



MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

ADDRESS OF

***Dr. the Honourable Tim Gopeesingh,
Minister of Education***

at

***THE LAUNCH OF THE
2012 CHUTNEY SOCA MONARCH***

Wednesday January 4, 2012 AT 7.00 P.M.

HYATT REGENCY TRINIDAD

Salutations:

- Minister of Arts and Multiculturalism, the Honourable Winston Peters
- CEO of Southex Event Management Company, Mr. George Singh
- Distinguished Artistes and Performers
- Specially Invited Guests
- Members of the Media
- Ladies and Gentlemen

A very pleasant good evening to one and all and let me say what a pleasure it is for me to be here tonight. As I stand here at the launch of this very significant and premier event in our country's Carnival culture, I recall the words of former United Nations Secretary General, Kofi Annan, who once said that, and I quote: "People of different religions and cultures live side by side in almost every part of the world, and most of us have overlapping identities which unite us with very different groups. We can love what we are, without hating what – and who – we are not. We can thrive in our own tradition, even as we learn from others, and come to respect their teachings."

You see, I find these words very applicable to this event tonight, considering the very great history from which it is derived, and the very bright future which it promises. As we've all heard from previous speakers, this annual competition was first held in 1996, and in the past 15 years of its existence, it has grown into a veritable staple of Trinidad and Tobago's internationally acclaimed Carnival culture, to the point where today, it is

considered to be the largest Indo-Caribbean event in the world, where tens of thousands of live spectators gather every year to take in what has become a unique, innovative demonstration of showmanship. But its history goes way beyond this.

The Soca Chutney Monarch competition evolved as the promoter and in many ways, guardian of a very significant aspect of our country's social and cultural history, and indeed, that of the Caribbean region, which has its roots in the merging of the traditional music and folk culture of our East Indian immigrant ancestors with that of the diverse Creole culture they met upon their arrival to this land, so many years ago, which evolved into an original art form that signified, in a very palpable way, the consolidation of the East Indian influence on our country's culture and socio-political foundation.

Some of us here tonight, including me may be EXPERIENCED enough—notice I did not say OLD—to remember some of these very roots over the years. I recall as a little child growing up dancing to the very infectious rhythms of the dholak and dhantals when bands of singers would perform traditional Hindi songs at weddings. I remember too, in the 1970s, when these rhythms were merged with lyrics written in our local English dialect, by that musical genius, the late, great, Sundar Popo, the still acclaimed King of Chutney Soca.

What a truly great advancement and national breakthrough it was in terms of our local music industry and we did not know then, but it turned out to be a very significant

turning point in our socio-cultural relations as a people, which went a long way in promoting racial and cultural unity in Trinidad and Tobago.

But it is said that for every King, there is a Queen, and the term Chutney Soca itself was coined by the great Drupatee Ramgoonai, whose national hit “Mr Bisessar/Roll up the Tassa” also went a very long way in the 1980s in promoting the nationalization of the Chutney art form. She stands out too as a role model and trail blazer in our country’s struggle for gender equality, having set the ball rolling for Indo-Trinidadian women to emerge as artistes in their own right with their own unique voice and eventually, rightfully claiming their places as equals in this cultural art form.

In the 1990s, with the proliferation and crossover success of the art form, Mr. George Singh decided to ensure that it had its own special place in our Carnival culture by creating a special competition for it, and today, I wish to say to him that his foresight then was tremendous and he should take a bow for his stellar contribution to the development of our nation’s culture and our social unity.

As I said earlier, today, with such a rich history, comes a great promise for the future development of the Chutney Soca art form, with the theme of this year’s national competition — ONE — is aimed at embracing the Caribbean spirit, Caribbean music and Caribbean people. This is a truly relevant, admirable and much needed initiative, especially at a time when our region is being affected by international forces of globalization, which mandates us to band together as a people socially and

economically for our ultimate survival. In many ways, our Government has been moving towards implementing policies and projects with a wider Caribbean appeal, and therefore, the extension of this completion to our Caribbean neighbours is not only in keeping with the Government's general aims, but also, promoting our concept and dictum of Caribbean unity.

Like many patrons and fans of Chutney Soca, I must say I also welcome the implementation of a new rule which demands 100 per cent originality in melodies and lyrics in order to be allowed to compete this year, and most importantly, the move by the organisers to ensure that as a rule, the topics of the songs are POSITIVE.

It is a well known fact that one of the chief criticisms of the Chutney Soca art form in recent years is that it has degenerated into what is called 'rum songs' and I want to make it clear tonight that I share that criticism. Art and creativity, I am well aware, is often subject to individualistic taste and must hardly be regulated to conform to societal norms if they are to truly have their intended impact, but I must say that in this case, the organizers have every right and responsibility to regulate the competition's songs to fit the realm of good taste and true creativity.

I remember when what is now known as Chutney Soca used to be valid social commentaries and/or picturesque social reflections of life and culture in the Indo-Trinidadian community, captured by timeless classics such as Sundar Popo's Nani and Naai, Drupatee Ramgoonai's "Roll up the Tassa," Rikki Jai's Sumintra and of late,

Rasika Dindial's Maticoor Night. Equally, we long for the days when the art form reflected the height of musical greatness that was demonstrated in Anand Yankeran's Nanda Baba and the wonderful dance of patriotism in songs like Guyana's Terry Gadraj's Bangalay Baboo.

The time has come for us to go back to such lyrics, albeit developed to suit the musical innovations and progress of today, if we are to preserve Chutney Soca as a valid art form which made a significant and positive contribution to our societal and cultural development.

As Minister of Education, I wish to make an appeal to the promoters of this competition here tonight to consider very seriously the implementation of a Chutney Soca Monarch Schools competition, similar to what exists in the Soca Monarch completion right now, by next year, if possible. I believe that, like all other cultural competitions, this would go a long way in not just promoting the development of our students outside the academic arena, but also, contributing to our historical and cultural preservation and development as a people. But I must say that as Minister of Education, I will only support this if we see a mandate of lyrics which engender positive development of our nation's youth and its people.

After all, it is said that a culture is the widening of the mind and of the spirit and it is made – or destroyed – by its articulate and intelligent voices, for, as the sum of all the forms of art, of love, and of thought, it has, over the course of centuries, the great power

of enabling mankind to be less enslaved. Culture indubitably still plays that vital role today in our society and region —indeed; it is more significant than ever as we move into a new era defined by a global people whose identity and individuality must be preserved for ultimate human and national survival.

And so, as I close, let me once again congratulate the promoters and artistes who have, over the years, made this wonderful art form and competition a great one in our country, region and globe, and I trust that we will all continue to join together to ensure that we always promote Chutney Soca, and indeed, all our indigenous art forms, to fulfill our greatest potential as a people. Let me wish all the competitors the best of luck in the 2012 Chutney Soca Monarch and I indeed look forward to the best show produced thus far. Thank you and May God bless us all. Thank you.

Best Regards