

FOREWORD

Trinidad has often been described as a world in an Island. Here, in this small space, all the cultures of the world meet and intersect and in that process they are leading to the creation of a new civilisation here in the Caribbean. What happens here does not end here; modern communications systems now ensure that the initiatives taken here are quickly spread throughout the region. In this cosmopolitan mixture, Indo-Caribbean culture has certainly claimed its own space and survivals and syncretisms now characterise the environment.

That Indo-narrative is rooted in the daily lives of half a million agreement signers (*girmityas*) who were transported to this region between 1838 and 1917 as part of the European effort to solve the labour crisis after the abolition of slavery. Up to the present time that *kheesa* (story) has been told in bits and pieces from the perspectives of economists, anthropologists and historians. This work, *The Shaping of a Culture: Rituals and Festivals in India and Trinidad (1990-2014)* finally brings together all of the disciplinary streams into one main river, interrelating all of these perspectives. The main burden of the text is the tracing of the trajectories through which some of the major rituals and festivals of India came to the Caribbean. Equally important is the manner in which these have evolved in the New World.

These commemorations were of course mainly of Hindu origin since the majority of those who came were adherents of that persuasion. However, there were significant other religions which came here or were the results of conversions within the Indo-Caribbean community. About twelve percent of those who came were Muslims and thousands of the immigrants were converted to Christianity. What emerged therefore was a cultural melange, a blending of the East with the West, which has considerably enriched the social umbrella and has made this nation an area of international curiosity and a model for inter-cultural co-operation in a world where inter-religious intolerance cause us to shudder daily as we watch the news.

This book brings together the performative traditions of Hinduism in *Ramleela*, *Divali*, *Shiv Ratri*, and *Phagwa* whilst integrating these with that eternal symbol of Hinduism, namely the *Jhandi* (flag) in its many manifestations and symbolic meanings. Sadly though, many of our citizens driving through our towns and villages seeing these *jhandis* fluttering in the breeze have no idea of what they mean to particular families or sects. That absence of information inhibits mutual understanding and lack of appreciation for the richness of the national culture. Whilst there is this necessary emphasis on the Hindu cultural presence there is a full explanation of the Shia Islamic remembrance of *Muharram* (*Hosea*), a Muslim minority observance in a predominantly Sunni Islamic community.

As the narrative explains, that commemoration includes Hindus and Afro-Trinidadians who have adopted it as part of the inclusive nature of the nation. Similarly the text gives an explanation of the Roman origins of *Carnival* and its exportation to India in the East and to the Caribbean in the West, outlining the similarities between the two tropical *Carnivals*. The multidisciplinary approach to the theme of the performative arts underlies the entire presentation. That, of course, is a reflection of the many levels of existence which have characterised the author's life.

Growing up in *Sangre Grande* he gained early familiarity with multi-culturalism in a region which was the final destination for farmer classes, indentured workers, and *cocoa panyols* from Venezuela as well as the white *Plantocracy*. As a youth he played *steelband* and in his culturally rich hometown he

took an early interest in Indian song and dance. That yearning took him to India on Scholarship where he studied performance at the Kathak Kendra in New Delhi (from 1971-76) and during that time pursued a degree in Economics at Delhi University. This was followed by post-graduate work in the United Kingdom and long years in the public service.

Between 2006 and 2010 he undertook doctoral studies at the University of Trinidad and Tobago but that research was not done only at the local level. He made several trips to India where he visited ancestral locations of performative traditions. The evidence of these long extensive visits are seen in the rare photographs in the text; the Danda lathi dance for Govardhan Leela in Chitrakoot, the St Thome Cathedral in Chennai, The jhandas at Chapra from where thousands came to the Caribbean and the Divali festival at Felicity. The author conducted lengthy interviews with practitioners and scholars in India and in Trinidad. He also spent time in the London archives.

All of these intensive researching have given a refreshing authenticity to the writings. His own continuous involvement as a performer and teacher of Indian music and dance enabled him to look at performance with a critical eye. After submission of the thesis in 2010, Dr Balkaransingh did not put down the text. He continued work on the manuscript, always adding new information and constantly subjecting himself to peer reviews, so necessary in the preparation of quality academic work.

The result of these long years of dedicated labour has been a book which fills a massive void in our comprehension of an integral part of our national heritage. Happily we are now able to decrease our dependence on foreign scholars who have traditionally come to our islands to tell us who we are and where we came from. For those of us who wish to be informed on these matters there is a comprehensive glossary at the end of the text, explaining the many terms which earlier appear in the text.

Table I in the book gives a bird's eye view of the rituals and festivals as they occur in India and in the Caribbean, indicating the significance of each of these. The enormous scale of the Goa carnival certainly has lessons for our celebrations.

Finally, there is an extensive bibliography in the final pages; this in itself is a treasure-trove for those who have an academic interest in Indo-Caribbean studies. All in all, *The Shaping of a Culture: Rituals and Festivals in Trinidad compared with selected counterparts in India:1990-2014* is a compendium of information and analysis, narrative and photographs which cover a wide area of enquiry. It is an account, not only of the past of the culture but equally of the present status of the performative arts in our society, and of how far we have come in our evolution. Certainly a must for all series book collectors!

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May 2016