

Indian Music in Singapore: From Diaspora to Local Identity

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Indian music in Singapore is partly a mirror-image of music in India, and partly a unique hybrid that could only have been born here.

The story of Indian music in Singapore is the story of the attempt to keep one's cultural roots strong and defined in a multiracial social context. Adding to the challenge is the fact that the Indian population in Singapore mirrors the diversity of India, with its many overlapping and non-mutually exclusive segments.

These include (but are not limited to) the descendants of the first Indians who came as labourers, administrators, teachers and so on. They came here during colonial times to seek a better life, and they include the later professionals who came from India to work in fields such as information technology, teaching and banking, those from the northern states of India as well as from the south, Indians from almost every major religion of the world, and Indians speaking a wide range of mother tongues.

Each group brought with them a love for a slightly different type of music, and the various streams have, over the years, converged, diverged, and morphed into new forms enjoyed by more diverse audiences. This dynamic tapestry has in turn formed a fluid paradigm in which the modern Indian Singaporean identity is viewed – the offspring of many sub-cultures.

Historical Background

In the middle of the 19th century, most Indians in Singapore were labourers, primarily from South India, with the majority of them working on plantations and estates, and in the government's public works departments. Soon after, the Indian presence extended beyond labour into merchant retail traders and Chettiar moneylenders. These moneylenders were an invaluable source of credit for small businessmen who had no collateral to offer at a time that pre-dated modern banks and cooperatives.

After World War I, continuing Indian migration boosted the numbers of Sikh, Gujerati, and Sindhi merchants. Indian contributions were also significant in the civil service where they were prominent as administrators, clerks, teachers, and policemen. In addition, there were convicts and coolies, eloquently referred to by one social historian as “ghosts at the banquet of colonial history”. Providing manual labour for the construction of vital infrastructure, they also built the grand Mariamman Temple on South Bridge Road in 1827. It quickly became a focal point for Hindu worshippers.

Role of the Temples

The temples built by the Indian immigrants, mostly of South Indian origin, were not only places of worship but also meeting places for the labouring workers who made up the majority of the migrant Indian population.

The Sri Mariamman temple, the first temple to be built in Singapore, and the earliest Sri Sivan temple, built in Orchard Road in the 1880s, also became the first platforms for Indian arts to be staged during Hindu festivals.

South Indian temple practices and traditions involve the use of various aspects of the arts. As such, temples were the earliest venues for performances of Indian music, mainly because music has a strong presence in Hindu practices. In turn, Hindu themes form the basis of much of traditional Indian music and dance.

For instance, the *nadaswaram* (a wind instrument) and *thavil* (a barrel-shaped drum) are played daily as worship rituals are performed, and these two instruments are also an important part of wedding ceremonies and annual festivals such as Thaipusam and Thimithi. Navarathri, the annual Hindu festival that stretches over nine nights, sees temples hosting as many nights of performances. So it was, and is, common to see processions, and vocal and dance dramas based on Hindu literature, performed during religious occasions.

In the early days, this was most popular at the Tank Road Sri Thandayuthapani Temple, and these performances were still active during the Japanese Occupation. The other temples that housed organised performances were the Ceylon Road Shenbaga Vinayagar Temple and the Kaliasman Temple on Serangoon Road.

Today almost all temples conduct these festive performances. People come to worship and then seat themselves to enjoy a wide range of performances by artistes of varying ability and experience – budding young talents and seasoned veterans, local and foreign.

Linked to the religious aspect, but forming a lighter style that more people can engage in even without formal training, are the *bhajans* (devotional songs) that are sung by devotees during regular worship as well as special festivals such as Maha Shivrathri. These are often sung in a variety of languages, reflecting the mother tongues of the worshippers. There are *bhajans* in Tamil, Telugu, Hindi, and even English and Mandarin. Specific to the Tamil-speaking community, there is also the *villupattu*, which is a form of storytelling that incorporates music and sketches.

Arising from the Community

Under British rule, Western music learning and appreciation were established practices that eventually came to be built into the education system. Regular military band concerts in Singapore played a significant role in nurturing familiarity with, and fondness for, Western music among a section of the local population.

However, traditional ethnic musical forms were promoted by the respective communities, for example by being taught in vernacular schools. This strong early communal support ensured that traditional music did not die out. Specifically, Indian arts schools teaching music and dance flourished, not only because there were teachers willing to sacrifice financial security for the sake of the art forms they believed in, but also because of support from members of the community who ensured their children attended classes to learn the various music and dance forms.

From the 1930s the Indian music scene was fairly lively. As the profile of the Indian population changed from that of indentured labour to include a burgeoning middle class of professionals, a certain strata of the community grew affluent enough to devote time to learning music and attending the rare musical troupe visiting from India.

They were also sufficiently affluent to own radios and tune in to the commercially-run British Malaya Broadcasting Corporation, which usually carried a half hour of Hindustani music and a half hour of Tamil music once a week at around 5.00 am. *The Straits Times* periodically provided programme summaries for a radio station known as Madras Today, which may have been a short-wave radio service available in Singapore. Radio programmes from the 1950s to the 1980s featured regular Carnatic music recitals by local and foreign artistes, but over time, this has been drastically reduced and replaced with cine music.

Three Pioneers

The early promotion and development of Indian music in Singapore was led by a number of individuals, whose passion and commitment to keeping the various music forms alive drove their efforts. Among them were the following:

Dr Chotta Singh

Dr Chotta Singh qualified from the King Edward VII College of Medicine as a medical doctor in the early 1920s and established a clinic at Dunlop Street. Loved as he was by his patients, he became known to almost every Indian household in Singapore because of his knowledge of, and performance ability in, Indian music and dance. Although an amateur musician and dancer, he was the earliest competent exponent and teacher of Hindustani music and North Indian dance. He eventually gave up his medical career for music.

Among his numerous students were individuals such as Paul Abisheganaden, a pioneer Western classical musician and composer. Singapore's first homegrown orchestral and choral conductor, Abisheganaden is affectionately referred to as Singapore's "Grand Old Man of Music" and was awarded the Cultural Medallion in 1986. He remembers his music lessons with Dr Singh, by whom he was tutored "so competently" that he and his brother Gerard were chosen to sing the welcome song (composed for that occasion by Dr Singh) when Dr Rabindranath Tagore came to Singapore in 1927. During the years under Dr Singh's tutelage, the Abisheganaden brothers would sing at the homes of wealthy North Indian merchants at their Deepavali celebrations.

Dr Singh played an important role in the promotion of Indian classical music in Singapore in the 1920s and after, and his name is synonymous with the Ramakrishna Sangeetha Sabha Orchestra which he founded in the early 1940s with about 20 members who were mainly women homemakers. This orchestra did much to showcase Indian music in Singapore and gave many – including Sharada Shankar, Radha Rajah, and A.P. Rajah - an outlet for their artistic pursuits.

Their concerts were usually held at the Victoria Theatre Memorial Hall, and comprised mostly North-Indian music as well as some dance. At a 1981 performance at the National Theatre (a building that no longer exists, which was at one time a focal point for traditional ethnic performances in Singapore), then Minister of State for Law and Home Affairs, Mr S. Jayakumar, praised the four-decade old orchestra, noting its significance in a time when so much focus was placed on material gains.

Because he grew into such a recognised figure among Singapore Indians, Dr Singh was elected to hold positions heading music departments in various Indian organisations that had begun to form in the 1900s.

Kannan Neelakantan

Kannan Neelakantan came to Singapore from Trivandrum, India, sometime around 1920. Having been trained in Carnatic music, he was keen to pass on his knowledge to others in Singapore, and taught music for free in the early years. He held regular weekend jam sessions at his home where his students would perform with him. These jam sessions occasionally attracted established musicians including Pandit M. Ramalingam, widely recognised as a stalwart in Indian classical music until his demise some time in the 1980s or so.

He kept up his interest in music by ordering musical books from India. He also had a custom-made harmonium crafted for himself in Singapore, and used to buy LP records from one of the earliest Indian music stores in Singapore known as Columbia House.

The economic stresses of the Japanese occupation forced Neelakanthan, who had until then been providing free music tuition, to turn full-time music tutor. His paying students were mostly from Sri Lankan Tamil families who wanted to stay connected with their roots. His daughter Yasotha, who had been taught by him, accompanied him and served as his pupil-assistant by singing and demonstrating while he explained and provided backing on the harmonium.

Kannan Neelakantan and his daughter Yasotha Somasundram were invited to perform at many public events, among them one at which the guest-of-honour was Subash Chandra Bose, the Indian revolutionary leader.

Pandit Marudavalar Ramalingam

Pandit Marudavalar Ramalingam came to Singapore in 1935 to take up a job as a temple singer at the Tank Road temple, an indication of how important music was as a component of temple worship which the immigrant Indians took efforts to preserve. He was such a masterful performer that many who came to the temple asked him to teach their children at a time when there were no Carnatic music teachers in Singapore.

With the blessings of his employers at the temple, he soon had many students and conducted several classes each day. During this time, he also worked with Bhaskar's Academy and composed music for them. His proficiency in Tamil meant that he was also asked to teach the language. By the early 1960s, he had so many students that one of his daughters, Yogeswari, would sometimes take over some classes. He regularly travelled to Malaysia to give classes there as well, a sign that there was increasing interest in Indian music beyond Singapore.

On Radio Malaya, Pandit Ramalingam hosted a programme about *ragas* (rhythm patterns used in Indian music), in which he would explain each *raga*, and then played songs which featured that *raga* so that listeners could understand the melodies. He was also involved in some of the first Tamil TV shows. He composed music, and among his works was the popular Singapore Tamil tune, *Munneru Valiba*. He also taught musicians to play as an orchestra, and performed himself. It was his love for music that kept him going. Many students did not pay for his lessons, which meant that his family faced a significant financial struggle.

When he was awarded a *Bintang Bakti Masharakat* from President Yusof Ishak, Singapore's first President – and the first batch of National Day awards – it was well deserved. His winning of this award was also evidence of the government's commitment to furthering the cause of traditional art forms in the country.

In the post-war period, Pandit Ramalingam had many students, among whom was Vijayalakshmi Sharma, M.V. Gurusamy, the great *mridangam* teacher and performer, Sarangapani and Gopalakrishnan who conducted classes and accompanied many a local artiste on the violin, and V. Ramachandran who introduced the *tabla* to many young boys. It is also significant to note that many of his students are today recognised in Singapore as homegrown local musicians.

Formation of Societies

Dr. Chotta Singh, who had supported the founding of similar organisations catering to the Indian community, was also one of the 60 Indians who convened to discuss the formation of an “Indian Association” in 1923.

The Indian Association had a wing exclusively for the women as well, and it was called the “Indian and Ceylonese Ladies Club”. The club was, also above other things, active in presenting Indian musical performances within its small circles. These women, among them Mrs Sinha and Mrs Sharada Shankar, were the spouses of prominent professionals. To encourage Malays, Arabs, Persians and other nationalities to become members, the club was renamed the “Lotus Club” (otherwise known as the “Kamala Club”).

Until then, it appears that Indian music was available in a range of genres, however certain genres were more accessible to particular groups. Dr. Singh’s music was largely popular North Indian music and this appealed to the masses, whereas in the Lotus Club, the music adhered to classical traditions more closely and was available only to club members or friends of the organisation.

Societies such as the Lotus Club, the Tagore Society, the Indian Fine Arts Society and the Indian Film Arts and Dramatic Society were set up by leaders of the Indian community and arrangements were made to engage teachers from India on contract to work in Singapore. Virtuoso performers were invited to give recitals in Singapore.

Music and dance often went hand in hand to attract students from the community. For example the Bhaskar Academy of Dance set up by K.P. Bhaskar and his wife, Shantha, in 1952 also taught Carnatic vocal music.

In the nation-building days of the 1960s, the Bhaskar Academy of Dances toured Singapore, performing in numerous multicultural shows known as *Aneka Ragam Rakyat* as part of national rallies promoting the Singapore identity. In 1987, its teaching wing, the Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society, was registered as a non-profit organisation and housed under a government scheme along with other arts groups in Stamford Arts Centre, Waterloo Street. In 1999, the Bhaskar’s Arts Academy was incorporated as a professional performing arts company.

The Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society was founded in 1949, and in its early years focused on staging plays by Indian playwrights. Starting out with 12 founding members, the aim was to provide a cultural grounding to complement the colonial education system. Having started out with six students, the Society today has more than 1,000 members and 900 students, a testament to the quality of teaching as well as the interest among the community in keeping the arts alive. These societies and academies went a long way towards keeping interest in the traditional arts high among the minority Indian community in Singapore.

Apsaras Arts, started by Mr and Mrs Sathyalingam in 1977, is another example of an organisation that is dance-based but which works to keep Indian music alive in Singapore. The Sathyalingams – “Mama” and “Mami” (Uncle and Aunt) as the founders are affectionately called – brought their grounding in classical forms to Singapore and used it to enrich the arts scene here.

S. Sathyalingam is the son of an academic who taught Mathematics at Oxford University before becoming a politician. Among his father’s students was Queen Elizabeth, who was a young princess at that time. When she later visited India as the Queen, she removed her glove to shake his hand, and even invited him to her coronation. The younger Sathyalingam studied music full-time at Kalakshetra, the most respected cultural academy in India, and worked hard to transmit his knowledge and skill to many students in Singapore. His wife Neila also trained at Kalakshetra, and is an accomplished dancer. Together, they took this cultural pedigree to the level of community engagement, by teaching at community centres and allowing students from all walks of life to share in their heritage.

Keeping Indian Music Alive

Through the People’s Association, founded in 1960 to preserve and encourage interest in Singapore’s traditional art forms, the Indian music scene experienced new initiatives.

Among these were the formation of the Singapore Indian Orchestra, which was established in 1985. Lalitha Vaidyanathan has been the conductor of the Singapore Indian Orchestra since its inception. After taking over the Ramakrishna Sangeetha Sabha Orchestra and leading it for five years, she had been asked by the People’s Association to set up a Western orchestra. She proposed instead, an orchestra that included Chinese and Indian influences. Her idea, revolutionary at the time, was accepted.

In 1989, a choir was added, to complement the orchestra, and two years later, the name of the orchestra was confirmed as the Singapore Indian Orchestra & Choir.

Starting off as a varied group of 11 amateurs from a range of professions and playing a variety of instruments (from the *veena* to the clarinet), the orchestra started off playing Indian classical works. At the time, the orchestra was made up of musicians with four or five years of training, and some with no training at all. All were part-time musicians. By 1989, it had grown to about 25.

Lalitha remembers that they sought inspiration from the All India Radio Orchestra. “We listened to their pieces over the radio, and notated them, and played them ourselves. At that time, we did not know about copyright issues and we paid for everything out of own pockets. When we visited our families back in India, we would take the opportunity to get things done for our music projects.”

When she met the composer of these works in India, she played him a recording of the orchestra playing his works. “He was shocked, but very happy that there were people outside of India who could appreciate his music. He gave me four/five pieces which he had composed, for us to play. He didn’t make a copy, he just gave them to me.”

The orchestra currently has about 30 musicians, and has performed more than 500 concerts over the past 25 years, most of them to full houses. Among its most successful performances are those held overseas which have been critically acclaimed.

The orchestra and the choir are innovative groups based on classical styles, but they also make modifications according to the scores being performed, such as the inclusion of Chinese, Malay or Western instruments when the need arises. The music rendered shifts between the classical and the experimental, with compositions generated from the traditional *raga-tala* formats sometimes crossing the usual classical boundaries. In their more experimental pieces, the trend is towards harmonisation and multi-layered melodic lines.

As the enabler of such developments, the People’s Association went a long way towards changing the perception that Indian art forms were elitist and to be kept within the community. With classical music and dance classes being established at the Community Clubs, more people gained exposure to these art forms, leading to wider appreciation for, and knowledge of, them. These classes also give trained practitioners the opportunity to remain engaged in the art forms that they have invested so much time in.

At the school level, appreciation for ethnic music is nurtured through platforms such as the Singapore Youth Festival, while on a national level, festivals such as the Esplanade’s annual “Kala Utsavam” give ethnic communities a chance to showcase their skills in an internationally-renown performing arts centre.

Role of New Immigrants

The first wave of migrants owed their primary allegiance to India. But as time went by, they grew more concerned with independent Singapore’s place in the world than India’s.

In meritocratic and multiracial Singapore, Indians were able to make a place for themselves, rising to significant positions in the civil service, business, and political fields. This led to an increase in cultural capital for the community as a whole. Adding to the government’s support for traditional art forms was an increased validation of Indian cultural pursuits within the community. As opportunities in education and employment grew in the post-independent era, Singapore opened its doors to new immigrants.

While they are part of a minority community that is itself fragmented by linguistic, religious, and class divisions, new immigrants who have come to work in the IT and other professional fields are expanding and entrenching the community’s presence in Singapore’s middle class.

Indians with families are especially keen to migrate to Singapore because Singapore has an Indian community that has already developed the social and cultural capital of Indian culture, cuisine and religion. In terms of the music scene in Singapore, these “new Singapore Indians”, while finding that there are arts institutions here that are keeping the culture alive, also bring with them an interest in learning classical art forms, attending performances, and bringing in performers from India who engage in creative interpretations of age-old traditions, which in turn revitalises the local scene.

With regard to the “new Singapore Indians” mentioned above, there are trends that indicate a lack of integration with the local Indian population, and once again this is evident even in the way in which music is experienced and appreciated.

Among other social and cultural factors, broadly speaking, it is simple economics that often separates “old” and “new” Indians, with the latter receiving expatriate remuneration packages which give them access to completely different lifestyles from their local counterparts. For instance, visiting artistes and theatre groups from the Indian sub-continent often appear in productions catering to Indian expatriate audiences which are able to pay top dollar for a ticket. This has also meant that private show promoters have been successfully bringing in acts from India, complete with advertising support, because these acts have drawing power.

This has not been the case with local acts, which necessarily relied on grassroots organisations and philanthropy, both of which have played a critical role in enabling the staging of Indian shows and providing a platform for Indian musicians. These shows draw sizeable audiences since they charge nominal fees. Having said that, the divide between the expatriate and local music scenes is one that could also be viewed as a zone of opportunity for new collaborations and trends.

Role of Audiences

The government’s continued commitment to multi-racialism has also meant that organisations such as the Esplanade Theatre will always ensure there is sufficient support for Indian performances, especially through their annual *Kala Utsavam* festival around Deepavali, even though audiences remain small compared to those attending Chinese or Western shows.

Small audiences mean that the development of Indian music in Singapore will remain a challenge. One factor that contributes to this is the fact that appreciating a classical Indian music recital in its traditional entirety requires some prior understanding and knowledge, and mental stamina. This is a challenge to today’s mass urban audience, a fact which, in turn, negatively impacts the creativity and scope of the artiste who is trying to connect with his audience.

Apsaras’ Managing and Creative Director Aravinth Kumarasamy, himself an accomplished musician, believes that audiences have to be educated to appreciate solo music performances,

and the lack of this education is one reason why dance recitals are better attended than music recitals. Even if an audience does not understand the details of the dance, it can still be enjoyed as a visual spectacle, unlike classical music.

Years of pandering to mass tastes in the form of an over-emphasis on film music in the media has resulted in an impoverished audience base. Many accomplished singers have no choice but to perform this genre of music if they want performance opportunities at public events because the demand for film music is so high. While there are many grants available, from sources such as the Lee Foundation and the Shaw Foundation, that allow musicians to explore new avenues for training, the fact remains that there is little interest among audiences or the media to support these talents.

Yasotha Somasundram, one of the leading faces in the Indian music scene between the 1970s and late 1980s, notes that the main challenge was that students somehow lost interest after a period. They did not have the inclination for repetitive musical exercises, which are so much a part of classical training in music and dance.

These attitudes may have had something to do with the fact that their parents, first or second generation Indians, who had come to eke out a life in Singapore, may not have placed a high premium on the arts, preferring to place greater priority on subjects with commercial value. This was the main reason, she says, why she had to teach film music alongside Carnatic music, so that the students maintained their interest. Singapore students also always had schoolwork to juggle with, and the student dropout rate was always high.

Aravinth Kumaraswamy came to Singapore in 1985. According to him, at that time, the Indian music scene in Singapore was in the early stages of organising itself, with numerous music and dance festivals and initiatives at the national level. However, most were private initiatives by institutions of learning such as Bhaskar's Academy, Apsaras Arts, and the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society. These institutions offered platforms for people to be trained in the traditional art forms.

Yet while the training end was being well supported by demand from the community, actual performance opportunities were limited, and only a small percentage of those who were trained actually managed to showcase the skills they had developed over years of intensive training. In addition, for many people, classical music forms were seen as the province of the elite, while the rest of the community engaged in Indian film music and other lighter musical forms. These forces are somewhat compensated for by the fact that younger artistes are increasingly making use of social media to connect with each other and their audiences. This bodes well for the Indian music scene in an increasingly connected world.

Conclusion

In general, while there is a fair amount of innovation, the basis of Indian music in Singapore remains strongly rooted in the classical. The music schools and the individuals who keep the art of Indian music alive in Singapore live and work in this balance between tradition and the natural pull to innovate and adapt in a rapidly-changing environment. Perhaps because of this tension, within the ASEAN region, Singapore has one of the strongest traditions of Indian music.

While there is great interest among the Indian community in film music, it is classical forms which have stood the test of time both in the country of origin as well as in Singapore. Indian classical music is very much rooted in Singapore because of dedicated private schools, organisations, and individuals keeping the art alive for many decades. There is continual musical communication going on with India and a constant stream of Indian artists and teachers who come to Singapore to enhance learning and appreciation of Indian music. While the arts schools offer training in both North Indian (Hindustani) and South Indian (Carnatic) music, the latter is dominant as the large majority of the Indian population in Singapore has its origins in South India.

There is, however, a fair amount of interaction between the two forms of music, not only in terms of audiences crossing over between them, but also in terms of performances that incorporate elements of both. The close connection between music and dance has also helped to keep interest in Indian music running high, especially because of the visual spectacle and variations in theme afforded by dance dramas that encourage fusion of different musical styles.

Although Indians are a minority, there has always been some form of patronage by the authorities since Independence. Free and/or subsidised air time on TV and radio has been a given since colonial times. This was in line with the government's commitment to multi-racialism. Indian performers thus found a platform on radio and television. Indian radio has long been a regular feature but a few years back the radio station became a 24-hour service while Tamil TV programming hours have been extended.

However, compared to India, musicians here have never really been able to make a living out of performance or teaching owing to the small audience. Many musicians hold day jobs and they have to fit rehearsals, teaching and performances into their professional schedules. Devoting a life to the arts involves a great deal of sacrifice.

Lalitha Vaidyanathan, conductor of the PA Indian Orchestra, is one such example. She grew up to be a talented violinist, but also taught chemistry in school. This balancing act between pragmatism and passion is one that many musicians in Singapore engage in, which makes their contributions all the more significant.

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