CHAPTER 2

The Development of Local-Classical Music

You take a capsule from India, leave it here for a hundred years, and this is what you get.

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East Indians in the Caribbean had in many respects constituted a "people without history" until their emergence into public culture in the mid-20th century. Local scholars, from Leo Despres to Dwarka Nath, have documented much of the political history of Indo-Caribbean society prior to this period, but most Indo-Caribbeans of the colonial epoch lived and toiled in a relatively isolated world of rural plots and plantations that was quite remote from the urban milieu of barristers and parliamentary debates. It is precisely this rural, lower-class Indo-Caribbean world, especially as constituted by popular expressive culture, whose development and historical depth have yet to be reconstructed. As the Jamaican saying goes, "The half has never been told." An exploration of tān-singing may reveal much about the history of an otherwise obscure era and provide organic substance to the skeletal outlines proffered by political and economic chronicles.

For all its importance and richness, tān-singing comes to us as a historical enigma. By the time that it started to be recorded (around 1960), it constituted a mature and coherent style system, and one that differed markedly from counterparts or precedents in India itself. In the absence of historical documentation, any attempt to reconstruct the evolution of this music confronts formidable challenges and obstacles and must contend with a set of difficult basic questions, such as: What were the stylistic sources of this music? Which elements were brought from India, which have been imported since immigration, and which were created anew? What was the nature of the debt to North Indian classical music? What sort of trained professional musicians came among the immigrants, and what was the nature of their impact? What was the

relationship among the musical communities in Trinidad, Guyana, and Suriname? To the extent that they came to share certain styles and genres, in which country did these first evolve? Was this evolution the product of a gradual, collective creation, or of a small nucleus of influential performers? How and when were the now-shared elements transmitted to the other countries? Where, in a word, did this system come from and how was it created?

This chapter constitutes an attempt to explore these questions, some of which have already been the subject of minor polemics. As will become clear, investigation reveals some of the answers, providing in the process some insight into the dynamics of continuity and change, the interaction of oral and written traditions, and even the nature of subcontinental Indian musical culture of the colonial period. My research has also been able to generate more or less plausible, if hypothetical, responses to some of the other questions. Unfortunately, I forewarn the reader that I have failed to answer some of the most important and interesting questions. I would voice the hope that future research, whether by myself or others, might shed greater light on such enigmas, but the ongoing attrition of elder musicians and informants and the further recession of the formative epoch into the past do not bode well for the uncovering of fresh data.

Colonial-Era Music Culture in the Bhojpuri Region

The roots of tān-singing lie in the music culture of the Bhojpuri-speaking region of North India as it existed during the period of indentured migration. The Bhojpuri, or *purab* (eastern), region, comprising what is now eastern Uttar Pradesh and western Bihar, was the source of more than two-thirds of the migrants, and its language, music, and traditions in general came to serve as a cultural lingua franca to which the smaller numbers of immigrants from other regions, such as South India, largely acculturated.[1] Although several of the migrants came from cities such as Banaras and Faizabad, evidence suggests that the vast majority were villagers. As such, their primary cultural legacy would have been that of the rural North Indian hinterland in the latter 19th century.

The *purab* region itself has long been known for its poverty and backwardness. It is at once isolated and densely populated, a North Indian hinterland whose culture, language, and music have enjoyed little pan-regional, not to mention international, visibility. As V. S. Naipaul (1976: 39) wrote, "It is a dismal, dusty land, made sadder by ruins and place names that speak of ancient glory. For here was the land of the Buddha; here are cities mentioned in the Hindu epics of three thousand years ago—like Ayodhya, from which my father's family came, today a ramshackle town of wholly contemporary squalor."[2] The villager emigrating from rural Bihar would have had little awareness of the new intellectual trends in Calcutta and Bombay. For that matter, he would have known little of the history embodied in the ruins punctuating the region's landscape, except that they represented a rich and glorious past to which he was in some sense an heir. More tangibly, his worldview would have been

shaped by more general sociocultural developments, including in particular the *bhakti* movement, which, from the 11th century on, had supplemented Brahmanical orthodoxy with a more personal devotionalism, often expressed in song and verse. A related general development was the growth and legitimization of vernacular languages and their use to disseminate religious texts that previously circulated only in Sanskrit. Pre-eminent among these in the *purab* region would be the Maithili songs of the 14th-century poet Vidyapati, the vast body of Braj Bhasha verse celebrating the exploits of Krishna the cowherd, and, above all, the *Rāmcharitmānas*, an Avadhi-language version of the *Rāmāyāna* written in the 16th century by Tulsidas.[3] The *Mānas*, as it is more informally known, has long constituted the most cherished book in the region, disseminated and memorized via print, the discourses of pandits, and, perhaps most extensively, folk-song traditions.

Islam, too, had established a legacy in the Bhojpuri region, especially as spread by pacifist Sufi missionaries; moreover, centuries of Hindu–Muslim cohabitation had led to shared patterns of village life that overshadowed the formal differences between the two religions. Finally, the colonial presence would also have made some mark on village worldviews, whether in the form of respect for British technology or, for many, spite for the foreigners whose invasion was the most recent in memory and whose taxation policies were engendering recurrent famines. The villagers, however provincial their attitudes and narrow their experiences may have been, were heirs to a strong cultural legacy that would enable them to resist the proselytizing pressures of the indentureship experience (see Haraksingh 1985: 167).

Music constituted an important aspect of local culture and served as a key element in the transmission and perpetuation of that culture in the diaspora. Bhojpuri-region music culture during the migration era was, and remains, heterogeneous, ranging from simple and unpretentious rural folk-song genres and textually rich oral-narrative genres to the classical music and dance of the urban courts and courtesan salons. Because most migrants were of rural peasant backgrounds, far removed from the rarefied milieu of the landed nobility and the emerging bourgeoisie, it was the region's folk-music culture that would constitute the core of the legacy brought to the West Indies. North Indian folk music is clearly the source of many aspects of tān-singing, including the use of the dholak and dantāl, of genres such as *kajri* and *chaiti*, and of the general importance of the text—in contrast to Hindustani music, in which the lyrics are generally subservient to more abstract parameters of *rāg* (mode) and *tāl* (meter). Unfortunately, our knowledge of pre-modern Bhojpuri folk-music culture is limited, and even its modern counterpart remains under-researched.[4]

However, colonial-era documents that have survived reveal clear continuities with Indo-Caribbean music. For instance, Abdul Halim Sharar's illuminating account of mid-19th-century Lucknow describes tāssa ensembles that are essentially identical to their Caribbean derivatives. However, his ethnography focuses on the elite Muslim urban culture of a city that lies slightly outside the Bhojpuri region, rather than on the Hindu-dominated rural areas from which most indentured emigrants came. More directly relevant to 19th-century Bhojpuri folk music are two articles by British civil servant and ethnographer George Grierson (1884, 1886), which present several

Bhojpuri (Bihāri) folk songs, with informative commentary. The genres represented include *kajri, chaiti, ghāto* and Vidyapati songs; these also flourished, in varying degrees and forms, as folk genres in the Caribbean and are occasionally rendered by tān-singers. Given the general conservatism of rural folk culture, it is not surprising that the lyrics to the songs cited by Grierson resemble modern Caribbean and Indian counterparts in form, style, and content (see, e.g., Myers 1998). Of equal interest are certain of Grierson's general observations about Bhojpuri folk songs regarding the liberties taken with lyrics, the important role of women in preserving songs, and the exclusive use of familiar stock melodies that distinguish individual genres.

In general, however, the folk-derived aspects of tān-singing constitute only one aspect, and arguably a subsidiary one, of its style and evolution. Tān-singing, as an art cultivated by semiprofessional specialists in the realm of what could be called sophisticated rural culture, is recognized as distinct from the simple, repetitive, and more unambiguously folk genres like work songs, responsorial bhajans, women's wedding and childbirth songs, and the melodically monotonous *birha*. Even the tān-singers' occasional renditions of folk-based subgenres such as *chaiti* and *kajri* are distinguished by the soloistic singing, the sophisticated rhythmic accompaniment, the higher technical standards, and the general context of formal, generally paid performance for a sedentary audience, often of connoisseurs. (Such renditions thus parallel the occasional performance of these genres by classical and light-classical singers in North India.) Moreover, although tān-singing might be regarded as a sort of stylized semiprofessional folk idiom, its links to Hindustani music are overt and seminal. As has been mentioned, tān-singing's analytical terminology and core genres—dhrupad, tillāna, thumri, and ghazal—all derive from North Indian classical and semiclassical music. In Chapter 5, I will discuss in some detail these North Indian forms and their Caribbean counterparts. More directly relevant at this point is the general presence of these genres in the colonial-era Bhojpuri region and the degree to which they may have penetrated rural peasant culture.

Since the mid-20th century, Hindustani music patronage has come to be concentrated in a few large cities—especially Bombay, Delhi, and Calcutta. Previously, however, the classical-music realm was less centralized, and many provincial towns throughout the north served as secondary centers for the fine arts, as performed by hereditary male specialists and skilled courtesans. In the Bhojpuri environs, landlords and petty princes actively patronized music and dance in Arrah, Bhagalpur, Darbhanga, Faizabad, Muzaffarpur, Patna, Saharsa, and elsewhere (Roy Chaudhury 1976: 148). During the era of the nawabs of Avadh (Oudh) (mid-1700s–1856), nearby Lucknow was the foremost center of music and dance patronage in North India. As will be discussed later, although the ranks of the indentured laborers may or may not have contained many formally trained classical performers, elements of Hindustani music could also have been introduced by immigrants from less elite milieus. In North India in the 19th century, certain performers, genres, and practices existed between the realm of the barefoot peasant and the hyper-refined court that served as conduits between elite and folk culture and constituted a sort of intermediate sphere of public culture. Thus, for example, *domnis*—women of the *dom* caste of predominantly folk performers—were among

the most respected and sophisticated of courtesan performers (Sharar 1975: 145; Quli Khan 1989: 110). Similarly, many of the dancing girls of Banaras are said to have come from the provincial Bihar town of Bhabua (Roy Chaudhury 1976: 149). And although Sharar's chronicle focuses on Lucknow, it attests to the general popularity—at least within the city itself—of light-classical music and poetry: "Sometimes bazaar boys have been heard singing *bhairvin, sohni, behag*, and other ragas with such excellence that those who heard them were entranced and the greatest singers envied them" (Sharar 1975: 139).

The emergence of an incipient bourgeoisie was also serving to spread amateur performance of classical music beyond the milieu of the court. The sitar was becoming increasingly popular in the *purab* region (Miner 1993: 46), and although it is now used almost exclusively as a solo classical instrument, in the 19th-century it was often used to accompany *nāch* (courtesan dance) and singing, presumably of light music (Sharar 1975: 140). Meanwhile, modes, meters, and lyric idioms of Bhojpuri folk music were being actively incorporated into light-classical styles, particularly in the form of the incipient *bol banāo* thumri (Manuel 1989: chap. 4–5; see also pp. 148–49 in this book).

Hindu temples also served as sites for the transmission of court-related music—dhrupad, in particular. Dhrupad was the predominant classical-music genre from the Mughal era until the 19th century, when it was effectively supplanted by the livelier *khyāl*. However, from the time of its inception in the 15th century, parallel traditions of dhrupad appear to have flourished in temples. These traditions have taken various forms, from the refined, soloistic *haveli sangit*, or *kirtan*-singing, of Pushtimarg temples in Rajasthan and Gujarat to the collective, responsorial *samāj* song sessions led by a pandit, such as those that flourish in the Mathura region (see Gaston 1997; Beck 1996). Such traditions, while particularly strong in the Braj region, have thrived throughout much of North India, including parts of the Bhojpuri region. Thus, Ramakant Dvivedi (1992) has documented a tradition of temple dhrupad singing in Kanpur, on the borders of the Bhojpuri region. Similarly, the Ramanandi sect of Rama devotees also cultivated a tradition of temple dhrupad singing in Ayodhya, the legendary home of Lord Rama and the more historically verifiable home of many of the indentured emigrants. Forms of temple and even local court-based dhrupad singing have also been actively cultivated in Darbhanga, Banaras, and elsewhere in the Bhojpuri region (see, e.g., Thielemann 1997).

A particularly important role in diffusing elite genres beyond the court milieu was played by the various forms of popular dance drama that had come to flourish in North India by the latter 19th century (Hansen 1992). Some of these theatrical forms originated before this period, such as the *Rāmāyān*-based *Rāmlilā* associated with Banaras, and the *rāslila* of Brindavan, which dramatized the amorous antics of Krishna the divine cowherd. From around 1850, Parsi theater emerged as an urban entertainment genre, thriving particularly in Calcutta, Delhi, and Bombay. Gaining popularity around the same time was the play *Indarsabha*, which, as originally written in Lucknow in the 1850s, mixes Hindu and Muslim elements in a tale of love between a courtier and a fairy. Along with *Indarsabha*, most relevant to Indo-Caribbean culture

were the somewhat more rustic dramas *Gopichand* and *Raja Harishchandra*, which, together with other assorted tales, came in the early 20th century to fall under the rubric *nautanki* (or, in the Braj region, *swāng*). *Gopichand* and *Raja Harishchandra* both narrate epics of calamity and eventual salvation that ensued when virtuous and mighty kings became obliged to renounce their thrones and family ties. *Indarsabha*, *Gopichand*, and *Harishchandra* all combined narrative dialogue in Hindi and Urdu with comedy, fights, and a variety of songs and dances. By the latter 19th century, these dramas were being performed for urban and rural audiences throughout much of North India by itinerant troupes of professional or semiprofessional artists. The Awadh and Bhojpuri regions appear to have been particular strongholds of these traditions, partly due to the impetus given by Wajid Ali Shah to *Indarsabha*, *rahas* dance theater, and related forms before his dethronement in 1856.

As Hansen's research has shown, these theatrical forms constituted a lively component of an early modern public culture that attracted both elite and lower-class patronage and bridged the subsequently polarized realms of urban and rural and "folk" and "classical." Hansen characterizes such genres as "intermediary" theater, both in terms of their level of sophistication and in the ways that they synthesized and mediated elements otherwise associated with distinct classes, regions, and performance traditions. As she observes (1992: 79):

> The *Indarsabha* in this manner accelerated a process that transplanted court-based styles of music, dance, and poetry to a popular milieu. The perennial movements of exchange between refined and folk forms accelerated in the rapid breakdown of the patronage structure after the annexation of Awadh [in 1856]. Performers in search of employment must have turned to the rapidly growing theatrical sphere for survival. In consequence, styles such as Kathak, *thumri*, and *ghazal* were transplanted to the popular performance sphere, where they met less discriminating but not unenthusiastic patrons and audiences. By the same token, poetic meters and song forms moved from the court to the public milieu.

In popular theater, songs accompanying kathak, the predominant classical dance of North India, included versions of tillāna/tarāna, thumri, and ghazal. Other song types common in such dance dramas included bihāg, holi, and dādra, idiosyncratic forms of which, as we shall see, were incorporated into tān-singing. Folk music–drama was also evidently the source of the *dohā-chaubolā-daur* verse format that became standard in popular theater in North India and the Indic Caribbean.

Finally, the second half of the 19th century saw the emergence of an extensive Hindi-language publishing industry, which served to further disseminate aspects of both erudite and regional vernacular cultures. Much of the output of this network of independent presses consisted of relatively inexpensive anthologies of song texts, especially Hindu devotional verses in the Braj Bhasha dialect of Hindi. Although these books will be discussed in greater depth later, at this point we can observe that many of the song texts were labeled and structured as classical or light-classical dhrupads, thumris, and ghazals (more often in Hindi than Urdu), or in "intermediate" prosodic forms such as lāvni, dandak, and *savaiyya*, which were associated with certain stock tunes. Also circulating were chapbooks of popular dramas like *Gopichand*