

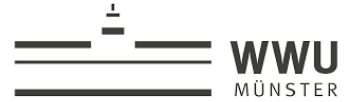


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**Report on the *Diaspora and Identity: The Case of Indian Music in the Caribbean* by
Professor Dr. Ajaya Sahoo on 17th February 2023**

The Mumbai Münster Institute of Advanced Studies (MMIAS), University of Mumbai, had organised an online lecture on *Diaspora and Identity: The Case of Indian Music in the Caribbean* under the MMIAS International Interdisciplinary Lecture Series 2023 on 17th February 2023. Professor Dr. Nilufer E. Bharucha welcomed the participants and introduced the Chair for the lecture, Professor Dr. Vidya Vencatesan.



Professor Dr. Nilufer E. Bharucha



Professor Dr. Vidya Vencatesan

Professor Vencatesan proceeded to introduce the speaker, Professor Ajaya K. Sahoo and handed over the session to him. His topic focused on the evolution and transformation of

Indo-Caribbean music in the diaspora and how Indians asserted their ethnic identity through their music and also tries to analyse the impact of 2ymbolizing2n on Indo-Caribbean music in context of different genres. He briefly touched upon the definition of Diaspora and the connotations currently attached to the term and how Indo-Caribbeans are diasporic and transnational in the true sense. Professor Sahoo stated that the spread of Indian music, especially the Hindustani *sangeet* in the Caribbean has served as a touchstone, 2ymbolizing the power of culture and tradition among the Indo-Caribbean communities. He highlighted some of the prominent scholars who have contributed towards the music world and cultural preservation in the context of music in diaspora. Many sub-genres of the Indo-Caribbean music have become extremely popular with global audiences in recent times. Among the third and fourth generations, Indian musical tradition is preserved as a link to their ancestral land while for the older generations, it has become a tool of expression and education for the younger generation about their homeland culture.



Professor Dr. Ajaya Sahoo

He discussed the history of Indians in the Caribbeans, their arrival in the region, and their present contribution in the demography. The Indians first entered the region in 1838, right after the abolition of slavery, through the sea-route under the British colonial authorities, and were labeled as coolies. Majority of these Indians came from the northern part of India and spoke Hindi and Bhojpuri. The music in various traditions and practices of Indo-Caribbeans often reflect the Bhojpuri culture heritage, such as in festivals like Holi.

Professor Sahoo talked about Lommarsh Roopnarine and his idea of how Indian ownership provided East-Indians with an opportunity to move to village settlements which marked their caste free movement in the Caribbeans. However, he states that the Indo-Caribbean rural communities in the late 19th century suffered from high rates of unemployment, poverty, illiteracy, and suicide, which brings to light the lack of opportunities and struggle that Indians as a community experienced in the new host land. With the onset of globalisation, numerous Indians residing in the Caribbeans started migrating to various states in the UK and the Netherlands to seek higher education and better job opportunities and some achieved power and success all across the region. He accounted how Indians in the Caribbean have substantially contributed to the unique culture of the region, including politics where influential posts of President and Vice President have also been occupied by personalities like as Cheddi Jagan, Basdeo Panday, Kamla Persad-Bissessar, etc. which has not only given visibility to the diaspora community but also highlighted Indian culture at an international platform.

Professor Sahoo spoke about how Indo-Caribbean are regarded as the most lively community and have progressively managed to sustain their cultural and religious ties to their homeland through music and dance. The present population of Indian origin citizens in the Caribbean is approximately 2.5 million, out of which many showcase a cohesive approach towards society building due to ethnic interconnection with immigrants from other parts of the world.

He quoted Late Mrs. Sushma Swaraj, minister of External Affairs, who stated that Indians in the Caribbean occupy position of power and influence and they have produced some of the best artists, writers, spiritual leaders, political thinkers, doctors, lawyers, scientists, and sportsmen. He also quoted Gaiutra Bahadur, the author of the book *Coolie Woman*, on her love for Chutney genre, the hybrid form of Indian-Caribbean dance music that developed in the West-Indies.

Selected Indo-Caribbean Artists and their Musical Traditions

Artists	Country	Years of active	Genre
Dropali	Suriname	1968-Unknown	Balthak Gana
Sundar Popo	Trinidad	1969-2000	Chutney, Indian Folk, and Bhajan
Hemlatha Dindial	Trinidad	1999-present	Chutney
Raymond Ramnarain	Trinidad	2013-present	Chutney, Chutney Soca

Professor Sahoo mentions Vinaya Ramnarayan, who talks about the role of Indian music in building and developing Indo-Caribbean identity where folk music of traditional ceremonies, such as ‘Sohar’ (child birth ceremony), transformed into legitimate genres that helps Indo-Caribbean community to assert their identity on various platforms. The bloom of Indian music in the Caribbean occurred with the first indentured labour migration during colonial period.

Professor Sahoo also pointed out that the Indo-Caribbean music not only enables the Indo-Caribbeans to express their ‘Indianness’, but also allows them to represent their unique identities as Indo-Caribbeans. Indian films and music are also part of the Indo-Caribbean popular culture as in India. For instance, music shows and dance performances an essential part of celebration for the Indo-cab community. There are various styles incorporated in public performances including Chutney and Chutney Soca which can be observed on various occasions and celebrations.

Professor Sahoo elaborated on how, initially, music served as a healing element to overcome the feelings of isolation not only from the homeland but from other co-residing communities as well. It also helped them survive the adverse conditions of a new land and the gruelling working hours.

Artists of Indian origin in the Caribbean are contributing to the newly emerging trend of composing hybrid music which is enabling them to reclaim their identity and glorify their culture and ancestral history.

Professor Sahoo summarised the history of how different Indo-Caribbean music forms developed. One of the most popular forms of music in the Caribbean, Chutney, originated in the 1970s in Trinidad. Another essential music form called Baithak Gana also originated around the same time in Suriname. These different genres gradually changed in form and became more hybrid. In the 1980s, when Chutney music was at its peak of popularity, a new genre of music called the Chutney Soca emerged in Trinidad. Professor Sahoo explained that the distinction between the genres of Chutney and Chutney Soca is the heavy African influence of Soca beats in the latter and the use of creolised lyrics. He defines Chutney Soca as a union of cultures in the diaspora which makes it more than just a music genre. Chutney Soca is always defined by hybridity as opposed to pure Chutney songs. This evolution of Chutney and Chutney mix attracted a variety of local artists in Trinidad, Ghana, and Jamaica towards the Indo-Caribbean music industry.

Professor Sahoo further introduced some of the leading figures in Indo-Caribbean music, beginning with Dropati, a very popular artist in the genre of Baithak Gana. She is known for rejuvenating East-Indian music with the release of her album *Let's Sing and Dance* in 1968. He states that it is her who converted the community tradition of singing into a proper music genre and expanded Baithak Gana in the form of a recorded album. Her music depicts the customs of rural Indians in relation to their religious feelings. Professor Sahoo also played a track from her collection named *Moray Gari Suno Maharaj* for the attendees. He points out that the arrangement of this song resembles the contemporary *bhajans* which are performed during Hindu rituals and ceremonies like *Jagrans* and *Kirtans*, and other religious processions.



Show chat replay

Nack Ah Ting (Official Music Video) Raymond and Dilenadan | Chutney Soca 2021

He then moves on to Sundar Popo, a Trinidadian of Indian descent who introduces a different style of music artistry to the East-Indian population. He also collaborated with Windsor records in 1969 which was the year of the biggest turning point in the history of East-Indian music in the Caribbean. His song *Nana Nani*, which was released in the same year and led him to receive the title the 'King of Chutney', has a mixture of creolised Trinidadian and Hindi mixed with instruments like Dholak and Dhantal backed up by Guitar and Synthesiser. Professor Sahoo also explained how his songs address the conflict assimilation of Indian migrants by representing the lifestyle of liberated East-Indians and

how people of Indian origin are adjusting and embracing the continuous cultural shifts in the community.

Professor Sahoo further states that there has been a decline in Chutney compositions after Chutney Soca took over many artists. He mentions Hemlata Dindlal, also known as Hurricane Hemlata, who has taken charge to revive the original Indo-Caribbean music form of Chutney. Rashika Dindlal, her sister who is also known as the 'Queen of Chutney', is also working along with her to preserve the age old tradition.

He then moves on to the genre of Chutney Soca and introduced the works of Raymond Ramnarine who is considered the biggest star in the Chutney Soca industry due to his unique music style. His song *Nack Ah Ting* (2021) is very famous with the younger generation of Trinidadians due to its unique twist of Chutney Soca and is a symbolism of modernity displays progressive imagery through its visuals and lyrics. It also represents the continuous link of the Indo-Caribbean diaspora with the culture of their homeland.

Professor Sahoo concluded by talking about how the Indo-Caribbean diaspora has reattached its link to India mostly through cultural practices such as Indo-Caribbean music, which displays the acculturation and hybridisation with the culture of their host land while simultaneously preserving the tradition of their homeland.

The Talk ended with the MMIAS Research Associate Ms. Kirti Risbud's Vote of Thanks.

The Talk was attended by participants from India and abroad.

To view the complete talk, please visit the link given below:

<https://youtu.be/YaMsYS9qvQY>