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CHAPTER 11
South Indian Pop Music and Musicians

Eugene Dairianathan
While musical configurations of South Indian classical modes of performance and Anglophone popular culture seem diametrically opposed, there is a site where both seem to co-exist, that is, the Hindu temple during the nine-day preparation to the fire-walking ceremony. Mohammed Ali Nilavu (1994: 89) observes that, "on each day of Navaratri, the temples sponsor a cultural performance. This includes classical dance, music and devotional songs (the latter sometimes accompanied by Western-style band)." Oral accounts corroborate this observation and add that the temple priests had not objected to the presentation of devotional (but not sacred) material with Western-style accompaniment. The presence of such a 'popular music' configuration bespeaks a parallel repertoire – one classical and another contemporary.

An entry by Lee Tong Soon (2001) on 'Music in Singapore' in the Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians makes the following observations:

'Temple music from the Carnatic tradition, featuring the nagasaram (oboe) and tavil (double-headed barrel drum) is performed to announce daily prayer times and during festivals such as Thaipusam and Thimithi. Other genres include bhajanas (Sanskrit bhajans), film music and Hindustani and Carnatic classical music.'

The absence of descriptions of other musical practices at the Hindu temple is better ameliorated via examining the presence in such a public setting, albeit among a select community of supporters. Appearances of music-making at a public setting also suggest a deeper level of this collective action, namely ways in which it may have been initiated, nurtured and supported. This chapter explores and evaluates the presence of musicians recreating songs from South Indian films in Singapore through oral interviews (conducted in the early 2000s) and other supporting documentation.

Presence

Although names, events, dates and times are not provided, we are offered clues through two photographs of musicians with their instruments. The first features a generation of Singapore Indians Music Party (SIMP) musicians and their instruments, which included a fife/piccolo, shakers, double bass, tambourine, accordion, bulbul-tara (Nagoya harp), clarinet, bongos and guitar.

This picture ensemble with Indian Students Music Party (SIMP) musicians and their instruments (missing) across a stage alongside bongo, clarinet (played with guitar, tabla and small percussion).

Repertoire, Accessibility

While it was a collective effort for groups to re-create films, there were difficulties with instruments:

'We are not going to do ... we are not going to get it ... we didn't see many of the ones we mixed and played it with the harmonium ... we had to play it with film songs.'

This approach extended to North and South Indian musicians for the inaugural Tamil Fest. The ramifications, both positive and negative, attribute the proliferation to play songs from popular films:

"That's everywhere between SIMP and Rangoon Road, Canning - the most active ... there was a road ... Bertie F ... would win ... they were interested in music, a clarinetist - James SIMP ..." (Raymond)

Western Band configuration at a temple (with permission of S. Sivam family).

New Indian Amateur Orchestra and Singapore Indians Music Party (with permission of Edmund Appau's family).

Singapore Soundscape
This picture (right) appears to be a student ensemble with the curious title ‘Singapore Indian Students Orchestra’ (some letters are missing) across the bass drum of the drum kit, alongside bongos, congas, saxophone and clarinet (played by one person), accordion, guitar, tabla and what looks like a dholak and small percussion.

**Repertoire, Relevance and Accessibility**

While it was a common practice for musical groups to re-create songs from films and their own songs using film tunes, many recall the difficulty with instrumentation. Mohd. Rafee (2004) describes some of this in detail:

'We are not in the film industry, there was no one before us showing us what to do ... we couldn’t get an opportunity to watch orchestras play ... how did they create this piece, how did they play ... we were in Singapore ... all we got from the film was one hero, one heroine running around and singing ... we didn’t see bands ... up to the 1980s we were still copying and playing, trying to get a hold of how these guys were doing it ... whatever bands we saw were the ones which we saw playing here [locally] ... they mixed and matched so we mixed and matched ... take a Latin tune ... copy it into Hindi and Tamil, play it with bongos, congas, drums, maracas, cowbells, cabasas, castanets ... we have these instruments, we can play with them but how to play these instruments is another thing ... there is a way to play the drums and you start playing it differently, over the years it takes a form ... that happened in a lot of [film] songs.'

This approach enabled local musicians to successfully recreate songs from popularised North and South Indian films that received a warm reception within the community. The inaugural Tamil Festival at the Happy World Stadium in the Jalan Besar area had immediate ramifications, both culturally and musically. Members of a pioneering group, the SIMP, attribute the proliferation of Tamil music parties to Mr. Sarangapani. All they had to do was to play songs from popular films at such settings:

'That’s where we had this inter-band competition ... bands sprouted everywhere ... they wanted to win ... every year there would be a big fight between SIMP and Chitra ... then came Roshi Jeevans and Febra ... at Rangoon Road ... during this period of the festival ... music bands would be most active.... We didn’t have housing estates ... but any corner you went there was a road show organised by Radio Singapore.... We used to go to Fort Canning – the old drama centre – for the band competitions during Bertie’s time [Bertie Fernando was their former band leader] ... SIMP every year would win ... those days there was [sic] total commitment ... they were more interested in music ... during those days, people had titles ... if you mentioned a clarinetist – Joseph; saxophone – Karunan; tabla – Shanmugam ... all from SIMP....' (Raymond/Errol 2004)
The presence of these band competitions drew in non-Tamil musical groups and continued with radio and television broadcast. Amar Singh (2004), leader and singer of Hindi band Roshni Jeevans, recalls:

‘There was an invitation to all the bands to participate in a competition ... this was in 1965 ... the producers and directors were from RTS, Philippines, Malaysia... We had to do three songs ... instrumental ... Hindi Song Hava ... then we had a Tamil song ... with Krishna on Hawaiian guitar ... he played Satyam ... one more was our own composition ... I can’t remember now ... there were altogether 12 bands ... we were second ... first was Singapore Indians ... we got our prize, then we got a contract ... every month on some shows on TV or Radio ... we became busy and very popular ... we lasted for seven years, 1965-1972 ... I was given a chance to sing on TV and radio until 1980 ... at the same time, when there were requests for a good Hindi band for weddings and functions they would recommend our band ... although Roshni Jeevans is a Hindi band we did Tamil (music and songs) for radio and TV.’ (Raymond/Errol 2004)

An even clearer indication of change appears in an observation by Balakrishnan Veerapan (2003) of a different kind of South Indian film music that permeated the Indian community in pre-television Singapore through the organisation and presentation of these events:

‘Film music was very popular since the screening of movies in Singapore, I believe. In the 60s, at the wedding dinners and other functions, film music was a must. They had bands playing the music and locals singing film songs. I saw guitars, saxophone, clarinet, accordion, jazz drums, along with the tabla and dholak ... they were very entertaining.’

Some of these observations corroborate Peter Manuel’s historical overview of Indian film culture up to 1975 in India, particularly background information on North Indian (Bollywood) film practice:

‘While many melodies are quite Western-sounding in their tonal organization, most are distinctly Indian, using characteristic modes and melodies akin to those of folk or light-classical music. Cuban and disco rhythms are not uncommon ... typically] a quadruple meter ... equivalent to the kaherva tal ... in North Indian folk and light music ... the most conspicuously indigenous feature ... is the vocal style, which exhibits characteristically South Asian ornamentation and timbre.’ (Manuel 1993: 50)

Musical instruments on display indicated performance as spectacle to be anticipated and enjoyed. Print culture helped to fan the flames of a growing interest in this ‘entertaining’ style of Indian cinema in Singapore: Movie News was published locally, featuring Tamil and Hindi movies; and Pesum Padam, which was imported from India and included gossip, latest releases, interviews with actors and actresses, and even lyrics of popular songs. The introduction of television in Singapore became another significant moment when the various live shows supported by the Indian community in Singapore were transferred onto an even larger public platform. Local performers of songs from South Indian films had a Singapore-wide audience through television:
There were variety shows which had classical, modern songs and dances. Local singers who were popular were the late V. Ramachandran, Betty Jones, Rajamani Francis, Rukmani and Dr. Uma Rajan … the Singapore Indians Music Party was a leading band in the TV shows. There were also locally written songs. Songs were mainly penned by the late Kavingnar Ka Perumal and E.S.J. Chandran (now based in India). Music was composed by the late Pandit M. Ramalingam … there were two prominent magazines which promoted films.’ (Balakrishnan Veerapan 2003)

One more notable event took place through recorded media. Local practitioner Christina Edmund (2004) remembered being the first local singer to be featured in a record release of Tamil songs:

‘In 1967, the first local Tamil record was made in Singapore. Four songs were composed and written by a lyricist from India, Mr. Banuthasam. Two local singers, S. Thanaletchumi and myself, recorded the songs at Kintex Studios. [They were] recorded by a Chinese company called TNA Records. The four local songs were very well received and were very popular in Singapore and Malaysia. They were always requested by the public over the radio.’

Oral accounts indicate many youths were encouraged to participate in these programmes because their parents believed it would help them in the development of their language and culture, as well as it being a wise use of their leisure time. Parental support enabled local practitioners like Mohd. Rafee (who has worked for celebrated film music director A. R. Rahman in India) and Ravi Shanker to be introduced to broadcast media at the very early ages of 10 and eight respectively.

Interactions Between North and South Indian Practices

Mohd. Bagushair, a singer with the Al-Wehdah Arab musical ensemble in Singapore, observed how the Malay community enjoyed Hindustani songs because of their love for Hindustani movies, which were screened at theatres like Garrick, Haz, Singapura and Queens, alongside Malay films produced by Shaw Brothers. Tamil films were shown at Alhambara, Capitol, Cathay, Diamond, Royal, Rex and State theatres, among others (Balakrishnan Veerapan 2003). Sivam’s contemporaries, who were members of SIMF, also recall a Hindustani musical group, Chandiniraat, who:

‘…played modern music using clarinet, saxophone, accordion (which was the lead) … playing music mainly from Hindi films … so all the programmes along Geylang side went to them … Malays had an obsession for Hindi music …

Cover of first local Tamil record (reproduced with permission of Christina Edmund).
Chandiniraat was very good and it was very difficult for us (Tamil bands) to get into that area..." (Raymond/Errol 2004)

Bagushair's brother Omar, a violinist, was the leader of the Mijum orchestra playing Malay, English and Hindustani songs for weddings and functions, while continuing his commitment to Samra al' Fan from the Arab community in Singapore with a very different repertoire serving devotional functions. While following his brother Omar, Bagushair came across musical ensembles like Shah Jehan and Chandiniraat – the latter the most popular Hindi band in Geylang – playing Malay, English and Hindustani songs, led by Halim Marican, the 'Mohammad Rafi of Singapore' (Mohd. Bagushair 2004).2 Rafee (2004), no stranger to both practices, offered the following views:

'The division came about because there were Tamil bands that were very good at doing Tamil songs but whenever they played Hindi music, it didn't have that feel or flavour... also, Hindi bands would never play Tamil songs... Hindi music caught on very well with the Malay community and among Indians who married Malays in Singapore.'

Rafee (2004) also recalled how in his father's time and in his time:

'Malays were crazy about Hindi music and songs and we had a very strong following... you have to remember Malay film [in Singapore] was spearheaded by Indian film directors and producers... that's why they carried on the tradition...'

Cultural Medallion recipient Yusnor Ef (2003), a lyric writer who worked alongside the prolific P. Ramlee, points out how in the Malay film industry, 'Composers came from Indonesia, but those songs were mostly of Indian influence... and the technical side of the Malay film industry was Indian.' John Lent (1990: 189) goes further:

'Usually, the Indian directors just translated Indian scripts into Malay, the result being that the films had all the Indian nuances, cultural idiosyncrasies and mannerisms, and very little that was truly Malay.'

Rafee's father was the leader of a group called Jeevans in the 1960s (later Roshni Jeevans) and they played a lot of popular Hindi songs.

'My father didn't mind the mix of both Hindi and Tamil songs... that was an exception and we had a very strong following... as musicians we saw it [the ability to play mixed repertoire] as an opportunity.' (Mohd. Rafee 2004)

Ravi Shanker (2004), Rafee's contemporary who took over leadership of the Maru Malarchi band from his father, S. Sivam, points out that:

'About 20 percent of our performances have Hindi songs... when you have Indian Muslim weddings, they prefer more Hindi songs to Tamil songs... when they book the band they will ask whether we can play Hindi songs...'

In broadcast media post-1965, however, it was probably the reverse and Rafee (2004) recalled his difficulties:

'There were a lot of Hindi music put up on the radio. At the time I was being taught Malay by learning Hindustani. But learning Hindustani was impossible in Singapore because there was a whole lot of Tamil music on the radio.

Amar Singh (2004),

'Although Rafee grew up in Malaysia, even in the 1960s, he didn't know any Hindustani songs. I taught him to look in a dictionary, to translate Indian scripts into Malay, to look into the words and find their translations... sometimes they would put foreign words into the Malay lyrics. But the way Rafee learned was different... he would definitely learn Hindustani songs.'

Transitions in the Malay film industry

From the beginning, Singapore Soundscope is the presence of Hindustani influences and stylistic elements of dance music of both cinema and radio. The ease of transition and the introduction to popular music:

'...there was a lot of Hindustani music put up on the radio. At the time I was being taught Malay by learning Hindustani. But learning Hindustani was impossible in Singapore because there was a whole lot of Tamil songs.'

'S. Sivam (2004), friend and colleague who says that the influence of Hindi music is still part of the local Malay community and the Hindustani works of Amjad Ali Khan, Ustad Bismillah Khan, and other musicians caught on.

'This modern Hindustani area... bands like Maru Malarchi comprised Malay, Tamil and Urdu speaking people.'

To understand the Hindustani influence, we referred to broadcast media in the Malay film industry, which was dominated by Hindustani songs.

160 Singapore Soundscope
'There were many Tamil bands like Febra and Maru Malarchi ... my father knew a lot of Hindi songs but he did not play a lot of Tamil songs. As we were growing up he wanted us to play music and one channel for playing music was to play for radio. At the time, radio was only highlighting Tamil ... not much Hindi. ... I started by learning Hindi songs ... slowly, because of TV and radio, we started playing Tamil music ... South Indian styles ... we wouldn't have done it otherwise.'

Amar Singh (2004), leader of the Hindi band Roshni Jeevans, shares similar sentiments:

'Although Roshni Jeevans is a Hindi band we did Tamil (music and songs) for radio and TV ... normally RTS producers will select their own singers ... maybe 10 songs, one Hindi and the others Tamil ... only we didn't have a main Tamil singer ... so John Mammen and Christina Edmund (Edmund Appau's daughter and her husband) and many other singers used to come over to practice ... that is how we played Tamil songs ... if my band was performing, I would definitely get one Hindi song even though we played mainly Tamil songs.'

Transitions in Musical Style – Classical to Popular Culture

From the beginning, what emerges from this account of Indian musical practices in Singapore is the presence of film music as practised in India (both North and South) revealing stylistic elements of pop and rock culture, as well as styles employed in Hollywood and dance music of both jazz and Latin culture. Another important point here was the directness of impact and speed of reception and response. Rafee (2004) points out that '...anything that came out of India in the '50s and '60s was just replicated here ... it's like a speaker ... whatever happens there, happens here ... given the delay in transmission.' With respect to this ease of transition, musicians from SIMP (Raymond/Errol 2004) remembered their early introduction to popular culture:

'...there was also a change from tabla to bongos to African drums and to jazz drum ... first inhaled by Hindustani musicians ... when the bongos were in ... this style was totally inhaled by the South Indian musicians.... Then the rhythms like cha-cha, mambo and samba, which started in Northern Indian films, caught on ... slowly but gradually we moved into Tamil cinema songs...'

S. Sivam (2004), former leader of Venus Music Party and later Maru Malarchi, believes that the influence of popular culture can be attributed to the considerable support of the local Malay community:

'This modern music was started by Malays in Singapore in the Geylang area ... bands playing Hindustani music at weddings ... these music groups comprised Malays, Indian Muslims, or their wives were Malay or some were Urdu speaking Muslims ... these groups wrote in lyrics with romanised Hindustani words ... there were so many of these groups, like Suara Bahru, Melati Puth.'

To understand this influence means to grasp, firstly, how the Malay community subscribed at the immediate level to Hindustani film music. At another level, however, the Malay film industry, which enjoyed immense popularity, was driven primarily by technical
directors from the Northern Indian film domain. Yusnor Ef, a lyric writer for Malay film music, pointed out that those songs were mostly of Indian influence. He recalled being in Pancaragam Aneka after being in the Harmonica Party and remembers groups like Sri Pemuda Harmonium Parti and Pancaragam Kampung Glam. The repertoire in question was undoubtedly songs from Malay film but Ef (2003) also recalled how fashionable songs from Hindi films were, as well as the competition with groups like Chandiniraat and Naujahan Music Parties. Thirdly, a recent and scintillating phenomenon among Malay youth was a local practice, Pop Yeh Yeh, inspired and influenced by British popular music culture through groups such as Cliff Richard and the Shadows, the Ventures, the Beatles and The Rolling Stones.

Preparations in the Public Sphere
From 1953 onwards, many of the bands participated in the band contests organised by Mr. Sarangapani at his Tamil Festival. This led to the formation of bands like Gemini, Shah Jehan, Venus and Newton Bharath music parties. In the words of the Edmund Appau family, ‘We were so proud to see our father, the first president of SIMP, go up to the stage to collect the champion trophy’ (Christina Edmund 2004). Amar Singh (2004) recalls a competition for live bands organised and held at the RTS auditorium in 1965. Twelve groups participated for the top three spots:

‘...the producers and directors from RTS, Philippines, Malaysia ... were the judges ... we had to do three songs ... an instrumental from a Hindi song Hava ... then we had a Tamil song ... with Krishna on Hawaiian guitar ... he played Satyam ... one more was our own composition...’

Groups that won or were highly placed could look forward to many engagements. Being placed among the top three in this RTS competition enabled Roshni Jeevans to play at the Khalsa Association during the mid-1960s.

Radio and television were significant platforms for these musicians' re-creative expression. As early as the 1950s, the radio had become a very important resource for these practitioners because of the potential number of listeners. The repertoire for live performances was largely determined by paying attention to the request programmes on the radio and drawing up a list of pieces to be played at functions. Very few risks were taken as expectations seem to have determined the sort of repertoire to be performed. S. Sivam (2004) noted that initially, very few programmes involving music were acceptable on radio and they were largely music from the Indian classical tradition. However, repertoire changes incorporating music of popular Western and Indian film meant a greater variety of songs were made available. Christina Edmund (2004) recalls:

‘We had the main radio in Singapore and Rediffusion ... a song would be a great song [based on] hearing the number of times it was requested ... sometimes twice a day, even three times a day ... morning, afternoon, and even night ... actually it was mainly our parents.... For us, once we had TV we listened less to the radio....’

S. Sivam was offered a place to perform on variety shows on radio and television in 1962. His son, Ravi Shanker (2004), born in 1963, recalls his first experience watching his father perform:
'I was about five years old in 1968 ... my father was playing on TV ... I was very excited ... I waved to him thinking he could see me and wave back ... he was quite famous so he appeared about twice a month ... the programme happened on Saturday nights ... around 8 pm at night ... our dad was a star ... he even used to sing on TV ... I started playing in 1972 ... I was playing triple conga with the seniors ... the congas were higher than me so they adjusted the congas lower .... 1972 was my first performance on TV.'

His contemporary, Mohd. Rafee, also began as a child of 10 on television some two years earlier than Ravi. Although opportunities for musicians to record albums were rare, Christina Edmund (2004) was the first local singer to be featured in two record releases of Tamil songs:

'In 1967, the first local Tamil record was made in Singapore. Four songs were composed and written by a lyricist from India, Mr. Banuthasam. Two local singers, S. Thanaletchumi and myself recorded the songs at Kintex Studios ... by a Chinese company called TNA Records. The four local songs were very well received and very popular in Singapore and Malaysia ... always requested by the public over the radio ... when I did my second record, it was backed by the Esquires [a local group playing Anglophone popular music] ... there was also a pianist by the name of Ramdas who played English music [sic] at nightclubs.'

Crossing Borders
Edmund Appau's children and band members were equally conversant in Anglophone popular musical repertoire. His eldest daughter Christina (2004) recalls:

'By this time, my brothers [Jesson and Hermann] were old enough to join the percussion side. Jesson started playing the drums with a group called Blues Inc. and became the lead singer and drummer for that group. Hermann went on to play the trumpet and Lawrence [another brother] joined the English scene as a drummer. They all played music in nightclubs, but at the same time, played Indian music too. Joe Chandran, who was a member of SIMP, later became popular with the X'periments ... my second record was backed by the Esquires.'

Prowess with the guitar enabled S. Sivam (2004) to use those skills beyond his role in Venus Music Party:

'Philip Ariken (lead guitar), Tommy (a drummer who married Philip's sister), Hugo (a Filipino rhythm guitarist) and myself on bass used to play at the British Military Hospital (Alexandra Hospital today) NCO Club ... our group didn't have a name ... anyway, the NCOs only wanted some group to play English music and songs. We used to play three days a week in 1962. We would start at 8 pm and finish at 3 am ... these nurses all liked to dance ... Thursdays was ladies' evening ... Wednesday and Saturday for guys ....'

Increasingly, despite resistance on grounds of authenticity and altered meanings, there was little to prevent flows into and out of other musical spaces, notably the music of
Anglophone popular culture. Unfortunately, crossing soundscapes was not as simple as that. Mohd. Rafee (2004) explains:

'My brother [Mohd. Noh] played Hindi music exactly the way the Hindi guys did it on tape or on record ... but when he started playing in pop and jazz circuits [accompanying Randy Crawford among other international musicians] cowbells were played differently, congas were tuned/played differently ... my brother thought all along this [music style in Hindi film] was the way to play it ... what happened was it had a form of its own, was copied by people here who called themselves Hindi musicians ... but then that's the way they played it.'

Any attempt to bring back cross-border exchanges was resisted, as Mohd. Rafee (2004) recalls:

'I went into the Indian music scene in Singapore on a fully professional basis ... playing [South] Indian film music but with the sounds of Kool and the Gang, and the younger crowd loved what we did at live performances. I recorded an album in Tamil with Reggie Verghese (from a renowned local group The Quests) as my producer. When we did our first song he said Indian music doesn't sound like this ... I told him, it's going to sound like this ... he took the sound around to small drink shops, pubs, his friends and they said, "this doesn't sound like Indian song ... cannot sell" ... Reggie got afraid ... I was forced to do Indian film songs.'

Support Systems of Everyday Life
The New Indian Amateur Orchestra rehearsed at Edmund Appau's residence at 34 Short Street. Edmund Appau's residence became the rehearsal studio even as the family moved to Race Course Road/Rangoon Road, with one exception when they rehearsed at a clubhouse at Norris Road, even following personnel transitions from SIMP to Edmund Joseph Music Party, Edmund Music Party and later Edmund Appau Orchestra (Family of Edmund Appau 2004). Singapore Indians Music Party III practised at Owen Road, Kamala Club near Middleton hospital, Moulmein Road and Jervois Road. Some of these groups had sponsors and advisors, others were sustained via subscriptions from group members.

Another space that encouraged and sustained these musicians' activities was the local community centre (CC), a practice that continues to this day. These groups provided music for functions organised by the various community centres, such as Deepavali or Pongal (harvest festival), to more cohesive events like National Day or functions involving national campaigns. S. Sivam's Venus Music Party rehearsed at Queenstown CC and provided music for whatever community club functions Queenstown CC asked of them. On 21 July 1984, tensions between the Malay and Chinese communities erupted into riots in Singapore.

status of the Singapore Indians
According to cultural historian S. Sivam (2004), that time, no lives were spared because "both of the governmental and non-governmental communities involved in the riots were equally responsible." Singapore Indians Music Party rehearse at Musicians' Connections, with loose composition of Jeewans (but no more than eight people) to practise at EDM.

Money was a constant worry. It was mostly light Indian film music, often a form of clash between Hindi films (music in the style of popular Indian social and pop)

Oral accounts of the community's activities provide music for functions organised by the various community centres, such as Deepavali or Pongal (harvest festival), to more cohesive events like National Day or functions involving national campaigns. S. Sivam's Venus Music Party rehearsed at Queenstown CC and provided music for whatever community club functions Queenstown CC asked of them. On 21 July 1984, tensions between the Malay and Chinese communities erupted into riots in Singapore.

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Money was a constant worry. It was mostly light Indian film music, often a form of clash between Hindi films (music in the style of popular Indian social and pop)
in Singapore during the birthday celebrations of the Prophet Mohammed. When asked to provide music at an inter-racial goodwill event organised by the Queenstown CC, Mr. S. Sivam (2004), as leader and founder of the Venus Music Party, volunteered his group: 'At that time, no band was willing to play for these PA programmes because they were scared of the riots ... we were the first band.'

Both of these letters, dated August 1964, indicate the co-opting of music as one governmental response to promote greater interaction and exchange among the various communities. It is difficult to ascertain whether S. Sivam and his Venus Music Party were spared because they were not part of the Chinese-Malay ethnic tensions but the essential point remains that South Indian film music assumed a mediatory role across the various communities resident in Singapore and became identified as such thereafter.

Singapore Indians Music Party III currently resides at Bukit Batok CC. Maru Malarchi rehearse at Marsiling CC and Oothayha Githam at West Coast CC, alongside AV-Connections, who are more minus-one oriented. A much younger group calling themselves Jeevans (but not connected to a live band of the 1960s with the same name) were known to practise at Braddell CC.

**Status of the Band**

According to current SIMP members (Raymond/Errol 2004), when it comes to economics 'it's big band, small money'. That phrase has historical resonance for the Edmund Appau family (2004):

'Money was not a big thing in those days; they [musicians] were not paid much. It was more for the love of music. SIMP entertained the Indian community with light Indian music at a time when most Indian music entertainment was in the form of classical music. Also SIMP played mostly songs from films, popular films starring Sivaji or MGR, semi-classical music, English, Malay and later, even popular Chinese songs at public functions.'

Oral accounts indicate music-making did not develop into a full-time professional commitment. Virtually all interviewees had full-time jobs, although some lost their jobs or changed jobs because of their passion for music-making. However, being part of such a musical ensemble was no ordinary membership, as the family of Edmund Appau (2004) recounts:

'During those times, one was considered to have considerable status to belong to a well-known band and SIMP was the most popular band in the Indian community in Singapore. My father played at functions, weddings, birthday parties, engagements and dramas. There were very few Tamil bands. Word went around the community that if you got SIMP, you got the best. People came from all over to book this band. If they couldn’t get SIMP they would be very disappointed but sometimes my father had to turn them down. My father (with the first SIMP), even entertained prisoners at Changi Prison and played at functions at the Istana.'

This affirmation went beyond the Indian community. For Raymond and Errol of the SIMP (2004):
'A show was organised and coordinated by Mr. T. T. Dorai, coinciding with the formation of the National Sports Promotion Board. All the actors and actresses from Tamil film, M.G. Ramachandran, Nagesh, Jayalaleetha, playback singers Soundarajan, P. Susheela and Chandra Babu were all flown to Singapore ... I remember it was in June 1972 ... we were all stationed at Hotel Imperial Oberoi [now demolished]. On this occasion, RTS selected Singapore Indians Music Party for the whole show ... we were the main band ... no payment ... but we had a final dinner at the Shangri-La ... and after the performance each [of us] got a ride home in a Mercedes provided by Mr. Jumabhoi ... that is one unforgettable experience.... We also got to play at the National Day programmes.'

S. Sivam (2004) recalls:

'We used to play for weddings, birthdays, parties, functions, events, stage shows ... other special occasions ... when we practised at Queenstown CC we didn't have to pay any rent but any event which we played for at the CC had to be free ... even until now they are still with that arrangement ... normally, we do Deepavali shows ... so Tamil and Hindustani songs ... if it's a National Day function, we'll play Tamil and Hindustani songs ... and there will be a group for Malay classical dance ... I started with Queenstown in the 1960s with the Goodwill community dinner.'

The Present: Challenges and Prospects

Essentially, live performances made these groups of musicians special and endeared them to the community. Christina Edmund (2004) noted that the bands played at numerous functions, such as weddings, birthday parties, engagements and dramas, even entertaining prisoners at Changi Prison, functions at the Istana and talentime presentations at the Victoria Theatre featuring local and international singers. They played for stage shows in Singapore and Malaysia and Navarattiri programmes in the temples. As Edmund Appau had converted to Roman Catholicism, SIMP members would play music on board a lorry with Christmas decorations on the night of Christmas Eve, visiting churches with significantly large Tamil parishioners, especially the Church of Our Lady of Lourdes at Ophir Road. People would get excited when they heard the sound of the bongos and tambourines announcing the arrival of the 'Christmas lorry'.

Yet the phrase used by SIMP, 'big band small money', implies a harsher reality. Most of the players have full-time jobs and such gigs are a part-time endeavour. As a result of this present state of affairs, there are very few live bands performing Indian popular film music in Singapore. According to oral accounts:

'... only five major bands are active: SIMP, Maru Malarchi, Bai Rayvee, Febra, Oothayha Githam ... all other bands are using sequenced music, minus-one ... Jeevans are now using minus-ones ... another one called AV-connections ... mostly popular requests....'

As a result of a fully committed and passionate activity being run part-time, sustainability remains fragile. Technology, particularly its use, has been an important factor affecting their sustainability. When asked to compare variety shows of the past with the present,
Ravi Shanker (2004) of Maru Malarchi, who also plays in a percussion group called Rhythm Masala, articulated the problem:

'...what is happening now is mostly minus-one type of shows ... no more live bands on TV ... recently when we did a performance with Rhythm Masala ... there was quite a bit of interest because there were live bands and plenty of percussion instruments ... the feedback was that with minus-one, there was no impact ... that is when the live bands can give the real impact.'

The arrival of sequenced music, or minus-one technology, is just one aspect of technology that seems to have challenged the very existence of live bands. Ravi (2004) observed the emergence of the minus-one around 1995: 'Audiences still wanted live bands but for some pubs the minus-one dropped the cost by half.' This alternative had not only affected their ability to be visual and aural in the broadcast spheres of music-making, but also affected their means of performing at nightclubs and entertainment spots. In practice, different pubs and clubs had differing needs and in some cases, dissatisfaction with minus-one formats ensured the survival of the bands. On the other hand, minus-one technology offered cost savings and the clubs and pubs welcomed it. When entertainment spots were affected by slowing business, live bands became casualties.

A newer and equally problematic issue is the presence of Malaysian bands. The ease with which foreign bands came into the entertainment scene in Singapore affected local popular music groups as early as the 1970s, and worsened in the 1980s. According to interviewees in the Tamil pop scene, a gap in proficiency levels in the past ensured local bands' survival, but changes in the standards of performance, the use of minus-ones and performance fees are some of the challenges local Tamil bands face. The current exchange rate is a crucial factor. As Ravi (2004) points out: 'We went to a wedding last week ... they had two bands from JB ... they are much cheaper than we are ... they are paid 1,000+ Ringgit, which becomes SGD$400-500 ... we charge $900/950...'

Politics in the entertainment spots were also cited, with live bands discovering to their disadvantage the ad-hoc burden placed on them during their gigs. Raymond and Errol (2004) mentioned that:

'SIMP III last played at a pub called Happy Days every Monday almost for a year in 2002. We were drawing good crowds for a Monday ... then they started complaining they weren't selling more beer ... they blamed the band ... but we play the music ... we are not responsible for the selling of beer...'

Perhaps one problem that has and will continue to engender controversy is the reported lack of infrastructure and support at the most fundamental level. Rafee (2004) explains why, despite being a child performer at RTS and countless variety shows, he joined the ranks of the 'lesser privileged':

'I went into the Indian music scene on a fully professional basis ... but with the sounds of Kool and the Gang.... I was born and bred in Singapore and exposed to all kinds of music ... Indian music was depicted in such a way that made it difficult for others to digest ... I wanted to make it more accessible ... so we started improvising, playing songs entirely differently, and the younger crowd liked it. Then I started to play at the Taj, the first Indian nightclub at Syed Alwi Road in 1991 ... when we took the Tamil songs and did brass jams we couldn't get players to play ... basically it just didn't happen for us until we met...'

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this guy called A.R. Rahman ... exactly what we were doing with Indian music 15 years ago in Singapore is happening in India today ... Rahman himself knows ... fortunately he's at the right place and right time ... India didn't have the musicians ... I went to India ... sang in the movies, started arranging for Rahman ... I've been playing on the radio since I was 10 ... and even after my work with Rahman I was told my materials cannot be played locally because I'm local ... that's sad ... how are we to show our brand?

A similar view is held by SIMP III musicians (2004) who know Rafiee:

'Today in Singapore, you can't even make a living as an artist ... some of our best musicians are all abroad ... [there is] very little encouragement for [local] Tamil music in Singapore ... for example, Mohd. Rafiee has gone and played for A.R. Rahman in India – but why were his songs not played or supported in broadcast?'

Finally, slowly gaining ground is a much younger group of heavy metal musicians who have totally rejected their predecessors in Indian popular film practice. A new phenomenon in the 1990s, Indian heavy metal groups fuse Sanskrit and English lyrics; they identify their music as a uniquely Indian, albeit heavy metal, sound. One group, Rudra, which has been given air-play space and voted among the top 40 bands in Singapore, explains:

'...We have always been interested in metal although traditional music does appeal ... we have utilised it in Rudra. I reckon traditional music defines the Hindu essence in us. Originality is what sells and is appreciated.'

Another metal group, Narasimha (2002) says:

'We grew up listening to Indian film songs and heavy metal bands from Black Sabbath in the '60s to its peak in the '80s ... this was how our group Narasimha was formed ... I got to listen to Rudra, the first ever band in Singapore to officially release a full length album ... the heavy distorted sound of the guitars mixed with the aggressive drum beats with a touch of Indian melody fascinated me. We started going down to gigs and got to know people ... other Indians who are also in this scene. Everyone of us had different band influences, but still united in heavy metal. Well, the birth of heavy metal among Indians ... in Narasimha, the vision is [from] Indian culture ... we incorporate the Indian philosophy in our music. We never sing about love ... common among the Indian film songs.... In the music we compose, the Carnatic or Hindustani style is inherent.'

At least one outcome of this exploration is the discovery of a practice obvious to its supporters, lesser in written discourse but virtually unknown in other circles. When articulated through oral and e-interviews with practitioners and supporters, knowledge of and about musical practices of the South Indian diaspora in Singapore creates an open site for awareness, documentation and discussion. The problems, issues and challenges provide seed for further and future scholarship.
Notes

1 Parenthesis and emphasis in original. Navarattiri involves a nine-day preparation for the fire-walking ceremony.

2 Mohammad Rafi is one of the few playback singers in Hindustani films from the 1940s to the 1980s and is mentioned in Peter Manuel’s study of popular music and technology in North India.

3 Mohd. Rafee’s father was an Urdu-speaking native of the Deccan Plateau, while his mother was Tamil.

4 Ravi Shanker is a member of the band Maru Malarchi. By the time he was active, however, Ravi Shanker’s repertoire was extended, by choice, to playing Bee Gees numbers like ‘Tragedy’, ‘You Should Be Dancing’ and George Michael’s ‘Careless Whisper’.

5 For a closer examination, compare Burhanudin bin Buang 2001 and Ef Yusnor 1991: 357.

6 July 2004 marked a remarkable change in Rafee’s fortunes, with a more positive reception to his musical styles and songs.

7 Raymond/Errol 2004 and Ravi Shanker 2004 yielded these names.

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