festival hosted in Mississauga.