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**VEDIC METAL; ISSUES OF LOCAL PRACTICE, POPULAR MUSIC AND
EDUCATION.**

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Abstract

In early 2007, an Extreme metal quartet Rudra made a tour of three US cities (Pennsylvania, Minnesota and New York) with partial sponsorship from the local composers and performers association (*COMPASS*). This tour followed another performance in November 2006 at the Outdoor theatre of the Esplanade. This was preceded by their participation at the *Rock On Singapore!* Festival organised by the *National Arts Council* in 2005.

Their presence at local and international performances disguises multiple identities; contemporary, Singaporean, South Indian, youth, popular music (including Extreme Metal music), among others (**Dairianathan** 2007; 2008). Moreover, *Rudra's* absence in written accounts is as revealing as their seventeen year existence.

Rudra's continued presence raises a crucial question: if music of popular culture is, following Kellner (1995) and Denzin (1992), a *lived* curriculum - one that has suffused young people's lives - can *Rudra's* presence in prominent social and cultural space be extended to educational space? By focusing on *Rudra* and activities surrounding them, this paper will draw attention to Vedic Metal and its relationship/s with local practice, popular music and the implications for education.

**VEDIC METAL; ISSUES OF LOCAL PRACTICE,
POPULAR MUSIC AND EDUCATION.**

Introduction

Fowler (1970) identified three central arguments by North American school teachers for not including rock music in the school curriculum:

1. *Rock music is aesthetically inferior music, if it is music at all;*
2. *Rock is damaging to youth, both physically and morally; and*
3. *School-time should not be expended teaching what is easily acquired in the vernacular.* (Fowler, 1970, p. 38)

Three decades later, a further three reasons were identified to account for this resistance:

1. *Traditional teacher education has not provided substantial training in rock music;*
2. *Rock music is viewed as rebellious and anti-educational, characteristics that problematise its appropriation by teachers; and,*
3. *Effective instructional curriculum for rock music is relatively difficult to acquire in the United States.* (Herbert & Campbell 2000, p.16)

In her chapter on curriculum discourse, Janet Barrett noted the calls for change in curricular practice along at least four areas:

1. Challenge longstanding views of musicianship and musical understanding including:
 - a. More comprehensive views of musical behaviours
 - b. A wider array of musical styles
 - c. An integrated sense of music as an embodied experience, and

- d. Greater depths of musical understanding (Barrett 2007, p. 149)
2. Situate the music curriculum as a dynamic social practice;
3. Relate developments in the music curriculum to broad arenas of educational policy that enable or inhibit change; and,
4. Foster views of teachers as primary agents of change in curriculum work. (Barrett 2007, pp. 147-161).

Drawing from Barrett, I focus on the musical dimensions which are as follows:

1. Challenging, at an epistemological level, an understanding of music and by consequence its creators, makers and participants. This is implicit in the call for more inclusive views of musical behaviours which are contingent on musical practices which reveal human behaviour in situated contexts. (Blacking, 1973; 1995).
2. Reinforcing these musical practices as *living practices* rather than *arte/facts of* and *about* musics that have privileged specified persons, places and systems more than others based on unilaterally imposed criteria. Conversely, certain musical practices have not been considered because they are unable to satisfy these said criteria.
3. Concomitantly, as living practices, these musical practices are performed and performative cultures. (Dimitriadis 2006)
4. These performative cultures, as embodied and lived experiences, make the musical experience as much a socio-cultural, socio-historical and socio-political experience if not engagement.
5. These musical practices are performed not only in the musical instrumental sense but also re/created by people through a variety of media in the authoring and authorising of their lives. (Dimitriadis & Weis, 2007, p.333)

One such *lived and living space* that qualifies for inclusion in the music curriculum is that of popular music; particularly for its salience in contemporary discussions and practices.

Denzin informs us that:

At the level of lived experiences, a central problem, as noted above, becomes the examination of how interacting individuals connect their lives to these ideological texts and make sense of their experiences in terms of the texts' meanings. As a distinctly qualitative approach to the social, interpretative interactionism attempts to make the world of lived experience directly accessible to the reader (mindful of the many problems surrounding this commitment). (Denzin 1992, p.82).

Douglas Kellner (1995) informs us that the contemporary 'media culture' has radically reworked *the everyday* or *the real* for the young in ways difficult for those older to understand:

A media culture has emerged in which images, sounds, and spectacles help produce the fabric of everyday life, dominating leisure time, shaping political views and social behaviour and providing the materials out of which people forge their identities (1995:1).

Focussing on hip-hop practices and the fraught relationships between black and white Anglophone cultures and communities, Dimitriadis suggests that popular musical practices have to consider, if not contend with, their relationship with contemporary media culture which *demands new and innovative educational responses*. (Dimitriadis 2009, p.159). Criticism notwithstanding, popular culture, either as traditional, transformative, transgressive, transcribed and transposable practices, is undeniably *following Kellner and Denzin, a lived curriculum, one which has suffused young people's lives in ways that belie the kinds of formal and distant identifications we might expect from more traditional educational practices*. (Dimitriadis 2009, p.160).

The multiple uses of popular culture and media by young people form a nexus in what Willis calls *common culture*:

The omnipresent cultural media of the electronic age provide a wide range of symbolic resources for and are a powerful stimulant of the symbolic work and creativity of young people. The media help to mediate the new possibilities of common culture_But whilst the media invite certain interpretations, young people have not only learnt the codes, but have learnt to play with interpreting the codes, reshape forms, interrelate the media through their own grounded aesthetics. They add to and develop new meanings from given ones (Willis 1990:30 in Dimitriadis 2009:9).

It is Willis' point about the use of instrumentality and media which emphasize the importance of nature, role and identity *in and of* performance. As Denzin (2003) points out, *performance is a key site where social, cultural and material constructions are put into motion, are articulated and rearticulated in new and (often) powerful ways. The 'performative turn' looks towards an 'interactionist epistemology' one where context replaces texts, verbs replaces nouns, structures become processes. The emphasis is on change, contingency, locality, motion, improvisation, struggle, situationally specific practices and articulations, the performance of con/texts.* (Denzin 2003, p.16).

Local Context

These five points I've extrapolated from Barrett's discussions are considered with reflections and assertions on the performative in popular music and culture because of the need to contextualize both aspects and situate them in the educational landscape in Singapore. My focus is that of an Extreme (Death) metal group *Rudra* who has emerged in public/ised performing space of which I highlight three for reflection. My initial search by word-of-mouth network was eventually supplanted by an electronic network. I met *Rudra* on the internet and attempted to schedule interviews with all Rudra members at their meeting spaces and jamming studios, to name a few locations. This proved difficult partly because of conflicting times, partly also fuelled by a sense of wariness. When their confidence was won

and with bassist/vocalist K.Kathirasan acting as group spokesperson, I gained access to their songs, lyrics, clippings of the group from various media, as well as privately held materials. Information obtained through e-mail exchanges was corroborated by e-documentation available on *Rudra's* website alongside information from other media. Moreover, using e-contact and correspondence enabled me to receive more articulate and considered views about their practice. The longer the e-contact with *Rudra*, the richer the discussions grew and this has had a significant impact on my own exploration and understanding of Vedic/Death and subsequently local Extreme metal.

Documentary evidence of *Rudra's* repertoire may be found in five CD releases (*Rudra* 1998, *Aryan Crusade* 2001, *Kurukshetra* 2003, *Brahmavidya Primordial I*, 2005, *Brahmavidya Transcendental I*, 2009), a three-song release (*The Past*, 1995) and original material written as early as 1993 and 1994. Their praxis has also been supplemented by multiple interviews with local and [more] international magazines as well as e-zines. The *Rudra* website indicates no less than ten international performances albeit considerably fewer local events (highly profiled or otherwise).

Brief Chronology of Rudra

Members of *Rudra* first met as a trio in 1991 comprising *K. Kathirasan* (bass, vocals), *Shivanand Palanisamy* (drums) and *M. Balasubramaniam* (guitar):

All of us met at Ngee Ann Polytechnic_pursuing our studies in Engineering. We soon realized that we had another interest_Metal music. (*Rudra* 2002).

The group was first formed in 1992 as *Rudhra* (a misspelling of *Rudra*) and began recorded an original track *Armageddon* and released in a cassette compilation by *Mouse Records* called *Made in Singapore* (M.I.S Vol.3). *Rudhra* successfully auditioned at the *New School Rock* competition (held at the World Trade Centre Amphitheatre) which was scheduled for the 4th July (*New School Rock*, 2 July 1993). At the *Rock the Day* concert (14

August 1993) held at the Thomson Community Centre organized by the Thomson Community Centre Youth Group, *Rudhra* played three original tracks. A newspaper photograph of *Rudhra* as a quartet (with newcomer Pannirselvam on lead guitar) accompanied announcement of a cassette tape release of fourteen *Death metal* tracks, *The Birth*, in 1994 in produced by Andy Mohamed with TNT Studios (Figure 1). *Rudhra's* three songs in this compilation were identified as *melodic death metal* (Keshvani, Straits Times, TGIF, 24 June 1994).

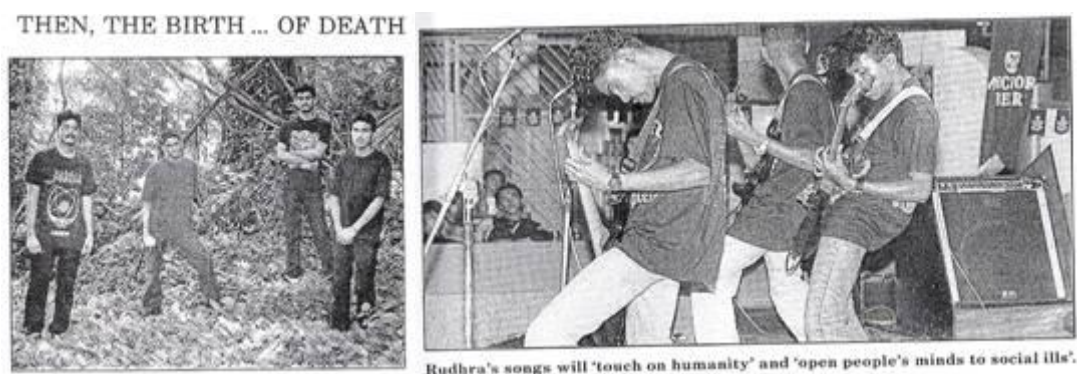


Figure 1 - Rudhra in *The Birth of Death* release, Straits Times 24 June 1994.

Figure 2 - Rudhra in *Anchor/Hotline Top of the Bands* competition, Straits Times 29 July 1994.

In July of the same year, *Rudhra* won a place with fifteen other bands to participate in the *Anchor/Hotline Top of the Bands* competition (Keshvani, Straits Times, TGIF, 29 July 1994). Having earning their reputation by getting into the finals of the *Fire* and *Hotline Battle of the Bands* competitions, *Rudhra* made a demo-release *The Past* in 1995. (Goh, Straits Times, 31 March 1995).

The group broke up in 1996 and members got involved in several other bands but some members still wanted to pursue the idea of incorporating elements of the Vedic tradition in Extreme metal. Towards the end of 1996, they re-formed as *Rudra* and released their first eponymous album in 1998 with personnel Kathirasan, Shivanand, Balasubramaniam and newcomer, Alvin Chua who stayed with *Rudra* till 2000. With the return of Pannirselvam and

newcomer Kannan Rajendran, their second album, *Aryan Crusade* in 2001 earned *Rudra* second placing in a 'Top 40 albums of the year' ranking in a now-discontinued local magazine *BIGO* (Before I Get Old) and frequent air-play on a radio-station *Passion 99.5 FM* (now discontinued). It is in *Aryan Crusade* that Vedic Metal gained currency as *Rudra's* preferred term for their original material. Another album, *Kurukshetra* was released in 2003, followed by *Brahmavidya: Primordial I* in 2005. International tour itineraries by now included Malaysia, India, Thailand, Indonesia and USA. By mid-2007 Sreedevan s/o Andoor Ravindran replaced Kannan Rajendran and *Rudra* have just released their latest CD, *Brahmavidya: Transcendental I* (April 2009).

Local practice

In 2005, *Rudra* performed at *Rock On Singapore!* Festival (17 June) organised by the National Arts Council. Another performance, comprising original compositions and *some fusion music* (Rudra 2006), took place from the 10th and 12th November 2006, at the Esplanade. In the first quarter of 2007, with partial support from the local performing rights association (COMPASS), *Rudra* performed at three US cities: *The Heathen Crusade II Festival*, Minneapolis (20th January); one performance in Brooklyn, New York (21st January) and another (23rd January) in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (<http://www.rudraonline.org>).

These three *instances* mark *Rudra's* most recent profiled performances. According to their promotional materials, *Rudra* is a name for the God of Storm in the Vedic period and in later Hinduism, *Shiva*, God of Destruction). Their name, as it also applies to their musical subscription, symbolises the aggressive character of its music and unique identity; epitomized in a genre of Extreme metal (Death Metal) they call Vedic Metal.

Rudra's participation at the *Rock On Singapore!* Festival (17 June) in 2005, is telling in more ways than one. In K.Kathirasan's words:

We feel very honoured to have been chosen but we aren't sure if our music will be palatable to the typical Singaporean audience. (Aging Youth 2004).

As an Extreme Metal group, *Rudra* acknowledge their place within an Extreme Metal community in Singapore. In the Singapore context, Extreme metal had for its origins, the musical practice of *Mat Rock*, a local instance of Heavy metal and rock music, which emerged during the late 1970s with songs sung in the Malay language (Fu and Liew 2008: 117). Many youth among the Malay community were identified with, and supportive of, the practice of *Mat Rock* and by extension heavy metal. *Rudra* members acknowledge their participation in their myriad activities, specifically the music that was exchanged and consumed (Rudra, e-correspondence 2007).

But this segment of the popular music community acquired a reputation as social misfits and deviants and potential anti-establishment persons (Kong 2006; Fu and Liew 2008). Steps were taken against subscribers to heavy metal practice to *guard against the ills of a perceived drugs, sex and rock n' roll lifestyle* (Fu and Liew 2008: 118). A little later, heavy metal's guilt-by-association with drugs was supplanted by fears of the music's impact on listeners, particularly devil worship, occult, suicidal and/or violent responses. These concerns reached the levels of Parliamentary debates when a Member of Parliament (of Christian belief) called on the then Minister of Culture to ban such music. Public debate continued into the early 1980s on the detrimental effects of listening to rock and heavy metal music and a ban on rock concerts at the now demolished *National Theatre* but with less emphasis on moral panics. By the mid-1980s, debates for and against 'moral panic' made it necessary for the authorities, the police in this case, to remain relevant to youthful constituents for better understanding. As such the 'moral panic' moved towards moral guiding and guarding through a series of rock concerts and discos organized by the *Singapore Police Force* and later with the *Singapore Armed Forces Reservist Association (SAFRA)* and the *Singapore Joint Civil*

Defence Force (SJCDF). These events were designated as appropriate contexts for local pop/rock stars to act as models of morality to exhort the youth to keep off the streets (Kong 2006, p.106). From the late 1980s into the early 1990s, concerns swung back to drug-abuse and charges of devil-worship among heavy metal subscribers, through what Fu and Liew (2008, p. 119) refer to surveillance by *suspicious state apparatus*, as this thrash metal band member recounts:

I like to listen to Death Metal and I always get spot checked by the police. They say we are drug addicts but we are not. We don't look for trouble but because we always wear black we 'kenna' [get] hassled...we aren't into Satanism, we like Death metal because it is fast and loud. (BigO, October 1990, p. 25 in Fu and Liew 2008, p.119).

That experience was not very different for *Rudra* in their early years of formation (*Rudhra*):

Every other day when we left our jamming place, the police would stop us and check our id (identification cards). And the public would watch us as though we were criminals because we wore black all the time. (Rudra 2009).

From the early through mid-1990s, there was a committed focus on crackdown on substance abuse and the activities of slam-dancing seen at rock (also punk) concerts but with less focus on moral panics. *Metallica's* Singapore gig was marked more by the imposing presence of riot police in 1993 (Fu and Liew 2008, p. 122). Moreover, any specific references to Extreme metal in Kong's accounts of the reception of popular music in Singapore focus on slam-dancing at heavy metal concerts more than the actual music or music-making (2006, p.107).

Paradoxically, but not surprisingly, responses to Extreme metal practice via state apparatuses eventually came in the form of government-based community clubs hosting metal gigs through organizers. *Rudhra's* appearance alongside other metal *acts* at a National Day event at *Thomson Community Club* in 1993 corroborates these initiatives by

government-based community centres (Fu and Liew 2008, p. 121). Additionally, stakeholders of heavy metal practice seemed to have been offered alternatives to the monitoring of music with explicit or offensive visual and/or textual material through self-regulation under the Singapore Media Development Authority (1992) scheme (Fu and Liew 2008, pp. 120-122). K.Kathirasan recounted that the lyrics for the songs to be performed at *Thomson Community Club* had to be supplied ahead of the performance to enforce that regulations (K.Kathirasan, personal communication, June 2008). A mass-circulation article on a Death metal cassette tape release appeared highlighting a *nascent home scene* (Straits Times, 24 June 1994). That the support had been extended from grounded surveillance to mass-media circulation represented a considerable shift (positive) in attitude. Most recently, an article describing the Metal scene in Singapore declared that *Singaporeans are not only consuming this genre of music, but they are also actively producing it* (Straits Times, Friday 12 September 2008); curiously carrying none of the prior connotations or anxieties almost four decades ago.

Rudra's formative and emergent identity during the 1990s in the popular music scene in Singapore might have been considered propitious timing with support and *space given to youth subcultures* (Fu and Liew 2008:115) by the very same state apparatuses who sought to curtail and limit its practice in the preceding decades because of alleged associations with substance abuse, hippism and inappropriate social and moral values. Having performed through governmental agencies, cultural organizations and intellectual property stewards, *Rudra* can claim Singaporean identity.

Rudra's practice cannot not deny the influence and significance of communal re/sources, of which their south Indian ascription is a given. Even though English is a language they have been known to use more often, *Rudra* members consider themselves third generation Indians in Singapore who studied Tamil as a second language in the Singapore school system (Metal-rules 2004) and brought up with religious affiliation to Hinduism,

which they claim as their *innate cultural (not just religious) identity* (Rudra 2002). However, Lee Tong Soon's entry on music in Singapore in the *Groves Dictionary of Music and Musicians* informs us that:

The majority of Indians in Singapore speak Tamil_temple music from the Carnatic tradition_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. (Lee 2001, p. 421)

Since the group comprised males of south Indian ascription, *Rudra* could be identified at an Indian Festival on communal grounds. Oddly, Lee's descriptions of music, which includes cinematic and classical and folk soundscapes, does not mention *Rudra*, and by implication, their presence in the South Indian community in Singapore. This is curious since their recent performances underscore a more public sphere profile locally and internationally, and if one also considers *Rudra's* seventeen year existence.

Moreover, it is surprising to discover *Rudra* performing *fusion* pieces and their Extreme Metal compositions at two spaces of apparent dissonance simultaneously; the Esplanade Outdoor Theatre as a physical space, and communal space, *Kalaa Utsavam*, an annual Indian Arts festival, traditionally the purview of Indian folk and classical arts and more recently music of Indian film. That they were able to perform at the Esplanade, as a *venue* and *avenue*, is instructive of *Rudra's* place in a highly profiled performance space. According to the Ministry of Information and the Arts (*MITA* then, *MICA* presently), music's role in the Renaissance City Project - with the Esplanade as central space - was, *to provide cultural ballast in nation-building efforts* (*MITA* 2000, p.4). But the Esplanade was, and has been, read by local communities as space for international music concerts, musicals and shows. Such activities potentially accorded *less than equal* access and opportunity for participation for local and indigenous creative endeavour. Local communities have argued

that providing *hardware (infrastructure and facilities) without concomitant attention to the software (creative development) is regressive for the development of local/indigenous arts* (Kong 2000, in Gibson and Connell 2005, p. 120). Despite these concerns, *Rudra* had access, in performance, to one of the Esplanade's most visible outdoor facilities, as a local ensemble and not an introductory act prefacing a major international performer or performance.

Secondly, organisers of this annual festival would have included a number of both local and international performers and performances representing what could have been identified with *Indian-ness* through communal practices, affinities, affiliation and eventually identity. Their choice of repertoire not only distinguished *Rudra's* practice from the practice of south Indian film as consolidated and consumed Indian cultural re/source but also their distance from contemporary musical influences in south Indian film notably African American and African Caribbean *black inner-city youth culture* re/sources (Tamotharan 1999,p.21). In the words of bassist and vocalist K. Kathirasan:

We were invited to play as part of an [annual] Indian Arts festival called Kalaa Utsavam. We were_nervous_a metal band being showcased in a traditional environment. But we managed to pack the venue for three consecutive nights with a few watching us all three nights (Rudra, 2006).

Through *Kalaa Utsavam*, *Rudra* could claim to be identified with *local indigeneous* culture with access to the Esplanade as performance space *through* governmental agencies. But participation at *Kalaa Utsavam* was only made possible by the event organizer who had been impressed by *Rudra's* live performance *outside* Singapore. Put in another way, *Rudra's* local identity at this local event had been vindicated but not from *within* Singapore:

I remember the organizer mentioning that he watched us in Bangalore, India in 2002. And the performance impressed him and he wanted people of Singapore to appreciate a Singaporean band which was lesser known in its own country. What an irony! (Rudra, 2007).

Rudra's American tour of three cities is instructive of partial support from the local performing rights association (*COMPASS*) which validated their creative and intellectual oeuvre. Secondly, they were validated as performers of their own compositions. Thirdly, they performed as creators, performers and purveyors of Vedic Metal; their own local version of global Extreme Metal with approbation from *COMPASS*.

Local practice of global Extreme Metal soundscapes

Rudra's situated practice reveals a decided Extreme (Death) metal identity if not by their own admission then at least by their identification, through lineage, by print media and Heavy metal. As a musical genre, Heavy metal's notoriety has been such that opinions are formed long *before* the music has been heard (Kahn-Harris 2002, p. 135). During the 1980s it attracted widespread condemnation, media and state-sponsored *moral panics* (Miller 1988; Richardson 1991). The Extreme Metal scene emerged in the 1980s, *out an interconnected musical and institutional rejection of heavy metal, more influenced by punk bands* (Kahn-Harris 2006, p.129). Bands such as *Possessed* and *Death* were associated with 'Death Metal' which, *shared thrash metal's extremely distorted electric guitar and fast riffs but focused_on death, religion and gruesome theatricality. The vocal section became comparatively less clear, song writing became more complex and riffs sounded more austere and dark.* (Walser 2001, p. 431).

While Extreme Metal shared Heavy Metal's radicalism, but distanced itself from commercially popular Heavy Metal of the 1980s, it developed its own institutions and practices, circulating through micro-structures better known as the *underground*, utilizing practices such as fanzines and tape trading. While Heavy Metal was dominated by Anglo-American bands, Extreme Metal was produced, consumed, disseminated and discussed within highly decentralized global networks of cultural reproduction (Kahn-Harris 2006, p.136). For example, Malaysia is identified as one of many *local* scenes in the development

of the global Extreme metal scene (Kahn-Harris 2006, p.129). Given music's porosity, it should not be surprising to find similar soundscapes in Singapore given the close proximity and a shared history with Malaysia.

To summarise the more detailed observations of Bogue (2004) and Kahn-Harris (2002), an overriding consideration of Death Metal is distortion and amplification accompanied by fast frenetic drumming with abrupt changes in rhythmic meter or time-signature. This dominant drumming is accentuated by tuned-down bass guitars but in a way that the rhythm guitar riffs are given an indistinct grinding feel. Melodically, guitars deliver frenetically paced passages either in short bursts or what might sound like 'prolonged wails'. Vocal articulation of the lyrics seems to augment the guitar with wails or screams, sometimes as short phrases spat or shouted out, and growls of varying textural density and depth of resonance. Occasionally, there are songs which resemble conventional songs in popular culture. Performance of lyrics suggests *ametrical* structures not dissimilar to forms of recitation found in the performance of religious texts. Lyrical content ranges from angst-filled and abusive to the deeply social, political and philosophical presented in a variety of forms, from poetic through to aphoristic 'blog-texts'. Because the lyrics are presented in non-conventional structures, they have considerable influence on musical materials, particularly musical form and content, which includes harmonies and accompanying textures and timbres.

My brief observations focus on *Aham Brahmasmi* [I am Brahman], from their 2005 CD-release, *Brahmavidya: Primordial I*. The lyrics penned constitute a compositional (both musical and lyrical) response to an excerpt taken from a dialogue between a man and his wife found in the *Fourth Brahmana* from the *Brihadâraṇyaka Upanishad* (<http://www.geocities.com/advaitavedant/brihadaranyaka.htm>). *Rudra's* interpretation of this excerpt focuses on an awareness of the primacy of the self and pathways to such a realisation.

Lyricaly, the structure of the song *Aham Brahmasmi* is through-composed. In the song, however, the phrase *Aham Brahmasmi* (I am Brahman) is given sufficient space through repetition making it almost *mantra-like*. This repetition renders the perception, through musical performance, of a strophic structure (verse-and-chorus) albeit several musical interludes which tend to obscure this strophic perception.

Vertical sonorities (in contradistinction to harmonies) are found in this song as *power chords*: which comprise two notes a 5th interval apart, played simultaneously to make the sonority dyadic in orientation rather than triadic or chordal. The power chords in *Aham Brahmasmi* focus their intensity on two pitches D and E^b (a semitone apart) which function as pitch centres as well as other secondary pitches which in retrospect affirm the overall pitch centre D as the overall structural pitch (much like a song which has a key in D major/minor although the orientations are necessarily different). The song seems not to reveal remote modulations and any unconventional vertical sonorities are linked to the vertical treatment (for example power chords) of melodic/linear structures.

Musical observations notwithstanding, it is *Rudra's* performance of *Aham Brahmasmi*, realised through amplification and distortion, which contrasts starkly with the preceding description. Drums pound out very loud rhythmic patterns at a frenetic pace; the bass guitar supports the intensity of a low-frequency 'harmonic support' with insistent repetition of D and E^b (which is nearly imperceptible because of the distortion); rhythmic patterns (riffs) articulated by the rhythm guitar; and, solo lead guitar moments sound wailed and screeched in fragments. Vocal articulation of the lyrics is achieved through growls, grunts, groans or sudden loud vocal attacks. The vocal delivery of the text apparently avoids conventional poetic scansion and metrical delivery of text. Such a performance exacerbates the incomprehensibility of the song (unless one is in possession of a lyric sheet). But *Rudra's* vocalist K.Kathirasan prepares most of his pitched growls to *sound in tune with the bass and*

drums (Rudra 2008). Therefore the growls are not a matter of a haphazard or even adhoc performance of text; they are pitched so as to appear to be *sonically consonant* (in contradistinction with musically consonant) with the drums and bass guitar.

Discussions of Extreme metal have usually begun with a consideration of how the music and lyrics *deviate* from normative structures and strategies. For instance, Extreme metal is performed in a way such that the lyrics are almost totally indecipherable without a lyric sheet. Whether or not a song title or its lyrics empathise with its idiomatic soundscape, it is the printed word which inevitably finds reception or readership first. Should there be two textual versions, a sonic one and a written one when songs are *agglomeration[s] of music and lyrics?* (Kahn-Harris, 2003, p. 84). Lyric sheets for *Rudra's* songs would have easily allayed fears of occultism, injury to other communities or even anti-establishment. *Rudra* explain their narratives in coming to terms with Vedic Metal:

In the initial years we did jump onto the Death Metal bandwagon trying to sound like the bands we loved. Over the years there has been a conscious attempt to de-identify with the bandwagon and redefine our existence in terms of Vedic Metal or Vedanta_our style of Vedic Metal will reflect the opposites of nature, trying to find that which pervades both the profane (growls and loud guitars) and the sublime (Vedic chants/philosophy). The oscillations which are very much evident in all our albums reflect the nature of reality we perceive, both unpleasant and pleasant. So we seem to be closer to what Death Metal is right now musically although lyrically we do not conform much to what was defined as Death Metal then. We prefer to call ourselves a Vedic Metal band or maybe an Extreme Metal Band. Death Metal kind of limits what we are. (Rudra 2008).

By admitting they were trying to sound like the bands they loved to hear in their formative years, *Rudra's* practice of Vedic metal makes them vulnerable to criticism of being cover or tribute bands of *white Anglophone* popular music, first, and secondly, emulating or

imitating transgressive themes found in these musical practices. On balance however, what emerges from *Rudra's* admission is an emulation of the *signature-sounds* of the bands they loved to hear and not the songs. Moreover, this is a strategy they admit to using in their formative years; a strategy no longer needed.

My own reading of *Rudra's* Vedic metal compositions reveals pitch-centred musical works (at the local and structural level), accompanied by melodic riffs and power-chords substantially *enriched* by amplification and distortion. Unfortunately, media reports and studies of Extreme metal songs and lyrics render an impression that amplification and distortion are deployed as a measure of dissonance in the multi-sensorial as multi-levelled sense; whose messages, and identity, almost inevitably act as referents for transgressive ideological or socio-political agenda. Extreme metal identity is inevitably *vilified* by textual descriptions which predicate that *instantly identifiable sounds of death metal* can be associated with *loud, aggressive guitars and low-growling voice* (Straits Times 1994); '*Low-pitched growls and vomiting sounds, and such soundscapes are to some extent deliberately meant to shock people, and to be a symbol of their non-conformity*'; and names of bands and their albums reflect '*a form of social resistance and reflect the chaos and alienation perceived as characterizing modern living*' (Phua & Kong 1996, p.226). With undecipherable lyrics to complete the description, Extreme metal songs are not surprisingly judged *before* the music is listened to without prejudice let alone requests for a lyric sheet. Vedic metal would have been no exception; suffering the consequences of a lack of *informed* discussion of the music, music-creators, creative space for performance and reception *in ways* other musical practices reserve for their composers.

Would their performance at the *Rock On Singapore* Festival have left any impression that *Rudra* have pioneered and sustained Vedic metal practice in Singapore? Would their performance at *Kalaa Utsavam* have been understood as markers of inter/national

recognition? Would *Rudra's* 2007 tour of three American cities been possible through partial funding from *COMPASS* if their oeuvre had not been identified as local intellectual creative property?

Vedic metal is identified as an *own-language* practice of white Anglophone Extreme metal because these *musical modes, forms and traditions are tenacious and provide a resource of themes, rhythms, tunes for young musicians* (Laing 1997, p. 123). Local scenes benefit from their links with this Anglo-American *base* through a characteristic unique to global Extreme metal practice, *decentralisation*, which in turn, impacts the global scene via what Kahn-Harris refers to as *complex, fluid negotiation* (Kahn-Harris 2002, p.134). Citing the example of Brazilian Death Metal band Sepultura's 1996 album *Roots*, Kahn-Harris suggests that *since the 1990s it has become increasingly common for Extreme Metal bands to draw on constructions of ethnicity and nationhood* (Kahn-Harris 2002: 142). While Vedic metal cannot avoid its local/ised situation of global Extreme metal identity, it nevertheless emerges as a *glocal* identity: f/using western and Indian musical instruments, resources, as well as combining English and Sanskrit lyrics, Vedic imagery and philosophical themes; engaging in an identity of rootedness in a form that predates Hinduism:

Vedic Metal is Metal inspired by the Vedas, one of the oldest scriptures on earth. Our lyrics deal with the philosophy found in the Vedas called Vedanta. We are very much inspired by that school of thought and hence, we call our music Vedic Metal (Aging Youth 2004).

Rudra's co-opting of non-Extreme Metal re/sources, despite being manifest in expressly Extreme Metal musical terms, is not read as a practice problematised as a uniform translation of a white Anglophone practice but as a *rich source of musical ideas* (Kahn-Harris 2002, p.145).

Concluding Remarks

Rudra's three earlier mentioned performances have arguably affirmed local Extreme Metal practice; not only as local and indigenous but also inter/national identity. I suggest that Vedic metal can also be seen as redefining Singapore's social, cultural and musical heritage. But how will *Rudra's* practice dis/connect with *lived curricula* of local youth musical practices and the *implementation* of the inclusion of *popular music and technology* as well as the fifth and sixth objectives of the General Music Programme curriculum (MOE 2007, pp. 1-2)?

This will require challenging, at an epistemological level an understanding of music, in this case Vedic Metal, and by consequence its creators, makers and participants. That Vedic metal is produced and consumed not only locally and internationally reinforces *Rudra's* musical practice as *living* practice. Their songs indicate how much of *Rudra's* musical and textual endeavour is rooted in spiritual and philosophical explorations of their pre-Hindu roots. Concomitantly, Vedic metal, as embodied and *lived* experience, underscores its practice among various agencies and institutions, local and global, in varying levels of consonance and dissonance. But Vedic metal practice is not only performed in the musical instrumental sense but also re/created by *Rudra* through a variety of media in the authoring and authorising of their lives. As lived, living, performative, self-authored and authorised practice, is there a place for Vedic metal in music classrooms in Singapore?

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