

Holi Chawtaal: A Musical Tradition in Mauritius

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Abstract: UNESCO inscribed the Bhojpuri folk songs from Mauritius, known as ‘Geet Gawai’, on the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in December 2016 (UNESCO, 2016; Boodhoo, 2016, 2023a, 2023b; Dawosing, 2019, 2020; Chakrabarty, 2025). However, ‘Geet Gawai’ represents only one facet of the island’s rich Bhojpuri folk traditions, transplanted to the diaspora by the Indian indentured labourers (*girmitya-s*) in the mid-nineteenth century. Equally significant traditions - Ramayana Chanting and Holi Chawtaal as practised in Mauritius, through musicological and ethnomusicological lenses, examining its historical origins, musical structures and sociocultural functions. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, audiovisual analysis and desktop research, this paper outlines the rhythmic organisation, vocal form, instrumentation, performance style, performance contexts and cultural significance of this musical form within Indo-Mauritian communities. The findings show that Holi Chawtaal preserves the core features inherited from North Indian folk traditions while evolving through local adaptations that strengthen community participation and cultural continuity. The study highlights its role as a structured participatory musical system that preserves heritage, sustains communal identity and memory in contemporary Mauritian society, even as modernisation and commercialisation reshape participation patterns and performance contexts.

Keywords: Holi, Chawtaal, Folk Music, Mauritius, Cultural identity

1. Introduction

In Mauritius, the celebration of ‘Holi’ or ‘Phagwa’, the Hindu festival of colours, is marked not only by vibrant visual spectacles and ritual observance but also by the musical performances of Holi Chawtaal and Dhamaal, two communal vocal–percussive musical forms that occupy central places in the island’s Hindu festive culture. While the term ‘Chawtaal’ formally refers to a twelve-beat rhythmic cycle in North Indian classical music, commonly used in Dhrupad and Dhamaal singing styles on the Pakhawaj (a barrel-shaped, two-headed Indian drum) (Dutta, 2008; Maharaj, 2022), findings indicate that although the name is shared, in the context of Holi festival, ‘Chawtaal’ does not technically align with this definition (Miller, 2008; Manuel, 2009; Sasenarine, 2010; Maharaj, 2022). Instead, in this study, ‘Chawtaal’ (also spelt Chawtal/Chowtal/Chautaal) is an umbrella term for a whole family of upbeat, joyful folk song styles, one of which is called ‘Chawtaal.’ These songs are traditionally performed during Holi or Phagwa celebrations, especially in Bhojpuri- and Awadhi-speaking regions of Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh, as well as in Bhojpuri diaspora communities such as Trinidad and Tobago, Mauritius, Fiji, Suriname, Guyana, South Africa, among others (Miller, 2008; Manuel, 2009; Sasenarine, 2010; Sasenarine & Manuel, 2022; Maharaj, 2022; Singh, 2024). Dhamaal, on the other hand, appears to be a subgenre or variant of Chawtaal, somehow close to the ‘*Dhamaari*’ in India (Manuel, 2009; Sasenarine, 2010; Sasenarine & Manuel, 2022).

History indicates that during the indentureship period, between the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Indian Indentured workers hailing from the rural Bhojpuri-speaking regions of western Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh brought Chawtaal and other folk songs traditions to the aforementioned Bhojpuri diaspora regions (Ramdin, 1989; Boodhoo, 1999, 2023; Manuel, 2009; Sasenarine, 2010; Servan-Schreiber, 2011; Mukherjee, 2014; Sasenarine & Manuel, 2022). Over time, some of these styles faded away, others transformed or merged into different genres, while a

few have persisted and are still practised in forms close to their original versions. Holi Chawtaal and Dhamaal are two living examples of such continued musical practices in contemporary Mauritius. Indeed, in the past, besides Holi Chawtaal and Dhamaal, folk singing during Holi in Mauritius also included *Sumiran*, *Hori*, and *Phagwa-s* (Boodhoo, 1999). However, over time, the focus shifted more towards the practices of Holi Chawtaal and Dhamaal, which have been effectively preserved through oral transmission and communal participation, thereby continuing to flourish in both their traditional and adapted forms within the pluralistic cultural fabric of Mauritius.

Besides, Holi Chawtaal’s performances and competitions are continuously and systematically organised annually, at both national and regional levels in Mauritius. The Mauritius Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) regularly broadcasts Holi Chawtaal and Dhamaal sessions performed by various Chawtaal *mandali-s* (performing groups) from across Mauritius. Additionally, there are numerous videos on YouTube and other social media platforms serving as digital archives, featuring performances by specific Chawtaal *mandali-s* from various areas of Mauritius, reflecting processes of tradition retention, adaptation, and cultural continuity. This musical form represents, therefore, much more than simply folk music. It is a vital social ritual which acts as a living archive of indentured labourers’ musical culture—melodies, lyrics, and performance styles. However, although Holi Chawtaal continues to be a significant part of Holi celebrations and socio-cultural events in Mauritius, it remains underexplored in musicological studies, particularly regarding its melodic and rhythmic features. This paper seeks to address this gap in the scholarly literature.

Thus, the present study traces the roots of Holi Chawtaal in Mauritius and examines its musical dimensions, focusing on its rhythmic structures, vocal form, instrumental interaction, lyrical themes, performance style, and cultural significance, thereby contributing to a broader understanding of the Mauritian Holi Chawtaal as a vibrant folk song tradition that

mediates between devotion (ritual practice), music (a living musical system), festivity (social practice), and identity (a marker of diasporic cultural identity), and that negotiates inherited musical structures and contemporary local expressions.

1.1 Significance of Inquiry

Despite much attention having been given to Indo-Mauritian religious practices and Bhojpuri culture and folklore, in general, no robust studies provide a detailed musical analysis of Holi-associated Chawtaal and Dhamaal in Mauritius. Succinct existing accounts, if any, omit the systematic analysis of their rhythmic patterns, responsorial singing, melodic contour, instrumental interplay, performance style and musical notation. This paper thus fills a critical gap in contemporary musicological scholarship by providing a detailed, explorative, descriptive and analytical examination of Holi Chawtaal in Mauritius, fostering a deeper appreciation of Mauritius's rich folk musical heritage.

Through a systematic exploration of the musical characteristics of Mauritian Holi Chawtaal, this research paper argues that this musical tradition in Mauritius operates as a not-so-complex yet organised, structured rhythmic and vocal system, intertwined with group participation. Consequently, it naturally supports community involvement and maintains cultural continuity within the Mauritian Hindu diaspora. The study underscores that although the tradition preserves fundamental aspects of its North Indian roots, it has also adapted locally, reflecting the island's unique historical, social, and cultural context. Hence, the present study equips researchers and students with empirical methodological documentation of an authentic cultural practice for further musicological inquiry, such as comparative studies across other folk traditions. Besides, for policymakers, it provides scholarly support and strengthens the case for cultural preservation initiatives and informed policy-making around intangible cultural assets.

1.2 Research Questions

- 1) What is the origin of the Mauritian Holi Chawtaal?
- 2) How are the melodic, rhythmic, instrumental and lyrical elements of Holi Chawtaal, as performed in Mauritius, organised?
- 3) What is the socio-cultural significance of Holi Chawtaal in Mauritius?
- 4) How does Holi Chawtaal function as a marker of the Indo-Mauritian cultural identity?

2. Literature Review

Although there is abundant literature on the Holi or Phagwa festival worldwide, there remains considerable scope for research on Holi Chawtaal from a musicological standpoint in India, Mauritius, and other Bhojpuri diaspora communities. Kevin Miller's doctoral thesis's chapter on Indo-Fijian Chawtaal is one of the most comprehensive and insightful analyses of the genre, much of which also applies to the Mauritian Holi Chawtaal. According to Miller (2008), in Fiji, the Chawtaal is also known as 'Jhagru' or 'Faag' (derived from Phalgun), and it is performed during the colour festival

celebrated by Indo-Fijians, with the repertoire mainly featuring Vaishnavite themes of Holi, particularly the playful or romantic stories of lord Krishna from the Bhagavata Purana and Krishna bhakti traditions.

In his research papers, Manuel (1997, 2009) offers an in-depth description and musical analysis of Chawtaal and its sub-genres as performed within Indo-Caribbean music, including specific lyrics and Western notation. He also incorporates comparative references to North Indian and Indo-Fijian Chawtaal practices. In his book 'Chowtal Rang Bahar', edited by Peter Manuel, Sasenarine (2010, 2022) presents a detailed explanation of Chawtaal as a vast genre comprising many regional variants or subgenres, including its fundamental musical structure. He also provides sol-fège for one Chawtaal, highlights the correct pronunciation of certain words, and includes the Bhojpuri lyrics with English translations of 54 Chawtaals. The research paper by Maharaj (2022) discusses the structure, musicality, and lyrics of several Phagwa festival musical forms performed in the Caribbean, including Chawtaal, Ullara, Jhumar, Lej, Chaiti Kajri, as well as Bhajan and Hindi film songs. In addition to the lyrics and Hindustani notation of a few other Holi song genres, his work also includes the lyrics and notation of one Chawtaal. Arya and Vedabharati (1968) provide a brief overview of Chawtaal, including some lyrics with translations, in their volume on Indo-Surinamese folk songs. Ethnomusicologist Helen Myers (Myer, 1998, cited in Maciszewski, 2001) offers a compelling musical ethnography of Felicity, a village in Trinidad mainly inhabited by East Indian Hindus, and details the schematic notation for one Trinidadian Chawtaal.

Certainly, Mauritian scholarship also offers valuable insights into this tradition. Notable scholars such as Ramdin (1989) and Boodhoo (1993, 1999, 2011, 2023) have emphasised the need to preserve Bhojpuri cultural expressions, especially in folk music and oral traditions. Ramdin (1989), serving in the Bhojpuri Department at the Mahatma Gandhi Institute, collected, documented, and recorded numerous Bhojpuri folk songs in the late 1970s and early 1980s. During that time, she also released two volumes of 33 LP Audio Records, 'Swarna Chakra' and 'Abhishek', which feature precious traditional Bhojpuri wedding songs. Additionally, she published "The Sanskar Manjari", a detailed compilation of Bhojpuri ceremonial folk songs in Mauritius and highlighted the cultural and linguistic aspects of the *Jantsar* work songs in her doctoral thesis (Ramdin, 1989; Ramdin, 1989, cited in Boodhoo, 2011; Ramdin, 2004, cited in Bissessur- Doolooa, 2020). Boodhoo (1993, 1999, 2011, 2023a) also extensively documented Mauritian Bhojpuri folk traditions, specifically, the popular *Geet Gawai*, highlighting their role in connecting to ancestral heritage. In his book 'Bhojpuri Lokgeetika', the well-known Mauritian writer Ramsurrun (2001) compiled the lyrics of 60 Mauritian folkloric songs, sung on various occasions, while Bissessur-Doolooa (2020) underscored the role of the Indo-Mauritian women as transmitters of cultural traditions, customs, and folk songs, and as preservers of identity. Insights derived from these works have served as a fundamental support for this study.

Related to Holi Chawtaal itself, apart from the Department of Bhojpuri, Folklore and Oral traditions of the Mahatma Gandhi Institution, the National Heritage Fund has also

conducted projects on the recordings and lyrics of traditional Bhojpuri songs, including some Holi Chawtaal-s by singers across Mauritius (National Heritage Fund, 2013; Mahatma Gandhi Institute, 2020). Together, these two major entities help document such unique musical traditions for the National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Besides, concise descriptions of the genre can be found in the works of Boodhoo (1999), Dawosing (2020), and Chuttoo-Jankee (2022). Interestingly, Dawosing (2019, 2020) has published several engaging research papers on Mauritian folk traditions, and one of them offers a succinct overview of Chawtaal and Dhamaal, including the lyrics of selected Chawtaal-s and Dhamaal-s with English translations, and thoughtfully analyses them using Critical Discourse Analysis. Moreover, the Mauritius Sanatan Dharma Temples Federation has uploaded a 'Holi Chawtaal Sangraha' - a compilation of valuable traditional Indian Chawtaals - to its website (Msdtdf.org, 2023). This work, written by the Indian author Bhagat Bhagwandas in 1826 and assembled and edited by Khemraj Shrikrishnadas in 1961, can significantly aid Chawtaal practitioners in expanding their repertoires and enhancing their performances, while preserving ancient texts from India.

Therefore, while existing studies on Mauritian Holi Chawtaal have explored its cultural, ritualistic, and social aspects, the intricate musical dimensions – including rhythmic structures, melodic frameworks, and performance techniques and styles remain understudied. This gap represents a critical omission in the scholarly discourse, as these musical components are fundamental to the authentic expression and cultural transmission of Holi Chawtaal. The present study addresses this lacuna by providing a detailed musicological analysis of Holi Chawtaal, thereby contributing essential knowledge to both ethnomusicological scholarship and the preservation of this traditional musical form. Through this focused, comprehensive musical analysis, the research also offers new insights into the artistic and cultural significance of this musical tradition.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Approach

This study adopts a qualitative ethnomusicological approach, combining desktop research, participant observation, interviews, and audiovisual documentation and analyses, guided by the views of ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl (2005) on musical tradition and Alan Merriam's (1964) tripartite model, to examine the phenomenon under study. Ethnomusicology emphasises the study of music within its social and cultural contexts, treating musical sound, performance behaviour, and cultural meaning as interconnected (Merriam, 1964).

3.2 Fieldwork and Data Collection

Fieldwork was conducted during the Holi season in Mauritius, including semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Performances were observed in *baithka-s* (congregational venues), temple courtyards, village communal spaces, and private homes, enabling direct engagement with how Holi Chawtaal and Dhamaal are

performed. Also, audiovisual analysis of recent video recordings of Chawtaal and Dhamaal by various Chawtaal *mandali-s* across Mauritius, available on the Mauritius Broadcasting Corporation website and on YouTube, was undertaken. This provided additional opportunities for detailed examination of rhythmic patterns, vocal styles, and instrumental interactions.

3.3 Analytical Framework

From an ethnomusicological perspective, the audiovisual recordings were analysed as contextual documents, following Bruno Nettl's (2005) view of musical tradition as a dynamic process. In his work "The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-One Issues and Concepts", Nettl (2005) argues that no musical tradition is entirely static or a frozen relic of the past; it is an essential dynamic reality that bridges the past and present through continuously changing processes and constant adaptation.

The musicological analysis focused on rhythm, melodic form, instrumental interplay, and the relationship between text and music, with descriptive prose complemented by illustrative examples of musical notation. Particularly, Merriam's (1964) tripartite model guided interpretation, alongside insights from Miller (2008), Manuel (2009), Sasenarine (2010), Maharaj (2022) and Mauritius-specific insights from Boodhoo (1999, 2023), Dawosing (2019) and Chuttoo-Jankee (2022). These various analytical tools supported a multi-layered understanding of Holi Chawtaal practice in Mauritius.

Merriam's tripartite model, detailed in his book 'The Anthropology of Music,' defines ethnomusicology as "music as human behaviour" (Merriam, 1964, p.viii). It examines music through three interconnected levels: conceptualisation (ideas linked to the creation and practice of the music), behaviour (actions in relation to the music), and sound (the aural/sonic characteristics of the music). In Merriam's words - "sound has structure, and it may be a system, but it cannot exist independently of human beings; music sound must be regarded as the product of the behaviour that produces it" (Merriam, 1964, p. 32). Therefore, Merriam suggests that music goes beyond just sound; it involves a dynamic interaction between Concept, Behaviour, and Sound. His framework emphasises the study of music within its cultural context, making it particularly relevant for analysing the festive participatory folk music tradition of Holi Chawtaal in Mauritius.

4. Analysis, Findings And Discussion

4.1 Origins, Historical and Cultural Background of Holi Chawtaal

As previously highlighted, the presence of Holi Chawtaal in Mauritius is associated with the migration of Bhojpuri- and Awadhi-speaking indentured labourers from North India during the nineteenth century (Miller, 2008; Manuel, 2009; Sasenarine, 2010; Maharaj, 2022; Singh, 2024). These groups introduced a variety of devotional and folk musical customs linked to the Hindu ritual calendar, with Holi songs being particularly prominent. Findings indicate that, over generations, the tradition of celebrating Holi continues to be

enthusiastically observed in contemporary Mauritius, while Holi Chawtaal and Dhamaal have become integral to the Indo-Mauritian seasonal celebrations, community activities, and the communal identity.

As noted earlier, originally, the term ‘Chawtaal’ in its native regions in India is an overarching term encompassing a group of subgenres, one of which is specifically called ‘Chawtaal’ (Miller, 2008; Manuel, 2009; Sasenarine, 2010). Essentially, all these subgenres are performed in groups or teams called *mandali-s* or *toli-s* in a distinctive antiphonal style. These genres include Ullara, Dhamaari, Kabir, Jogira, Rasiya, Jati, Jhumar, Bilvariya, Baiswara, Lej, Chaahka, Bhartaal, and Sada Anand, each defined by distinctive prosodic frameworks, melodic contours, and specific patterns of rhythmic modulations and stanzaic repetitions (Miller, 2008; Manuel, 2009; Sasenarine, 2010; Maharaj, 2022; Singh, 2024). Miller (2008) specifically categorises the subgenres as either “long-format” styles (e.g., Chawtaal and Jhumar) or “short-format” ones (e.g., Kabir, Jogira, and Sada Anand). Sasenarine (2010) notes that most Chawtaal melodies are simple and tend to resemble one another, yet the lyrics, rhythms, and melodies must synchronise perfectly to create a smooth flow with a repetitive pulse that supports collective engagement. He also emphasises that most Chawtaal lyrics are in Braj-bhasha, the regional Hindi dialect spoken around Mathura and Vrindavan, believed to be Lord Krishna’s birthplace. These lyrics mainly describe Lord Krishna’s romantic and playful adventures, seldom praising other deities. The author further observes that a Chawtaal group’s appeal and vigour stem from their skilful collective vocal navigation through intricate and lively rhythmic shifts, transitioning between intense moments and calmer sections.

It is notable that traditional Holi folk songs have continued despite modern changes and thrived in various locally adapted regional styles across the *girmitiya* nations, including Mauritius, Fiji, Guyana, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, while they struggle to survive in their homeland, India (Singh, 2024). Manuel (2009) and Sasenarine (2010) observed that some melodies are intriguingly common across these regions, despite a lack of direct cultural contact since indentureship concluded in the 1920s. Interestingly, even the Mauritian Holi Chawtaal and Dhamaal exhibit numerous musical characteristics typical of a traditional Chawtaal performed in India and among the *girmitiya* communities, as detailed by Manuel (2009), Sasenarine (2010), and Maharaj (2022), which will be elaborately discussed in the succeeding sections.

Regarding the ‘Dhamaal’, also known as ‘Dhamaar’ by some custodian practitioners in Mauritius, research through documents and interviews indicates that Dhamaal most likely relates to the Indian ‘Dhamaari’ sub-genre of Chawtaal, although in an altered form. In the Indo-Mauritian context, it exhibits a high-energy variant of Chawtaal, featuring fast-paced rhythms and tempos, as well as significant melodic variations. The word ‘Dhamaal’ itself means “lively celebration”, or “intense state of happiness”, perfectly capturing the spirit of the festive ethos of Holi. In Mauritius, a Dhamaal is typically performed after Chawtaal, with an elevated rhythmic pulse escalating to the ‘explosive’ segment of the entire Chawtaal performance serving as the cathartic

peak of the celebration. As the performers sit on the ‘*Chataayi*’ (hand-woven mat) while singing the Chawtaal, they often rise to their knees during the Dhamaal, creating the atmosphere for the mounted rhythmic section. Markedly, most groups stick to the same theme for their Chawtaal and Dhamaal. For instance, a Chawtaal dedicated to Lord Ram will likely be followed by a Dhamaal equally focused on Lord Ram. Dhamaal highlights lyrics that evoke devotion, playfulness and fun, celebrating the triumph of good over evil with a joyful spirit. Ultimately, set to highly rhythmic music, Dhamaal often culminates in impromptu open-air dance by performers and the audience.

Interviews and desktop research show that in the olden days in Mauritius, Holi festivities began 40 days in advance, indeed from Basant Panchami, with fasting and Chawtaal singing. Remarkably, in the early days, the Holi Chawtaal was performed solely by male singers, accompanied by Jhaal (brass cymbals), which are called ‘jhanjh’ in some other diasporas (Manuel, 2009; Maharaj, 2022), and Dholak (two-headed hand drum), in the evenings at the *baithka-s* and *shivala-s*, or at the villagers’ homes on a rotating schedule. It was known as ‘*Taal Thonkna*’, that is, setting the mood to announce that Holi is approaching (Boodhoo, 1999). On the eve of Phagwa, men burned ‘*samad*’, now known as ‘Holika Dahan’, in which the effigy of Holika is set on fire symbolising the destruction of the evil (Chuttoo- Jankee, 2022).

4.2 Holi Chawtaal: Social and Cultural Functions in Contemporary Mauritius

In Mauritius today, beyond devotion, celebration and entertainment, Holi Chawtaal, as an intrinsically community-led musical practice, fulfils critical socio-cultural roles. Intermittent rehearsal sessions begin weeks before Holi, following Basant Panchami, transforming individual homes, *baithka-s*, temple courtyards, community centres, ‘*Kaalimaye-s*’ (shrines or small temples, dedicated to the Hindu Goddess Kaali), village gathering areas, and private compounds into lively hubs of social interaction that strengthen kinship and neighbourhood bonds. These interactions primarily involve local socio-cultural *mandali-s* and youth clubs, including men, women, youth and children. In fact, these settings influence the musical structure of Holi Chawtaal by encouraging participation over musical precision, resulting in performances that are flexible in their rendering and duration and responsive to social dynamics.

It is noteworthy that the majority of the Holi Chawtaal *mandali-s* in Mauritius are also observed to be engaged in the Ramayana Chanting. Findings indicate that a Holi Chawtaal session lasts about 25 to 30 minutes on average, including the Dhamaal or ‘Dhamaar’ segment, though some performances may run longer. Subsequently, the celebrations culminate on the day of Holi with festivities that include Holi Chawtaal and Dhamaal singing and dance performances, the communal throwing of ‘*gulaal*’ (coloured powders), and the use of coloured water-spraying devices known as ‘*pichkaari-s*’. People also indulge in local delicacies such as *thekwa*, *gujiya*, and *puwa*, accompanied by tea. Certain people also take these sweets while sipping on ‘*Bhang*’, the traditional staple drink made from cannabis leaves and milk.

Ultimately, a typical feature of the Holi celebration in Mauritius is the spirited singing of popular Holi Chawtaal, Dhamaal, and other Holi songs (often even Hindi film songs) by large crowds gathering for processions around certain villages and specific locations, to the accompaniment of Jhaal and Dholak. Though it has been observed that in recent years, youth have occasionally included instruments such as Dhol and Cajon drum boxes in Holi songs, which can be seen only during processions. Regarding this practice, some practitioners feel that the loud, overpowering sounds of these instruments are unsuitable for Holi songs. Others, however, see it as the youth experimenting and bringing change to the musical tradition, keeping it vibrant and evolving. Anyhow, the Holi processions have always been a carnivalesque setting for Phagwa, serving as a metaphor in which people from different cultural backgrounds often join the religious procession to express their love, brotherhood, and unity among families and friends.

Besides, findings reveal that in Mauritius, Holi Chawtaal singing is prominently promoted and encouraged through the intermittent organisation of performances such as 'Holi Mela' (carnival of Holi) and competitions at regional and national levels (National Heritage Fund, 2013; Dawosing, 2019), primarily by local Village and District Councils, city and town councils, community welfare associations, and religious organisations, often in rural areas. For instance, several Village Councils under the District Councils, such as Flacq, Pamplemousses, Riviere Du Rempart, Moka, Grand Port, Savanne, and Plaines Wilhems, are very active in organising such events. Specifically, Petite Julie Village Council, Belle Vue Maurel Village Council, Quartier Militaire Village Council, and Valle Pitot Mandir regularly hold Holi Chawtaal competitions. The Municipality of Curepipe also organised Holi Chawtaal competitions a few years back, while Highlands and Belle Terre often organise Chawtaal and Dhamaal performances, encouraging cultural participation. Maheshwarnath Mandir in Riche Mare, Camp De Masque, and Siddheshwar Mandir in Tyack are recurrently associated with organising Holi celebrations, including Holi Chawtaal performances. Usually, these events are held in the weeks leading up to the main Holi festival, mostly at village halls or community centres.

Markedly, over the past decade, Holi Chawtaal competitions and public Holi Chawtaal performances organised by various stakeholders across Mauritius, including the Mauritius Sanatan Dharma Temples Federation, as well as broadcast events such as those recorded in the Mauritius Broadcasting Corporation's studio, have gained momentum. Consequently, these staged and televised performances have begun to place greater emphasis on musical accuracy, prompting Holi Chawtaal groups to engage professional musicians and music mentors for support. Findings show that this collaboration seeks to enhance their performances while still maintaining the core rhythmic, vocal, and textual elements of the musical tradition. However, as pertinently noted by some practitioners during interviews, the musical changes should be carefully calculated and remain within the grasp of the layman, so that the tradition does not lose its identity as folk and become a practice reserved only for professional musicians.

As stated earlier, Holi Chawtaal in Mauritius has traditionally been performed solely by male singers, accompanied only by Jhaal and Dholak for many decades. Today, to preserve Holi Chawtaal's pristine form, a few purist groups, mainly composed of elderly practitioners, still feature only male singers and primarily use Jhaal and Dholak as instruments. While some other groups, such as the Long Mountain Baillache Kaali Mata Mandir, Notre Dame Kali Mata Mandir Association, Sanatan Hindu Yuva Mandal Triolet, Ganesha Castle Mandali of Valle Des Pretres, L'Esperance Trebuchet Hindu Cultural Force, Bel Terre Yuvak Sangh, Highlands Kailashnath Mandir, Chitrakoot Chawtaal group, Human Service Trust Mauritius, Tri Shakti Socio Cultural Group, Quatre Soeurs and Trilokinath Mandir Grand Bois, among others, have brought significant innovation and enhancement to the tradition over time, adapting it to the contemporary socio-cultural contexts. These groups have included female singers and children, making Holi Chawtaal gender-neutral and intergenerational. Some cultural associations and centres, such as the Human Service Trust Mauritius, L'Esperance Trebuchet Hindu Cultural Force Centre, the Indian Folk Music Academy of Chitrakoot and the Gurukul Triolet, among others, currently teach Holi Chawtaal singing to the younger generation using both formal, pedagogical and informal strategies. These associations have equally endeavoured to empower and support female vocalists to assume prominent roles and lead Ramayana Chanting and Holi Chawtaal performances in Mauritius. Consequently, a few female-led Holi Chawtaal groups have successfully emerged, including the Ganesha Castle Chawtaal Mandali and the Amitie Navjeevan Pathshala Mandali, among others.

Adapting to the changing socio-cultural realities, besides Jhaal and Dholak, today, several groups have incorporated other instruments such as Chimta, Kartaal, Manjeera, Tambourine, and Harmonium into their Holi Chawtaal performances, while specific groups such as the Bois Pignolet Chawtaal Mandali and the Baillache Kali Mata Mandir Chawtaal Mandali have even added the electronic Tanpura as drone, a tonal anchor, providing a harmonic foundation for melodies as well as elements such as 'Aakaar aalaap' (free elaboration of notes in 'aa' sound) and 'Tarana' (a form of singing using mnemonic syllables) from Indian classical Vocal music to their renditions. In his interview, the group leader of Bois Pignolet Chawtaal Mandali, Mr Veeraj Kavi Soomary, explained that, having a master's degree in music (Violin), he experimented by adding a piece of 'Tarana', such as 'Dhim Tananana Dhim Tananana Dhim Tananana Dhin Dhin na', to the Chawtaal singing by his group during a competition in 2024, which was ultimately very well received and appreciated by the audience.

4.3 The Musical Characteristics of Holi Chawtaal in Mauritius

Before delving into the musical specifics, it is important to recognise that Holi Chawtaal in Mauritius is fundamentally folk music, with its unique folk musical system, features, and expressions, different from Indian classical music. Therefore, this paper will analyse its musical traits solely in the context of its folk nature. From a musicological standpoint, findings indicate that the Mauritian Holi Chawtaal is generally characterised by group participation, lively responsorial

singing in an antiphonal (call-and-response) format, energetic rhythmic cycles, and temporal variations, with rhythmic accompaniment provided primarily by percussion instruments such as the Jhaal and Dholak, while handclapping is also a prominent feature of this folk rendition. The

performance typically centres on a lead singer (there may be more than one), supported by a chorus arranged in a circle or semi-circle, with two Dholak players positioned in the centre, facing each other in front of the singers as illustrated in Figure 1 below:



Figure 1: The Ganesha Castle Chawtaal Mandali of Valle Des Pretres, Mauritius
Source of Figure 1: MBC Online (2024)

Findings suggest that the melodic content in Mauritian Holi Chawtaal appears relatively narrow in range, prioritising embodied rhythmic energy, gradual tempo acceleration, and textual delivery over melodic elaboration. Such characteristics underscore the functional role of this musical form within ritual performance, where musical repetition and embodied rhythm contribute to enhancing collective engagement during Holi celebrations. The lyrical content of the Mauritian Holi Chawtaal is frequently centred on devotional themes revolving around Lord Krishna, Lord Ram, Lord Narsimha, and, rarely, Lord Shiva. Interestingly, the musical performances of all the Holi Chawtaal groups studied for this research exhibited notable similarities, with most of them sharing the same fundamental melody (albeit some minor melodic nuances), identical sequential progression, call-and-response singing, rhythmic modulations, and stanzaic repetitions. The upcoming sections provide a detailed overview of the typical musical characteristics of a Mauritian Holi Chawtaal, presented progressively and supported by illustrative examples of specific musical notation.

Holi Chawtaal in Mauritius typically starts with a brief Shloka recitation, which is often skipped during competitions and stage performances. It then features the lead singer of the group performing a powerful 'Jaykaar'- a call of praise for Lord Krishna, Shree Ram, Lord Narsimha, and Bhakta Prahalad. These include expressions like "Ati prem se boliye Shri Krishna Kanhaiyya Laal ki (Jay), Shree Ram Chandra Bhagwaan ki (Jay), Narsimha Bhagwaan ki, Bhakta Prahalad ki (Jay)," or simply the 'Jaykaar' for the deity on whom the Chawtaal is centred. Then there is a brief prelude-like instrumental section (lasting approximately 30 seconds to 1 minute) to ensure proper synchronisation between the percussion instruments and handclaps. Thereafter, as cued by the group leader (formally or informally designated), the

performance begins with an initial textual-melodic line, such as a 'Sthayi' or 'Mukhra' (refrain), which is called 'tek' (pronounced as 'take') in India and some other Indian diasporic countries (Manuel, 2009). In Mauritius, some elderly practitioners call it 'Uthaaw' (meaning 'to start' in Bhojpuri). The 'Uthaaw' is then followed by three or four couplets called 'pad-s', each consisting of three lines. The 'Uthaaw' and the 'pad-s' are all progressively sung in shifting rhythm while navigating through temporal modulations. After the 'pad-s', finally, the Chawtaal gets back to the starting melody of the 'Uthaaw' with varied lyrics that again go through rhythmic shifts and temporal modulations.

Hence, the lead singer(s) first sing the 'Uthaaw' in Taal Deepchandi (a rhythmic cycle of 14 beats) at 'madhya Laya' (medium tempo), and the chorus repeats the line exactly as it is, without any change or improvisation. Most singers play the Jhaal simultaneously, while those without the Jhaal clap their hands. After a few repetitions (usually two), there is a shift in Taal and tempo. The 'Uthaaw' is then rendered in Dadra Taal (a rhythmic cycle of 6 beats) at an increased tempo, from medium to fast, again first sung by the lead singer(s) and echoed by the chorus. The Taal and tempo then shift one more time, with the 'Uthaaw' sung in Keherwa Taal (a rhythmic cycle of 8 beats) at an even faster tempo, with repetitions. At this stage, a lively and exuberant atmosphere often takes hold, with vocalists singing at full volume and striking their Jhaal resoundingly, accompanied by spicy folk expressions, cheers, hand claps, and zestful gestures. The excitement then gradually winds down, typically concluding with the line - "Ho ah... ah ah ah... ah ah ah... ah ah ah" (notation- R... GSR... GSR... GSR). An example of this pattern in a Mauritian Holi Chawtaal performed by the Notre Dame Kali Mata Mandir Association, schematised in the Hindustani notation system, is illustrated in Tables 1, 2 and 3 as follows:

Table 1: 'Uthaaw' (Refrain) In Taal Deepchandi In Medium Tempo

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Dha	Dhin	r	Dha	Dha	Tin	r	Ta	Tin	r	Dha	Dha	Dhin	r
X			2				0			3			
										S	-	R	-
										Ma	-	na	-
M	-	-	M	-	G	-	M	P	-	M	-	G	-
Mo	-	-	ha	-	na	-	Kri	-	sh	na	-	mu	-
(GRS)	-	-	R	-	G	-	M	G	-	R	-	G	-
ra	-	-	ri	-	ho	-	li	-	-	hai	-	ma	-
S	-	-	S	-	R	-	R	-	-	-	-	-	-
cha	-	-	aa	-	aa	-	yi	-	-	-	-	-	-

Table 2: 'Uthaaw' In Dadra Taal In Fast Tempo

1	2	3	4	5	6
Dha	Dhin	Na	Dha	Tin	Na
X			0		
			S	R	-
			Ma	na	-
M	-	-	M	G	-
Mo	-	-	ha	na	-
M	P	-	M	G	-
Kri	-	sh	na	mu	-
(GRS)	-	-	R	G	-
ra	-	-	ri	ho	-
M	G	-	R	G	-
li	-	-	hai	ma	-
S	-	-	S	R	-
-	-	Cha	aa	aa	-
R	-	-			
yi	-	-			

Table 3: 'Uthaaw' In Keherwa Taal In Faster Tempo

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Dha	Ge	Na	Ti	Na	Ka	Dhi	Na
X				0			
				S	-	R	-
				Ma	-	na	-
M	-	-	-	M	-	G	-
Mo	-	-	-	Ha	-	na	-
M	-	P	-	M	-	G	-
Kri	-	-	Sh	Na	-	Mu	-
(GRS)	-	-	-	R	-	G	-
Ra	-	-	-	Ri	-	ho	-
M	-	G	-	R	-	G	-
Li	-	-	-	Hai	-	ma	-
S	-	-	-	S	-	R	-
Cha	-	-	-	Aa	-	aa	-
R	-	-	-				
Yi	-	-	-				

Table 4: First Line of the First 'Pad' in Dadra Taal in Fast Tempo

1	2	3	4	5	6
Dha	Dhin	Na	Dha	Tin	Na
X			0		
M	M	-	M	G	-
Ha	ra	-	Dha	ra	-
M	M	-	M	G	-
Gi	ra	-	dha	ra	-
M	M	-	M	G	-
Ma	da	-	Na	ma	-
M	P	-	P	P	-
No	-	-	ha	ra	-
P	-	-	M	G	-
Khe	-	-	la	ta	-
R	-	-	R	G	-
hai	-	-	cho	ri	-
S	-	-	S	R	-
Cho	-	-	o	o	-
R	-	-	M	M	-
ri	-	-	Bo	lo	-
M	M	-	M	G	-
Khe	-	-	La	ta	-
M	M	-	M	G	-
Hai	-	-	cho	ri	-
M	-	-	M	G	-
Cho	-	-	ri	la	-
M	P	-	P	-	-
Laa	-	-	ho	-	-
P	-	-	M	G	-
Khe	-	-	La	ta	-
R	-	-	R	G	-
Hai	-	-	Cho	ri	-
S	-	-	S	R	-
Cho	-	-	o	-	-
R	-	-	D	D	-
Ri	-	-	bo	lo	-
D	-	-	D	D	-
Khe	-	-	La	ta	-
D	-	-	N	D	-
Hai	-	-	Cho	ri	-
P	P	-	M	-	-
Cho	ri	-	La	-	-
M	P	-	D	M	-
Laa	-	-	ho	-	-
P	-	-	P	M	-
Khe	-	-	La	ta	-
GR	-	-	R	G	-
Hai	-	-	Cho	ri	-
S	-	-	S	R	-
Cho	-	-	o	-	-
R	-	-			
Ri	-	-			

After the 'Uthaaw', the performance continues with a transition to a new text line and melodic pattern, moving to the first line of the first 'pad', which is performed to a different melody in Dadra Taal at a fast speed, which is repeated a few times, including some Bhojpuri folk expressions such as "oh ho" and "oy hoy". Then, next, the same tune is sung but replacing the first half of the line with the second half of that line, adding filler words like "La Laa Ho", "Hare ho" or "Radhika" to make the metre of the couplet fit. This line also undergoes some recurring singing, and the notation form of this segment is illustrated in Table 4 as follows:

Then the second line of the first ‘pad,’ with the lyrics “*Abeer Gulaal Kumkum Kesar, kheench machi khoro khori,*”- is sung in exactly the same tune and pattern as the first line of the first ‘pad’, with repetitions as illustrated above. After the second line, the climactic line of the first ‘pad’ is sung on higher notes, initially in Dadra Taal at a fast pace, with some repetitions; then it is sung more energetically, in Keherwa Taal at an even faster pace, equally rendered multiple times, following the notation forms as illustrated in Tables 5 and 6 below:

Table 5: Climactic Line of the First ‘Pad’ In Dadra Taal In Fast Tempo

1	2	3	4	5	6
Dha	Dhin	Na	Dha	Tin	Na
X			0		
-	-	M	M	M	-
-	-	Mo	ra	mu	-
M	P	-	D	D	-
ku	ta	-	ma	ka	-
P	-	-	D	P	-
ra	-	-	ki	ta	-
M	G	-	R	-	-
ku	na	-	da	lo	-

Table 6: Climactic Line of the First ‘Pad’ In Keherwa Taal in Faster Tempo

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Dha	Ge	Na	Ti	Na	Ka	Dhi	Na
X				0			
M	M	M	M	P	D	D	P
Mo	ra	mu	ku	ta	ma	ka	ra
-	D	P	M	G	R	-	-
-	ki	ta	ku	na	da	lo	-

After the climactic line, the excitement subsides as the performers return to the initial melody of the ‘uthaaw’ (refrain) at a medium tempo in Taal Deepchandi, though with different lyrics. Subsequently, this line also undergoes the same pattern of rhythmic shifts from Taal Deepchandi to Dadra Taal, then to Keherwa Taal with gradual temporal increase from medium to fast and very fast, including repetitions, ultimately, concluding the first ‘pad’ with the staple finishing line - “Ho ah.... ah ah ah.... ah ah ah.... ah ah ah” (notation- R... GSR... GSR... GSR). The group then sings the remaining three to four ‘pad-s’ or verses in the same melodic and rhythmic patterns as of the first ‘pad’ illustrated above, subjected to similar modulations, accelerations, and intensifications, and every time coming back to the melody of the ‘Uthaaw’ (with different lyrics) again subject to gradual rhythmic and temporal shifts after every ‘pad’, indeed, showing the strophic form of the genre.

After singing the ‘Uthaaw’ in Keherwa Taal in a very fast tempo, there is a brief pause as performers rise on their knees and the group leader then performs the energetic ‘Jaykaar’ once more, fully supported by his team. Then, the singing of the ‘Dhamaal’ or ‘Dhamaar’ begins, which is distinguished by its vibrant rhythmic frameworks, cyclic temporal organisation, and equally performed in the same distinctive stentorian antiphonal style as the Chawtaal, with responsorial vocal textures and several repetitions of lines. The Mauritian Dhamaal features typical Bhojpuri folk vocal expressions and melisma, such as “Eh Ho”, “Jai ho” or “oh bolo”, woven into

the singing, accompanied by enthusiastic handclaps from singers who are not playing the Jhaal, adding to the performance's liveliness. In the repertoire of the Dhamaal, many melodic variations have been noted among the Mauritian Chawtaal groups. Most of these are performed in Dadra Taal in Drut Laya (at a fast tempo), often with shifts in speed between medium, fast, or very fast sections. The popular song sung by actor Amitabh Bachchan, picturised in the 2003 Hindustani film ‘Baagbaan’- ‘Hori khele Raghuvveera Awadh mein, Hori khele Raghuvveera’, is a vivid example of a traditional Mauritian ‘Dhamaal’ that is widely performed by several groups across the island. The performers of the Ganesha Castle Mandali of Valle Des Pretres and the Navyuvak Chawtaal Mandali of Riviere Du Rempart sing the same melody as in the ‘Baagbaan’ film song, for their Dhamaal with different lyrics, featuring “*Siya daale ho Ram gale Jaimaala*”.

The following Tables 7, 8 and 9 exhibit the notation form of a ‘Dhamaal’ performed by the Notre Dama Kali Maata Mandir Association, after their Chawtaal, to conclude their performance. The Shayi (refrain) is in Dadra Taal in *Drut laya* (refer to Table 7), while the Antra (stanza) is in Dadra Taal based on Garba style set to *Madhya laya* (at medium tempo) (Refer to Table 8).

Table 7: Dhamaal - Shayi (Refrain) In Dadra Taal At Fast Tempo

1	2	3	4	5	6
Dha	Dhin	Na	Dha	Tin	Na
X			0		
			S	R	-
			-	-	Aja
G	G	-	G	-	-
Lag	ja	-	Ga	-	-
G	P	-	M	G	-
Le	-	-	Nan	da	-
R	-	-	-	-	-
laa	-	-	Aa	-	la
S	R	S	N	-	S
Aa	yi	-	Aa	-	ja
R	-	-	G	R	-
Ho	-	-	Li	-	-
S	-	-	S	R	-
Hai	-	-	Te	re	-
G	G	-	G	-	-
Gaa	lon	-	Pe	-	-
G	P	-	M	-	-
Mal	doun	-	Gu	-	-
R	-	-	-	-	-
Laa	-	-	Aa	-	la
S	R	S	N	-	S
Aa	yi	-	Aa	-	ja
R	-	-	G	R	S
Ho	-	-	Li	-	-
S	-	-			
Hai	-	-			

Table 8: Dhamaal – Antra 1 In Dadra Taal Garba Style At Medium Tempo

Dhin	Ta	DhiTa	TiT	Ta	TiTa
X			0		
-	S-	GM	P	P	-
-	Mas	tama	hi	na	-
-	M-	PD	M	G	-
-	Pha	guna	Aa	yaa	-

-	S-	GM	P	P	-
-	Hum	saba	Ka	hai	-
-	M-	PD	M	G	-
-	Mana	hara	Saa	yaa	-

The Dhamaal has two Antra-s (Couplets), and both are sung to the same melody and notation as illustrated in Table 8. Table 9 shows the notation of the Sthayi (refrain) with different lyrics, sung after Antra 1.

Table 9: Dhamaal- Sthayi (Refrain) in Dadra Taal in Fast Tempo with Different Lyrics

Dha	Dhin	Na	Dha	Tin	Na
-	-	-	S	R	-
-	-	-	Baa	je	-
G	G	-	G	-	-
Dho	lak	-	Mri	-	-
G	P	-	M	G	-
Dan	ga	-	Da	fa	-
R	-	-	-	-	-
Taa	-	-	Aa	-	la
S	R	S	N	-	S
Aa	yi	-	Aa	ja	-
R	-	-	G	R	-
Ho	-	-	Li	-	-
S	-	-			
Hai	-	-			

4.4 Holi Chawtaal from Bruno Nettl’s Ethnomusicological Perspective.

4.4.1 Tradition as “Handing Down” and transforming

Nettl refuses to define tradition merely as a fixed artefact. Instead, he views it as a mechanism for “handing down” music while simultaneously adapting it to new contexts to ensure its survival (Nettl, 2005). For Nettl, a musical tradition is a living process that endures over time, regardless of whether it is valued or appreciated, and how much it changes. Nettl’s concept closely reflects the reality of the musical tradition of Holi Chawtaal in Mauritius, which has been passed down orally from generation to generation. As previously discussed, this tradition has experienced slow, steady, yet continuous changes in various forms. It has evolved from a traditional male-dominated performance featuring only Jhaal and Dholak to its current modified form, now featuring female vocalists, participation across different generations, with additional instruments, and stylistic alterations.

4.4.2 Constant Evolution and Innovation

Nettl argues that traditions derive their existence from a “continuous process of change and innovation (Nettl, 2005). They are continually shaped by new influences, which render them adaptable rather than fixed systems. This idea resonates with the evolution that has occurred and continues to unfold in Holi Chawtaal. Faced with new socio-cultural environments and the influences of modernisation, digitalisation, globalisation, and technological progress, Holi Chawtaal has undergone subtle yet meaningful evolution, especially under the guidance of music professionals. It now features additional accompanying instruments, and, as per interviews with practitioners such as Veeraj Kavi Soomary and Niranjana Jugroo, over the past few years, specific groups have gradually begun integrating elements such as Aakaar

Alaap and Tarana syllables from Indian classical music into their renditions. Certainly, these adaptations demonstrate responses to the changing demands of modern society.

4.4.3 Performance as Re-creation

Nettl highlights that, in many traditional settings, music depends on performances that differ each time. To him, since tradition is lived through performance, it is re-created with each iteration, inherently allowing for variation and evolution. From this perspective, as noted by the Chawtaal performer Ishwarduth Abbanah, since the Holi Chawtaal is a traditional folk musical form with fixed melodic, rhythmic, and lyrical patterns that are regularly rehearsed in a disciplined manner to maintain its integrity, it does not necessarily change from one performance to the next. This point does not fully align with Nettl’s view, as re-creations or modifications do occur in Holi Chawtaal, but slowly and gradually, in small increments, through discussions among custodians and group consensus, to prevent sudden, drastic changes that could be detrimental to the folk tradition.

4.4.4 Tradition in Context

Nettl, together with his broader ethnomusicological outlook, considers music a social process. He contends that tradition is constantly evolving, as it is connected to the changing needs, social structures, and cultural experiences of those who create it. The practice of Holi Chawtaal in Mauritius certainly echoes Nettl’s argument; although slowly and gradually, in small percentages, it has been evolving. It did not stay static. Besides, since the colonial time, the tradition has navigated through several social challenges while its devotional essence, its fundamental rhythmic and melodic structures, and its spiritual objectives remained intact; its performance contexts, its varied socio-cultural environments, and, to some extent, its musical rendering have adapted to serve the community’s evolving needs in a multicultural island society. The evolved performances featuring the Tanpura, Harmonium, other instruments, and integrated components of Indian classical vocal music by several groups are proof of the adaptation of Holi Chawtaal through social processes and the cultural experiences of its performers.

4.5 Musicological Analysis of Holi Chawtaal Through the Lens of Merriam’s Tripartite Model.

4.5.1 Level One: Conceptualisation (Ideas about Music)

Merriam’s model suggests that we can study music at three analytical levels, which can be seamlessly applied to the Mauritian Holi Chawtaal as well. From an ethnomusicological perspective, Holi Chawtaal naturally relates to the level one - Conceptualisation (Ideas about Music) of Merriam’s Tripartite model, as this music is conceptually bound to the Holi festival, the mythology of Prahalad and Holika, the spring season, and renewal. It is not an “everyday music”. While the lyrics are often devotional, the conceptual aesthetic is one of energy and ‘Veer Rasa’ (heroic sentiment), in which participants value power, volume, and stamina over delicate musical nuances. Additionally, the concept of Holi Chawtaal intrinsically favours group participation, that is, communal music-making rather than performer v/s passive audience, reinforcing intergenerational transmission, and a shared religious and cultural identity. Ultimately, Holi Chawtaal is conceptually

viewed as an act of cultural preservation. It is a sonic link to the ancestors and diasporic identity.

4.5.2 Level Two- Behaviour in Relation to Music- (Physical and Social Actions)

Level Two of Merriam's model addresses Behaviour, both physical and social acts, focusing on what people do physically and socially when making music. In Holi Chawtaal, the key behaviour is antiphonal performance, involving call-and-response singing between a lead singer and chorus, fostering a competitive, energetic social interaction. As the tempo increases, playing the Jhaal demands more physical effort, causing the performers' actions to become more impulsive: they rise to their knees, their clapping becomes more frantic, and their swaying becomes more intense. Despite the communal nature, a behavioural hierarchy exists. The lead singer, often the best vocalist within the group, leads the singing and dictates the tempo changes. There is also contextual behaviour. Often, the place and context of performances dictate and shape performers' behaviour. For instance, their singing in local social spaces during the Holi festival while sipping 'Bhang' differs from their performances on stage for broadcast media or competitions.

4.5.3 Level Three: Sound (The Sonic Object)

This level of the tripartite model inquires into the technical musical characteristics of the sound produced. In the context of the present study, this level focuses on the four features elaborated below:

4.5.3.1 Rhythmic Structure and Taal Organisation

Rooted in the Indian folk tradition, the Mauritian Holi Chawtaal is sung to simple, cyclic rhythmic patterns, with accented strokes on the Jhaal and Dholak, prioritising rhythmic energy, a repetitive pulse, kinetic momentum, and accentual emphasis over strict adherence to the rhythmic structures of Indian classical Music. This recurring pulse anchors the vocal ensemble. It is reinforced through accented strokes and metallic percussion such as Jhaal, Chimta, and Kartaal, which articulate metric stress points and intensify rhythmic clarity. The laya (tempo) starts in medium and gradually increases to fast and very fast, culminating in a frantic, high-speed crescendo contributing to a heightened sense of collective excitement aligned with the festive mood of Holi.

It is important to note that in Holi Chawtaal, the Taal-s are played on the Dholak in a distinctive folk style, coherent with folk music, and not similar to the mnemonic syllables and rhythmic strokes played on a Tabla. Findings reveal that although certain practitioners may loosely use the terms 'Dugun', 'Tigun' and 'Chawgun' to refer to the gradually increasing rhythmic tempo during their Holi Chawtaal performances, the minute technicality of 'layakari' of Indian classical music is not necessarily applied to them. Besides, as most interviewees stated, the beauty of folk Holi Chawtaal lies in its raw and rustic nature, characterised by its rough performance. Thus, Holi Chawtaal reflects a more flexible and functional approach to metre, prioritising communal synchronisation and embodied rhythm over formal metric rigidity.

An important debate that has long captured the attention of many Holi Chawtaal practitioners in Mauritius concerns why the genre is called 'Chawtaal'. Based on document analysis and interviews, the name likely refers to the use of 'Chaw' (meaning 'four' in Hindi) Taal-s (rhythmic cycles) (Manuel, 2009; Dawosing, 2020). Referring to the Caribbean Chawtaal, Manuel (2009), explains- "The genre's name itself reflects its intricacy... it derives from 'cār tāl,' that is, 'four tāls,' reflecting the four rhythmic modulations it can be seen as running through." However, the audiovisual content analysis in this study indicates that the Mauritian Holi Chawtaal predominantly features only three Taals: Deepchandi, Dadra, and Keherwa. Although some groups include the Garba-style Dadra Taal, a rhythmic cycle of six beats (with the Theka - Dhin Ta Dhita| TiT Ta TiTa), this is, however, seen merely as a variation of Dadra Taal rather than a separate Taal in itself, as argued by some musician interviewees. Interviews with custodian practitioners also reveal that even their predecessors consistently performed Holi Chawtaal using solely three Taals in Mauritius. Moreover, interviews with Mr Jogeshwar Yashpal Dixit and Mr Harynuth Chummun, who grew up listening to Holi Chawtaal and have served on adjudicating panels for Chawtaal competitions for many decades, confirm that they have witnessed only the three Taals mentioned above being used in the Mauritian Holi Chawtaal tradition.

Intriguingly, Manuel (2009) explains that the first Taal in the Caribbean Chawtaal is a 7-beat rhythmic cycle played at a moderate speed. While performers do not articulate the name of the metre, Manuel contends that it is theoretically closer to Rupak Taal; however, it feels more like an up-tempo Deepchandi Taal and lacks Rupak's distinctive 'Khali' (empty) beat. Therefore, based on this, it can be deduced that the missing fourth Taal in the Mauritian Holi Chawtaal is most likely the 7-beat rhythmic cycle, which may have been marginalised long time ago. Besides, Manuel (2009) points out that the complexity of the Chawtaal structure places it beyond the scope of a typical strophic Bhajan or Kirtan, whether in India or in the diaspora. According to him, Chawtaal needs at least one knowledgeable enthusiast in each group, along with a few others who can follow his cues to render the genre judiciously. The Dholak player must also be skilled enough to indicate rhythmic changes, since a proficient Dholak player can significantly enhance the performance by signalling modulations and energising the music through his spirited playing.

4.5.3.2 Vocal Form and Responsorial Texture

The vocal organisation in Holi Chawtaal is predominantly responsorial (call-and-response) in structure, with interplay between one or more lead singers and the chorus, with repetition as a key feature. Indeed, the repetitive rhythmic cycles, refrains, and communal participation facilitate collective entrainment, enabling participants to synchronise their voices, movements, and gestures, which also constitute a mnemonic device that ensures transmission across generations. The lead vocalist sets the song's pitch and introduces the lyrics and melodic contour, while the chorus responds with repeated refrains. In this call-and-response format, the chorus plays a significant role, adding vocal power and sonic reinforcement to the rendition. This responsorial singing format also creates a cyclic vocal form

that mirrors the rhythmic repetition established by the percussionists.

Since Chawtaal is “rowdy and vigorous in character” (Manuel, 2009), the vocal timbre prioritises projection over refinement- strong, high-pitched, loud, usually with chest-voice projection, at times nasal to cut through the sound of the percussion. However, even without a drone, probably through extensive practice, the pitch somehow settles on a tonal nucleus that facilitates group participation. Certainly, given the strong basis in Bhojpuri folk music, the flavour of folklore is prominent throughout the singing, from the language, pronunciation, the voice production and throw, to the intermittent small candid Bhojpuri folk expressions in between. The ornamentation is minimal with occasional gamak (oscillations), meend (glides) and murki (quick melodic runs), and the melodic movement tends to emphasise stepwise motion and rhythmic articulation rather than melodic elaboration. Such features indicate that the primary musical focus lies in rhythmic drive and textual delivery, reinforcing inclusion and communal participation rather than virtuosity and musical refinement. The melodies in this tradition are typically catchy and lively, capturing the festive spirit of the occasion. However, in Mauritius, Holi Chawtaal shows limited melodic variation, with most pieces being variations of just two or three common tunes that are very similar.

4.5.3.3 Instrumentation and Ensemble Interaction

The instrumental ensemble in Mauritian Holi Chawtaal is relatively small yet rhythmically dense. The Dholak functions as the principal time-keeping instrument, producing a thunderous sound, a combination of bass and treble tones that articulate the underlying pulse. In Chawtaal, the Dholak is played with greater force and carefreeness than in the graceful style of the Tabla when accompanying performances. Indeed, at times, it is literally struck by the player. Its rhythmic patterns are often repetitive but dynamically varied, responding to changes in vocal intensity and tempo. The metallic percussion instruments, such as Jhaal, Chimta, Manjeera and Kartaal, serve a complementary role by marking strong beats and reinforcing metric accents and rhythmic cohesion. The interaction between vocal rhythm and instrumental accompaniment produces an interlocking rhythmic texture, in which voice and percussion are mutually reinforcing rather than hierarchically structured. Now, physical movements, such as clapping, swaying, or kneeling, often accompany performance, further embedding rhythm in the participants’ bodily experience. Besides, observed local adaptations in instrumentation, such as the use of Tanpura and Harmonium, have helped stabilise ‘sur’ and sustain pitch in Holi Chawtaal singing. This indicates that Holi Chawtaal in Mauritius is gradually evolving into a space with more musically knowledgeable performers and audiences, which is particularly significant for stage and broadcast performances, where elevated musical quality is appreciated, and for competition settings, where musical refinement impacts scoring.

4.5.3.4 Text (lyrics) and Music Relationship

Regarding language, Holi Chawtaal in Mauritius is typically performed in Braj Bhasha or in a Braj close to *Khadi Boli* Hindi, also often blending Bhojpuri words and accents such

as ‘*Siri Ram*’ for Shree Ram, ‘*Biraj*’ for Braj, ‘*Dholokwa*’ for Dholak, ‘*batiya*’ for baat, ‘*hathwa*’ for haanth, ‘*bahiniyan*’ for behen, and ‘*phagun mahinwa*’ for phalgun mahina, among others.

As noted earlier, the lyrical themes of the Mauritian Holi Chawtaal revolve around the bhakti (devotion) to Lord Krishna, Lord Ram, and Lord Narsimha, while a few songs also focus on Lord Shiva. Remarkably, the two most popular Chawtaal-s, sung by most Mauritian groups, feature the lyrics “*Shree Ram liye Avataar Surana Harshaayi*” and “*Holi khelata Janaka Dulaari, haathe Pichkaari*”. Other well-known ones include – “*Raghunandan Awadh Bihaari, Kesar Rang Maari*”, “*Sakhi Phaguna Maas janaaye, Mohan Nahin aaye*”, “*Bansi Baaji Chahoun Disi ori kahe Radha gori*”, “*More Kanha bidesa sidhaare, keise khele Holi*” and “*Shiv Shankara Deendayaal mahavardaani*”. A rare one in Mauritian Bhojpuri with a totally different melody sung by the Sanatan Hindu Yuva Mandal of Trois Boutique Triolet village is – “*Hiranyakasipu apan behna Holika ke godiya mein beithaiylan leke Prahalad ke*”

Although Bhojpuri was historically a primary language of Indian indentured labourers and their descendants, its use has admittedly declined over time due to sociolinguistic changes and the growing prevalence of Creole in daily life (Hookoomsigh, 2007; Tupsy, 2021; Bhautoo, 2025). However, findings show that the Holi Chawtaal remains one of the most powerful living repositories, passing on the lexicon, vocabulary, and grammar of Indian languages through communal singing practices. Findings from the audiovisual content analysis of the songs indicate that the lyrics of Holi Chawtaal appear to have remained largely linguistically unaffected by the hybridisation and creolisation of Bhojpuri in Mauritius. The repertoires still carefully preserve the major ancient scripts, with only mild lyrical changes made by the practising Holi Chawtaal *mandali-s*. Not a single creolised Bhojpuri word appears in the lyrics of the studied performances. Indeed, most Holi Chawtaal singers in Mauritius memorise their lyrics through frequent practice and keep them in carefully handwritten notebooks compiled over decades. Thus, it is reasonable to say that although the everyday use of Indian ancestral languages has declined in Mauritius, their cultural legacy persists strongly in folk music, religious practices, and identity formation.

Furthermore, the repetition of the lyrics plays a significant role in Holi Chawtaal as it musically turns the lyrical content into a ritual expression, in which meaning is strengthened through collective singing rather than through narrative development. Indeed, the relationship between the text (lyrical content) and the music in Mauritian Holi Chawtaal performances is predominantly syllabic, with each syllable or linguistic stress closely aligned with the rhythmic pulse. Linguistic stress often coincides with rhythmic accents, thereby enhancing textual clarity and collective memorisation. Thus, repetition of key phrases and refrains serves both musical and semantic functions, reinforcing devotional content and fostering audience participation.

Regarding the poetic structure of the genre, for instance, the initial and recurring ‘*Uthaaw*’ (refrain) punctuates a single-line verse composed of two small grammatical phrases separated by a comma as follows:

“मन मोहन कृष्ण मुरारी, होली है मचाई” - “*Mana Mohana Krishna Muraari, Holi hai machaayi*” (1 1 2 1 1 2 1 1 2 2 [14], 2 2 2 1 2 2 [11]:14 + 11 = 25 matra-s (beats)).

The *pad-s* are essentially three-line poems, often with varied poetic matra-s in each, such as

“हर धर गिरधर मदन मनोहर, खेलत है चोरी चोरी” - “*Hara dhara Geerdhara Madana Manohar, khelata hai chori chori*” (1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 2 1 1 [16], 2 1 1 2 2 2 2 2 [14]:16 + 14 = 30 matra-s)

“अबीर गुलाल कुमकुम केसर, खींच मची खोरी खोरी” - “*Abeer gulaal kumkum kesar, khinch machi khori khori*” (1 2 1 1 2 1 1 1 1 2 1 [16], 2 1 1 2 2 2 2 2 [14]: 16 + 14 = 30 matra-s)

Climactic line of the pad – “मोर मुकुट मकरा किट कुण्डल” - “*Mora Mukuta Makaraa kita Kundala*” (2 1 1 1 1 1 1 2 1 1 1 1 1 = 16 matra-s)

Therefore, as shown above, the metrical pattern of the poetic structure does allow some flexibility. However, the lines need to be consistent enough to align with the traditional fixed melodies and rhythmic modulations.

Consequently, it may be affirmed that through the three complementary levels of analysis - conceptualisation, behaviour, and sound, Merriam’s tripartite analytical framework demonstrates substantial applicability in elucidating the multifaceted dimensions of the Mauritian Holi Chawtaal that moves beyond purely formal musical analysis to encompass social practice and cultural meaning, thus capturing the full complexity of this cultural phenomenon.

5. Conclusion

This research further consolidates existing knowledge and offers an organised, explorative and descriptive musical analysis of Holi Chawtaal in Mauritius, revealing significant connections between music, ritual, and community. It deepens understanding of Holi music as a sonic ritual act, a living musical tradition and a tool for cultural preservation, shaping Indo-Mauritian Culture in which religion plays an important role. Through ethnographic and musicological analysis, the study demonstrates that the legacy of Holi Chawtaal in Mauritius is more than the celebratory sound of folk Holi music; rather, it is a well-structured rhythmic vocal system that exhibits coherent principles of cyclic rhythms, temporal modulations, responsorial singing, melodic repetitions, set syllabic texts and integrated percussion-vocal interaction, all ingrained within the Indo-Mauritian communal ritual practice. This highlights that the musical structure of Holi Chawtaal is intentional, organised and functional, fostering inclusivity and social cohesion, reinforcing community memory and facilitating intergenerational connections as elders pass down these festive songs to younger generations for cultural continuity. The study also reveals that, while retaining the core melodic and rhythmic structures and the typical folk features of the inherited North Indian folk traditions, Holi Chawtaal has simultaneously dynamically adapted to the changing socio-cultural realities of Mauritius over time, thereby sustaining its relevance across generations. The findings reinforce the importance of documenting and supporting such traditions to ensure their continued vitality within Mauritius’s multicultural landscape.

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