



Thinking Future



# Cutting Paths for Tassa - NGC Trinidad and Tobago Sweet Tassa to Launch Manual for Tassa Drumming





**Dr. Christopher Ballengee:** Ethnomusicologist and Project Consultant

**Miss Lenora Kumar:** Lead Cutter in the NGC Trinidad & Tobago Sweet Tassa All-Female Band

**Mr. Ustad Lenny Kumar:** Tassa Drummer Extraordinaire, Leader and Manager of NGC Trinidad & Tobago Sweet Tassa and Director of the NGC Trinidad & Tobago Sweet Tassa Academy

**Mrs. Lennita Kumar-Mathura:** Leader of the NGC Trinidad & Tobago Sweet Tassa All-Female Band, and Assistant Manager of NGC Trinidad & Tobago Sweet Tassa.



With its distinctive timbre and almost palpable beats, tassa music is an iconic feature of weddings and festive occasions in Trinidad and Tobago.

This percussive genre, descended from East Indian musical tradition, is today an integral part of our country's cultural identity.

Although it is a staple form of entertainment with a healthy number of groups currently practising and innovating the artform, there needs to be a deliberate effort to ensure tassa drumming endures into the future. This is because students of tassa are generally taught informally by practical demonstration or learn to play by ear. This manner of instruction requires a seasoned player to directly share his or her knowledge – at present, tassa drumming cannot be studied independently from a textbook as can be done with other instruments.

Moreover, since the pieces of tassa music or 'hands' are passed along and kept alive through oral instruction, there is a risk that many traditional compositions could get lost if students of the artform do not practise and pass them along in turn. Concerned by this risk of cultural loss, one band has taken on the challenge of formalising tassa instruction. The NGC Trinidad and Tobago Sweet Tassa band – already founders of a successful tassa drumming training academy - is preparing to launch a first-of-its-kind method book to teach the art of tassa drumming.

#### The Sweet Tassa story

As an ardent supporter and patron of the arts and culture, The National Gas Company of Trinidad and Tobago



#### DRUMMING TECHNIQUES DEMONSTRATED IN THE MANUAL

Limited (NGC) has been investing in building the tassa industry for several years.

NGC began sponsoring the Sweet Tassa group based in Mt. Stewart Village, Princes Town in 2014. The Sweet Tassa brand was born in 2002 when Mr. Lenny Kumar decided to branch out from his father's tassa group to form his own. Two years later, when his daughters and other girls in the area demonstrated an interest in playing tassa, he formed an all-female section in his band - the first all-female tassa group in the country. Today, the band - which also has an all-male ensemble and a junior band - has grown into a successful business which is taking tassa in unprecedented directions.

The band's list of accolades includes awards from local and international institutions. In 2010 the all-male band won 12 gold medals and in 2016, the all-female band walked away with 12 silver medals after participating in the prestigious World Championships of the Performing Arts (WCOPA) competition in the USA. Members

from different sections of the band also had opportunities to perform at events in the Caribbean, USA, India and the UK. In 2019, founder Lenny Kumar himself was invited to tour Europe during production of a documentary on tassa drumming by Dr. Christopher Ballengee, and shared his music with audiences in Sweden, Denmark, Poland, Italy and Germany.

One of the innovations that the band introduced with NGC's support is a Tassa Academy, to teach the artform to others. Such was the demand that 200 students enrolled in the inaugural programme in 2017. The group has since gone on to take their classes online and show no signs of stopping.

Mrs. Lennita Kumar-Mathura, Assistant Manager of the band, spoke glowingly of the group's progress. "Thus far it has been quite a memorable journey," she said. "Every year we try to do bigger and better things that no other tassa band could. We care about safeguarding our artform and the more people know about us and our teachings, the better."



It is in that spirit that the band decided to undertake a ground-breaking project to change the rules of tassa instruction and secure the future of the artform.

### The Beginner's Guide to Tassa Drumming

Manager of the NGC Trinidad and Tobago Sweet Tassa group, Mr. Lenny Kumar, had a vision to create an instructional guide with notated music for beginner-level tutoring and/or independent learning of tassa drumming. Such a resource would be a first for the industry, and an important medium for preserving and sharing traditional pieces of music.

Mr. Kumar found support for this vision in an American academic Dr. Christopher Ballengee, an ethnomusicologist and associate professor of music at Anne Arundel Community College in Maryland, USA. Dr. Ballengee had nurtured a keen interest in Trinidad and Tobago music since 2003, and spent time in the country researching tassa in 2007. He was introduced to Mr. Kumar in 2009 and both have collaborated on several academic projects since then.

Dr. Ballengee's scholarly work has centered on the confluence of Indian and Caribbean creative expression arising from the experience of colonial indentureship. He has been instrumental in raising the profile of tassa music in international circles, through his dissertations and recently, his role in the production of a feature-length documentary film *Sweet Tassa: Music of the Indian Caribbean Diaspora* (2019). This film details the history, repertoire and social significance of tassa while profiling the life and work of Lenny Kumar and his family.

In the course of their collaboration, Dr. Ballengee encouraged Mr. Kumar in his desire to produce an



MR. LENNY KUMAR

instructional tassa manual. In 2019, Mr. Kumar finally completed a draft of this book, to which Dr. Ballengee contributed sections on the historical and cultural significance of tassa. He also edited the musical notation.

By way of preview, the book is divided into chapters that include:

- An overview of the origins of tassa
- The fundamentals of musical notation
- An overview of the instruments - tassa, bass and jhal
- Practice sheets for different tassa 'hands'

As sponsor of the band, NGC was proud to move this book into production, and is working together with The University of the West Indies (UWI) on accreditation of the final publication. Once completed,

the manual will not only be a resource for local tassa enthusiasts but can be a springboard for aspiring tassa stars around the world. Notably, no such publication currently exists for this instrument. The realisation of this project will therefore be a momentous achievement, and the book itself a seminal work for building scholarship around the artform.

Mr. Kumar is thrilled to see this project so close to completion, and shared his inspiration for the book: "As a professional drummer with over 50 years of experience, continuously mastering my skills, drumming technique, and knowledge of drumming, I am proud to share what I've learnt about this art form which my forefathers brought to Trinidad and Tobago from India. My goal is to help keep it alive for future generations."

He added: "My hope is that with the support of our sponsor NGC, this publication will enable tassa drummers to elevate themselves musically and become pioneers and composers for this genre of music. I encourage drummers to keep practising and enjoy the process, and greatness will follow."

For its part, NGC is proud to stand with this group as it continues to cut paths for the industry and for Trinbagonian culture. The Company is also exceedingly proud of the group's work to bring women to the forefront of this musical genre, and its efforts to sustain tassa music as an emblem of East Indian heritage in Trinidad and Tobago.

Tassa fans and students of the artform can look out for the launch of this manual within the coming months. For more information and to get in touch with the NGC Trinidad and Tobago Sweet Tassa group, visit [www.sweettassaedu.com](http://www.sweettassaedu.com). ■

