



INTELLECTUAL HERITAGE: MIGRANTS AND MUSIC IN COLONIAL SINGAPORE

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ABSTRACT

The paper aspires to highlight the cultural connection India and Singapore shares through Indian Classical Music. Singapore, in the 19th and 20th century witnessed continuous influx of Indian migrants that varied in their ethnicity from Punjabi to Tamil (McCANN 2011). The Tamils are the most visible Indian-Singaporians who contributed to keep the Indian culture and traditions alive in Singapore. The South Indian (Carnatic) classical style progressively developed to have an impact on Singaporean musical practise. For instance, throughout the 19th century, ceremonies and temple grounds appeared to be heavily influenced by the Indian classical heritage. Furthermore, folklore and Hindu mythology have been used in early 20th-century films to represent classical traditions and, implicitly, music (Dairianathan, 2014). The South Indian classical tradition may have been practised in Singapore as early as the 19th century, according to a wealth of evidence.

The objective of the paper is to underscore the significance of Carnatic music in the development of a multicultural Singapore. The paper will study the impact of Indian classical music on the social relations of Singapore. The paper will further explore the interaction and interchange between Indian classical and other genres of music in Singapore and the outcome of the interaction. The next objective of the paper is to present an overview of the situation of Indian Classical Music in contemporary Singapore and its role in establishing strong India-Singapore ties. Music connects people and helps in establishing strong people to people bond specially when it also connect them with their roots.

KEYWORDS: Intellectual history, Indian migrants, Carnatic Music, Tamil, Shared heritage.



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Intellectual Heritage: Migrants and Music in Colonial Singapore

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Under the Convention of London (1814), the Britishers had to give up the territories in Java and Malacca they had acquired from the Dutch during the Napoleonic wars (Robson 1931). Four years later, Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles in December 1818 to replace the ceded territory left India. He was an East India Company (EIC) official employed in India and later went to become the father of modern Singapore. With the loss of the territory in SouthEast Asia the Britishers had lost their foothold in the region. The objective behind Raffles voyage in the strait of Malacca was to establish a trading outpost in the strait in order to check the growing influence of the Dutch in the region (Makepeace, et al. 1991). On February 6, 1819 he signed a treaty with Sultan Hussein to allow the Britisher to establish a trading outpost in Singapura¹ (Raffles). However, Raffles was not alone in his journey. He was accompanied by sepoys, domestic helpers, milkmen and the Indian sepoys. One of the notable ones to follow Raffles in his second journey to the port town was Naraina Pillai – the first Tamil on record to arrive in Singapore (Lim 2007). Pillai was a trader who left Penang to journey along with Raffles in May 1819 to become part of his plan to remodel the city. Pillai built Sri Mariamman Temple in Singapore and also became the first building contractor of the port town.

1.2 Raffles created a town plan to transform Singapore into a modern town. The concept called for creating distinct clusters to house the various ethnic communities and providing infrastructure like roads, schools, and space for government buildings (Charles 1984). The plan required a huge number of labourers and skilled builders willing to work cheaply and for a longer period of time. The Indian convicts and prisoners were transported to the city who were later employed cheaply by the colonial government to work as labourers. The Indian migrants were a diverse group reflecting the diversity of the country belonging to different ethnicities, communities, and regions. The convicts and the migrants were skilled in different occupations and trades. They represented merchants, masons, accountants coming mostly from the coastal regions of India (Vidya 2008). The convicts after their release either returned to India or settled down in Singapore after marrying. The merchants and the accountants had a vision similar to Naraina Pillai.

1.3 Chettiars, Mappilas, Chulias (South Indian Muslims), Sikhs, and Gujaratis were among the Indian groups that established themselves in Singapore and made a significant contribution in the development of Southeast Asia. The nature of such movements shifted with the arrival of the colonial powers in the early nineteenth

¹ Singapura was the ancient capital known as the city of lions by the locals. After signing the treaty Raffles hoisted the Union Jack in the city which later came to be known as Singapore. The name itself suggests the ancient cultural link between India and Singapore. For more, see: RAFFLES, T. S. "THE FOUNDING OF SINGAPORE." Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, no. 2 (1878): 175–82.



century. The colonial regime tends to compartmentalise diversity, knowledge, communities, and people. This compartmentalisation allows them to effectively rule over the natives and use their knowledge and information against them. In Singapore, the colonial government made a similar attempt to classify people based on their ethnicity, class, occupation and origin through photographs in order to create a knowledge database. This process inspired certain representational modalities. The Indians were shown in stiff poses without any mention of a setting or context. Their attire or instruments served as indicators of their occupation. As a result, the people and their diversity was transformed into identifiable ethnic groups (Vidya 2008).

1.4 The Indian immigrants mostly settled within the city and established themselves into five major congregations. The first and the earliest was located in the western region of the central business core which was inhabited by the Chulias and Chettiars. The settlement existed before the 1830s. The second congregation was located near the High Street area of the city which was dominated by Sikh and Gujarati cloth traders. The third was near the Arab Street of Muslim and Gujarati jewellery and textiles dealers. The fourth Indian settlement was of the Tamils on Serangoon Road who were mostly shopkeepers and businessmen. The locality later came to be known as Little India. The last one was around the railway yards and ship docks inhabited by the labourers and workers of Tamil, Malyali and Telugu speaking communities (Sandhu 1969). The Tamils in Singapore continuously expanded and around the 1860s there were about 13, 000 Indians on the trading outpost of Singapore. They were, from the beginning, an influential community in Singapore who attracted attention from the colonial government reflected by the priority that was provided by the government to the education of the Tamils. Since 1834, school instructions were provided in the Tamil language in Singapore. A Tamil class was started at the Singapore Free School, however it was abandoned after a year due to a lack of adequate and acceptable texts (Koh, et al 2008).

1.5 The Tamils are the largest ethnic group of Indian origin followed by Malayalese and Sikhs (Census 1970). During the 19th century, Tamils immigrated to Singapore as labourers and traders. A little over 5% of Singapore's population is Tamil today. Although there are Tamil Christians and Muslims as well, Hindus make up the bulk of Tamils. When workers were needed for plantations in British Malaya indentured labourers were mainly imported from South India, particularly from modern Tamil Nadu. Despite the early 20th century's abolition of slavery, workers were still brought in by agents or foremen known as *Kanganis* (Guilmoto 1993). Free migration was also practised, particularly by merchants and entrepreneurs who went on to become well-known businesses. They also intermarried and had families as the town stabilised. The Indian migrants still viewed Singapore as a temporary residence in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The majority of them spent a few years working there while continuing to keep in touch with their families in India.

1.6 Even with their brief stay, the Indians in the early 19th century constructed numerous houses of worship. These places of worship also served as hubs of sociocultural activity, which helped the immigrants adapt to life in the new city. The Tamil Muslims built *Al Abrar* mosque and Nagore Dargah on Telok Ayer Street. The site was the centre of social and cultural activity for the *Chulias*. The Dargah was dedicated to the Sufi saint Sahul Hamid Sahib and it was a replica of his original shrine located in Tamil Nadu's Nagore. Another significant location for the migrants was the Sri



Mariamman Temple on the South Bridge Road (Lal 2006). For newcomers, it functioned as a place of refuge where they could stay while looking for other alternatives to stay. The people's village and caste origins were partially reflected in Singapore's other temples as well. For instance, harbour workers coming from Tanjore were among the Sri Mariamman temple's most devoted followers.

2. Establishing Heritage: Growth of Indian Classical Music in Singapore

2.1 Religious places like Sri Mariamman Temple were the adobe where Indian Classical music began to establish itself through rituals and processions such as *Theemithi* and *Thaipusam*. Since well over 180 years ago, *Thaipusam* has been celebrated in Singapore where Hindu worshippers perform penance by carrying kavadi, which are long metal frames with spikes inserted into the flesh of the carrier. Throughout this trip of penance, the accompanying party plays an improvised call-and-response music that is largely rhythmic and encourages a trance-like dance. Some of these actions were reported in the Singapore Chronicle in the 19th century, with special concern being made regarding the fire-walking ceremony (*Theemithi*). In addition, an incident during *Thaipusam* in 1896 raised concerns and required police enforcement during a religious festival. There are several different artistic disciplines performed in South Indian temple's customs and ceremonies. Due to the fact that Hindu customs place a significant emphasis on music, temples were the first places where Indian music was performed in Singapore. The Indian music and dance performed in Singapore by the Indian community are heavily influenced by Hindu themes – religious and folk.

2.2 There are two genres of Indian Classical Music, Hindustani which is the older one and Carnatic which evolved from Hindustani in the 15th century. In the history of Carnatic music, the birth of Purandaradasa in 1484 was a crucial turning point. He organised and refined the art in such a thorough way that it has remained unchanged up to this point. Purandaradasa is also known as the father of carnatic music. The names Carnatic and Hindustani are first seen in Haripala's "Sangeeta Sudhakara," which was composed in the 14th century A.D. Following the arrival of the Muslims, and particularly under the rule of the Delhi-based Mughal Emperors, the two distinct forms of Hindustani and Carnatic music gained popularity. An era of rapid development in Carnatic music began with the formation of the Musical Trinity of Syama Sastri, Muthuswami Dikshitar, and Tyagaraja around Tanjore and Tiruvarur between the years 1750 and 1850 A.D. (CCRT).

2.3 The immigrants from Tanjore found refuge in the temple of Sri Mariamman where the Indian Carnatic Music first established itself through several processions. Further, the contribution of Purandaradasa is also celebrated by the Indian communities in Singapore through processions of *Purandara Namana* organised by Singapore Kannada Sangha. The history of Indian music in Singapore is a story of the struggle to retain one's cultural identity within a diverse social setting. The task is made more difficult by the fact that Singapore's Indian population reflects the heterogeneity of India, with its various overlapping and non-exclusive divisions. Since the 1980s, there have been attempts by the Singaporean government to forge a single national identity which is contested by the ethnic groups of Singapore (Hill and Lian, 1995). Music has been an instrument for the Indian immigrants to reassert their ethnicity in the colonial as well as post-independent Singapore and at the same influence the other ethnic group through music ultimately contributing in the emergence of a multicultural Singapore.



2.4 During the colonial era, western music knowledge and taste were widespread traditions that finally found their way into the educational system while the country was ruled by the British. An important factor in fostering knowledge and love of Western music among a segment of the local populace was the regular military band performances held in Singapore by the colonial government. However, local communities promoted traditional classical musical genres, for instance by having them taught in local schools. Traditional music was kept alive because of this early and widespread support from the community. Indian art schools that taught music and dance flourished due to the support of the community, which made sure that children visited schools to master the various music and dance forms. The contribution of teachers was also invaluable who were willing to sacrifice their salary and remuneration because they respected and believed in their art form. One prominent example is Kannan Neelkantan who arrived in Singapore in around 1920 from Trivandrum/Thiruvananthapuram. He had received training in Carnatic music and was eager to share it with Singaporeans, thus he initially gave music lessons for free. He would perform with his students at frequent weekly jam sessions he conducted in his house. Occasionally, well-known musicians attended these jam sessions, like Pandit M. Ramalingam. Pandit M Ramalingam arrived in Singapore in 1935 to work as a temple singer at The Sri Thendayuthapani Temple, demonstrating the value that the immigrant Indians placed on music as a part of temple worship. He also started teaching Carnatic music to the children of the immigrants as there was no music teacher having expertise in Indian classical music. The parents attached importance to the music and wanted their children to be acquainted with their roots and culture (Vadrevu, et al., 2010).

2.5 By the turn of the 20th century, performances of Indian musical shows, folk arts, dance became popular in Singapore and according to oral testimonials accessed by Eugene Dairianathan such visual performances were organised for free for the public in and around Selegie Road. Posters on horse coaches, large notices, and print advertisements were used to promote such performances. Accounts reveal the extent of the audience's support for the performances, and there is possibly the first reference of "band music" used to gain more popularity (Dairianathan 2014). However, what was identified as band music was in fact a musical ensemble performing carnatic music. Gregory Booth's study on the Madras Corporation Band suggests that the bands represented a processional requirement for the Tamil people which combined music ensembles and their "concomitant layers of cultural meaning" (Booth 1997). The practice was carried by the immigrants to Singapore. The visual performances helped the younger generations in comprehending and relating to their culture and assimilating it in their lifestyle. For instance, Dairianathan mentions Christina Edmund and her father Edmund Appau who was a Hindu Tamil by birth and subsequently converted to Catholicism after getting married, went to temples to listen to Indian classical music. She was a child and it had a substantial impact on her life as she started performing along with her father. The New Indian Amateur Orchestra, which Edmund Appau co-founded in 1948 with V. Sinniah, a tabla player, was possibly the first Indian musical ensemble in Singapore. They were mostly recognised as an Indian classical ensemble of the Carnatic school. Christina Edmund recalls:

"We used to go and then we used to sing. Even my sister used to sing. Both of us used to sing



devotional songs with my father's group. I used to play music. I have photos of that at Kaliamman Temple or Vadapathira Kaliamman Temple. We used to play for these Navratri programmes and sing as a family group. In one temple as when we performed at Vadapathira, we were requested to perform again the following night (Edmund)."

2.6 Formation of associations, societies, and clubs further expanded the reach of Carnatic music in Singapore and helped in establishing a pan-Indian identity (Sykes 2015). Formed in 1910, Ceylon Tamils' Association was one of the first associations to be established in Singapore for the promotion of religious and regional identity through music. It was followed by Indians' Association in 1923 co-founded by Dr. Chotta Singh². There was a women's subgroup called 'Indian and Ceylonese Ladies Club' inside the Indian Association. Along with other activities, the ladies club was proactive in hosting performances of Indian music within its small circles. The club was later renamed as "Lotus Club" (also known as Kamala club) in an effort to attract members from different nations, including Malays, Arabs, and Persians (Vadrevu). In its early years, the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society (SIFAS), which was established in 1949, concentrated on producing plays by Indian authors. The group's objective was to offer a cultural foundation to supplement the colonial educational system. The Society began with six pupils and now has more than 1,000 thousand members and nine hundred students, proof of the quality of training and the community's interest in preserving the arts. These organisations and academies significantly contributed to the minority Indian community of Singapore maintaining a high level of interest in traditional arts. Ceylon Tamils' Association also actively engaged in organising Carnatic music shows. There are posters and advertisements in newspapers substantiating its activities in the cultural domain. One advertisement in Singapore Free Press reads:

"There will be an Indian Musical Recital in the Ceylon Tamils' Association Hall, 11 Dhoby Ghaut, on Saturday Mar. 28 at 6:30 PM by Mr. P. Gabriel, a talented Indian Musician and a gold medalist" (SFP 1936).

Advertisements and posters in newspapers were very instrumental in enhancing the reach of such events among Indians as well as other communities of Singapore. Aware of the potential of the print media, the Associations exploited it to expand their reach and awaken people's interest in Indian music.

3. Interaction, Social Relations and Music

3.1 According to the Singapore census, Chinese, Malaya, Indian and others are the prominent four communities of the nation. However, Indian music in general and Carnatic in particular have played a substantial role in the emergence of, among the Indian communities, an imagined "Malayan Indian" community (Sykes). Music concerts became an event in Singapore where cultural representation and interaction occurred which created an atmosphere of debates and allowed exchange of values and tradition. Sykes in his article has elaborated how such programmes created a debate on time

² Singh, also known as the "Grand Old Man of Music" in Singapore, gave up his medical career for the promotion of Indian Classical Music. For more see: Vadrevu, et al. (2010). 'Indian Music in Singapore: From Diaspora to Local Identity'. National Library Board, Singapore.



allocation for different genres of music as he further deliberates upon the divide between Carnatic and Hindustani music. The Tamil bands also played Hindi music but lacked the flavour and feel and the Hindi bands were not interested in playing Tamil songs. The Singapore Indian Music Party (SIMP) which had expertise in Carnatic music lost concerts to their rival Chandini raat as the latter played a combination of Hindustani, Malay, and English songs and also due to the “obsession” for Hindi music among Malays. Music was also broadcasted through radio, usually between 11 a.m. to 11:45 a.m. Indian Music was relayed as a homogenous category. With the emergence of “The Worlds”, a kind of amusement park, in the 1920s a cosmopolitan culture developed around what Sykes refers to as “popular public entertainment”. Indian art forms such as music, drama and dance found a place between Jazz, opera and movie halls (Dairianathan, et al., 2002). Hotels of Singapore were another place where music was a medium of interaction where in the 1920s Tamil, Malay, Hindi music were introduced along with Mandarin, English and Hokkien in talkies.

3.2 The later Indian generation who grew up in composite Singapore and were acquainted with the other cultures of the nation evolved a multicultural taste while keeping their identity intact. For instance, Edmund Appau was fluent in Malay and Chinese. His daughter, Christina Edmund was fluent in Tamil, English, Chinese and Malay music and went on to become the first Singaporean Indian transnational pop star. Indians made their mark in the popular and classical music landscape of English and European languages as well (Edmund). Although, in the colonial era Indian music was not much appreciated in Singapore but Indian musicians were accepted by the others. In Singapore, Indian artists and Indian music were not confined to themselves but made a contribution to the city's musical environment by absorbing the globalised, cosmopolitan mix around them and assimilating into it themselves further influencing the other communities and their culture and music.

3.3 In the 20th century the Carnatic Classical music was not confined to religious and regional themes of Indian diaspora but it also incorporated the elements of European, Malay and Chinese music and culture. The flow of culture was not unidirectional as the other communities as well showed interest in knowing Indian culture. Sykes mentions of Chinese dancers performing Bharatnatyam. On the other hand, while the musical arrangements of Anglophone popular culture and South Indian classical ways of performance seem considerably opposed, there is a location where both appear to coexist, namely in the Hindu temples during the nine-day celebration upto the fire-walking rite. The temples offer a cultural performance on each day of Navaratri. This includes traditional dance, music, and religious songs—the latter of which is occasionally backed by a band in the Western style (Nilavu 1994). Dairianathan, through photographic evidences, has showed that a generation of the musicians of the Singapore Indians Music Party (SIMP) used western instruments such as bongos, guitar, tambourine and the another group of musicians belonging to Singapore Indian Students Orchestra (SISO) using congas, accordion along with dholak and tabla (Dairianathan 2014*). In the musical events of the 20th century of Singapore SIMP also performed Chinese and Malay music at dances demonstrating that musical communities and genres were not as rigid as they were perceived. It was a common notion that certain genres were only played by certain groups/ethnicity but the diverse performances by musical groups such as SIMP or SISO show that the rigid boundaries were trespassed by the



Indian and other communities of Singapore as well.

3.4 SIMP was a group that performed Tamil and Hindi film music with Western, Malay and Chinese musical instruments. The musical practices of South Indian films in Singapore were influenced by Carnatic and Tamil cinema. Folk and Hindu mythology are examples of classical traditions and music that were implicitly present in early 20th-century films. Early Indian films shown in Singapore shared a connection with South Indian classical (and semi-classical) music based on mythological narratives. According to Balakrishnan Veerapan, a local cinephile and analyst of Tamil cinema:

"Here, mythological films were huge favourites and frequently drew large crowds. They played classical music, which helped many of us understand our religious upbringing. Almost all of the 'Hindu Mythological figures' were visible on screen" (Dairianathan).

By the 1960s, film music became a mandatory ritual in ceremonies such as weddings and local bands recreated movie songs using western instruments such as guitars and accordion. Most movie songs incorporate both Western and native themes. Along with tabla and dholak and other musical instruments like sitar and sarod, imported instruments like congas, synthesisers, horns, and violins were played. The majority of the melodies were uniquely Indian, using distinctive modes and melodies similar to those of folk or light classical music, despite the fact that many of them had a very Western-sounding tonal organisation.

3.5 Print media, magazines, televisions and movies were instrumental in further popularising Indian Classical Music among the masses. The growing demand of print and sources of entertainment such as TV, on the one hand, increased the reach of music, on the other, it also created interest and opportunities in Carnatic. The enhanced reach also attracted the attention of Indian artists and music society in the music market of Singapore. As print media was playing a significant role in Singapore's growing interest in Indian entertainment style magazines such as *Pesum Padam* was imported from India which featured gossip, the most recent releases, interviews with actors and actresses, and even the lyrics to hit songs. *Movie News* was a local publication that featured Tamil and Hindi films. Television, according to Dairianathan, was an even more popular medium where live shows supported by Indian diaspora and South Indian movies and songs got enhanced penetration among the people of Singapore. Artists like Christina Edmund, who was the first Singaporean of Indian origin to record and release Tamil songs, collaborated with Indian lyricists such as Banuthasam to record those songs. Interestingly the songs were recorded by TNA Records – a Chinese company. It is a testimony to the growing demand of Indian songs and the influence it was having on other communities as it attracted the interests of musical companies which had no history of interest in Indian culture and art forms. Such endeavours were also supported by the parents as they believed that these engagements will help their children in developing the culture and language (Dairianathan). The interaction was also reflected through the music syllabus of schools of Singapore where Malay, Chinese along with Tamil music were taught (Cain 2015).

3.6 The initial wave of migrants had their first allegiance to India as they were more sentimentally connected to their country due to their cultural and emotional bond. But



as they settled, their allegiance for Singapore gained prominence and they were concerned more for Singapore's emergence as an independent nation (Vadrevu). Indian immigrants in Singapore have been able to establish themselves in the social-political landscape of Singapore despite being a minority community with a population share of only around 8%. Their presence in socio-political terms is reflected through the rise in their cultural capital as the acceptability for Indian culture increased in Singapore with the Government supporting the Indian art forms and other communities showing interest in learning them (Vadrevu; Sykes). The Indian population in Singapore has already established the socio-cultural capital of Indian tradition, food, and art. The "new Singapore Indians" who immigrated to Singapore in the 20th century discovered that the city-state has arts institutions that are preserving the culture, but they also introduced with them a desire to learn classical art forms, going to performances, and introducing Indian performers who engage in creative reinterpretations of long-standing culture, which in turn rejuvenated the local scene.

3.7 Music being part of the intellectual and cultural heritage of the immigrants connected them with their roots and became a part of their identity. The temple visits, processions and later clubs, associations and orchestras were very instrumental in imbedding the cultural and traditional values associated with music. Music, further, engraved regional and religious along with ethical identity among the immigrants as the places of worship carried with them the tradition of music and other art forms which ran parallel to the religion and the region. For instance, the changes introduced to Carnatic music by Sarabhoj-ji II in the early 19th century such as incorporation of clarinet continues in the carnatic music practised in Singapore. The cultural connection Carnatic music had established continued in the 20th century as well, although the dimensions and mediums changed. In the 20th century, the people of Singapore of Indian origin kept themselves updated with the changes happening in India in the field of music through movies, radio, magazines as their interaction with Indian artists increased. For instance, founded in 1989 the Singapore Indian Orchestra and Choir (SIOC) , played from *veena* to clarinet, and was inspired by All India Radio Orchestra. SIOC played songs of All India Radio Orchestra and the members travelled to India to interact with the original composers.

4. CONCLUSION

4.1 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.

4.2 Music has been successful in connecting people to their roots. The temple visits, musical concerts, processions and associations made younger generations aware of their heritage. They, aware of their cultural roots, also assimilated musical traditions belonging to other communities. Christina Edmund belongs to such a generation. In the second half of the 20th century, the number of musical associations increased and they frequently interacted with their Indian counterparts. For instance, in 2021 the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society (SIFAS) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Delhi University to train 2000 Singaporean students in Carnatic and Hindustani music.

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