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INTERPRETING DIASPORIC MUSIC: AN ETHNOMUSICOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF IDENTITY

Athira Subin

Guest Lecturer

Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit

Tirur Regional Centre

Kerala

Aneeta Joseph

MA English

St, Teresa's College

Ernakulam

Kerala

ABSTRACT: The identities of diasporic communities, as inherently complex and unstable entities, problematise and compartmentalise the coterie's allegiances to their ancestral and contemporary homeland. Their antipodal relations to the world are identified to be often asymmetrical with the consuming presence of the new land and the blemished mental images of a motherland. In *diasporic literature*, a significant portion of the oeuvre is found to be focused on a lingering sense of alienation, loss and cultural-ethnic identity crisis. However, beyond literature, musical tastes, ideas and practices may also conspicuously serve to indicate the multidimensional complexities within migrant communities. In this context, ethnomusicology, which emphasises on the biological, social and cognitive facets of musical behaviour can be employed to decipher and explore the intricacies embedded in the unique diasporic music culture and their urge to establish a sense of identity in their imaginary homelands. In this paper titled "Interpreting Diasporic Music: An Ethnomusicological Understanding of Identity", the Indo-Caribbean neo-traditional genres of music called "tan-singing" and "chutney music" are analysed in detail in this regard. The amalgamation of Indo-Caribbean mimicry, hybridity and ambivalence is also recognised to be further complicated by the community's voracious consumption of native Indian arts – especially when they are cherished as a trail to their lost motherland. Among the Indo-Caribbean diasporic community the production and performance of music, as a cognitive phenomenon, vividly exhibit the underlying desire to affirm a sense of identity and belonging. This paper ultimately aims to analyse how music becomes a medium for the Indo-Caribbeans to maintain rootedness with their ancestral land and form a concordant identity.

Key words: Diaspora, Identity, Ethnomusicology, Chutney music, Tan singing.

In the contemporary academic context, the term diaspora has evolved to become an emphatically problematized thought within the field of postcolonial studies. In the past few decades, the concept of diaspora has surfaced as a much-favoured idea among literary scholars. This affinity towards it, however, is partly fired by the ongoing debates and discussions aimed at reaching a consensus regarding its concrete meaning, as within the nebulous area of postcolonialism there exists no uncontested and unmediated understanding on what diaspora actually is. History allows us to discern that, initially, the term was employed to refer particularly to the Jewish dispersal. But with respect to the current cultural climate, the term has emerged to evoke a profusion or plethora of global migrations and movements: African, Asian, Romanian, Irish, Palestinian, Lebanese, Sikh and so on. An ensued expansion or widening of the conceptual horizons of diaspora has also been observed in the recent past, for it has advanced to also function as a travelling metaphor connected with the tropes of displacement, mobility, crossings and borders.

Postcolonial literature can be argued to critically reflect on the focused significance of the term ‘postcolonial diasporas’, which draws together the parallelly coexisting and equally disputing fields of diaspora and postcolonial studies. Also, when the term began to garner momentum, the horizons of this concocted field, further opened up by fascinating research findings, appeared to be all the more hazy, complex and stretched than ever before. Here, noteworthy is the fact that in exploring and recognizing the legacy of the empires, researches in the field of postcolonial studies has shown an inclination towards focusing more on the individual and specific nations without exhibiting much interest in investigating and analysing the comparative links between the empires.

Until recently, the term ‘diaspora’ as such, was understood to be a fairly neoteric English word which was principally intended to describe the historically relevant event of the Babylonian exile and following settling of the Jewish community outside of Palestine. However, recent advances in research have come to reveal that the term may be quite older than the previous conceptions. It can even be traced back to the 1594 translation of Lambert Daneau’s *A Fruitfull Commentarie vpon the Twelue Small Prophets*. “This scattering abroad of the Iewes, as it were an heauenly sowing, fell out after their returne from the captiuitie of Babylon ... they are called Diaspora, that is, a scattering or sowing abroad”, said Daneau.

Etymologically, the word diaspora is said to descend from ‘diaspeirein’, the Greek word which means “to scatter and spread about” (*newspapers.com*). In the recent decades, studies on diaspora have turned to become increasingly expansive as a result of the broadening of the definition as well as application of the term. Though till the early years of the twentieth century the definition of diaspora was limited to the elucidation of the plight of the dispersed populations who were forced into exile, today, it has generally come to be inclusive of the dispersion or displacement experiences of a wide range of people—voluntary or forced, single or multiple-generational, temporary or permanent – who live with the mentally constructed images of a perceived homeland.

Diaspora or migration studies grants an interdisciplinary understanding by providing insights on the approaches of humanities and social science to the analysis of the transnational movements and other settlements of people. Diaspora is concerned with a triadic relationship – between a community of individuals, a host land and a homeland. However, the subjects of this relation as well as the meaning of its components may always be in a state of contest. Even though it can be difficult to totally differentiate diaspora from the numerous other kinds of communities with minority status, it does possess a distinctive feature: it relates to a collective memory or even a myth of, and a link to, something conceived as a ‘homeland culture’. As an interdisciplinary field in social sciences and the humanities, Diaspora studies include literature, cultural anthropology, history, art history, sociology, cultural studies, film studies and music.

Intersection of Diaspora and Music: An Ethnomusicological Overview

Ethnomusicology refers to the study of music in terms of its socio-cultural contexts. Ethnomusicologists synthesise music as a process of social and cultural significance in order to decipher not just what music is but also what it implies to be its practitioners and listeners. Moreover, they explain that music can be viewed as a means to renegotiate stereotypically established identities and notions (*jstor.org*). Ethnically coded and predefined sub-cultures may find themselves questioning their assumed identities and, in turn transforming them by transmitting certain cultural elements through their music practices. In other words, cultural and ethnic identities can be found to be transformed and maintained by the diaspora, namely through the channel of music. Here, music, as a socio-political and ethno-cultural phenomenon stresses on four particular ideas: the first is the context, which is the diasporic situation; the second is space for resistance and recognition; the third is memory

and time which facilitates identity transformation and maintenance; and finally, the fourth is politics which deals with resistance or social subordination.

Music has always been and will continue to be an emotionally and artistically creative vehicle for refugees and immigrants to create and develop their own unique identities in the new settings through constant negotiation. The interconnectedness between music and identity formation can be observed to be a recurring theme in most of the studies associated with the field. Also, several interdisciplinary researches vividly reveal that the performance, as well as listening to music facilitates the shaping, articulation and acknowledgement of particular ethnic and cultural identities (*jstor.org*). In this regard, Christopher G. Small is worth mentioning, for he coined the term “musicking” for capturing the aforementioned conceptual meaning, that is, the spectrum of meaning-generating practices that effectively contribute to construe the essence of musical performances by diasporic artists. This activity can never be unidirectional from the musician to the listener. Rather, it is a dynamically charged process with heavy involvement of factors like culture and context, thereby creating, changing and maintaining meanings.

Subfields of Ethnomusicology and Musicology in the Diasporic Context

The emergence and evolution of Ra'i music in the mid-1970s in the Algerian subcontinent can be pointed out as a particularly pivotal and heartening phenomenon according to the academic dimensions of ethnomusicology. Ra'i music is rough, raw and earthy in feel and musical texture which serves to exhibit a sense of passion, defiance and assertiveness. The singers immerse themselves and sway in accordance with its rhythm while simultaneously maintaining an unimaginable fury during the rendition. It is this poignant amalgamation of intense thoughts and sentiments that bestows Ra'i with its unique zeal and vehemence.

The genre of Ra'i does not comprise of music that can effortlessly be clubbed under a general umbrella term. On the other hand, Ra'i's acceptance and popularity can be understood as a token of its success in granting varied forms of representation and identification to which different people can immediately respond and relate. It ardently encourages all forms of self-identification and self-expression. As a 'hybrid' genre of music, it has offered an inclusive creative space for articulation and expression, resistance and revolt, negotiation and innovation.

Music studies have witnessed a growth in the interest of its practitioners towards unveiling the intricacies behind the thematic relationship between identity and music production, not least within the area of ethnomusicology (*jstor.org*). Music has always been a constitutive and quintessential part of culture and society, and hence has gained importance in terms of social as well as individual identity formation. It can be looked upon as a platform that enables the binding together of its members, which will generate a sense of understanding among themselves as belonging to one another and jointly find certain specific missions or tasks to accomplish and fulfil. “Musicking” can lead to the fostering of social, cognitive and emotional ties, implying the enactment and construction of social identities and memories where the individual establishes links with the social.

Another instance of a delectable musical fusion is termed ‘Chutney’, which evolves from the merging of the *dhantal* and *dholak* from the Indian heartland, and the Soca beats and *tassa* drums from the Caribbean shores. Chutney gained prominence in Trinidad in the late 1980s due to the public shows put for entertainment purposes but the genre as such has been intricate to the Indo – Caribbean region. Originally, it can be discerned that ‘Chutney’ music started with the indentured labourers from the eastern parts of India who were brought to the Caribbean by the British as workers on coffee and sugar plantations of the colonised islands. Most of these labourers were recorded to be the natives of Bihar, Bengal and Uttar Pradesh. Many of them got settled in Trinidad, Guyana and Jamaica even after the land was freed from the shackles of the British empire. Also, a few others who were brought in to the Caribbean by the Dutch, continue to stay on in Suriname.

Conceptualising and drawing inspirations from the folk traditions of India, particularly the Bhojpuri east, along with devotional songs and cinematic music presently, it has become a distinct genre of its own and the only way of contact with the parent country. This has also been catalysed by the fact that the English language was used as a way of conversing with each other among the Indian diasporic community and the latter half of the populace in the Caribbean. It became a way of assertion of the essential Indian-ness in the alien land than an assertion of India in itself.

Religious heroes like Rama, Krishna and Buddha exemplified in the texts like Ramayana and Mahabharata epics were dominant in the Bhojpuri tradition which in turn reciprocated through their dominant assertion in a new land among the community, especially in Trinidad. Additionally, the exile stories of Rama resonated with

the community and gave them significance like never before. Kinship systems, religious rituals and village formation of the motherland were retained and reiterated in their displacement. For instance, kinship associated terms for names were retained together with food references like *baigane*, chutney, *dhal*, *lentils* to name a few to instruments like *tassa* in the song lyrics. But unlike the long-standing tradition of the hierarchical motherland, people from high caste (*Brahmins*) to low caste (*chamar*) resided among themselves without stratifications and meshed together, as a part of work demands in the cane-fields. This enables singing to be seen not as a mimic product that is merely reproduced but revised and adapted to the daily realities to enhance the fluid nature, which is intrinsic to music in general.

Primarily, the chutney genre has its origins in the intimate women singing tradition called *mathkor* which, at its inception, documented the family lineages to preserve the identities of the ancestral land. As a ritual restricted to pre-wedding and birth ceremonies, which again shows its kinship nature, it is primarily sung to celebrate and sometimes, welcome additional family extension. Due to its communal and oral narrative nature followed by women, much documentation of this genre as such is scant. In the contemporary era, it has embedded elements from the calypsonian rhythms, rap and soca music which has rebranded as a distinct 'chutney soca' genre associated with the other half of the population in the Caribbean islands. Modern chutney performances establish a wider kinship ties historically, culturally and politically. As a result, a tradition used to assert kinship between families have rebranded to asserting wider kinship among the community. Also, a sense of relatedness is enabled regardless of gender, presently. This aspect reflects the acculturation process resulted from the contact zones and in effect, the formation of chutney music as a popular Indo-Caribbean tradition.

In the year 1970, Sundar Popo, a young musician from Trinidad, catapulted to sudden fame among the Indian community in the Caribbean with his song titled *Nana and Nani*. The song, with its witty and droll lyrics and an attractive mix of Trinidadian Creole and Hindi, dwelt on the comical and mundane affairs of everyday life in a small village. Charged with the rhythm of the *dhantal* and *dholak*, the song immediately turned into a chartbuster, in turn originating a new genre of music known as the 'Chutney'.

In fact, it is the isolation and alienation that they had to endure from not just their homeland but also from the natives of their new home that helped these Indians to retain much of their ancestrally acquired culture. An


essentially inevitable part of the situation was music – mostly the devotional songs and bhajans sung in Hindi and Bhojpuri, which artfully incorporated the traditional use of the Indian instruments like *dholak*, *tabla*, harmonium, *dhantal*, *sitar* and so on. But gradually, as the community expanded and started to imbibe the socio-cultural influences from its environments, the stirring and fast-paced beat of *tassa* drums and the Calypsonian rhythms began to become a part of the Indo-Caribbean homes. Though their songs continued to be mostly in the language of Hindi, they were sung with the distinctive accent of West Indian creole. Also, its lyrics revolved around the occurrences and relationships of day-to-day Indo-Caribbean life, while assiduously managing to echo the frustrations resulting from political and colonial subjugations.

However, the recognition and acceptance of the birth and emergence of the fusion music of ‘Chutney’ did not come until the popularity of Sundar Popo. But, with no other exceptionally talented artists in the field, the genre of ‘Chutney’ soon lost its glory and faded out of the limelight. Ultimately it disappeared altogether. For a long while, it seemed like the genre would be reduced to a mere few lines in history books. Simultaneously, the native Caribbean musical interests were also evolving by breaking away from the traditional Calypso to a blend with Blues and American Rhythm which became famous under the name ‘Soca’. During that time, the Indo-Caribbeans were unaware that the old ‘Chutney’ music would, later, reappear on the music field, in a new garb with the name ‘Indian Soca’.

The new avatar of the ‘Chutney’ style of music called ‘Indian Soca’ differentiated itself from its old version by inducing more Calypso flavours of the synthesizer, steel pan and even electric guitar. The lyrics of these songs underwent major changes in terms of subject and diction. They came to be less dominated by Hindi and were mostly in the West Indian Creole. However, the most prominent change was that the new fusion came to be picked up by the Afro-West Indian singers who later became the dominant proponents of Indian Soca. But most of the native East Indian settlers in the Caribbean refused to embrace it. Many looked askance at the changes that took place to their music as a threat that would destroy their traditional culture and outrightly rejected ‘Indian Soca’ hits like *Raja Rani* and *Marajin*.

The Afro-West Indian singer Sparrow's song, *Marajin*, had caused such controversy among the native Indians settled in Guyana due to its vulgar lyrics that the song had to be eventually banned. Observations reveal the interesting trend that while the Afro-West Indians practitioners sang about their admiration and love for the beauty of East Indian women, the original East Indian singers used the art form for exactly opposite purposes. For instance, in the song *Give Me Paisa*, its singer named Kanchan debases all East Indian women as mere gold-diggers. Similarly, in '*Darlin I Go Leave You*', the artist Anand Yankarran expresses his scorn for the East Indian women and collectively degrades them by labelling them as 'lazy' and 'cheats'.

Within a short span of time, East Indian women too began to make their entry into the Indian Soca scene. Among them, the most notable is Drupatee Ramgoonai, from Trinidad, who garnered fame and carved a niche for herself in the musical industry in 1987. Her masterpiece is the single '*Pepper Pepper*'. Its lyrics reveals her desire to seek revenge on her husband who seems to be disinterested in her. Despite its fame, the conservative Indians went on to protest against Ramgoonai. According to these Indians, it was acceptable for the East Indian men to ridicule "their" women, but the vice versa was believed to bring disgrace and shame to the community. Mahabir Maharaj, who writes in the local newspaper *Sandesh*, reflected these prejudiced sentiments: "...for an Indian girl to throw her high upbringing and culture to mix with vulgar music, sex and alcohol in carnival tents tells me that something is radically wrong with her psyche. Drupatee Ramgoonai has chosen to worship the gods of sex, wine and easy money." (*web1.hardnewsmedia.com*)



However, these backlashes couldn't leash the extremely talented Ramgoonai. The very next year she released her next album titled *Mr Bissessar* which was about her admiration for a Trinidadian *tassa* player. This song sprang to the number one spot with its release in the year 1988 in almost every English-speaking Caribbean country. The song also managed to secure a place on the Soca charts in England, America and Canada. In this fashion, Ramgoonai made history.

Over time, as the younger generations of Indo-Caribbeans began to emigrate to the United States and Canada in search of better prospects, the actual meaning of the concept of 'homeland' changed for them – no longer was it associated with India, but the villages and towns of Guyana and Trinidad where they had their

immediate family and friends. For instance, in the song titled *Bangalay Baboo*, the artist Gajraj evokes his fond memories of Guyana which he regards as his 'now homeland'. Similar songs were played in the homes of almost all Indo-Caribbean families in the United States and Canada, who felt nostalgic not for India but for Trinidad, Guyana, and Suriname. Thus, it can rightfully be argued that the genre of 'Chutney' had now evolved to become truly international by not being restricted to the Caribbean context and by being expanded onto the world stage.

'Indian Soca' as a musical genre may not be much sought after in India yet. But its popularity and acceptance in the United States and Canada steadily grow because of the large number of Indo-Caribbeans settlers in New York as well as in Toronto. Some of these immigrants have even managed to establish their own record companies for the sake of 'Indian Soca'. Here, their immense love for this music becomes all the more intriguing because of the fact that most of these people cannot even properly understand Hindi. This points to the reality that 'Chutney' or 'Indian Soca' is more than mere music for them. Geography and history may have managed to uproot them from India. But their unique music is a mirror to the notion that their pasts are always firmly anchored by an ancient tradition.

The second dispersal crossing geographic, cultural and political boundaries of the Indo-Caribbeans to the mainstream and further to global capitals like London, New York and Toronto made the diversification of chutney even further in the form of cultural performances. For instance, in Britain, chutney songs emerged as a popular genre with *bhangra* although the latter is the best known Asian genre. Yet, chutney as a genre is still exclusively restricted to a small community of the Indo-Caribbean populace in London even it is an established and popular genre in Trinidad. This has enabled the retention of the lived experiences and struggles of the diasporic community to others possible. At the present state, the figurative translation of Indian music has become multifaceted as it reciprocates as film music for the young whereas, for the older, it assumes the nature of ancestral Bhojpuri folk nature. Auxiliary to this, it could also be attributed to temple songs as *bhajan* and *kirtan*.

The third neo-traditional genre popularly known as *tan*-singing came to be established as a predominant repository of Indian heritage in a parallel yet dissimilar route. Like the chutney genre, it consists of borrowed elements and versions from classical and semi-classical North Indian versions of *thumri*, *drupad*, *ghazal* and a few other genres performed with the accompanying harmonium, *dholak* and *dantal*. It is and prized for and

embedded with Hindu mythology derived from numerous anthologies in India. For instance, songs recounting Ram's exile from the native Ayodhya is particularly reminiscent and relatable of their own experiences and hardships as an emigrant. Primarily due to acculturation and assimilation of the new land, the ancestral motherland reflected through these songs often represent a distant fictive and often surreal, mythic Eden that comes as an imaginative construct as opposed to the actual land. Essentially, India has evolved into a state of mind with references to its animals (elephants and peacocks) to sacred places like Brindavan, the Ganges and Lanka. For instance, a Trinidadian tan-singer Boodram Holass sings "Let's go to the Lucknow bazaar" even though he has never seen nor know anything about it but it comes from the knowledge that has been handed down as a grand place through the traditional folksongs ever since the colonial era of Bhojpuri region.

Rag Bihag phrases is another style included in this type of singing which has currently undergone various influences particular to the new homeland and therefore has become a new idiosyncratic music form called Indo-Caribbean Bihag.

Contemporary Guyanese singers advocates for the idiosyncratic nature and genuine Indianness of *tan*-singing from their counterpart in the ancestral homeland and sees themselves as the preserver of culture and tradition. This is further advocated by the so-called hopeless Westernization that Indian film songs reflect which in turn reiterates how genuine Indianness is found in the diasporic Indo-Caribbean natives rather than the natives of the motherland even though they've no ties with their ancestral nation, let alone the Bhojpuri region or folk traditions.

Rather than a celebration of cultural purity or tradition, the newfound identity rooted in both cosmopolitan syncretism, cultural assimilation and hybrid existence is given value. Thus, music with its ability of cognitive relateness through repetition and rhythm maintain a huge cultural and historical repository which facilitates the formation of neo-cultural identities and gives a sense of belonging. Constant negotiation and renegotiation become a continuous process in this collective identity formation whereby people as whole use music as a medium to assert their internal diasporic consciousness. As a result of this dynamic transmission process of active absorption of a collective identity, identity formation will always incorporate the nuances of new cultures wherever it finds whether it is in the case of ra'i', chutney or *tan*-singing genres.

Music studies, ethnomusicology in particular helps comprehend the diasporic community and the communal intricacies through the narratives transposed in different places in myriad ways. More than projecting the identity and sense of belonging, it postulates a shared experience that people can relate to. The hybrid nature of each foreign culture will always provide even newer possibilities for identity construction of which, music will always contribute a significant part to maintain a connection with single or multiple homelands. Just like the fluid nature of music, the ambivalent nature of immigrants and refugees will easily help them respond through songs to preserve, negotiate and expand identities in new surroundings. The inculcation of diversity through music and its simultaneous overlapping or juxtaposition provides opportunities for celebration and expression of one's multilayered culture through an "intercultural network" (*jstor.org*) formation as propounded by D. I. Slobin.

Consequently, in the current academic scenario where there is a multitude of works specifically based on literature around the ideas of diaspora, an ethnomusicological approach is of dire need and recognition of music as containers of identity formation is the first step towards achieving this status. This study intends to contribute and expand, as a starting point to the fertile area of diaspora music by making an academic contribution in this respect. Whether it is ra'i' in the case of Algerians or chutney or *tan*-singing for the Indo-Caribbean, these genres are more than just a song. It is reflective of their daily realities, struggles and triumphs. It is a way of life which contains a huge repository of their culture. It remains as the vestigial link that marks some form of rootedness for a population that has been twice removed from their homeland, whether it is India or the Caribbean region.



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