

CHAMPA DEVI
(Fatima 'Khartoon' Khan; 1923-2000)
National Cultural Icon and Exemplar
by
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Life in Trinidad at the beginning of the twentieth century was British, or rather European oriented, with a predominantly Christian value system. This was alien to an Asian value system and moreso to the life style of the Indian immigrants in this, their adopted land. The British education system, assisted by Christian missionaries sought to obliterate the foundational heritage and traditions of the Indentured immigrants; their philosophical, religious, literary, linguistic, artistic and aesthetic representations of their culture. Had this policy succeeded, it would have left this over forty percent of the society in a cultural wilderness. But the culture of this new section of immigrants, far from being erased, continued to exist in pockets of the island including Port of Spain and its suburbs, even in Queen Street of the capital city. The introduction of the Indian movies in 1935 provided a much needed boost to East Indian cultural retention and to reenergizing that community. It was in that era that the young and beautiful dancer-song-bird, Champa Devi, emerged.

Born into poverty, the offspring of an Indian indentured family, Khartoon Alia, her pet name, rose to fame as Champa Devi, blazing a trail in dance and music in Trinidad and the southern Caribbean. Champa Devi rose to stardom as one of the most distinguished artistes and entertainers of the Indian performing arts in this region. The epitome of local beauty, exhibiting grace and charm; and doubly blessed with a nightingale's voice she exhibited panache and flair on the stage, first in British Guiana (BG) from 1939, then throughout Trinidad, and Suriname. She conquered the hearts of all those who came into contact with her, endearing herself to her thousands of adoring, mesmerized fans. A celebrity, she fraternized with the rich, the educated, the established and emerging leaders of the three countries who were to play major roles in the formative stages of their respective countries' development. Married twice, Champa had seven children; sired by three loves of her life.

From diamond Village to Port of Spain

Born to Fauzad Khan and Nabihan in Diamond village, south Trinidad on January 25, 1923 - three years after the legal termination of Indian contract labour (1920), under indentureship - the baby girl was officially registered as Fatima, daughter of Fauzad Khan.¹ A first generation Indian Trinidadian, her parents came from India; her mother was from the Basti area of Uttar Pradesh. She was given the 'nickname' of Khartoon Alia and knew this to be her name. Like many Indo-Trinidadians, much later in her life she discovered that her birth certificate carried her name as Fatima.

At an early age Khartoon's parents separated. She lived for some time with her father and her step-mother on the Waterloo estate in Carapichaima. Life became difficult for her within the

new relationship and ‘relatives of her step-mother took her with them to live in Port of Spain’. Fakeer (Fakir) Mohammed and his wife Hasimat became her foster parents. The Mohammeds owned the *Dil Bahar* restaurant and boarding house at 55 Queen Street in downtown Port of Spain. With its colonial style façade this building and address was to become an iconic place in Trinidad’s history.

The building was a two-story structure with a loft. The ground floor housed the ‘cook shop’ - for that is how Indian food establishments were then referred to – with the living quarters at the back. The second floor and loft was occupied by the infamous gangster, preacher and folk hero, Boysie Singh. There Boysie operated an unlicensed bar, gambling and whore house where many unsavoury illegal deeds were committed either by Boysie or under his watch; all well documented in Derek Bickerton’s book; *The Murders of Boysie Singh* (2020).² Much later the *Dil Bahar* restaurant gave way to the Windsor Record Shop owned by another Mohammed family from San Juan. Fakeer and Hasimat also lived at that address, behind their restaurant. This establishment of ‘cook shop’ and boarding house accommodated itinerant visitors; some coming to the city to transact business, and students who lived in the country but attended school in the capital city.³ Fatima assisted Hasimat in the running of the establishment, performing the functions of both assistant and maid. She ‘cooked, cleaned and served customers.’

Faker Mohammed, himself a trained dancer from India; he was born in Trinidad, from Indian indentured workers, returned to India with his parents, spent twelve years there, studying the Indian theatre arts - instrumental music and dance - and returned to Trinidad. He is credited as having introduced the *Indra Sabha* dance drama to Trinidad in the 1920s.⁴ Fakeer initiated Khartoon and another dancer, Alice Jan, into dancing. He taught them the rudiments of the ‘Indar Sabha’ (Indra Sabha) dance, a theatrical dance-drama. It is around this same period that the first Hindi movie, *Bala Joban* (wayward child) was brought to Trinidad and screened in 1935, by Ranjit Kumar. It became an instant success.

Shortly thereafter Faker downsized his main establishment at 55 Queen Street. Part of the ground floor, a front outlet, was rented out to the Mohammed family; Hydar, Kamaluddin, Moenudin and Shamshudin from San Juan, and the Windsor record shop - selling records and song copies from the Indian movies - was established at this address. Hydar Ali ran the establishment. From this location much early planning was done for the PNM party’s politics of control and for the Mohammed clan’s control of the public image and purse strings of the emerging Indo-Trinidadian performing artistes. But that is for another place and time.

Fatima loved listening to the latest songs from the Hindi movies on a gramophone while she worked. Understanding Hindustani (a mixture of Hindi, Urdu, Bhojpuri and other Indian languages brought by the *jahajis*) the language which her foster parents spoke with her, she would do her own interpretative dancing to the lyrics of the various songs, dancing by herself, for herself. She also learnt the Rajdhar/Rasdhari dance from a ‘Kissoon’.⁵ Nirmala recalls her mother, Champa, telling her in later life, that she would ‘look in the mirror and recognize the

physical beauty of her body’ and its form and ‘felt in her heart that there was more to her life than serving in a cook shop.’ She danced all of her spare time and even between her daily chores.

Her foster parents recognised her aptitude for dance, her natural rhythm, the gracefulness of her movements, and her potential as a future stage artist. Fakeer was a friend of the Guyanese businessman and entrepreneur, Budbir Singh, who operated one of the first Indian Stores in nearby Frederick Street; selling artifacts and other Indian paraphernalia. Fakeer took the fifteen year old Fatima to meet Budbir Singh. Budbir looked at her, considered her physical features, listened to her voice and agreed to assist in launching her on the stage. He named her *Champa Devi*; the flower goddess. The name Champa, or fragrant jasmine flower, survived throughout her stage career and into legend.

Champa goes to Br.Guiana

Budbir then organized a troupe of artistes from Trinidad, with Champa as singer and dancer, to perform a series of concerts in British Guiana (BG). Budbir appointed his younger brother, Indal Singh, an immaculate dresser and local playboy with impeccable English manners, as manager and impresario of the troupe. Indal took the troupe to BG in 1938. There the troupe was hosted by J.B.Singh, a member of the Legislative Council (LEGCO) of the then British-administered country. J.B. was the elder brother of both Budbir and Indal Singh. This troupe toured Guyana extensively, performing in the cities and towns, even crossing the ‘mighty rivers to the villages in the interior of the country where Indo-Guyanese lived on the land.’ They

planted their sugar cane, rice and other crops and fished, but thirsted for live entertainment.



Champa Devi 1950. Photo courtesy family archives.

The young, impressionable Champa became infatuated with her flamboyant manager. Nirmala recalls her mother telling her of her father, “He used to dress up well nice. Every suit of his had two pairs of pants”. They fell passionately in love. Pundit Lalman Sookool married the young, beautiful, Muslim singer-dancer Fatima Khartoon Khan of Trinidad to Hindu Indal Singh of Br Guiana. The troupe then toured Suriname. The literati and members of Suriname’s high society embraced Champa, ‘wining and dining her in their homes.’ Men swooned during her stage performances. Women envied her and became insecure when they saw their men folk around her. Her tour of Suriname was triumphant.⁶ She gained *prima donna* status.

She became pregnant and had her first baby in her third year out of Trinidad.

The baby, a daughter, born in September 1941 in B.G., was named Yugeshwari Singh (Nirmala) by the same pundit Lalman who performed her wedding ceremony. Champa was just 18 years old. Marriages across religious boundaries were not easily accepted in those days even though both parties had common ancestral, ethnic ties. Indal's family did not fully accept her or their baby in their home. Problems developed in the marriage.

Gulshan Bahar and Bengal Famine Relief of 1943

She returned to Trinidad in 1943, pregnant. Her marriage was strained; Indal Singh kept their baby daughter, Nirmala, in B.G. She had spent about five years away from home. Meanwhile with World War II raging across continents, in India the Bengal province was being ravaged by a devastating man-made famine in 1943, the repercussions of deliberate British policy decisions taken to support its War effort.⁷ Trinidadians took a decision to assist Bengal in alleviating some of the hardships being experienced there. Planning proceeded with much haste by a group of entrepreneurs and patrons, including Messers Budbir Singh, Noor Ghany and M. J. Kirpalani (a Trinidad businessman of Indian origin) to produce the first local dance drama; *Gulshan Bahar* (The [flower] garden of pleasure). Somewhat of a musical pageant, *Gulshan Bahar* was staged to raise funds for contributing to the Bengal Famine relief programme.

Now back in Trinidad and not divulging her pregnancy, Champa was invited into the cast of performers. She plunged herself headlong in the rehearsals for *Gulshan Bahar*. The production, premiered in late 1943, had a totally local cast and featured live music and dance, with elaborate stage props, décor and costuming. Even the songs were locally composed; the lyrics of one of the compositions was penned by John Mohan (Dharam Dev), the son of Indentured immigrant Badaloo who had earlier bought lands on 'barren Picton hill' in east Port of Spain and rented it out to tenants; Africans and Indians. Champa's costumes were sponsored by Murli Kirpalani.

Gulshan Bahar also featured Narsaloo Ramaya, Ahmad Khan (Chookcham) and others. At the first showing in San Fernando the late Bhadase Sagan Maharaj, then an entrepreneur and amateur wrestler functioned as Champa Devi's bodyguard.⁸ The second show was staged at the Rialto cinema in St James, then a predominantly Indian settlement, called 'coolie town'. The production played to full houses wherever it went.

The *Indian Centenary Review – One hundred years of Progress* published in 1945,



commenting on the contribution of local artistes to this venture, carried the following:

“During the Famine Relief drive a group of enterprising Indians produced an outstanding stage show called Gulshan Bahar. They were fortunate to secure the services of the excellent artiste Champa Devi, who toured the Island and thrilled large audiences with her exquisite dancing. She was ably

supported by a local cast chief of who was Tarran Persad and Jagroo Kawal...’’⁹

The book also identified details of the contributors to the Famine Relief Fund. *Gulshan Bahar* contributed TT \$5,000.00 of the then grand sum of TT\$54,490.65 which was forwarded to India.

Champa by this time had developed a close relationship with Murli Kirpalani.¹⁰ She lived then in Curepe. Meanwhile Indal had secretly brought Yugeshwari/Nirmala to live with

Champa Devi in *Gulshan Bahar*. Photo from *India Centenary Review -1945*

Champa’s sister Badroon, *alias* Rokia *alias* Carmen, in Tobago. As soon as Champa got wind of this information and established contact with Nirmala, Indal spirited her away, back to B.G. Nirmala recollected that “She was not to see her mother again for another 12 years until 1955”. After *Gulshan Bahar* ended Champa gave birth to her second child; a boy named Kamille, Kamille was also the son of Indal, for she was already pregnant when she left Georgetown in 1943.

Gulshan Bahar with its local artistes and live orchestration music had created tremendous impact and resultant demand for such type of local entertainment. It differed from the imported dance drama scripts of *Harishchandra* (Harichand), *Indar Sabha*, *Sarwaneer* or *Gopiechand* and the other local ‘dance-drama’ presentations which were earlier performed in Trinidad. It was also different from the purely musical *saaj-s* (orchestras) which were mushrooming in profusion throughout the country, reproducing the musical hits of the rapidly growing Bombay film industry and arriving in Trinidad in quick succession. *Gulshan Bahar* was an entirely local, ground-breaking production.

World War II

World War II raged on. The local population needed some pleasant distraction to take their minds from the problems being experienced at the time. *Gulshan Bahar* had stirred an inward hunger for this type of entertainment. Another local dance drama, *Naya Zamana* (A new era), followed. Premiered in 1945, *Naya Zamana* featured Champa Devi as singer-dancer, vocalist Tarran Persad, dancers Owen Ali and Nizam Ali, *alias* ‘Manul’ and musicians Narsaloo Ramaya and Ahmad Khan. The lyrics of two of the songs in *Naya Zamana* were composed by J. locals; Jang Bahadur and Mohan.

Trinidad was an active air force and submarine base of the allied forces of USA and Europe. Hundreds of military aircrafts were serviced and stationed at the American operated airbase at Fort Reid in Waller field. Large battalions of American army personnel were stationed both at Fort Reid and at the military base in Chaguaramas. The officers were also starving for entertainment. Champa teamed up with other Trinidadian artistes including ‘Geoffrey holder, then a young dancer and comedian, and singer Grace Baptiste’;¹¹ to entertain the American armed forces stationed at Wallerfield. She recalled that during this period, in 1944, while rehearsing and performing she taught Holder “how to move his neck while dancing” for which he credited her in his later interviews.

The celluloid entertainment industry was also growing rapidly during this period in Trinidad. A new breed of local entrepreneurs emerged in this sector. They included Timothy Roodal, Sarran Teelucksingh, Juteram and Seetaram. They also recognised the need for

performing stages for a rapidly growing, live-entertainment sector. They merged cinema construction with performing auditoriums; a raised stage in front of the audience with a large cinema screen behind it. Many evenings of entertainment were held in these cinema-theatres; Globe and Roxy theatres in Port of Spain and Empire in San Fernando. Country-theatres such as Juteram's Ascot in Sangre Grande, Saith's Jubilee in Chaguanas, Seetaram's Palladium in Tunapuna and Central theatre in Princess town usually carried either a full stage show or two movies. Sometimes they advertised a combination of a live 'stage show' followed by a movie.

The year 1945 was memorable in many respects. Not only did it see the end of the second world war, but Indo-Trinbagonians had also won a major, hard-fought victory for universal adult suffrage; securing the right to electoral franchise and to their selection of national leaders through the democratic process. The island-wide battle had been fought by Adrian cola Rienzi (Vishnu Deonarine), Ranjit Kumar and others.¹² This right had come one hundred years after the landing of the first Indian indentured labourers to Trinidad (May 30, 1845) and twenty five years after the termination of all Indian contractual labour (1920) to the Caribbean. May 30th was indeed worthy of celebration and Champa had assumed iconic status, a shining star in the Southern Caribbean firmament. Dharmacharya Pt. Dr. Parasram recalled that a popular ditty was even composed and sung on her stage exploits during local 'break-away' parties:

*"High as the mountain, deep as the sea;
Ah never see a dancer like Champa Devi."*

From Naya Zamana-Dance drama to orchestra

Naya Zamana underwent a smooth transition from dance-drama to being an orchestra, belching out live music in their performances. Champa continued to grace movie 'theatres', entertaining packed and captive audiences. Entertainment 'flyers' advertising Champa and Naya Zamana blazed a trail across the country. One flyer in 1946 billed her to perform at Central Theatre in Princes Town at an admission price of 50 cents stalls and 75 cents, House and Balcony. Champa, with a cast of local entertainers, continued mesmerizing her audiences.

While performing in the dance-dramas *Gulshan Bahar* and later in *Naya Zamana*, Champa gradually lost her heart to another. She fell in love with her co-star, Tarran Persad. Young Tarran had an extremely melodious voice. Being much younger than Champa - the differences in their age did not matter to them - she moved to Waterloo to live with Tarran. After the war they performed in almost every Indian function throughout the country. In August 1947 the couple eventually produced a 'love child', a daughter named Laila.

“NAYA ZAMANA”

Starring—



NISREEN and KADHA
Last seen from “The Rajah”
played by Tarran and Champa

**Champa Devi and
Kumar**
[Acclaimed by critics as the Most Outstanding
Indian Stage Play ever produced in the West
Indies and the Guianas]
— with —
**KUMAR, TARRAN PERSAD, JANG BAHADOOR,
NOOR JEHAN, RAMSAMOOO and any others.**



TARRAN PERSAD
The ultimate champion of Trinidad,
who will thrill you with songs which
most men have never heard before



MUSIC BY THE COMBINED
ORCHESTRAS OF NAZEEH
MOHAMMED & HIS SEESAH!
with N. RAMAYIA, Violinist,
A. KHAN, Standoffish, B.
CHANDI, Tambora.

“NAYA ZAMANA” has been
playing to capacity houses
at Port-of-Spain and San Fer-
nando. People were turned
back as all seats were sold out.
Now is your opportunity of
seeing the show for the last
time.



CHAMPA and KUMAR
The sensational new dancing partners of Champa.
Kumar wants fame and glory with his dancing
— at the —

**CENTRAL THEATRE
(PRINCES TOWN)**
SATURDAY 26th JANUARY, 1946
at 8.30 p.m.
DON'T MISS IT
BETTER COME EARLY AND AVOID THE GREAT RUSH.



NARSALOO RAMAYA
Played by Narsaloo and Nara Jahan
whose brilliant acting will stir your
interest.

PRICES: STALLS 50¢, HOUSE & BAL. 75¢.

That same year, 1947, Radio Trinidad, one of the two local radio stations, decided to expand its listening audience. It introduced a local East Indian segment to their weekly programming. Champa Devi teamed up with Tarran Persad to sing for this inaugural programme of “Indian Talent on Parade”, on Radio Trinidad. The programme was hosted by young Kamaluddin Mohammed. Musical accompaniment for this programme was provided by Narsaloo Ramaya and the Naya Zamana Orchestra. Champa performed on numerous occasions on this programme. That same year a steel band segment was also introduced on Radio Trinidad. After 1956 general elections Kamal - as he was familiarly called - relinquished the hosting of the Indian Talent programme. He had become a minister in the Peoples’ National Movement

government with Dr Eric Williams, the party’s leader, being its Chief Minister.

Birth of Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha.

Indian religious organizations operating independent of one another in the country were being encouraged to form one major body to consolidate their resources for development. Many people were in the forefront of this initiative then headed by the major driving force, the young Charismatic and dynamic Bhadase Sagan Maharaj. Now a successful businessman and entrepreneur, he had accumulated riches during the war and then from the departing American forces from the island. Bhadase, having an innate foresight for future events and talent for leadership had begun to attract many emerging luminaries within the Indo-Trinidadian population, including Simbhoonath Capildeo, Chanka Maharaj of San Juan and Rampersad Bholai in Sangre Grande. In 1952 several discrete Indian organizations, including an already existing Maha Sabha organisation, established in the 1940s by Ranjit Kumar - remember the young engineer who brought the first Indian movie to Trinidad, Bala Joban in 1935, and decided to let his bucket down here - merged, under Bhadase influence, into one umbrella body, the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha (SDMS). Bhadase Maharaj was elected its President and became its maximum leader.

Prior to 1952 all Indian children were compelled to receive English education from either the few government schools - the majority of which were not located in Indian areas - or those run by the Presbyterian Christian Church (Canadian Mission Indian [CMI]). English education and teaching careers were major routes and stepping stones of the Indian community’s escape

out of a life in agriculture and the search for independence and self-sufficiency. A teaching job in the Presbyterian schools was one escape route, but the Church extracted its pound of flesh by insisting that no one could teach in their schools without first being baptized into Christianity. Bhadase and the Maha Sabha commenced the process of establishing primary schools throughout the rural Indian areas to break this vicious system and educate Hindu and all rural children. This English literacy project was more so critical when Indians considered that in 1945 they had almost lost the battle for the granting of the universal adult suffrage and franchise to vote because of their widespread inability to speak English.

With the SDMS school building programme moving apace, as part of this overall emancipation movement, Champa Devi, now a firm friend of Bhadase, helped in the initial stages in raising funds for his education initiative. She gave numerous performances to large 'sellout' crowds, dancing and singing. As a female she performed alongside mostly male artistes, holding her end in a male-dominated society. Within a short time the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha, had established dozens of primary schools in and around Indian communities throughout the island and a secondary School; the Sangre Grande Hindu College. Her popularity was at its zenith. Many years later, in 1987, Champa recalled to this author that "On one occasion when I performed in Sangre Grande," - having been brought there by Balkaran Singh and Rampersad Bholai to raise funds for the establishment of the Sangre Grande Hindu college - "the stage collapsed with the on-rush of patrons, wanting simply to hold and touch me... They (the organisers) had to physically remove me from the overflowing audience who were all my admiring fans."

Her personal relationship with Tarran Persad became strained. She moved to San Fernando. There Champa met young Rahim and a new relationship blossomed. She got pregnant with her fourth child, this time from her new flame, Rahim. "But Rahim's mother refused to allow her son to marry Champa. Rahim was about eighteen years old, many years younger than her....They ran away to Tobago and lived with Champa's mother for a number of years"¹³ Two of Champa's daughters Patricia and Ramona were born in Tobago. Then she and Rahim moved back to Trinidad where their third daughter Rosemarie was born.

Return to Br.Guiana

Shortly after the birth of Rosemarie¹⁴ Champa was back on the stage, returning to British Guiana (B.G.) in 1955, with a performing troupe comprising dancer, Owen Ali; singer Ganga Persad (One of their favourite songs was a duet '*Jaag Dard-E-Ishq Jaag*' [*Awake to the pain of love*] made popular by Indian playback singers Hemant Kumar and Lata Mangeshkar from the movie *Anarkali*)¹⁵; pannist Cyril Raymond and singer-dancer Noor Jahan (later called Irene Montrichard). Nirmala remembered that, "Irene at that time was married and living in B.G. when she joined the troupe. With Champa as its artistic director, the troupe spent a few months there, performing in cinemas and makeshift stages throughout the country. It was sponsored and managed by Mahabirsingh, a Guyanese rice planter and entrepreneur, turned impresario...".

Nirmala, Champa's first daughter with Indal Singh, then living with her father in B.G. had become an acrobat and was performing, by 1954, on stage with the Boodoo Brothers. Simultaneous with Champa's return to B.G., Nirmala had travelled to Suriname on tour with the Boodoo Brothers' troupe. These were separate actions unknown to mother or daughter. However while in Suriname Nirmala, coincidentally, one day heard her mother's voice, singing a duet with Ganga Persad, on a Br. Guiana's the radio station. She was filled with sadness and morose, longing to meet her mother. They had not seen each other for 12 years. So overwhelmed with grief was she that she was unable to perform, insisting instead to return home to meet her mother. The acrobat troupe was forced to return to Georgetown. Mother and daughter reunited and Nirmala returned to Trinidad with her mother.

Champa Devi continued to sing and dance throughout the 1950s. She hobnobbed with the literati, the wealthy and the political leaders. Maintaining charm, diplomacy and tact she developed close ties with Lionel Seukaran, Chanka Maharaj, the Mohammed brothers; Shamshudin, Moenudin and Kamaluddin, promoters of Indian music and dance on the stage, and later radio and television. Articulate and flamboyant on stage, she revealed that Seukaran, then a school teacher was the Master Of Ceremonies for a few of her concerts. Nirmala recalls that: "...sometime in the 1950s I accompanied my mother to visit Chanka Maharaj at his home. Chanka Maharaj, already a politician was a huge and handsome wrestler and a onetime local playboy..." He was also a philanthropist.

Building Succession

From the 1960s her attention turned to tutoring younger artistes. She taught for a short time with the Maha Sabha and turned her energies to the training of ten year old daughter Patricia. Champa, a disciplinarian for high-quality performances, taught Patricia for a few years, all that she had learnt. Patricia herself had a desire to emulate her mother's stage career. Champa then enrolled Patricia with the Bharatiya Vidya Sansthan where she learnt the fundamentals of Kathak with Smt Nirmala Adesh. A rising star on the Trinidad horizon, she appeared on the local Television talent competition, Mastana Bahar, in 1971. She later went on to represent Trinidad and Tobago in Europe and Canada.

Having danced throughout the country and abroad, with the exception of her performances in Gulshan Bahar, where she was well compensated, Champa had never made money from her art-form. She was usually given a meagre TT\$20.00-25.00 per appearance and provided with transport to and from the concert venues.¹⁶ She had lived most of her life in frugal circumstances. Several promises made to Champa to get Patricia a scholarship to undergo further training in dance in India never materialized. By the mid-1970s she felt beaten and disappointed by a society which was divided on lines of race, ethnicities, colour, religion and artistic preferences, manipulated by politics. It was and continues to be a society that still has not been able to recognise and support passion, artistic potential and a burning ambition to succeed; a society which cares little for the creators and propagators of serious artistic endeavours and the desire to achieve perfection.



Patricia Rahim- 1974. Photo courtesy Liz Lokre

This is equally true within the Indo-Trinidadian society with deep rooted selfishness, its absence of philanthropic organisations or of persons with little or no interest in developing an ethos of high quality aesthetic values of identity, worthy of emulation and nation building. This is largely the fate of both aspiring and existing artistes.

While Champa had lived a life of excitement and flamboyance on the stage, it was also dotted with 'periods of grief and despair'. In 1975 Champa migrated to New York to work to fund Patricia's training. Domestic circumstances even thwarted that vision; but she continued shuttling back and forth, between her house in Freeport, Trinidad, and New York.

In 1987 she was invited to Trinidad, to participate in a conference on the 'Role of the Arts in Development', organised by Nrityanjali Theatre in collaboration with the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine campus. The conference and static exhibition was chaired by cultural activist Kenneth Vidya Parmasad. The then NAR Minister of Information and Broadcasting, Dr Brinsley Samaroo, readily provided government's media support for the venture. There Champa talked at length of her life and times on the stage, of her relationships and extended family in Suriname and Guyana and of her fight for survival in the public sphere among male dominated artistes with their petty prejudices.

Public recognition of Champa's contribution has been limited. She was conferred with the *Angwastram*, the ceremonial Shawl of Honour in 1987 by Nrityanjali theatre for her sterling contribution to the Arts. Later she was recognized by the Council for Indian Culture Ltd (National council for Indian culture), by Radio FM 103 Hall of Fame, and Queens Hall Board of Directors, celebrating the Hall's fiftieth anniversary in 2009.

Suffering frustration, despair and depression at her inability to set Patricia on a stage career, Champa died in 2000 (September 15th) in a cold New York apartment, in the arms of her family; far away from those who had idolized her. **Now**, many years later her grand-daughter, Liz Lokre, daughter of Patricia, a classically trained artist; songwriter/singer and multi-instrumentalist, has inherited Champa's passion, and is performing internationally.

A celebrity in her time, now the legend, Champa was a pioneer in several fields. She aided numerous charitable causes. A brave and indomitable female warrior; by her actions she advocated for equal opportunities for women, making it an issue when it had not even entered mainstream discussions as yet. This passionate crusader waged her battles in the arts. When women on the local stage were shunned and even treated with derision, Champa, from age

sixteen, had been performing alongside her male counterparts in a plural male-dominated society. She held her own among women contemporaries such as Alice Jan and Noor Jahan and gave hope to others. She tangibly helped the SDMS to introduce and establish an education system rooted in its philosophy, arts and heritage traditions. Her career of over three decades spanned pre and post-independent Trinidad and Tobago.

Crossing national boundaries and cultural lines, she was in the forefront of a Caribbean integration movement, engaging in geo-cultural diplomacy and promoting cultural tourism in the southern Caribbean (Br Guiana, Suriname and Trinidad). This was long before the idea took roots and became vogue in political circles, after these countries started aspiring to achieve national independence from their respective colonial authorities. This cultural integration accelerated in the 1940s, albeit at the individual and group level. More than a decade later the idea of socio-economic and political integration started accelerating, in the 1950s. Today this regional integration is still floundering; it seems to have lost its way, or is drowning in the watery void, between the land masses. The Caribbean single market and economy (CSME) continues to experience embryonic stultification - Guyana's inability to conform to ethical principles of democracy and the Trinidad and Tobago-Barbados, recent Covid 19 impasse, are cases in point - even as the region enters the second decade of the twenty first century.

Today the name of this patriot, role model, regional Icon, legend of the performing stage in Trinidad and the Southern Caribbean, has almost faded; consigned to the dustbin of obscurity. This emancipator, Champa Devi, is yet to receive any form of official recognition for her sterling contribution to Trinidad and Tobago's emergent Culture, to nation building and to the forging of our Caribbean cultural identity. In this the 100th anniversary of the end of Indian contract labour and the fifty eight year of Trinbago's independence, Champa Devi, the Trinidad daughter of former Indian contract labourers deserves remembrance for her pioneering contribution to cultural development and national identity formation.

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End Notes.

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¹ Nirmala Singh P.I. N.Y. June 25 2011.Nirmala is the first daughter of Champa Devi.

² Derek Bickerton. *The Murders of Boysie Singh*. (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2020 (1962).

³ Karna Singh based on his interviews with Champa Devi in NY. Karna Singh and his brother Hari ‘Gora’ Singh, himself a dancer, were nephews of Champa Devi’s first husband Indal Singh of Guyana. A.I. June 24 2011,

⁴ Kim Johnson. Unpublished manuscript, “Narsaloo Ramaya (2010)” P.14. Others have also laid claim to introducing Indar Sabha to Trinidad.

⁵ Champa Devi in interview with Naila Maharaj on Gayelle Television, 1987 while in Trinidad for a conference and the “Angwastram”; the ‘Shawl of Honour’ ceremony.

⁶ Champa Devi. PI with author in 1987 in Trinidad; later substantiated separately by Gora Singh and Nirmala (2011).

⁷ That Famine, the result of the British policy to pay more attention to the War effort of World War 11, killed over three million Indians. See “Churchill's policies contributed to 1943 Bengal famine – study...”

www.theguardian.com › [world 2019/Mar/29](http://world.2019/Mar/29): www.economicstimes.com › News › Politics and Nation; 2019/Mar /29.

⁸ Nirmala Singh

⁹ *Indian Centenary Review: 100 years of Progress, 1845-1945 Trinidad B.W.I.* Trinidad: 1945. Ed Murli. J. Kirpalani et al. P113,115 & 170

¹⁰ Nirmala. (telephone Interview- Author) June 24, 2011 NY.

¹¹ Champa Devi. P.I. with author in 1987

¹² Bridget Brereton & Primnath Gooptar. *Ranjit Kumar: Bridging the East and the West*. (Trinidad: Create Space, 2013)76-77

¹³ Nirmala. P.I. June 25, 2011.

¹⁴ Info on the dates of births was provided by Liz Lokre, May 5, 2020 (Liz is Patricia’s daughter and the granddaughter of Champa Devi).

¹⁵ Champa Devi. P.I.in 1987.

¹⁶ Champa Devi speaking to Naila Maharaj in a Gayelle Television interview in 1987.

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