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Published by Anonymous on Sep. 01, 2000

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Death of a Giant

Anil Mahabir

Sundar Popo, one of Trinidad's and the world's most popular Indian "chutney" singers, died in early May of heart failure at the age of 53. He had been ailing for about a year with kidney problems. Before he returned home to die, he was seeking medical attention in the United States. Chutney, in this instance, is the word used in our area to describe a type of song which is usually a fast paced, very rhythmic, Indian song. They are mainly sung at weddings, particularly the night before, which is known as the "cooking night," or "farewell." The music is infectious and creates a festive mood of dancing and singing.

In recent times, chutney singing, which has its origination in Trinidad, has spread throughout the world, to such an extent that there are now local and international chutney competitions which generate millions of dollars in prizes and profits.

Sundar, as he was affectionately called, was credited for being the first local artist to sing a song utilizing both Hindi and English lyrics: his famous "Nani and Nana," a song about an

Indian grandmother and grandfather eking out a living in their new home of Trinidad, is one such example.

Sundar was also the first Indian singer to join forces with a calypsonian, when in 1995 he sang a duet with Black Stalin in a "national unity song," proclaiming Indian and African unity.

Stalin delivered the eulogy at Sundar's funeral, becoming the first black artist to speak at the funeral of a Hindu/Indian artist. It was a touching ceremony to see a black calypsonian among the many orthodox Maha Sabha pundits who performed the religious rites for Sundar Popo.

After the Hindu rituals were finished, Stalin even sang the 1995 song he and Sundar had sung together on the national calypso stage. This was the first time a calypso was sung at the funeral of a Hindu. So close was the bond between Stalin and Sundar that the normally strict and traditional Maha Sabha president, Sri Sat Maharaj, "broke the rules," so to speak, and allowed Stalin to sing. Tears flowed from Stalin's eyes.

The funeral service took place at his Barracpore home in south Trinidad. He was then cremated according to full Hindu rites at the popular "Shore of Peace Cremation Site" next to the sea in the Gulf of Paria, overlooking the obscured Venezuela coastline. The government bore the costs.

During Sundar Popo's 30-year career as an entertainer, he received awards from many cultural organizations and from

the government of Trinidad and Tobago in recognition of his cultural service to the people of this country, the Caribbean, North America, Holland, Fiji and Mauritius.

Temple Desecrated

Vandals broke into a southern Trinidadian Hindu Temple to Siva in April and offered cooked pork to the icons in a bizarre midnight ritual. Police have so far been unable to find the persons or person responsible for this unconscionable act. Chunks of pork were found smeared around the mouths of the icons, and more at the base where the sacred lamps are lit and flowers offered. Bones were also strewn across the floor in an area reserved for persons who fast from meat. Nothing was stolen. Police are operating under the theory that it was an "anti-Hindu group which perpetrated the act." Some blame the re-airing on local television of *Candle in the Dark* a few days prior. The film recounts the story of William Carey, an early missionary to India.

Airport Opening

Trinidadian minister of works and transport, Sadiq Baksh, a Muslim, said that a Ganesha Puja will be held to commemorate the official opening of the new airport on Independence Day August 31, 2000. It will be the most modern airport in the Caribbean. Its ultra sleek features promise to make it one of the best in the Western Hemisphere. It will be named the V.S. Naipaul Airport, after the Trinidadian world-acclaimed English novelist. Baksh told the audience at the Indian Arrival Day Celebration, "Lord Ganesha is the remover of all obstacles and obstructions." His statements were met with resounding applause. He explained that "the airport project met many obstacles, so we want to have a Ganesha Puja to remove all

those obstacles. Some people will find it strange that I have embraced Ganesha, but Ganesha removes obstacles."

Blasphemous Libel

The blasphemous libel clause contained in the "Equal Opportunity Act" which outlaws attacks on non-Christian religions in Trinidad and Tobago is now set to become law. As of June 1, 2000, the bill was presented to Parliament by Trinidad's Prime Minister, the honorable Basdeo Panday.

For centuries, the country's religious laws, modeled from former colonial master England's common law, protected only Christianity from attack. The slightest condemnation could bring a jail term. It also meant that Christians could (and did) say whatever they wanted about Hinduism, Islam and other non-Christians' faiths without fear of state-sanctioned reprisals. Even today in England, blasphemous libel law only applies to Christianity and not other religions. Some areas of the US have similar statutes.

The new laws are designed to thwart unwarranted attacks on all religions of the world being practiced on this tropical island. Already the opposition party, which is seeking re-election to office later this year and largely dominated by Christians, is raising alarm bells against the proposed law and said it will not support the new bill. However, the bill now has only to pass the Senate, a formality, before becoming law.

Certain evangelical pastors have also come out against the "equality for all" law. One pastor said, "They are trying to

prevent us from spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ which seeks to enlighten mankind against the pagan Hindus." Local Hindu philosopher Ravi ji says, "The bill is in keeping with the principles of humanitarianism, since it protects the human being in his quest for worship as he sees fit. It creates a just, fair and equal society."

CULTURE

Indian Arrival Day Fest

Food and music spice up the celebration

By Anil Mahabir

Indian arrival day festivities on May 30 celebrated the 155th anniversary of the arrival of East Indians to Trinidad. The festivities include aspects of Trinidad culture which are original products of Indians here. The dhantal, a musical instrument, and "doubles," a spicy Indo-Trinidadian dish, cannot be found elsewhere in the world, except, perhaps, in areas where Trinidadians have migrated.

The dhantal, which sounds like a beautiful bell, was invented in Trinidad and Tobago over 100 years ago. It originated from the rhythmic beat of a discarded horseshoe and crowbar or piece of straight steel about three feet long, common materials found on the sugar plantations where many Indians worked. Soon, the dhantal, as it came to be called, became a primary instrument in local devotional Indian singing.

Trinidadian Indian food also took on a creative twist with "doubles." Doubles is a local delicacy regarded as the national

dish of Trinidad. It is made of curried chickpeas sandwiched between two pieces of fried flatbread, topped off with chutneys and spices. It is the number one choice for fastfood and breakfast. It costs only one Trindadian dollar (^{us}\$0.18) and just two can fulfill the desires of any glutton.