AN ASHRAM AT MY DOOR
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I shall make it quite clear from the start that I am not setting to write a scholarly treatise based on ponderous research but rather to some observations which have accumulated over the years. My boyhood with two companions, one a Negro, the other a Muslim Indian at a time at least, was hardly concerned with such distinctions. What was more was being boys together, particularly planning our own brand of mischief together spinning out those gentle days as only boys can who live in the country. And the fact that I was born in the Quaysay are probably the most significant circumstances of my early life.

Living in the Quaysay, or as some would insist, the Croissee, was a special experience because, after all, it was a very special place, and spiritually, I still feel a part of that robust environment. The Northern foothill meandered down the Santa Cruz Valley to meet the Caroni plain at this market junction which, proverbially, never slept. Day and night it hummed with the busy commerce of vendors from Cantaro, fisher folk from Maracas, conservative city workers from San Juan, or humbler folk from Petit Bourg and Barataria. It was an accepted fact that here the Gouse and Sweetbread were tastier, the lettuce fatter, the sounds and sights brighter, and everything else about it really better in every way than anywhere else. The people from Cantaro gossiped in patois, and the men from Bourg Mulatresse played quartets, and there were shouters and shango and Chinese whoo-who and, (beyond the railway tracks) Aranjujes and El Socorro were the mysterious Indian villagers with their drums and their dancing and Hosein. [I have always hated the railway. It ran parallel with the main city road and together they split our village in two; but the railway always seemed the more awesome barrier. North of the line lived the Christian Negro, Spanish and Chinese population, while on the south side were the Hindus and Muslims. From our house I used to gaze down the bustling gap past the venerable landmark silkocoton which stood like a sentinel beside our wooden post office, for almost a quarter mile down the El Socorro Road, almost to where the white mosque still stands beneath waving coconut palms, than whone others could seem as graceful or as magical. And in time I began to develop a mystique about that place and used to dream that I would one day build an ashram at the end of that road where the brooding swamps and paddy fields lay glistening in the sun.

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On festival days, the colourful characters of the village added very special fascination to the normal gaiety in the street. One such was Papa Mange, an unkempt beggar who wore the customary choti and pooti—carried a stout staff with which he pretended to use on disobedient chilidren. He literally danced down the street, jiggling his hips and stamping his feet to a quaint refrain, more often than not, extemporized or injected with humorous comment. The children used to dance behind him singing: "Papa Mangeait, Mama Mangeait pickini go to hell!" Another was a very noble, gaunt Muslim with gentle eyes and a magnificent white goatee, who used to sell baskets carried coolie fashion across his shoulders, or paper windmills stuck into a bamboo pole padded with straw. The first time I set eyes on him, he was working as a gardener in one of the most magical kitchen gardens I have ever seen, which had a bamboo water wheel and was owned by a Chinese farmer who reared pigs and smoked opium. At that time, he was wearing Chinese dress and a broad Chinese hat but later he became caretaker of the mosque and reverted to his native garb.

The Hindu Sahdus or priests always looked quite impressive squatting together in the great bamboo tents, their enormous handle-bar moustaches twitching in earnest discussion looking for all the world as though they had been translated by some errant genie straight out of the Arabian nights. Their turbans and dhotis were snowy white, their pugreese and scarves, pink or lemon or green. They painted beautiful red and white markings on their foreheads buttoned their shirts with silver chains dripping with bells. Around their necks hung the sacred mala of wooden beads and coloured wool, or, when the occasion demanded, sweet smelling garlands of marigold and jasmine. The Mahants or monastic temple priests, on the other hand, always looked rather fierce and even unkempt, with their shoulder length hair sometimes tied into a topknot, wooden clogs with toe pegs on their feet, (for they were forbidden to wear leather) and on the rare occasions when they left the temple precincts, they carried strange instruments of iron and brass-like jingling sceptres.

One of the most beautiful festivals in the Hindu calendar is undoubtedly Divali, the celebration in lights which welcomes Rama from jungle exile. Thousands of lighted deeyahs filled with ghee are placed about the
homes from doorstep to gable and even around the freshly swept yards and the trees. To me it was always more beautiful than the artificial lig' Christmas. Diwali is a great social festival, full of public dance singing, but it is not as colourful as some others.

Chowtal, for example, is more robust. It forms part of the month of preparations for one of the great fertility rites of the Hindu year called Siewratri which culminates in the joyous spring festival of Holi (commonly called Indian carnival), when crimson abir stain or red powder is sprinkled over everyone on sight. Chowtal is an exclusively male activity usually it comprises a 'goal' or singing group of some sixteen men who squat on the floor in two rows facing each other and accompany themselves with tiny brass cymbals. At the head of the line is the drummer with a dolak or hand-drum propped between his legs and he controls the rhythm and pace of the whole performance. The songs themselves are in an ancient language and sung in octlets which are repeated and echoed back and forth from one side of the group to the other, with many subtle pauses, rising and falling, faster and faster, for fully an hour each. Then follows a coda which is extemporized and bandied back and forth in the same manner. Everything depends on complete rapport between the voices, the bells and the drums, and this lively performance lasts well into the wee hours of morning.

One of the big public festivals is Ramlila, a sort of mystery play developed out of the holy Ramayana epic. It lasts several days and tells the story of Rama and Sita, their struggles with the evil Ravana and their alliance with the monkey god, Hanuman. This used to take place in the Arangues savannah and was full of beautifully costumed characters, princes and saints, comedians and gods, good and evil. Their tiaras glistening in the sun, they strut and dance and indulge in stirring battles, and towering over it all is a gigantic black paper statue of Ravana, which is symbolically burnt with flaming arrows on the final day.

The festival draws many thousands of spectators, colourfully garbed, particularly the women wearing chhomis in rainbow hues. They wore exquisite jewellery; a nakphool or 'nose flower' of silver filigree set with imitation rubies, a necklace of coins and coloured wools, a heavy kara or ankle bracelet,
and the churias of some twenty silver bracelets which covered the entire arm. Each piece was intricately cut into numerous facets to catch the light, giving a dazzling effect that was often enhanced with hundreds of capsule bells or crosses of the finest filigree and coloured stones.

By comparison their menfolk were very restrained in dress. Their curtah of heavy white cotton was a boxy long-sleeved shirt with high collar and side vents and decorated with rows of fine stitchery at the cuffs, along the seams and across the yoke. The older men wore dhotis of thin white cotton wrapped around their waists with one end looped up between the legs and tucked in behind, the other falling in gentle folds in front. They also carried scarves of various colours and on their heads, white turbans or cotton caps. The whole oriental illusion was particularly becoming, but equally fascinating were the various adaptations of western dress incorporated into the orthodox costume. There seemed, for example, no end to the variety of ingenious shapes into which Indian boys can twist an old felt hat. Of special significance to were the accessories of little boys, their waists tied with a ‘kardhan’ band of coloured wool tassels. Often there was a bag of camphor or saffron hung around their necks (to ward off the cold), and tight bands of black beads around their wrists, a custom adopted from their Negro neighbours, for it was wise to play safe all around and ward off the evils of both east and west.

It was usually at weddings that the men really came into their own. Then the women kept indoors, their participation in the general preparations and festivities being separate and comparatively minor. The bridegroom underwent a period of purification with saffron for several days preceding the wedding. On the great day he is ceremonially bathed, and the mother takes farewell of her son in a most touching ceremony under the bamboo tent. He is then dressed in his Jora-jama of pink satin cut in the style of princes, and his head is tied with a pink turban. The family jewellery of gold filigree cascades down his chest, and he wears a crown of glittering beads from which many tassels of paper roses hang veiling his face. When all is ready he is placed in his carriage, cart or car, together with his page dressed in almost the same manner, and his sponsors and priest.

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The women perform an act of purification with fire, passing a brass plate of lighted tapers over his head and scattering the lights to the four cardinal points. Later at the wedding ceremony he will say his prayers and be purified with water and sacred butter, with flowers, honey and incense. Then with a great shout the bharat or procession moves off to the house of the bride, cymbals clanging, drums beating, huge curving horns hung with bobbles, dantailes of steel, chimbers like castanets jangling, much singing and hand clapping, a joyous concourse of jogging horse carts decorated with bunches of paper knot roses and elaborate arches of glittering foil.

Weddings like these generally took place at night at the auspicious hour devined by the priests, but the celebrations usually lasted several days. Not only were the guests feasted but sometimes entire communities, Indian or otherwise, were bidden, and also the poor of the district. The menu comprised sweet home grown rice, curry of goat, curhee of dhal, amchar mango chutneys, sohari oil basted pancakes, or pancakes filled with dhal peas, and sambols and sweetmeats, to be eaten from freshly cut banana leaves. Entertainment lasted throughout the day and the night and sometimes included dancing displays. I once saw in Bijucal a performance of a folk opera taken from the sacred epics, sung and danced entirely by a male cast. As usual the voices and costumes were superb, and there was one moving scene when Lutchman, one of the Pandavan heroes, sang a tearfilled dirge over the sandals of slain Bharrat, his brother. In between the singing was interspersed with vigorous bouts of dancing in a style commonly called Harrichand, by two veiled men dressed as Ranees. It was a very popular but elementary folk form, quite unlike the classical Bharata Nañyam, which is now being assiduously cultivated. I hope the Harrichand will not entirely be supplanted, however derided, for it is one of the true Indian folk dances of Trinidad, and possesses many subtleties of its own, nowadays with some rhumba and carioca thrown in for good measure.

The correct wedding dance however appeared to be the Nagara, which I once had the pleasure of seeing in Débé, in the very heart of the southern Indian villages. Nagara requires a special type of drumming, and it is danced by men clad only in jewelled breeches and hundreds of tiny bells. As usual in oriental musical form the opening movements are slow and very formal,
with sudden pauses, but quickly developing to a virtuoso climax, stopping abruptly and then starting all over again. The dancer sings a moving recitative with broad and noble gestures, kneeling, posturing, then stamping the ground and shaking his hips, then leaping into the air, all in the most unexpected and dramatic sequence. This dance has almost entirely disappeared today, or it is remembered, not even very well, by very old performers, and the drums too are hard to come by any more. The last time I saw it was at the Independence Command Performance when I managed to have it included in the Indian sequence.

I once had the temerity to suggest to a very progressive group of young men that their club could become a centre for research and documentation of the Indians in Trinidad. I was particularly interested in those aspects of Indian folk culture which showed the process of adaptation to our own environment; sitars that were hand carved in the villages and decorated with mirrors; lattis of plaited rope; kitchen implements; paintings on temples and houses - studies of the customs, habits and beliefs of the people, community organizations like the village panchayats, and the numerous festivals. My suggestions met with a polite rebuff, for their minds were already anxiously reaching to the more orthodox modes of modern India, and failed to grasp the uniqueness of what might be called the Indo-Trinitarian development in Trinidad.

The changes in a folk culture under the subtle pressures exerted by the other dominant cultures around it form a deeply absorbing study, and I often wonder how it is that the Indian phenomenon in our midst, involving more than a quarter of our native population, has not yet begun to receive even purely academic attention. One can loosely trace, for example, the gradual integration of the Indian into our carnival via, first, the burroquite, then through Jab-jabs and wild indians into sailors and fancy indians, until they graduate as it were, in recent times, as historical characters competing for the top acolade. This parallels exactly the social integration which has been taking place and there is a lot to conjecture about along the way.

Burroquite, a name of Spanish derivation, identifies an exclusively Indian folk-play with a prince on hobby-horse, and two transvestite 'Ranees', which has become part of the traditional mummery of carnival. Whence it

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derived, and how it became attached to a purely creole festival can hardly be suggested at this late date. One wonders if it was not the Indian skill with split bamboo, fringed paper and mirrors which encouraged the large bird headdresses of wild Indian costumes up to the early thirties. Undoubtedly too, the hosey builders have influenced fancy Indian and sailor headdresses of the fifties, while current Indian affluence in the south seems to be helping to preserve the fashion for elaborate costumes in hammered copper today.

Hosay, or Hosein, is a mourning observance practised by the Shiites, a Muslim sect whose spiritual ruler is the Aga Khan. It commemorates the tragic murder of two brothers, Hosein and Hassan, during the bloody Islamic wars, and by royal dispensation in the reign of Queen Victoria, the celebrants are permitted to parade the glittering tajahs or tombs through the streets of the city, and in many other parts of the country. The practice has been vociferously denounced as a mockery of their religion by orthodox Muslims in recent years, for though the participants dutifully observe the traditional rites and penances in private, the public spectacle has degenerated into an uproarious affair which must be very wounding to Muslim sensibilities. It however remains the most jewelled spectacle of all Indian celebrations and has become so woven into the fabric of our folk festivals that one sincerely hopes that it will be allowed to survive.

In El Socorro we used to build the Taj in tiers, like the tower of Holy Trinity Cathedral, and indeed there was a time when it was fashionable to put a decorative clock face between the twin onion shaped domes or gumaj. In Balanay they were made so tall that they swayed in the wind out on the vast savannah, but in San Juan the numerous electric wires prevented such excesses, while encouraging more ingenuous design. For us, ours was always prettier; the inner structure of roseau wood, straighter; the gumaj perfectly balanced. All up and down and around the jewelled arches there were fingerlike flutings of tissue in the sacred colours of white and green. The designs were outlined with rolled foil and jewelled with coria, and the pointed crenellations were frosted with paper roses. The dome was sometimes covered with transparent net through which one could see the dancing shimmer of cut glitter foil, and sometimes it (continued)...
was surmounted by a large paper peacock.

In procession the Taj is preceded by large half moons made of bamboo and straw. One face was covered with scales of tin and decorated shields or breasts, while the other face was a plain wool blanket, red or blue or green, hung with garlands of frangipani. Around the edges were flounces of coloured cotton which almost concealed the symbolic knives and cut-out of the saintly hands. It was twirled along the streets by male dancers wearing stout leather pouches called 'chamotees' and the sight of its alternating faces in the sun was most majestic and rapturous. Born on the shoulders of several stalwart men the Tjahah bow to each other as they meet, and are in turn saluted by the moons. The molvis wave sweet incense and weeping women singing a dirge, strewn rice upon them while the drummers played a stirring warlike tilana.

Among the various sideplays of Hosay was the Ghadka, a stylised stick fight in the oriental manner, and jaroo, a dance of brooms. In my time this was performed by some forty men in a great circle, swishing brooms of split bamboo and singing a lively village air. Sometimes, in the evenings, it was amusing also to watch agile performers twirling rings of flaming bamboo about their heads, or the ceremonial procession of flags. And all along the route are the picturesque vendors of sweetmeats, honeyed jalabi, crunchy mitai, peppery cachewxi or salted chana. The Ghadka has almost entirely disappeared from the scene, and jaroo is now performed by colourfully garbed urchins with miniature straw brooms hung with bells while the tilana has acquired a jazz beat which invites dancing feet. So it is that this touching display tends to erupt at sundown into a noisy, triumphant procession.

This infidel intrusion is scandalous to more orthodox sensibilities but I do wonder, without sacrilegious intent, if the saints would not themselves approve such a joyous climax to their passion, commemorated in a foreign land. Trinidad is a crucible where the living and vital folk culture of many peoples fuse and change, and among these the Indian mystique has made and will continue to contribute in large measure to the very essence of that synthesis.