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# CHAPTER 7

## **Classical Indian Music**

*Eugene Dairianathan*



The South Indian classical (Carnatic) tradition emerged gradually as an influence on musical practice in Singapore. For one, the classical tradition seemed to have been prevalent in temple grounds and in rituals throughout the 19th century. For another, classical traditions and, by implication, music had appeared in the early films of the 20th century in the form of folk and Hindu mythology. There is therefore much evidence to suggest that the South Indian classical tradition was practised in Singapore as early as the 19th century.<sup>1</sup>

By 1821, there were 132 Indians in Singapore – excluding those who were part of the garrison and camp-followers, which would have totalled 4,727 in the colony. The Sri Mariamman Temple was reportedly built by Indian convicts in 1828 (Sandhu 2006: 774–5). By the early 20th century, around the years 1925 and 1926, oral interviewees relate the presence of Indian dances, dramas and folk performing arts that were popular in Selegie Road and were performed free for the public. The actors and directors came all the way from India. The length of their performances was dependent upon their popularity, reflected by the size of the crowd: thus, the bigger the crowd, the more performances were staged.

Dances such as *Silambu*, *Karan* and *Kalai Nigalchi*, a combination of themed dramatic art and gestures, were the favourites (Subbiah Bullikutte Naidu; Chandrakasan Dharmalingam).<sup>2</sup> *Silambu* is the name of the age-old Indian (Tamil) art of self-defence, whereby a staff (a long wooden pole) is used to defend or attack an opponent. Stories such as the *Ramayana* and the Tamil epics were also acted (Om kara 1983). When the chariot was carried to and from the temple during the Thaipusam festival, it would be accompanied by a *Silambu* dance, sometimes with the horse and tiger dance, then a popular folk art among Tamils. Visitors from as far as Johor Bahru – and even Kuantan – would travel to Selegie Road just to watch these performances. However, at one point, the government banned these public performances as they were considered too rowdy (Subbiah Bullikutte Naidu; Chandrakasan Dharmalingam).

Evidence shows that drama troupes came by a ship, the *Rajullah*, in the 1930s and docked at the Naval Base. Historical and epic dramas were staged at Alexandra Hall while *Kathakali* drama was staged at Sembawang. Publicity for the dramas was organised by posters on horse coaches, big notices and newspaper advertisements, while Tanjong Pagar, Potong Pasir and Serangoon Road were the main sites for such publicity (Purushothaman Thambyah). Accounts indicated strength of audience support for shows and there is arguably the first reference to ‘band music’ for dramatic purposes.

Practitioners recall being part of a musical ensemble referred to as the Music and Dramatic Society (SIMP 2004).<sup>3</sup> What they identified as band music was played by members of a music party; a musical ensemble within a dramatic troupe which was to become an independent group. Gregory Booth's study of the Madras Corporation Band identifies the wind band ensemble in a 1911 recording as the Tanjore Band, which had become by the early 20th century something of a status symbol. Wind bands became a new processional requirement as the public of central Tamil Nadu gradually learned to combine music ensembles and their concomitant layers of cultural meaning. This extended to public and private, religious and secular processions (Booth, 1996/97: 67–68).

Names of musical ensembles, or ‘music parties’ in the 1950s and 1960s, were identified together with notable musicians, M. P. Gurusamy and Pandit Ramalingam, who were themselves allied with the South Indian classical and semi-classical tradition.<sup>4</sup> One explanation offered for the use of the term *semi-classical* referred to the degree of conformity to the *raga*, or mode, of the song/music. In South Indian classical music, some modes had very specific contexts, times and occasions. Music or songs that deviated from this convention could be found in semi-classical or light classical settings. Songs from South Indian films were such examples (Radha Vijayan 2005).



An Indian traditional music group performing at the finals of the Music Festival at Victoria Theatre in 1966. Yusuf Ishak collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Christina Edmund relates how her father, Edmund Appau, a Hindu Tamil by birth and later convert to Catholicism upon marriage, remembered visiting temples with his father to watch Indian classical music in his growing years. The New World Park was also the site where various Indian dramatic productions were performed. The Singapore Indian Artistes Association, for instance, staged Tamil plays from the late 1940s to the 1960s. In 1948, together with the late Mr. V. Sinniah, a tabla player, Edmund Appau founded arguably the first Indian musical group in Singapore, known as the New Indian Amateur Orchestra.<sup>5</sup> They were known essentially as an Indian classical ensemble, specifically of the Carnatic tradition.

Reference to band music is found in its supporting role in drama, particularly Indian classical derivation (Purushothaman Thambyah).<sup>6</sup> S. Sivam and members of SIMP recall how after the Second World War:

‘...even ladies washing clothes or washing rice would stop to listen to Thiagaraja Bhagavathar singing ... and songs by T. R. Mahalingam, who were from the Carnatic tradition and semi-classical as well.’<sup>7</sup> Repertoire reportedly consisted of cinema songs ... early MGR films, films about gods and goddesses with songs by Thiagaraja, A. Kittapa and K. Ramasamy...’ (SIMP 2004)

Narratives in Indian mythology formed a common bond between music of South Indian classical and semi-classical tradition, and even early films from India screened in Singapore. According to a local consumer and observer of Tamil cinema, Balakrishnan Veerapan (2003):



A demonstration of Indian classical music during a talk by the Indian Fine Arts Society in 1995. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

'Mythological movies [such as *Thiruvilaiyaadal*, *Saraswathi Sabadam*, *Kanthan Karunai* and *Aathi Parashakthi*] were great favourites here, running to packed houses. They had [Indian] classical music and it educated many of us on our religious background. At that time, they used to play the gramophone with the label His Master's Voice ... people from the elite class learned classical music and Bharatha Natyam from Bhaskar's Academy of Dance and Singapore Indian Fine Arts; especially the Ceylonese Tamils and the Brahmin Tamils.<sup>8</sup> The Tamils who were from the middle class went to small-time teachers who taught dance for film and music.'<sup>9</sup>

In addition, Hindu temples played a big part in promoting music and dance then and even now. There were performances of Carnatic vocal and instrumental music during the first half of the evening and all dances in the second half. It is interesting to note that the dancers also performed popular dance numbers from the films, either as solo, duets or groups (Balakrishnan Veerapan 2003).

Mr. Sarangapani's efforts had immediate ramifications culturally and musically. In 1953, the very first Tamil Festival was performed at the Happy World Stadium at Jalan Besar, catering to the many Indians living in that area. The Tamil Festival is also known as the 'Pongal Festival', or the 'Harvest Festival' in English. It was a celebration not only for the Tamil community, but also for all Indians who spoke the Tamil language (S. Varathan).<sup>10</sup> Dr. Seetha Lakshmi (2002) notes that: '...after 1952 (with the establishment of the Tamils Representative Council), Mr. Sarangapani initiated the Thamizhar Thirunal, which was celebrated as the Harvest Festival (*pongal*) in India. This was very popular and about 350 participants took part in a talentime organised by Mr. Sarangapani.'



Students at the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society learning how to play classical Indian instruments in 1993. MITA collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

## South Indian Classical Traditions

The ancient penitential rites, Thaipusam and Pookkulittal ('vow to walk on fire') are sustained by certain types of music. Thaipusam has been observed in Singapore for well over 180 years. Hindu devotees do penance by carrying *kavadi* (metal structures with spikes embedded in the devotee's flesh) over an extended distance. During this journey of penance, the accompanying party performs an improvised call-and-response melody that is primarily rhythmic, facilitating a trance-like dance. The *Singapore Chronicle* in the 19th century bore witness to some of these activities, with particular concern expressed at the fire-walking ceremony ('Letter to the Editor'),<sup>11</sup> while an incident during Thaipusam in 1896 became the subject of concern, with police intervention and enforcement at a religious festival (*The Singapore Free Press*).<sup>12</sup>

Indian classical music is practised in Singapore largely because of the efforts of private schools, organisations such as temples and dedicated individuals. Interviews with promoters and practitioners in Singapore engender the perception of a strong dependence on musical, educational and professional resources in India, with the exception, perhaps, of groups involved in experimental projects. Communication with cultural resources in the various cities and centres in India translate into a constant stream of Indian artists and teachers visiting Singapore to enhance learning and appreciation of Indian classical music.

Much of the classical and folk traditions have been dealt with in Joseph E. E. Peters' (1995) Singapore chapter on *Evolving Music Traditions of ASEAN* as well as a number of Internet websites in relation to the societies mentioned above. There have been some well-known sources for the teaching and learning of Indian classical music in Singapore. These are some notable examples:



Young students from the Anand Centre of Fine Arts performing during the Kirtan Darbar at Khalsa Dharmak Sabha Temple in 1990. The Kirtan Darbar is a gathering where Sikhs come together to perform devotional songs and North Indian classical music. Anand Centre of Fine Arts collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

1. Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society ([www.sifas.org](http://www.sifas.org))
2. Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society ([www.nas.org.sg](http://www.nas.org.sg))
3. Temple of Fine Arts ([www.templeoffinearts.org/sg/](http://www.templeoffinearts.org/sg/))
4. Apsaras Arts ([www.apsarasarts.com](http://www.apsarasarts.com))

Although South (Carnatic) and North (Hindustani) form the main divisions of musical traditions in Singapore, Carnatic traditions predominate, given that demographically there are more Tamils than Indians of other communities. Nevertheless, the *sitar* and *tabla* have become popularised through attempts to mix styles, as well as through recent trends towards creating more original forms of Indian music in Singapore.

## Dance-Drama

The increase in dance-drama productions and the development of an Indian Orchestra are part of the same trend. In its traditional context, Indian classical music would have been performed as part of religious, social or cultural events. There is little to deny the fact that in South Indian classical performances, there is a symbiotic relationship between dance and music, which is most evident in the highly structured forms like *bharatanatyam*, *katakali*, *odissi* and *katak*. Learning and performing these forms are the staple means of a livelihood for private Indian music schools in Singapore.

There have also been attempts to fuse the skills and efforts of dancers, choreographers, musicians, composers, set designers, mural painters, lighting designers and scriptwriters since the early 1990s. Instrumentation for musical accompaniment tends

to be orchestral and in a way influenced by theatre musicals. While it is not unusual to find pre-recorded music played as accompaniment to dance-dramas – with the problem of rehearsing episodes with choreography of a detailed nature – dance-drama, with live accompaniment, places different demands on dancers and choreographers, and is presently a viable option.

In 1993, the *Ramayana* was staged by Kala Mandir (or what is known as the Temple of Fine Arts today) with an elaborate setting lasting about four hours and using a montage of musical and dance ideas from Bali, Thailand and Sarawak. Their track record in this respect includes dance choreographies of *Swan Lake* (1988), *The Legend of Mahsuri* (1989), *The Legend of Lady White Snake* (1990) and *Jonathan Livingstone Seagull* (1991). In 1994, Kala Mandir staged *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Dharmaasoka*, the story of King Ashoka's religious conversion.

Others have also trodden the same path. The Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society has worked on similar ideas: *Siddharta – the Life of Buddha*; *Thyaga Chinam* – based on the love tale by Kannadasan; and *Aum Muruga III* – based on the life of Lord Muruga (and on whose behalf Thaipusam is celebrated). Apsaras Arts Society has been working through the same ideas with *Ganesha*, the story of the Hindu elephant-god. Recent dance-drama has now reached a point of being led by, and through, local creative endeavour.

## Singapore Indian Orchestra and Choir

The idea to establish an ensemble of Indian instruments first materialised in 1985 when the Singapore Indian Orchestra was established under the People's Association – an umbrella organisation that coordinates socio-cultural activities at the national community level – led by Mdm. Lalitha Vaidyanathan. A choir was added in 1990 and together the Indian orchestra and choir have given more than a hundred performances, with a number of people writing music for them. The instrumental configuration consists of veena, sitar, violin (but played Indian style), flute and clarinet, with percussion consisting of *mridangam*, *tabla*, *ghatam*, *ganjira*, and other small percussion instruments.

Occasionally, other musical instruments from the Western, Chinese, or Malay traditions are added. The Indian orchestra plays two types of music: Indian classical and what is called 'experimental' music. In playing Indian classical music, the performance adheres to *raga-tala* formats, but sonorities are distinguishable because of the instrumentation. When experimenting, the trend is towards syncretism, multi-layered melodic lines, ideas from popular music and mixing instruments from Chinese and Malay traditions.

At the 2002 Singapore Arts Festival, the Indian Orchestra and choir combined with the People's Association Youth Chinese Orchestra, The Orkestra Melayu Singapura, Singapore Wind Symphony, The Vocal Consort and Singapore National Youth Orchestra to perform Mozart's Symphony No. 40 in G minor, Vivaldi's Double Violin Concerto and some jazz numbers.

While Indian classical tradition and practice continues to be promoted as essential in its role in supporting and enhancing cohesive worship and devotion at sacred sites and religious occasions, music and dances are now available to interested participants from the non-Indian communities in Singapore.

## Remembering S. Sathyalingam (1929-2011)

By Apsaras Arts

Having migrated from Ceylon and India to Singapore, S. Sathyalingam and his wife Neila (b. 1938) set up the Apsaras Arts dance company in 1977, teaching classical music and

traditional dancing at the Tanglin Community Centre under the kind auspices of the late former Minister of Law, E. W. Barker. Despite an intensive travel schedule as the Regional Manager of Uniroyal, S. Sathyalingam continued to perform and served as the Music Director for Apsaras Arts. In 1983, he brought the company to the Australian Youth Music Festival at the newly opened Melbourne Arts Centre as well as the ASEAN Festival in Malaysia. In addition to performing at the 1990 Hong Kong Arts Festival, Sathyalingam also presented their compositions at the WOMAD (World of Music, Arts and Dance) Festival held in Singapore in 2002.

Sathyalingam was appointed a member of the National Arts Council (NAC) Music Advisory Panel in the early 1990s. His advisory work included the impact of NAC's policies on classical Indian music education; the setting up of the blueprint for the School of the Arts (SOTA); the music advisory panels for the setting up of the Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay and for the selection of various award recipients including the annual Young Artist Award and the Cultural Medallion. Sathyalingam continued to serve on the NAC music advisory panel until 2008. The Ministry of Education has also sought his expertise and invited him to judge various orchestral performances at the annual Singapore Youth Festival until 2011. He was also an advisor to the People's Association Cultural Activities Committee for music and arts activities at the Community Clubs.

Sathyalingam has also collaborated with composers and artistes such as Alex Abisheganaden and Joe Peters at the National University of Singapore to help educate and inspire young musicians. Under the guidance and persuasion of the then Minister of Information, Communication and the Arts, Dr. Lee Boon Yang, Sathyalingam set up the Kallang Community Centre Youth Orchestra. In recognition of his contribution to Indian Arts overseas, he was bestowed the accolade and title of 'Viswakalaa Bharathi' by the Bharath Kalachar Academy in Chennai, India, in 1995. This is a highly prestigious award presented by the famous Carnatic musicians Smt. M. S. Subhalakshmi and Sri Balamurali Krishna. Sathyalingam continued to teach music in Singapore until the end of 2010. Throughout his life, Sathyalingam has had an illustrious career performing live on stage and on television, as well as in the temples and arts festivals all over Asia and Australia.

## Notes

- 1 See 'Letter to the Editor,' *Singapore Chronicle* 3(44), 31 October 1833. The letter expresses particular concerns about fire and safety with an event which approximates the ritual of the fire-walking ceremony. Later, the *Singapore Free Press*, 31 January 1896, reports the confiscating of musical instruments used in the Thaipusam ritual at a temple at Tank Road by the police.
- 2 I am indebted to Clement Liew for his invaluable assistance in providing me with this brief summary based on his research.
- 3 George, a guitarist, remembers: 'I joined in 1962, Usha Music Party ... which was actually known as Usha Music and Dramatic Society.' SIMP members recall how their predecessors were considered part of a music and dramatic society configuration.
- 4 According to oral interviewees, musical band parties were synonymous with music parties.

- 5 Most of the interviewees were of similar opinion that SIMP was a pioneer group but none knew of the New Indian Amateur Orchestra. The repertoire of the New Indian Orchestra and the first SIMP was predominantly Carnatic, according to contemporary sources.
- 6 The term 'band' will require much further clarification but in the context of this synopsis, 'band' is used to identify musical groups. The synopsis also includes names of musical band parties in the 1950s and 1960s and includes names of famous musicians, M. P. Gurusamy and Pundit Ramalingam.
- 7 The definition of 'semi-classical' is not clarified.
- 8 Mani (2006: 796) notes a gulf in the South Indian community caused partly out of caste and community differences as well as notions of economic class. Additionally, the Sri Lankan (Ceylon) Tamils and Malayalees saw themselves as attuned to colonial culture and the use of the English language. In both senses, the subscription to Indian classical traditions as well as fine arts of the Western tradition would have sufficed for elitism.
- 9 Mani (2006: 796) also points out that with the establishment of the Tamils Representative Council in 1952, the Tamil language was promoted in literature, mass media – particularly newspapers – and cultural contexts. The Tamil language had for its support base Tamil-using and working-class Indians.
- 10 These festivities still occur today in the form of a Deepavali Festival Village that lasts 21 days and is similar to a street carnival. This provides a showcase for the best of Indian culture, featuring pushcarts displaying and selling a variety of costumes, jewellery and accessories, food, paintings, handicrafts, spices and carpets. The carts line Campbell Lane, from Serangoon Road to Clive Street, and the roads are closed to traffic throughout the 21 days. According to the Singapore Tourism Board, there are also performances by local talents and foreign artistes, presenting a rare mixture of South and North Indian cultures over a period of three weeks (except Sundays) until the eve of Deepavali. To add to the colour, the Silver Chariot of Sri Mariamman Temple makes a visit to the Festival Village as part of its traditional journey for the Fire Walking Ceremony on 1 November.
- 11 Unfortunately, this was referred to as a Kling festival. In most social exchange, this is a derogatory reference to members of the Indian community.
- 12 Oddly, it is referred to as the Tai-pusam or 'harvest thanksgiving festival'. Paradoxically, the festival of Thaipusam became a point of considerable debate in the late 1970s. See Sinha, 2006: 832–33.

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