

11-1-2009

Tejaswini Niranjana. Mobilizing India: Women, Music and Migration Between India and Trinidad, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2006.

Jerome Teelucksingh Ph.D.
The University of the West Indies, jtluxing@yahoo.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Environmental Studies Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Teelucksingh, Jerome Ph.D. (2009) "Tejaswini Niranjana. Mobilizing India: Women, Music and Migration Between India and Trinidad, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2006.," *Journal of International and Global Studies*: Vol. 1: No. 1, Article 14.

DOI: 10.62608/2158-0669.1016

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol1/iss1/14>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of International and Global Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. For more information, please contact phuffman@lindenwood.edu.

Tejaswini Niranjana. *Mobilizing India: Women, Music and Migration Between India and Trinidad*, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2006.

Mobilizing India is a unique study with remarkable fluidity that transcends ethnic, geographical, and cultural barriers. It is written from the perspective of a scholar from India, Tejaswini Niranjana, who attempts to understand the East Indian presence in the Caribbean while defining and comparing the intricate linkages between females in India and Trinidad.

In chapter one, "The Indian in Me: Studying the Subaltern Diaspora," the author comes to terms with Indians residing in Trinidad, who viewed her as similar to themselves. She claims to have been initially "deeply disturbed" by this association, however admits, "I am what I am *because of* who the East Indian woman in Trinidad is" (p.20). A minor flaw of this chapter is the extensive rehashing of the historical information on indentureship and the status of Indians in the early twentieth century. Nevertheless, in focusing on these early years of the Indian presence, Niranjana is able to reconstruct a unique discourse of the formation of normative Indian femininity.

Chapter 3 seeks to answer fundamental questions about the controversial chutney-soca music and the provocative chutney dancing as they relate to the Trinidadian Indian feminine identity. Some individuals and groups of the East Indian community have publicly condemned chutney dancing as vulgar and obscene and have criticized songs with sexual connotations such as "Lick Down Mih Nani" by Drupatee Ramgoonai. Niranjana explains that one of the common beliefs associated with chutney-soca is that it represents "the rampant sexuality of the Indian woman" (p.119). The author contends that this notion could have originated during the indentureship era with perceptions of the "promiscuous woman" (p.119). Indeed, the author herself claims that this musical form is "an attempt to reconstitute East Indian patriarchy" (p.123). Unfortunately, she does not provide any credible evidence to support this claim. Nevertheless, the chapter provides refreshing insight into the commercialization and structure of chutney and chutney-soca and the composition of the audience. Despite being unappreciated in some communities, the introduction of the Chutney Monarch and Chutney-Soca Monarch Competitions has undoubtedly exposed the public to this musical genre and has also served to partially legitimize the art form.

Issues of ethnicity and identity as they relate to a cultural art form are examined further in chapter four, in which the author explores the representation of Indo-Trinidadians in calypsos. Specifically, Niranjana draws attention to the racist lyrics of some calypsos and their impact not only in Trinidad but also Guyana. The chapter's subsection, "The 'Indian' Calypso," reveals that the lyrics of some songs from the 1930s to 1980s negatively depicted Indian females. Such an examination of these controversial songs supports the notion that calypso and chutney are unofficial arenas of a hostile ethnic battle. An interesting silver lining to the inflammatory or racist nature of some calypso lyrics, however, is that the singing of calypso and other musical genres is no longer seen as excluding Indians. For instance, the musically flexible Indian singer, Rikki Jai, has dabbled in calypso, reggae, parang, chutney, and Hindi film songs. Indeed, the author acknowledges the contribution of India's music to the evolution of chutney and chutney-soca; particularly highlighted is the work of husband and wife team Kanchan (an

Indian playback singer) and Babla (an arranger of film music) from Bombay. In addition, the inclusion of Remo Fernandes, an Indian-born rock-popstar, in the musical conversations unfolding in Trinidad represents a continuation of the musical interaction between Indians of India and Trinidadian Indians.

Chapter five, sub-titled, “Hindi Cinema and the Politics of Music,” explores the intersection between visual images and music. From the 1930s to the 1970s, Hindi cinema influenced culture and the music played by orchestras in Trinidad. While the influence of this music should not be underestimated, the author’s claim that in India “...normative Indianness comes to be associated in part with the Hindi language films and their constructions of modern femininity and masculinity” (p.173) is a flawed generalization. Certainly, other factors such as religion, caste, family upbringing, and class would also be determinants of gender identities. Hindi language films alone cannot be solely responsible for such constructions. Furthermore, the powerful Americanization process would certainly contribute to constructing cultural identity in both countries. In this regard, Niranjana might have exaggerated the influence of Hindi cinema on India and Trinidad.

One of the strengths of *Mobilizing India* is the inclusion of diverse views from musicologists, activists, newspaper columnists, and academics in attempting to understand adverse public reactions to certain songs. Some of these personalities include Satnarine Balkaransingh, Gordon Rohlehr, Kim Johnson, and Narsaloo Ramaya. Furthermore, there is a wealth of interviews culled from Indo- and Afro-Trinidadian artists such as Rikki Jai and David Rudder. This dialogue illuminates current discussions and adds a vital element of objectivity to the historical arguments.

The author has expertly achieved the goal of successfully illustrating the manner in which sexuality and cultural identity of East Indians are represented in Trinidad’s popular music. Undoubtedly, *Mobilizing India* will be essential reading for persons seeking to understand the challenges facing the Indian diaspora. The findings will be particularly useful for those persons venturing into the relatively new domain of Cultural Studies.

Jerome Teelucksingh, Ph.D.
The University of the West Indies
jtluxing@yahoo.com