

## Towards a Malayan Indian sonic geography: Sound and social relations in colonial Singapore

Jim Sykes

*From the mid-1920s, Indian music scenes developed in Singapore that were not just about the construction of regional and religious forms of Indian diasporic belonging. Drawing upon European, Chinese and Malay influences (musical and otherwise), and performing in contexts that were uncommon in India, Singaporean Indian musicians contributed to non-Indian musics, while incorporating non-Indian influences into Indian genres. Such musical-communal interactions functioned in colonial Singapore to locate the island as a hub for the constitution of a 'Malayan Indian sonic geography'. By encouraging links between various Indian and other communities throughout the peninsula via radio, films, recordings, touring networks, and performances at hotels and amusement parks, music became a means for Indian communication and integration in colonial Malaya — a sonic geography that would be significantly transformed, though not eliminated, after Singapore and Malaysia parted ways in 1965.*

On 18 June 1960, the *Singapore Free Press* ran a story urging readers to attend an event that night at Victoria Memorial Hall:

### **Molly Lee seeks National Ball Queen title**

Singapore, Sat. – Miss Molly Lee, a 24-year-old Singapore typist who will be competing for the title of 'Ratu Tamasha Negara' (National Ball Queen) at the National Ball at Victoria Memorial Hall tonight. Floor shows for the night will include a Chinese fan dance and an Indian gypsy dance. Top radio and screen stars will present vocal numbers. Music will be provided by the 'Rhythm Kings Show Band,' the Singapore Indian Music Party, the Sinco Combrados, and a Chinese and Malay band. Tickets at \$5 each are available at Robinson's, C. K. Tang's and at local cinemas.<sup>1</sup>

Jim Sykes is Assistant Professor of Music at the University of Pennsylvania. Correspondence in connection with this article should be addressed to [jimsykes@sas.upenn.edu](mailto:jimsykes@sas.upenn.edu). I would like to thank Katherine Schofield, David Irving, David Lunn, Julia Byl, Martin Stokes, and the European Research Council, for whom this study was completed under the auspices of the project, 'Musical Transitions to Colonialism in the Eastern Indian Ocean', housed at King's College London. In Singapore, I thank Eugene Dairianathan, Larry Hilarian, Navind Kumar, Nithish Sentur and Praveen Vijayakumar for their encouragement and support.

<sup>1</sup> *Singapore Free Press*, 18 June 1960, p. 7.



**Figure 1. Postcard featuring Indian musicians and dancers, early 1900s. (Author's collection)**

The article describes a night where musical groups of indistinguishable ethnicity ('Rhythm Kings Show Band' and 'Sinco Combrados')<sup>2</sup> rubbed shoulders with a group described just by their ethnicity ('a Chinese and Malay band'). The article promotes communal difference by noting that the event will include a 'Chinese fan dance' and 'Indian gypsy dance', but it also mentions that the concert would feature the 'Singaporean Indian Music Party' (SIMP), a group that played Tamil and Hindi film music with Western, Chinese and Malay instrumentals. If such articles served as much as the events themselves to determine communal relations in the Singaporean public sphere, they also provided a significant forum for the recognition of communal interaction.

At this and other musical events in Singapore in the twentieth century, 'Indian' music and culture were remarkably well defined. When Chinese dancers learned Bharata Natyam (a South Indian dance) — which they sometimes did — they were keenly aware they were learning an *Indian* dance; Hindu festivals like Thaipusam and Diwali could never be recognised as anything but Indian, even though their celebration attracted multiethnic audiences. Similarly, when Indian musicians performed non-Indian musics, as with the Malay and Chinese tunes performed by SIMP at dances, they knew they were performing the musics of other Singaporean communities. Which is to say, the boundaries between musical communities and genres in

2 It is possible that Sinco Combrados performed Latin American pop tunes sung in Spanish. Interview, Christina Edmunds, Oral History Centre, Accession No. 003022, Singapore National Archives.

Singapore were neither rigid, nor were they completely fluid. There was a perception that certain genres *belonged* to distinct ethnic groups, a definitional hardness that belied the surprising fluidity of performance contexts through which Singapore's musicians listened and occasionally learnt to play the music of each other's communities.<sup>3</sup> To understand the history of Indian musics in Singapore, we need to understand how the boundaries of genre and ethnicity were constituted *and* crossed, by Indian and non-Indian musicians alike.

To examine these processes is to situate Indian musics in the broader currents of Singaporean historiography. 'Singapore is a child of diaspora,' Tim Harper writes, but 'for all the characterization of Singapore as a crossroads of cultures and ideas ... historians have written about how specific diasporas came to terms with their new environment, but have said little about how different diasporas conversed with each other'.<sup>4</sup> The tendency for scholars to focus on the shaping of 'the boundaries of race and power set by colonial rule,' Harper says, has tended to leave the historiography centred on the European diaspora, rendering others 'somewhat shady and amorphous bodies off-stage'.<sup>5</sup> To combat this tendency, he suggests we look 'more deeply at the range of arenas, at the different layers of sociability within colonial society,' including 'institutions that are neither central to the literature on empire, nor to that on "national awakening"'.<sup>6</sup> Indian musics, a domain scholars may find peripheral (at best) to the history of Singapore, can be made relevant to that history through their ability to render a narrative about how Indians created diasporic belonging through engagements with other local communities at events like the dance mentioned above.<sup>7</sup>

3 In other words, English language popular music was not the only stream of Singaporean music to attract performers from multiple ethnic groups.

4 Tim Harper, 'Globalism and the pursuit of authenticity: The making of a diasporic public sphere in Singapore', *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 12, 2 (1997): 262.

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.* Thankfully, the last decade has witnessed a boom in the study of communal sociability in colonial Southeast Asia. See, for instance, Michael Laffan, *Islamic nationhood and colonial Indonesia: The umma below the winds* (London: Routledge, 2003); Wong Yunn Chii and Tan Kar Lin, 'Emergence of a cosmopolitan space for culture and consumption: The New World amusement park–Singapore (1923–70) in the inter-war years', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 5, 2 (2004): 281; Sugata Bose, *A hundred horizons: The Indian Ocean in the age of global empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Su Lin Lewis, 'Cosmopolitanism and the modern girl: A cross-cultural discourse in 1930s Penang', *Modern Asian Studies* 43, 6 (2009): 1385–419; and Ronit Ricci, *Islam translated: Literature, conversion, and the Arabic cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

7 Elsewhere, I consider the communal tensions that have arisen in postcolonial Singapore due to the banning of music in the Hindu festival Thaipusam, as well as the erasure of Indian material history and the increased tendency to associate Singaporean Indian culture with the 'Little India' neighbourhood rather than the many other spaces Indian musicians historically traversed (see Jim Sykes, 'Sound studies, religion and public space: Tamil music and the ethical life in Singapore', forthcoming). I touch on caste and gender in this article, but further research will need to document how these issues — as well as the Japanese Occupation during the Second World War — hampered, rather than simply contributed to, the sonic geography I describe here. See Rajesh Rai, *Indians in Singapore, 1819–1945: Diaspora in the colonial port city* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Brenda Yeoh, *Contesting space in colonial Singapore: Power relations in the urban built environment* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003); Terence Chong, 'Manufacturing authenticity: The cultural production of national identities in Singapore', *Modern Asian Studies* 45, 4 (2011): 877–97; Norman Vasu, 'Governance through difference in

Studies of Singaporean Indians conducted after the Second World War have located the neighbourhoods in which Indians lived and patterns of migration from the subcontinent and Ceylon, set within the context of Malaya.<sup>8</sup> Due to the island's relatively small precolonial population, Singapore remained peripheral to the wave of studies that traced connections between India and Southeast Asia over the *longue durée*, which explored topics like precolonial Melaka and its Jawi Peranakan community (Tamil Muslim traders who married Malay women)<sup>9</sup> as well as studies of indentured labour in the Indian Ocean, which (along with similar studies on the Caribbean) were some of the earliest writings on the Indian diaspora.<sup>10</sup> In the 1970s, though, Singapore was situated centrally in the study of Indian religions in Southeast Asia through Lawrence Babb's writings on Thaipusam, the major Hindu festival for Indians in Singapore and Malaysia.<sup>11</sup> A surprising amount of fieldwork on Hinduism and Indian mobility in Singapore has been conducted by undergraduates at the National University of Singapore, and remains available today as unpublished theses.<sup>12</sup> Recent studies have admirably developed the study of Indian religions in

Singapore', *Asian Survey* 52, 4 (2012): 734–53; and Tong Soon Lee, 'Technology and the production of Islamic space: The call to prayer in Singapore', *Ethnomusicology* 43, 1 (1999): 86–100.

8 See Kernial Singh Sandhu, 'Some aspects of Indian settlement in Singapore, 1819–1969', *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 10, 2 (1969): 193–201; K.S. Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya: Some aspects of their immigration and settlement (1786–1957)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969); Sinappah Arasaratnam, *Indians in Malaysia and Singapore* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970); Sharon Siddique and Nirmala Purushotam, *Singapore's Little India: Past, present, and future* (Singapore: ISEAS, 1982). Under the Raffles Plan of 1822, South Indian labourers were given a neighbourhood at the upper part of the Singapore River, Chulia Kampong (which no longer exists); Raffles divided 'the southern central core of the city (the zone of mercantile trade) into various racial quarters' (Bharzana Begam Nafizath, 'The making of a place: History, community and identity of Little India' (B.A. thesis, National University of Singapore [NUS], 1996/97, p. 3), with Chinatown for the Chinese, Kampong Glam for the Malays, and Chulia Street for the Indians. By the early twentieth century, five areas had significant Indian populations: Chulia Street and Market Street, on the western side of the central business district, home to 'South Indian Chettiers and Muslim Tamil traders, financiers, money-changers, petty shopkeepers and boatmen as well as manual labourers' (Tracie Yeo Chieh Sze, 'Socioscapes in a global city: Singapore's Little India', [B.A. thesis, NUS, 1998/99], p. 61); the High Street area and its Sindhi, Gujarati and Sikh merchants; the Arab Street region, farther to the east of the Singapore River, which housed Muslim textile and jewellery merchants; Tanjong Pagar, where Telegus, Malayalees, and Tamils worked at the Keppel Harbour dockyards and railways; and Serangoon Road (today's Little India district), occupied mainly by Tamil labourers.

9 See Paul Wheatley, *The Golden Khersonese: Studies in the historical geography of the Malay Peninsula before AD 1500* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1961); Helen Fujimoto, *The South Indian Muslim community and the evolution of the Jawi Peranakan in Penang up to 1948* (Tokyo: ILCCA, Tokyo Gaikokugo Daigaku, 1989).

10 Sunil Amrith, 'Tamil diasporas across the Bay of Bengal', *American Historical Review* 114, 3 (2009): 549. See John D. Kelly, *A politics of virtue: Hinduism, sexuality, and countercolonial discourse in Fiji* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Marina Carter, *Servants, sirdars and settlers: Indians in Mauritius, 1834–74* (Delhi; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Madhavi Kale, *Fragments of empire: Capital, slavery, and Indian indentured labor in the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).

11 Lawrence Babb, 'Walking on flowers in Singapore: A Hindu festival cycle' (Sociology Working Paper no. 27, University of Singapore, 1974); Lawrence Babb, 'Thaipusam in Singapore: Religious individualism in a hierarchical culture' (Sociology Working Paper no. 49, Dept of Sociology, University of Singapore, 1976).

12 Gopal Das, 'The Kaliamma Temple, Serangoon Road, Singapore: A study of the economic and social position of an Indian temple' (1958); D. Govindasamy, 'Social change and the caste system:

Singapore, but the arts remain virtually absent in those as well as all of the above studies of Singaporean Indian history and culture.<sup>13</sup>

In what follows, I show that the movement of Indian musicians around the Bay of Bengal, as with language and literature, created a 'network ... that provided a powerful site of contact and exchange facilitated by, and drawing on, citation'.<sup>14</sup> Sonic citational practices were not equivalent to those found in the translation of texts, but consisted rather of the performance of esteemed mediums (such as the chanting of Thevaram, the Saivite hymns), and the maintenance and teaching of hallowed traditions, particularly Carnatic and Hindustani music, throughout Malaya.<sup>15</sup> The prevalence of numerous Indian music genres in a small island space fostered imaginative connections and distinctions between Indians from different regional and religious backgrounds in Singapore, while 'Indian music' emerged as a category that demarcated Indian sounds as distinct from those made by Chinese, Malays and Europeans. Meanwhile, touring networks brought musicians and dancers from India and Ceylon through Singapore and into Malaya, from where they continued on (if they were not coming from) places like Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Indonesia. Such musicians occupied spaces previously filled by members of the Parsi theatre in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; they would later share such routes and, in some cases, venues with touring rock and jazz groups. Music functioned to connect Singaporean Indians and Ceylonese with their homelands, while forging distinct diasporic identities in the milieu of the global city; but music functioned, too, to make Singapore a hub in a Malayan Indian sonic geography.

The narrative I provide here on the formation of Indian music scenes in Singapore from 1920 to 1965 shows that governmentality and the pressures of nationalism did *not* drive Singaporean Indian music history (despite the period including the Second World War and ending with Singapore's independence). For Singaporean Indian musicians, the need to make music came first, and it was this need that drove them to perform in an array of contexts — 'political' (e.g. performances for visiting Indian politicians), 'entertainment' (e.g. dances), and 'communal'

Intergenerational attitudes towards caste practices of the Brahmin community in Singapore' (1975); S. Manokara, 'A study of change in two Hindu temples in Singapore' (1978/79).

13 Some recent work includes Sunil Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The furies of nature and the fortunes of migrants* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); Vineeta Sinha, *A new god in the diaspora? Muneeswaran worship in contemporary Singapore* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2006); V. Sinha, *Religion-state encounters in Hindu domains: From the Straits Settlements to Singapore* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011); Torsten Tschacher, 'Witnessing fun: Tamil-speaking Muslims and the imagination of ritual in colonial Southeast Asia', in *Ritual, caste, and religion in colonial South India*, ed. Michael Bergunder, Heiko Frese and Ulrike Schröder (Halle: Verlag der Franckeschen Stiftungen, 2010), pp. 189–218.

14 Ronit Ricci, 'Citing as a site: Translation and circulation in Muslim South and Southeast Asia', *Modern Asian Studies* 46, 2 (2012): 331–53.

15 The study of Indian music-making in Singapore is still in its nascent period. See Shobha Vadrevu and Audrey Perera, 'Indian music in Singapore: From diaspora to local identity' (Singapore: National Library Board, 2010); Eugene Dairianathan and Phan Ming Yen, *A narrative history of music in Singapore 1819 to the present* (Singapore: National Arts Council, 2002). For a broader purview that dovetails with my perspective here, see Eugene Dairianathan, 'Cultural dependence in question: An exploration of musical practices of South Indian film in Singapore', *Festschrift* (2005): 174–92; and Loretta Marie Perera and Audrey Perera, 'Music in Singapore: From the 1920s to the 2000s' (Singapore: National Library Board, 2010).

(e.g. for associations like the Singapore Malayalee Association). To be sure, Indian musicians *did* compose patriotic Singaporean songs, they *did* perform in musical theatre productions for the Indian National Army, and they *did* petition the radio for certain kinds of representation in the public sphere; but in such cases, music is best understood as a malleable tool that helped produce the discourses and processes concurrent with it, rather than an activity that was produced *by* them. By situating Indian music as an autonomous domain that contributed to Singaporean sociopolitical dynamics, this article inserts Indian music into Singaporean historiography as a domain of agency and site for the articulation of communal relations in Singapore and broader Malaya, rather than depicting it simply as a means for Indians to express their communal identities.

Thus I argue Singaporean Indian musics did not develop in tandem with the broad shift in orientation for Singaporean Indians identified by S. Arasaratnam and more recently by John Solomon, where the ‘pan-Indianism’ that formed the ‘dominant identity narrative amongst the Indian diaspora in Singapore’ in the early part of the twentieth century was replaced in the post-Second World War period ‘with a normative Indian identity based primarily on Tamil culture’ (thus emphasising the predominance of Tamils amongst Singaporean Indians).<sup>16</sup> Indian music did not make this transition because it was able to promote both sides of this ‘coin’ from the 1920s: music was used to promote regional and religious Indian identities through communal associations (such as the Ceylon Tamils’ Association, formed in 1910), while associations with a pan-Indian bent (such as the Singapore Indians’ Association, established in 1923) contributed to the production of a ‘pan-Indian’ identity. Even during the heyday of Tamil ethnic assertion in Singapore, the hallmark of which was the 1952 Tamil Festival (*Thamizhar Thirunal*) organised by the head of the Indian Reform Association and founder of the Tamil *Munerrum* newspaper G. Sarangapani, we find examples of Indian ‘music parties’ (like SIMP mentioned above) performing non-Indian songs and bringing non-Indian musical influences into live renditions of Indian film songs (see below). In other words, attending to Indian sonic engagements allows the historical narrative to get *more complicated*, by requiring us to understand how shifts in the conception and formation of Indian communities in Singapore occurred in tandem with shifts in global pop culture, patterns of cultural consumption, and a late colonial public sphere characterised not only by newspapers but by radio. The previous historiographical focus has allowed Singaporean Indians (Tamils in particular) to seem a homogenous bunch, isolated and talking amongst themselves about how to be and belong in Singapore; by turning to sites for musical performances and representations, we see Indians articulating spaces for themselves through their interactions with others.

In what follows, I tell a narrative of Indian genre and community constitution and crossing in Singapore, beginning with a sphere of more purely ‘Indian’ musical activity, where Indian musics were constituted as a scene (or rather, scenes) apart from others; the second half of the article considers broader domains in which

16 John Solomon, ‘The decline of pan-Indian identity and the development of Tamil cultural separatism in Singapore, 1856–1965’, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, n.s. 35, 2 (Apr. 2012): 257; Arasaratnam, *Indians in Malaysia and Singapore*.

Singaporean Indian musics and musicians became part of a ‘global jukebox’, heard and articulated in dance halls, on the radio, and in amusement parks, hotels and cinemas, leading to the formation of an imagined and constituted Malayan Indian sonic geography. I highlight the interaction between these domains for Indian music-making, for to a great extent they constituted one another. As agents of their own happiness, their own rootedness, and to some extent, their own representations — albeit under the roof of empire and in dialogue with Singapore’s other communities — the Singaporean Indian diaspora emerges here as something different from the ‘shadowy, amorphous bodies’ that Harper complains have dominated representations of non-European Singaporeans in the literature on the island’s colonial period.

### Indian musics: Associations and pioneers

In the 1910s and early 1920s, a number of Indian communal associations emerged that would play a significant role in forging a Singaporean Indian cultural landscape in the twentieth century. Some of the most prominent still exist, such as the Ceylon Tamils’ Association (est. 1910),<sup>17</sup> the Singapore Malayalee Association (est. 1917) and the Singapore North Indian Association (est. 1921). In 1923, the Singapore Indian Association emerged to represent the interests of all Indians in Singapore, though it promoted Hindustani music. Articles in the *Straits Times* and *Singapore Free Press* provide a glimpse of the musical activities of the Singapore Indian Association at that time:

A musical class will be started at the Indian Association shortly. Those who are interested in music are requested to communicate with the secretary.<sup>18</sup>

At the Indian Association Mr J. Baruch will deliver a lecture on the subject of Indian music and voice culture on Friday, September 23, at 8 p.m. Dr. Chotta Singh will preside. All are cordially invited.<sup>19</sup>

One prominent member of the Singapore Indian Association was Dr Mangal Chotta Singh, a musician who became ‘known to almost every Indian household in Singapore because of his knowledge of, and performance ability in, Indian music and dance’.<sup>20</sup> Dr Singh trained at the King Edward VII College of Medicine in the early 1920s, after which he moved to Singapore and opened his clinic (Mangal Dispensary) on Dunlop Street.<sup>21</sup> He remained active musically in Singapore from the mid-1920s through the early 1960s (he died in 1971), with a notable occasion being his composition of a song for Rabindranath Tagore when the Nobel Laureate visited the island in 1927. Kuala Lumpur-based newspaper *The Indian* mentions Dr Singh providing music for a celebration of Swami Vivekananda’s birthday in 1936 with two other musicians,

17 See Indra Rani Lavan Iswaran, *Celebrating 100 years: The Singapore Ceylon Tamils’ Association, founded 1910* (Singapore: Ceylon Tamils’ Association, 2010).

18 *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 3 Mar. 1925, p. 12.

19 *Straits Times*, 21 Sept. 1927, p. 8.

20 Vadrevu and Perera, ‘Indian music in Singapore’, p. 3; Suresh Kumar. ‘Singapore Indian Association, 1923–1941’ (B.A. thesis, NUS, 1994/1995), p. 1.

21 Paul Abisheganaden, *Notes across the years: Anecdotes from a musical life* (Singapore: Unipress, Centre for the Arts, NUS, 2005), p. 35. Vadrevu and Audrey, ‘Indian music’, p. 3.



**Figure 2. Indian Association building, 1962. (Courtesy of Singapore Press Holdings)**

Mr K.A. Pillai and Mr P. Suppiah.<sup>22</sup> In 1939, Dr Singh founded what the *Straits Times* calls ‘the first Indian orchestra in South-East Asia’, the Ramakrishna Mission Orchestra; he also founded the Sangeetha Sabha Orchestra, composed entirely of female musicians.<sup>23</sup> Dr Singh’s book, *An elementary guide to Indian music and harmonium playing* (1936), is an excellent portrayal of Singapore’s multicultural mix, containing descriptions of sheet music for the harmonium, with lyrics in romanised Hindi and English.<sup>24</sup> The last event I found in which Dr Singh played a leading role was in 1960, when on an occasion reminiscent of his performance for Tagore three decades prior, he chaired the organising committee for a concert celebrating Tagore’s birthday at the Victoria Theatre. In 1986, Dr Singh was among the first musicians to win the *Kala Ratna*, an award celebrating achievements in the arts, offered posthumously by the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society.<sup>25</sup>

Carnatic music concerts were organised by associations as well, though here it was the Ceylon Tamils’ Association that took the lead:

22 *The Indian*, Kuala Lumpur, 18 Jan. 1936.

23 *Straits Times*, 23 Sept. 1986, p. 11. These orchestras were merged in 1950 and renamed the Ramakrishna Sangeetha Sabha. It is unclear when that orchestra disbanded, but it appears to have split by the mid-1980s, when it was replaced by the Singapore Indian Orchestra and Choir, an organisation with the unique mission to blend Indian musics with Chinese, Malay and European musics.

24 Mangal Chotta Singh, *An elementary guide to Indian music and harmonium playing* (Singapore: Nanyo Printing Office, 1936).

25 *Straits Times*, 28 Sept. 1986, p. 10.



There will be an Indian Musical Recital in the Ceylon Tamils' Association Hall, II Dhoby Ghaut, on Saturday Mar. 28 at 6:30 P.M. by Mr P. Gabriel a talented Indian Musician and a gold medalist.<sup>26</sup>

A new south Indian music school will open on Friday, Jan 22, at 5:30 p.m. at 42 Rowell Road Singapore. The principal is Mr Vidwan A. Kasturi L.T. (Music) Madras, and the manager will be Mr N. Krishnamurthi B.A., L.T.<sup>27</sup>

One important Tamil musician to emerge at this time was Kannan Neelakantan, who moved from Trivandrum to Singapore in the 1920s.<sup>28</sup> Neelakantan gave free music lessons until the Japanese Occupation in the 1940s, and was often seen buying records at the Columbia House record store.<sup>29</sup> As with Dr Singh, who taught several notable musicians in Singapore (including the influential Paul Abisheganadan, considered below), Neelakantan also had influence as a teacher, in his case as the guru of the renowned Pandit Ramalingam. Born in India in 1913, Ramalingam came to Singapore in 1937, working for eight years as an *oduvar* (temple singer) at the Sri Thendayuthapani Kovil (the 'Tank Road Temple').<sup>30</sup> Performing and teaching in Singapore until his death at the age of 72, 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'.<sup>31</sup> He worked as a Tamil language and music teacher, travelling regularly to the Malay Peninsula to teach, and was known for his stint at Radio Malaya, where he served as part-time musician from 1944.<sup>32</sup> Pandit Ramalingam formed the Sri Ram Orchestra in the early 1940s, composing plays and the well-known Singaporean patriotic song 'Munneru Valiba'.<sup>33</sup> One of his greatest contributions was to co-found the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society in 1949, an organisation that remains among Singapore's best-known Indian arts organisations. An obituary cites Pandit Ramalingam as saying that if he had remained in India he 'would have remained one among thousands [of musicians] — an unknown figure', but by coming to Singapore, he 'was able to contribute to the growth of Indian music' on the island, which he considered 'a great honour'.<sup>34</sup>

Pandit Ramalingam performed frequently with the *mridangam* player M.V. Gurusamy, who was awarded a *Kala Ratna* in 1986 at the same ceremony that honoured Dr Singh. Gurusamy, who moved to Singapore from Seremban in 1939, performed with Pandit Ramalingam on the half-hour slots allotted twice daily for Indian musics on Radio Malaya in the early forties; the duo performed at Hindu festivals, such as a Sathurthi festival (honouring the deity Ganesha) at the Sri Senpaga

26 *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 24 Mar. 1936, p. 6.

27 *Straits Times*, 9 Jan. 1937, p. 12.

28 Vadrevu and Perera, 'Indian music', p. 4.

29 *Ibid.*

30 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

31 *Ibid.*

32 *Straits Times*, 1 Nov. 1985, p. 19.

33 *Straits Times*, 15 Nov. 1985, p. 8. On the Wikipedia article 'List of patriotic Singaporean songs', 'Munneru Valiba' is the only Tamil song listed (though there it is listed as a Tamil folk tune, rather than as being written by Ramalingam). I ran across a Singaporean Chinese musician performing this Indian tune, with obvious Singaporean patriotic overtones: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6YoqmpNhUIQ>.

34 *Straits Times*, 15 Nov. 1985, p. 8.



**Figure 3. Pandit Ramalingam. (Courtesy of [www.tribute.sg](http://www.tribute.sg).)**

Vinayagar Kovil (the ‘Ceylon Road temple’) in 1951.<sup>35</sup> Both played key roles in the formation of the Indian Music Art Society (est. 1940), a precursor to the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society, with Pandit Ramalingam serving as president and Gurusamy as secretary.<sup>36</sup>

Women musicians were prevalent throughout the worlds of Indian instrumental and vocal music, and were highly regarded in the interconnected field of dance. Yasotha Somasundram, daughter of Kannan Neelakantan and winner of a *Kala Ratna* in 1992, was one of the first female Indian musicians in Singapore to perform on television and ‘probably one of the first Indian female musicians around the world to perform the organ’, an interest she obtained from watching musicals organised by the British army.<sup>37</sup> Hired as a singer at the British Malaya Broadcasting Corporation (BMBC) at the end of the Second World War, she became an announcer and producer of children’s programmes, going on to form the KN Music Party (named after her father and featuring her five children), which was featured regularly on radio and television.<sup>38</sup> Another successful female musician, Mrs Nagarethinam Suppiah, was a student of Pandit Ramalingam’s who also studied in Madras; she passed away in 1978 at

35 *Straits Times*, 2 Nov. 1951, p. 5.

36 *Straits Times*, 15 Nov. 1985, p. 8.

37 Loretta Marie Perera and Audrey Perera, ‘Yasotha Somasundram: Breaking boundaries’ (Singapore: National Library Board, 2010), p. 3. Available at <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/music/Media/PDFs/Article/54f7953b-61cb-4bb8-b04b-f26363b3f45c.pdf> (last accessed 10 July 2015).

38 *Ibid.* Yasotha was co-leader of the Indian orchestra of the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation when she put out a record on the German Sonotone label in the mid-1980s. *Straits Times*, 12 Oct. 1984, p. 4.

the age of 48, after gaining recognition for performing ‘hundreds of recitals at various functions in Singapore and Peninsular Malaysia’, including ‘variety shows held in camps of the Indian National Army’ during the Japanese Occupation in the Second World War.<sup>39</sup> She worked as a broadcasting assistant in the Tamil School’s Broadcasting Service from 1951 to 1976.<sup>40</sup>

Madhavi Krishnan was born in Singapore in 1941, and by 1961 she was a ‘well-known Indian classical dancer ... who performed before the Yang di-Pertuan Negara, Inche Yusof bin Ishak, in Singapore and audiences throughout the Federation’.<sup>41</sup> She came to the public’s attention by winning ‘first prize in all the events’ when the Tamil newspaper *Tamil Murasu* organised a dance competition during Pongal celebrations.<sup>42</sup> Moving to India to train as a Bharata Natyam and Kathakali dancer, her troupe Madhavi and Ganga toured India and Southeast Asia, with a stop at the Victoria Theatre in Singapore.<sup>43</sup> Moving back to Singapore, she founded the National Dance Company in 1970, creating work that combines Bharata Natyam and Kathakali, with performances in Australia, the United States, Belgium, Moscow and elsewhere.<sup>44</sup>

No discussion of Indian dance in Singapore is complete without mentioning Bhaskar’s Arts Academy and Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society, run by husband and wife team K.P. and Santha Bhaskar. K.P. Bhaskar (1925–2013), ‘one of Singapore’s first classical Indian dance instructors’, studied Kathakali in his youth at the Royal College of Dance of Travancore in his native Kerala, with additional studies in Kathak, Manipuri dance, Kandyani (up-country Sri Lankan) dance and Russian ballet.<sup>45</sup> His gurus included the famous dancers Guru Gopinath, Kuttralam Ganesam Pillai and Uday Shankar, the latter of whom he worked for on the film *Kalpana* and at his Gemini Studio as assistant dance director.<sup>46</sup> After moving to Singapore to teach in 1952, he married the young Keralan dancer and choreographer Pankyamma Santhamma (later Santha Bhaskar), and the two set up their dance academy, Bhaskar’s Academy of Dance (later called Bhaskar’s Arts Academy and the Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society). A talented figure in her own right, Santha Bhaskar studied Malay, Chinese and Thai dance (at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok), incorporating these into her compositions, a notable piece being *The Butterfly Lovers* (1958), based on a Chinese folk tale.<sup>47</sup>

These and many other Indian musicians and dancers circulated in a context where the domains between ‘private’ performances for Indian audiences and ‘public’

39 *Straits Times*, 25 Aug. 1978, p. 15.

40 *Ibid.*

41 <http://www.tribute.sg/artistprofile.php?displayname=Madhavi+Krishnan> (last accessed 22 Nov. 2014).

42 *Ibid.*

43 *Singapore Free Press*, 24 Dec. 1960, p. 7.

44 <http://www.tribute.sg/artistprofile.php?displayname=Madhavi+Krishnan> (last accessed 22 Nov. 2014).

45 <http://www.tribute.sg/artistprofile.php?displayname=K.+P.+Bhaskar> (last accessed 22 Nov. 2014).

46 *Ibid.*

47 Among Santha Bhaskar’s awards include a *Natya Rani* (Queen of Dance) Award in 1975 from the Singapore Indian Film and Dramatic Society, a *Kala Ratna* Award from the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society, and a Cultural Medallion from the Singapore government in 1990.

performances for multiethnic (Singaporean) or international (non-Indian, non-Singaporean) audiences were fairly well marked. While events that celebrated public figures like Tagore or Swami Vivikenanda and performances by important artists were held at esteemed venues like the Victoria Memorial Hall (the most prestigious concert stage in Singapore, established as a venue in 1905), Indian music events were held for all-Indian audiences at halls (also used for marriages) attached to Hindu temples, at association gatherings held on association premises, in concert halls rented out for events, and in patrons' homes on special occasions.

#### **Music party at temple**

Rethnasamy's Quartette — three girls and a boy — the children of a Singapore City Council employee, will give a recital at the Hindu Temple, Clemenceau Avenue, at 8.30 p.m. today. The recital is part of the 10-day Navarathri festival of the Hindus which end on Oct. 10. Amateur and professional musicians will play every night at the temple during this festival.<sup>48</sup>

#### **Tamil club celebrates**

The Tamilian Association, Singapore, held its fifth annual celebration at the association, at its premises at 82 Rangoon Road yesterday. The programme included classical Indian dances, music and lectures by prominent local Tamils.<sup>49</sup>

#### **Thiagaraja Day**

The Indian Fine Arts Society, Singapore, yesterday celebrated Saint Thiagaraja [Tyagaraja] Day with a music session at the Ramakrishna Mission.<sup>50</sup>

#### **Indian dances**

The Indian Fine Arts Society will stage Poet Rabindranath Tagore's dance drama 'Valmiki Partibha' and other Indian classical dances at the Victoria Theatre on Saturday at 8.30 p.m.<sup>51</sup>

One context for Indian music was the celebratory dinner for visiting dignitaries, where Indian music served as a backdrop for distinguished guests:

#### **G.O.C. with Indian Officers**

Great conviviality prevailed at a luncheon party yesterday in honour of the Viceroy's Commissioned Officers of the Indian army units stationed in Singapore, which the General Officer Commanding, Malaya ... attended. Indian officers of the Hong Kong and Singapore Royal Artillery were also among the guests. The function was organised by the Indian Troops Entertainment Committee and was held at the seaside residence of Mr J.B. David at Tanjong Balai. There were about 400 people, including many senior British and Indian Army officers and civilians, and N.C.O.'s of the Malay Regiment. The band of the Hyderabad Regiment was in attendance and an Indian music party followed the curry tiffin.<sup>52</sup>

48 *Straits Times*, 2 Oct. 1951, p. 5.

49 *Straits Times*, 24 Oct. 1955, p. 5.

50 *Straits Times*, 20 Jan. 1957, p. 8.

51 *Straits Times*, 28 Feb. 1964, p. 8.

52 *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 9 Dec. 1940, p. 7.

Even the offices of a record company could become a site for live performance: in 1951, His Master's Voice (HMV) studio in MacDonald House hosted an audience of about a hundred who listened to live music by Kumari Adhilakshmi and Kumari S. Vijayalakshmi, after which the 'latest Indian recorded music was also played'.<sup>53</sup>

While the above discussion demonstrates the prevalence of Hindustani and Carnatic music in twentieth-century Singapore, Indian religious communities developed their own music scenes as well. Seva Singh Gandharab describes how a Sikh music scene developed in the early 1920s:

In 1921, the Khalsa Dewan Malaya employed Bhai Pall Singh, Bhai Badan Singh and Bahadur Singh Ragi Jatha (Musicians) to do parchar (preach religion) in Malaya. Singapore Sikhs were able to listen to them occasionally when they were invited to Singapore. Bhai Pall Singh and Bhai Badan Singh were both students of the famous Bhai Jowalla Singh of Baba Bakala. It was a pleasure to listen to their melodies. The accompaniment on the drums by Bahadur Singh was a joy to listen. Bhai Pall Singh's children grew up and joined their father's group. Sohan Singh Josh the eldest son was an accomplished Tabla (drums) player. Bhai Badan Singh lived to a ripe old age. He is remembered by many of his students throughout the country.<sup>54</sup>

Gandharab describes 'The late Mr Bhag Singh, a school principal', as a student of the Patiala Gharana who began playing in Kuala Lumpur in the 1930s, before migrating to Singapore: 'Mr Bhag Singh's group was the first local born Sikh youth musical group in Singapore and was comparable to many established groups in India'.<sup>55</sup>

The Tamil Methodist Episcopal Church (established in 1925) was built at the corner of Short Street and Middle Road, next to the David Elias building, a Jewish landmark (established 1928).<sup>56</sup> A short walk away on Bras Basah Road was an area that 'was home to several Goanese, Filipino and Eurasian musical families who had chosen to live near the Portuguese Mission of St. Joseph's Church in Queen Street and the French Mission Cathedral of the Good Shephard'.<sup>57</sup> Indian Christian musicians appeared in newspaper announcements as well:

The tenth anniversary meeting of the Indian Christian Association will be held at the Short Street Girls' today at 8.30 p.m. The Rev. W. Runciman, M.A., B.D., will preside. The Lord Bishop of Singapore will be present. Music and refreshments will be provided.<sup>58</sup>

My aim thus far has been to show respect for Singaporean Indian musicians by acknowledging their communal allegiances and associations: the latter provided encouragement and sites of performance, and no consideration of Indian music in

53 *Straits Times*, 24 July 1951, p. 4.

54 Seva Singh Gandharab, *Early Sikh pioneers of Singapore* (self-published, 1986), p. 11.

55 Other Sikh musical talent Gandharab mentions include 'a group of Shabad (hymn) singers from the village of Mallian, all brothers and cousins', who were popular in the 1920s and 1930s. *Ibid.*

56 Iswaran, *Celebrating 100 years*, p. 40.

57 Abisheganaden, *Notes across the years*, p. 3.

58 *Weekly Sun*, 8 Nov. 1913, p. 4. Goans and Eurasians made contributions to popular musics in Singapore I consider below.

Singapore would be sufficient without mentioning them. Nevertheless, divisions between Indian communities were by no means as tidy as they appear above. Occasions for communal interaction were vast, between Indians with different communal allegiances, between Indians and non-Indians, and between Indians and global popular culture. To gain a fuller sense of Indian music history in Singapore, we need to situate the above communities within broader contexts of musical convergence and interaction.

### Circulations

Sunil Amrith writes that in the nineteenth century two dynamics forged a diasporic Indian identity for Tamils in the Straits Settlements, of which Singapore was the economic, social and political hub.<sup>59</sup> First, ‘Tamil diasporic consciousness was a product of the shifting balance between mobility and immobility across the seas’; whereas earlier, Amrith states, ‘the intensity of oceanic connections across the Bay of Bengal forestalled the sense of separation — between home and abroad — at the root of the diasporic experience’. After 1880, there was less mobility between India and Malaya on account of the migrations to Malaya because of the growing demand for plantation labour (culminating during the rubber boom in the first two decades of the twentieth century).<sup>60</sup> Second, Amrith asserts, Tamil migrants’ engagements with others played a key role in ‘the constitution of diasporic communities and diasporic consciousness’.<sup>61</sup>

While I am in agreement with the broad outline of movement, stasis, and communal interaction Amrith provides, he ignores the fact that the increased stasis and physical separation from India that occurred towards the end of the nineteenth century happened in conjunction with an increased *movement* of Indian drama troupes, dancers and musicians around the Bay of Bengal. From the 1880s, Parsi theatre troupes toured heavily, gaining influence in Colombo (Ceylon) and the Straits Settlements, where they gave birth to local versions of Parsi theatre (*nurthi* in Ceylon and *bangsawan* in Malaya).<sup>62</sup> The music dramas used Indian and Middle Eastern plotlines and actors from a range of ethnicities and nationalities, including Ceylonese, Indians, Arabs, Malays, Chinese and Eurasians. After the birth of the Indian film and recording industries (which played a role in the decline of Parsi theatre), it was not just the physical movements of Indians but the circulation of Indian cultural products (and the *imagination* of such movements) across Indian-occupied spaces in the Bay of Bengal region that forestalled a sense of separation from India.

The Malayan Indian sonic geography took shape through advertisements, touring networks, recordings, film and radio. The Tamil language *Munerram* newspaper noted Indian sonic spaces across Malaya, as can be seen in an ad for HMV which provides an address (11 & 18 Chulia Street, Singapore), followed by a list of where one could find HMV recordings: ‘Also at Klang, Port Swettenham, Kuala Lumpur, Kuala

59 Sunil Amrith, ‘Tamil diasporas across the Bay of Bengal’, p. 549.

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid. See also Sunil Amrith, ‘Indians overseas? Governing Tamil migration to Malaya, 1870–1941’, *Past and Present* 208 (Aug. 2010): 231–61.

62 Tan Sooi Beng, ‘From popular to “traditional” theater: The dynamics of change in bangsawan of Malaysia’, *Ethnomusicology* 33, 2 (1989): 229–74.

Selangor, Ipoh, Penang, Malacca, Seletar'.<sup>63</sup> Kuala Lumpur-based newspaper *The Indian* ran ads from Robinson Piano Co., which suggested they were 'Here to supply All Your Musical Requirements' at their branches in Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh, Penang and Singapore; their advertisements featured 'the new plan-reflex Columbia Gramophones' ('\$85 each') and 'Columbia Indian recorded dramas'.<sup>64</sup> In such publications, ads for recordings and Tamil talkies rubbed shoulders with those for recordings of Gandhi and notable Indian poets.<sup>65</sup> Malayan Indian sonic spaces were registered between two discourses, one on the greatness of the Indian past (a discussion centred on centuries of connection between India and Southeast Asia), the other on fears for the future of Indians in India and Southeast Asia.<sup>66</sup> Advertisements for Indian films portrayed a generic 'Malayan' audience the film would entertain, as in this 1935 ad for the Tamil film *Sarangadhara* (see Fig. 4). Indian musical recordings kept Malayan Indian music lovers up to date on musical developments on the subcontinent (see Fig. 5).

Singapore was a recognised stop for Indian musicians on a Southeast Asian tour. In 1937, the *Singapore Free Press* announced that a ship called the *Rajula* had brought South Indian musicians Kadakkavoor Kesava Bhagavathar, Paravoor Govindan Achan 'and party' to Singapore.<sup>67</sup> In 1935, the Indian Association hosted the Menaka Troupe, a Kathak dance troupe that toured the world in the 1930s.<sup>68</sup> Later that year, famed Indian dancer Uday Shankar (with younger brother Ravi) performed at the Victoria Theatre.<sup>69</sup> In 1956, the *Straits Times* reported a troupe of '20 of India's most famous dancers and musicians' was due in Singapore to perform at the Indian Cultural Mission after visiting Burma, Siam, Cambodia, Laos, North and South Vietnam, the Philippines and Indonesia.<sup>70</sup> In 1961, an Indian singer spent several months in 'south Malaya' on her way to Kuala Lumpur:

#### **Indian Singer Leads Party to Malaya**

Miss T. K. S. Komadi Jeyam ... a singer from India, is touring Malaya with a party of musicians. Miss Jeyam has appeared on the stage and made several recordings. She has also supplied background music to films. She sings folk songs and modern tunes. After a tour of south Malaya, the party will give performances in Kuala Lumpur.<sup>71</sup>

In 1951, the *Straits Times* reported that 16-year-old Kumari Padma from Tamil Nadu, a veena artist who had trained under Veena Dhanammal, was on tour with her father,

63 *Munerram*, 4 Feb. 1932, p. 7.

64 *The Indian*, 28 Dec. 1935.

65 'Hear the greatest poetess Srimiti Sarojini Naidu impressively eloquently rendering her own the following compositions ... Words fail to describe her wonderful voice', *Munerram*, 18 Feb. 1932, p. 4.

66 The 18 Jan. 1936 issue of *The Indian* contains ads for Tamil talkies, musical instruments and life insurance, with articles on 'The sway of Indian influence in the East' (subheadings: 'Days of India's glory recalled' and 'Hindu culture in Malaya and Indo-China'), the plight of Indian labourers on plantations, current affairs in India, and a column called 'Random notes from Singapore'.

67 *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 16 Nov. 1937, p. 3. The article does not mention whether this group arrived to stay or were beginning or continuing a tour, but musical visits to Singapore were typically the culmination or launching pad for more performances.

68 *Straits Times*, 14 May 1935, p. 13.

69 *Straits Times*, 8 Oct. 1935, p. 17.

70 *Straits Times*, 3 June 1956, p. 4.

71 *Straits Times*, 28 Feb. 1961, p. 5.

**Outstanding  
Holiday Treat**

FOR  
YOUNG AND OLD

MOHINI

**Rukmangadha**

OR  
"EKADASI VIRTA MAHATHMYAM"  
A SUPER-CLASS TAMIL TALKIE  
NOW BEING SCREENED AT THE

**REGAL THEATRE**  
SINGAPORE.

FEATURING

**Miss M. S. VIJAYAL**

Supported by a Galaxy of Talented  
ARTISTES.

21 BEAUTIFUL GIRL DANCERS SINGING  
AND DANCING FOR YOU.

---

**WATCH!**

THE SCREENING DATES OF OTHER SUPER  
TAMIL TALKIES AT ALL MALAYAN THEATRES.

COMING! COMING!!

**'Sarangadhara'**

Sole Distributors:—  
MESSRS. S. A. PACKER MOHAMED & CO.  
IPOH.

Figure 4. Advertisement for the 1935 Tamil talkie, *Sarangadhara* (*The Indian*, 28 Dec. 1935, p. 2). (Courtesy of the British Library)

performing in Singapore, Java, Bali and Borneo.<sup>72</sup> The sonic geography was populated, too, by touring Indian musicians from elsewhere in Malaya:

Miss Leena Madhavan, daughter of Mr A.P. Madhavan, Town Board Superintendent, Ipoh, will be the main star at an Indian dance performance at the Victoria Theatre, Singapore, on Friday. Sixteen year old Miss Leena studied Indian classical dancing at Madras for five years. She represented India at the International Pageant.<sup>73</sup>

72 *Straits Times*, 27 May 1951, p. 9.

73 *Straits Times*, 24 Aug. 1952, p. 11.





On other occasions, musicians came to Singapore only to stay awhile:

**South Indian Musicians to Play Here**

A South Indian music party arrived in Singapore for a short season here yesterday. The eight-man 'Kacheri' group was greeted by a shower of garlands by scores of fans when they arrived by train from Penang.<sup>74</sup>

By the 1950s, there were enough resident Indian musicians in Singapore that even some visiting Indian musicians felt they had to offer free concerts just to get an audience:

**Free Indian music**

Pandit Davendra Vijay Dave, well-known Indian classical musician now in Singapore, is giving free performances dally at 20, Thiam Siew Avenue between 8 and 9 p.m.<sup>75</sup>

Inevitably, some musicians who moved from India to Singapore to teach and perform opted to return to their homeland:

**Indian Music Maestro**

She is fondly known as 'Mami' and confesses to being 'married to music first and then to my husband.' A. Padmavati is also acknowledged as the one single force in the Indian Art Academy responsible for the ever-increasing interest in Indian music here. Padmavati, whose day consists of more than 10 hours of teaching sessions, is returning to India after eight years of dedicated service.<sup>76</sup>

In 1960, the head of the Indian section of Radio Singapore, P.S. Raman, travelled to India to receive training in broadcasting, where he attended a music festival in Madras, visited the Tirichinapalli station of All-India Radio, and spent four days with the transcription service and four days at the staff training school of All-India Radio in Delhi.<sup>77</sup>

Though a detailed analysis of the geography of sacred music-making in colonial Malaya is outside the scope of this article, it is necessary to mention the importance of Hindu religious festivals as events for the promotion of a pan-Indian identity in Malaya. By the 1920s, Thaipusam had become the most important festival for Indians in Malaya, transcending its roots in Tamil Hinduism to become a display of Singaporean Indian identity in the public sphere.<sup>78</sup> Though the celebrations at the Batu Caves outside Kuala Lumpur and in Penang would become more famous — the Singapore version has been plagued by governmental restrictions banning

74 *Singapore Free Press*, 5 Aug. 1959, p. 5.

75 *Straits Times*, 21 Apr. 1953, p. 7.

76 *Straits Times*, 14 May 1982, p. 2.

77 *Straits Times*, 21 Dec. 1960, p. 11. Andrew Weintraub gives us a glimpse of a different sort of touring network when he discusses how an Indonesian *dangdut* singer, Sinar Kemala, from Surabaya in Java, worked as a freelance artist in the 1950s, wearing Indian clothes and imitating the vocals and dance styles of Indian film songs, touring in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia. Andrew Weintraub, *Dangdut stories: A social and musical history of Indonesia's most popular music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 60.

78 It is important to stress that such events could be rife with controversy about appropriate worship and display factionalism as much as unity.

drumming since the 1970s — the Singapore festival and others on the Hindu calendar like Deepavali and Navarathri were occasions where music brought Indians of various persuasions together, including plantation labourers. Singaporean Hindus were (and remain) a part of this greater Malayan Hindu domain of ritual festivity and pilgrimage, events that incorporate Tamil temple music (*nadaswaram* and *thavil*) and facilitate formal concerts in Hindu temples.

In his ethnography of a Malayan plantation in the early 1960s, Ravindra Jain notes that temple drummers, who were also estate workers, were one of the few Indians who moved frequently between plantations.<sup>79</sup> A van would visit the plantation he studied from time to time to show Bollywood films to labourers.<sup>80</sup> Worries about the state of Tamil labourers on Malayan rubber plantations facilitated visits by organisations that wished to help them, such as the Chettiar-run Temple Society, which brought drama troupes to entertain estate workers around the time of the annual Thaipusam celebrations. All the while, groups of itinerant musicians the British referred to as ‘snake charmers’ included musicians and dancers who had migrated to Malaya looking to earn money on the plantations, but had failed to find a job on the estates.

### Representations

Indian musics contributed to the emergence of an imagined ‘Malayan’ Indian community in which ‘Indians’ in some sense transcended their internal divisions to achieve ‘CMIO’ status.<sup>81</sup> A *Straits Times* story in 1933 announced that,

On Sunday night Penang broadcasted an excellent programme on a wavelength of 42.2 metres. The programme included Chinese wedding music, an Indian melody and kronch-ong selections. It is hoped to repeat a similar programme in the near future.<sup>82</sup>

Here we can imagine an Indian living in Singapore thinking about other Indians in Penang, differentiating themselves from the Chinese and Malays. Music was a means to homogenise the races, as differences within each CMIO category could be papered over in the drive towards representing the larger racial category in the public sphere.

In March 1939, a debate raged in the *Straits Times* about how much time should be allotted for Indian programming on radio. The BMBC had eliminated its Tamil programmes, including Indian music, while continuing its European, Chinese and Malay programming.<sup>83</sup> The BMBC reasoned that the 80 minutes per week previously allotted for Indian music was unwarranted on account of its small audience.<sup>84</sup> The fact that Indians spoke many languages and programming in Tamil could not

79 Ravindra K. Jain, *South Indians on the plantation frontier in Malaya* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).

80 Ibid.

81 ‘Chinese, Malay, Indian, Other’ are the four main categories of the Singapore census.

82 *Straits Times*, 21 Sept. 1933, p. 13.

83 Drew O. McDaniel, *Broadcasting in the Malay world: Radio, television, and video in Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1994), p. 43.

84 *Straits Times*, 19 May 1939, p. 15. Out of around 5,000 listeners, the BMBC argued only 200 were Indians. See also *Straits Times*, 6 Apr. 1939, p. 10.



**Figure 6. Indian musicians at a wedding ceremony, Singapore, 1962. (Courtesy of Singapore Press Holdings)**

reach them all may also have been a factor.<sup>85</sup> Indians accused the BMBC of underestimating the number of Indian listeners. One writer lamented, ‘They cannot guess the race of a licensee merely from his name. I could write down a hundred names which would sound European or Malay but are actually Indian’.<sup>86</sup> Writers held up the Penang Wireless Society as a model, noting that although Penang had a smaller Indian population, its station devoted ‘at least three days in the week to Indian programmes lasting for one hour on each day’.<sup>87</sup> After publishing nine letters from readers about the issue on its editorial page in March, the editor of the *Straits Times*, warning ‘space on this page has to be rationed’, took the Indian side of the debate, pointing out that Malays in Singapore still received radio time even though they numbered just slightly more than the Indians.<sup>88</sup> A few months later the BMBC announced that it would restore Indian programming, though initially this was for just an hour each week.<sup>89</sup>

85 *Straits Times*, 19 May 1939, p. 15.

86 *Straits Times*, 23 Mar. 1939, p. 15.

87 *Straits Times*, 6 Mar. 1939, p. 15. Singaporean Indians at this time could not rely on stations in India and Ceylon. As one writer put it, ‘It is a well-known fact ... that it is impossible to get good reception from the Indian stations in the early hours of the evening — between 6 and 8 p.m. — unless the listener possesses an up-to-date and extraordinarily powerful set.’

88 *Straits Times*, 6 Apr. 1939, p. 10.

89 *Straits Times*, 19 May 1939, p. 15. The situation had changed drastically by 1960, when Radio Singapore announced it would broadcast a variety programme throughout Thaipusam day, from 6:30

The radio debate is instructive for the discourse on Indian diversity and representation it opened up in a most public forum, the *Straits Times*. At issue was whether Indian communities deserved equal representation on air or whether Indians should be happy with airtime devoted mainly or just to the various musical genres of the numerically dominant Indian communities. One writer, going by the name 'South Indian Music-Lover', wrote that

the B.M.B.C. management could prove themselves impartial towards their Indian listeners by providing Canarese music one day, Tamil music another day, Malayalam music the third day, Hindustani and Bengali music the fourth day and so on. If this arrangement is not practicable, a selection of all these different types of music will not go without a favourable response.<sup>90</sup>

Another writer remarked that if the station's management thought 'that they cannot satisfy all classes of the Indian community, I would tell them that any Indian, whatever his class, would appreciate any Indian music. It is the monotonous European music that jars on Indian ears'.<sup>91</sup>

Similar debates flared up periodically in later years, sometimes as a squabble among Indians about who deserved more airtime:

I am tired of hearing repeated Tamil recorded music from Radio Malaya. I think in fairness to the Northern Indians, more broadcasts of Hindustani music should be given. Northern Indian. Singapore.<sup>92</sup>

In 1954, in response to a Mr Nair who had written to the *Straits Times* asking for more older recordings of Carnatic music to be played on the radio, a writer countered,

If Mr Nair cannot do without old Carnatic music, he can listen to All India Radio-Madras or get a gramophone. Radio Malaya should play more Hindustani records for both Indians and Malays seem to like them. N.B. Krishnan.<sup>93</sup>

Another writer chimed in for unity among Indians:

It is beyond the imagination to understand why a South Indian should bear any ill-will towards North Indian music, especially when the latter has the same swaras, ragas, thalams (or rhythms), and last but not least, even the same musical instruments for accompaniments. Is not an Indian always an Indian, whether he belongs to South India, North India or any other part of India?<sup>94</sup>

a.m. to 11 p.m., noting that, 'there will be music and talks including Indian music for Hindu listeners at 10:15 a.m.', *Straits Times*, 11 Feb. 1960, p. 4.

90 *Straits Times*, 27 Mar. 1939, p. 15. The writer goes on to say he has 'purchased dozens of H.M.V., Columbia, Hutchins and other records of Indian music as a result of broadcasting by the Penang and K.L. stations' and would be happy to lend the B.M.B.C. his records.

91 *Straits Times*, 18 Mar. 1939, p. 10.

92 *Straits Times*, 11 Mar. 1948, p. 6.

93 *Straits Times*, 10 July 1954, p. 12.

94 *Ibid.*

Writing a year later, an English listener complained that ‘oriental songs’ should be kept away from English ones:

Will Radio Malaya stop including oriental songs in the English programme? When one tunes to the English programme it is quite obvious what is required. A Malay, Chinese or Indian has reason to be equally displeased if his musical programme is interrupted with songs totally foreign to his taste. Let us hear Western music during English sessions, and Malay, Chinese and Indian music during their respective session. FAIRPLAY, Singapore.<sup>95</sup>

A similar issue that surfaced was what language Indian musical genres should be announced in. Responding to a complaint that Hindustani music should be introduced in Hindi, Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Syed Zainal Abidin, remarked that, ‘The Indian population here [in Peninsular Malaysia] and in Singapore speak predominantly Tamil. I can see no reason why we have to introduce Hindustani music only in Hindustani’.<sup>96</sup>

This divide between Tamil and Hindustani music was enhanced by the fact that ‘Malays had an obsession for Hindi music’.<sup>97</sup> The Singapore Indian Music Party (SIMP) lost gigs in the predominantly Malay Geylang area to rival band Chandiniraat, because the latter had a repertoire of Hindustani, Malay and English songs (in contrast to SIMP’s largely Tamil music repertoire):

The division [between Tamil and Hindustani music] came about because there were Tamil bands that were very good at doing Tamil songs but whenever they played Hindi music, it didn’t have that feel or flavor ... also, Hindi bands would never play Tamil songs ... Hindi music caught on very well with the Malay community and Indians who married Malays in Singapore.<sup>98</sup>

Amidst such divisions it would have been easy to miss the significant ground Indian musics made through such debates, achieving a place — even if in the singular, as ‘Indian music’ — on the global jukebox. The *Malayan Radio Times* and *Singapore Free Press* published radio playlists in 1941 where Indian musics appear with likely and unlikely combinations of sounds:

On ZHP 3 — 5 p.m.: Indian Association party; 5:30 p.m. news in Tamil. 5:40 p.m. Pancharan Muda Kronchong party; 6:25 p.m. Hindustani music; 6:45 p.m. News in

95 *Straits Times*, 25 Mar. 1955, p. 6.

96 *Straits Times*, 7 Sept. 1963, p. 8.

97 Dairianathan and Phan, ‘A narrative history of music in Singapore 1819 to the present’, p. 230. Hindustani songs had currency among Malays due to the popularity of *bangsawan* theatre in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the impact of Bollywood, and the Hindustani-influenced music of the early Malay film industry, where Indian directors sometimes ‘just translated Indian scripts into Malay, the result being that the films had all the Indian nuances, cultural idiosyncracies and mannerisms, and very little that was truly Malay’. Interview with John Lent, in *ibid.*, p. 231.

98 Interview conducted by Eugene Dairianathan with Mohd. Rafee, Feb. 2004, in Dairianathan and Phan, ‘A narrative history of music in Singapore’, p. 230. Dairianathan asserts that Hindi songs were preferred at Indian Muslim weddings, though it is clear there was intermixture among bands, as a Tamil singer (for instance) could guest on a Tamil song when performed by a band that specialised in Hindustani music. *Ibid.*

Hindustani. 7 p.m. announcements in Dutch. European music on records. 7:15 p.m. News in Dutch relayed from London. 7:30 p.m. Gramophone Record interlude; 7:35 p.m. News commentary in Thai; 7:45 p.m. Pancharan Muda Kronchong party (contd); 8:15 p.m. Warning to mariners. News in Malay. 8:30 p.m. News and commentary in English.<sup>99</sup>

10 a.m. Malay-Hawaiian Music; 10:30 a.m. Kronchongs; 11 a.m. Indian Music; 11:45 a.m. Cantonese Music; 12:30 p.m. Chinese Programme Summary and Peiping Dramas; 12:55 p.m. Mid-day Market Prices, in Hokkien; 1 p.m. European Programme Summary, Announcements and mid-day Market prices; 1:05 p.m. Miscellaneous new Gramophone Records; 1:30 p.m. Warning to Mariners. 1:45 p.m. News. Interval. 5 p.m. Modern Mandarin Music; 5:40 p.m. news in Cantonese; 5:55 pm Hokkien music; 6:05 news in Hokkien. 6:20 News in English, relayed from London. 6:35 p.m. warning to mariners. 6:40 p.m. Children's programme; 7 p.m. 'Chinese painting': a talk by professor Liu Hai Su; 7:15 p.m.: South America: a selection of songs and dances from Latin American Countries. 7:40 p.m. 'The Land We Defend' — the West Country. 8:20 p.m. News from London; 8:50 p.m. The London Palladium Orchestra and songs by Caven O'Connor. 9:20 p.m. 'Scots Abroad': Talk. Relayed from London; 9:35 p.m. Dance Music by De Silva's Band. Relayed from the New World Cabaret; 10 p.m. Warning to Mariners. Chinese Programme in Hokkien. 10:30 close down.<sup>100</sup>

From a twenty-first century perspective, the amazing thing about such playlists is not the choice of listening experiences they offered, but that it would have been impossible for listeners to avoid hearing the musics of other communities. Unless an Indian listener memorised or checked the schedule to know that 'Indian music' was offered between 11 a.m. and 11:45 a.m., there was a good chance he or she would tune in and hear Malay kronchong, Cantonese music, Hawaiian or Latin American music instead. While Tamil and Hindustani traditions were occasionally separated from one another (as we see in the first playlist), through the radio playlists, 'Indian music' appeared as a homogenous category to be contrasted with musics of the Chinese, Malays, Europeans, Latin Americans and Hawaiians. And yet, this national-cum-racial musical representation was also disrupted on the global jukebox by groups like 'De Silva's Band' (who appear in the second playlist above), led by a musician who, one can assume by his name, was likely of Goan or Ceylonese descent, performing European dance band music at a cabaret.

From the mid-1920s, a cabaret scene developed at amusement parks referred to as 'The Worlds'.<sup>101</sup> The aim of The Worlds was 'to provide popular public entertainment at the lowest possible price, with the largest variety of shows, to attract the largest number and range of patrons'.<sup>102</sup> They drew patrons from across Singapore's

99 Radio playlist, *Straits Times*, 20 Sept. 1941, p. 9.

100 Radio playlist, *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advisor*, 25 Mar. 1941, p. 9.

101 These included the New World (est. 1923), the Great World, and the Happy World, all modelled after Shanghai's successful Great World and New World 'not just for their names, but also through their nearness, cultural connections and cosmopolitanism'. The New World was founded by Straits Chinese brothers, the Ongs, who eventually went into joint venture with the entrepreneurial Shaw Brothers, transferring ownership completely to the Shaws in 1938. Wong and Tan, 'Emergence of a cosmopolitan space': 280, 281.

102 Ibid.: 280.

communities to their dance halls, boxing rings, movie theatres, food stalls and other diversions. Indian patrons who attended The Worlds could witness *bangsawan*, Chinese opera, and European big band jazz. Such a broad assemblage of the world's cultures, available for Europeans at the World's Fairs, had not previously been easily available for Asian audiences:

Prior to the urban amusement parks, the public urban space as a category in colonial Singapore was implicitly segregated and limited in terms of accessibility. The Esplanade, the *Padang* and Raffles Square, archetypal spaces which contemporary accounts claim as public, were the confines of European society. Their boundaries, although invisible, were explicitly defined by what could be done within them. The presence of Asian bodies in these public realms was incidental; if present, they were mostly and merely service appendages.<sup>103</sup>

Indian music, dance and drama could be found at The Worlds. The New World put on Indian dramas from the 1940s through the 1960s, organised by the Singapore Indian Artistes Association.<sup>104</sup> In 1951, Travancore court dancer Vishnu Nambudiri appeared alongside a female dancer, Padmaja Devi, performing Kathakali at the New World.<sup>105</sup> In 1952, the Happy World hosted the Tamil Festival (*Tamizhar Thirunal*), held on occasion of the annual Harvest Festival (Pongal), a major Hindu holiday; it was held simultaneously in Singapore, Penang, Arau and Perlis, with the Singapore version including a 'Talentine' contest involving 350 contestants.<sup>106</sup>

In 1952, the *Singapore Free Press* beamed, 'History will be made in Singapore tonight when the first pictures to reach a television set in this country will be seen in the Colony's first British Radio Exhibition in the Happy World Stadium'.<sup>107</sup> The event was to last 16 days and would include 'special television demonstrations', 'special items to be presented by Radio Malaya' (which would occupy a studio in the middle of the stadium), and 'a well-known singer ... featured nightly on the Chinese network, while on the Malay and Indian networks, concert choirs in national dress will be presented'.<sup>108</sup> The article goes on to say that the newest British radio receivers would be on display, as well as new developments in radar that would broadcast 'people, cars and other vehicles in motion along Geylang and Mountbatten Roads'.<sup>109</sup> Amidst the display of technological modernity, 'English, Chinese, Malay and Indian light music will be provided nightly by the central Radio Malaya studio. The programmes will be disseminated by every radio stand in the Exhibition'.<sup>110</sup>

Another site for communal interaction through music in this period was at Singapore's hotels, where a lively scene developed at the Sea View, Raffles, Adelphi

103 Ibid.

104 Dairianathan and Phan, *A narrative history of music in Singapore*, pp. 205–6.

105 *Straits Times*, 22 May 1951, p. 7.

106 Dairianathan and Phan, *A narrative history of music in Singapore*, p. 207. Paul G. Pakirathan, 'The Tamil festival in Penang: Tamil cultural identity and development', p. 3, paper presented at The Penang Story International Conference 2002, City Bayview Hotel, Penang, 18–21 Apr. 2002.

107 *Singapore Free Press*, 1 Aug. 1952, p. 3.

108 Ibid.

109 Ibid.

110 Ibid.



and Oriental. While patrons of these establishments were mainly European, performers were an eclectic mix, though predominantly Hungarian, Filipino and Goan.<sup>111</sup> From the 1930s, the hotel scene established a non-European audience, since concerts were broadcast live on radio, as ‘OBs’ (‘Outside Broadcasts’).<sup>112</sup> Filling out the musical scene were film musics that saturated Singapore from the 1920s, first as piano and violin accompaniment to silent films (another province of Goan musicians), followed by the musics of ‘talkies’ set in English, Hokkien, Mandarin, Malay, Tamil, Hindi, Telegu, and other languages.<sup>113</sup> The European classical music scene drew performers from across the range of local communities, including those of Indian descent like Paul Abisheganadan, the national orchestra’s first conductor, who remains among Singapore’s most famous musicians.

The landscape of musical interaction extended to other domains as well. Chua Ai Lin documents forty-three record stores in Singapore from 1930 to 1950, but only one — Messrs R.E. Mohamed Kassim and Co. on 17 & 18 Chulia St. — was devoted solely to Indian music.<sup>114</sup> This meant that when Indians visited record stores, chances were they encountered the musics of other communities. A *Straits Times* article in 1951 reports that a job opening for ‘music assistant in Radio Malaya’ received eight applications from men and women of Indian, Chinese, European, Eurasian and Filipino descent.<sup>115</sup> In 1955, the acting director of broadcasting F.N. Lloyd wrote to the *Straits Times* to announce that the Radio Orchestra would recruit new musicians, with first consideration given to British subjects and those born in Malaya ‘who have had their permanent home here for the last ten years’.<sup>116</sup> His plan was to build the orchestra as

a small but self-contained group of players able to perform for our English, Chinese, Malay and (if our orchestra can manage it) Indian programmes at any time of day or night. It will not be entirely dependent, as is the present Radio Orchestra on augmentation by musicians regularly engaged by hotels and clubs and unable to rehearse and play for us in the evenings. It will be a very attractive combination of picked players, and when it is augmented — as it will be frequently — I think it will be an orchestra of which Malaya will be very proud.<sup>117</sup>

111 Abisheganaden, *Notes across the years*, p. 4. Abisheganaden remarks that after the Goan D’Souza brothers secured a contract to book the Pavilion, it led to ‘an exodus from state and “railway” bands in various parts of India’, who were attracted to Singapore to avoid having to rely on the patronage of rajas or Indian heads of state (ibid., p. 6).

112 The station ZH1 relayed live music performances from dances at the Raffles Hotel and the Waterloo Street bandstand, while ZHL relayed dance music from the Great World on Tuesdays and Thursdays, the New World on Saturdays, light music from the Adelphi Hotel on Tuesdays and Sundays, the Sea View Hotel on Sundays, and recitals from Wesley Church on Sundays. Chua Ai Lin, ‘Modernity, popular culture and urban life: Anglophone Asians in colonial Singapore, 1920–1940’ (Ph.D. thesis, St. John’s College, University of Cambridge, 2007), p. 221. It is unclear how many Indian musicians took part in these performances, but undoubtedly Goans (and others) made appearances.

113 Abisheganaden, *Notes across the years*, pp. 5–6. The earliest Indian films were often reproductions of Indian dramas of the sort performed by groups of mixed ethnicity in the *bangsawan* theatre; thus the plots and, perhaps, style of Indian films would not have been foreign to non-Indian audiences.

114 Chua, ‘Modernity, popular culture and urban Life’, p. 361.

115 *Straits Times*, 23 Aug. 1951, p. 5.

116 *Straits Times*, 10 Nov. 1955, p. 10.

117 Ibid.

In the 1960s, rock 'n' roll became another conduit for interethnic collaborations. Naomi & Her Boys, one of the more famous Singaporean groups, was led by a brother and sister of Ceylonese descent, Robert Suriya (who wrote the majority of the group's songs) and singer Naomi, with musicians whose names reflect Singapore's multicultural milieu: Moses Tay, Henry Richards, Jose Ahmad, Peter Thomas and Alphonso Soosay.<sup>118</sup>

SIMP was a pivotal group in the 1950s and 1960s, providing a link between jazz and rock, as well as between Indian-only performing contexts and multiethnic ones. SIMP was voted 'best local Indian band' at myriad competitions, such as one organised by Radio Singapore's Indian Section in August 1967.<sup>119</sup> They performed events for VIPs, such as a 1961 performance at a dinner held to honour the director of an Indian trade exhibition that had been held at the Great World.<sup>120</sup> Other locations for SIMP concerts included Hindu temples and functions organised by Indian associations. In an interview with the Oral History Centre at Singapore's National Archives, Christina Edwards, daughter of SIMP founder Edmund Appau, described the wide range of music SIMP played:

Film soundtrack music, Sivaji [music from the films of iconic Indian actor Sivaji Ganesan], MGR [M.G. Ramachandran] — most of those songs were popular and would be requested, and Hindi songs also; at weddings, also Malay songs, Chinese songs, because there were other guests. Mostly instrumental versions. SIMP didn't have singers who could sing other than Tamil and Hindi, but [they performed] instrumentals of English, Tamil and Malay songs.

Paul Abisheganaden describes music parties as 'a motley group of instrumentalists with guitars, mandolins, violins, banjos, ukuleles and drums .... They played the popular tunes of the day and collectively made music that was acceptable to many at that time'.<sup>121</sup> The Indian version of this phenomenon, Eugene Dairianathan states, came up not through the European dance band scene, but as 'band music for dramas':

In traditional settings, a musical group, known then as a music party would be paid for playing well-known tunes from mythological films with stories involving Gods and appropriate themes in the practice of Tamil tradition and culture and how to live a good and pious life in a multiracial society.<sup>122</sup>

Indian music parties mainly played South Indian film songs and Carnatic light classical music: 'names of musical band parties in the 1950s and 1960s were identified together with two notable musicians, MP Gurusamy and Pundit Ramalingam [*sic*], who were identified in oral accounts as those synonymous with the South Indian classical tradition as well as a semi-classical tradition'.<sup>123</sup>

118 See <http://questing.wordpress.com/category/naomi-the-boys-with-henry-suriya/> (last accessed 22 Nov. 2014).

119 *Straits Times*, 10 Aug. 1967, p. 8.

120 *Singapore Free Press*, 17 June 1961, p. 7.

121 Abisheganaden, *Notes across the years*, pp. 9–10.

122 Dairianathan, 'Cultural dependence in question': 175–6.

123 *Ibid.* In English language newspapers, though, 'Indian music party' referred to a group of Indians playing any kind of Indian music, usually at a social gathering held for a special occasion or visiting dignitary.

The English phrase ‘music party’ — a ‘motley’ ensemble playing European music instruments at dances and other entertainment contexts — was thus borrowed by Singaporean Indians to play mainly, but not only, Indian film songs. The repertoire of Indian music parties included a wide range of Indian, European, Latin American, Hawaiian, Malay and Chinese tunes played on bongos, maracas, castanets, drum set, guitar, accordion, double bass, clarinet, saxophone, etc. — instruments that, it must be stressed, were not prominent in India at the time.<sup>124</sup> The musicians made non-Indian instruments sound more Indian, as when bongos were tuned lower so they did not sound like Latin American bongos, while later on, a Motown and funk influence allowed for emphasis of ‘brass jabs and brass arrangements’.<sup>125</sup> Indian ensembles performed devotional musics with a Western-style dance band in Hindu temples.<sup>126</sup> Dairianathan mentions the existence of a Malay music party that performed Hindustani music, and another group that featured two Chinese boys playing Tamil songs on guitar.<sup>127</sup> The confluence of Indian and Malay musicians, with the emphasis on Indian music styles using European instruments, is similar to that found in Malay films of the era, particularly those of iconic Malay actor and singer P. Ramlee, which were produced mainly in Singapore and fused elements of Malay and Western music with Indian directors at the helm.<sup>128</sup>

Christina Edmunds grew up on Race Course Road with a father who was comfortable with the Chinese and Malays, and who spoke Malay because it was then the national language.<sup>129</sup> She was comfortable with Chinese and Malay musics, but identified more with Tamil and English songs. Able to read and write Tamil, she compiled cuttings of Tamil film magazines; after two members of SIMP suggested she start singing, she began performing in her father’s band. Edmunds achieved short-lived fame by becoming the first — and to date, only — Singaporean Indian transnational pop star. Discovered by Chinese-run label TNA, she cut a split record with another Tamil artist, T.K.S. Thanaletchumi, with music and lyrics written by Indian composer Banuthasam.<sup>130</sup> In an era when Singaporean bands typically played covers, the four originals on the record stood out. The songs achieved popularity in the Malay Peninsula and Indonesia.

In sum, Indians contributed to all the English-language popular music scenes, as well as the European classical music scene, in Singapore, but their contributions differed depending upon the scene in question. With the exception of live renditions of Indian film songs — which were occasionally performed at multiethnic dances to non-Indian majority audiences — Indian *musics* were not always prevalent in multiethnic Singaporean public spaces, but Indian *musicians* were. Though South Asian

124 See Naresh Fernandes, *Taj Mahal foxtrot: The story of Bombay’s jazz age* (New Delhi: Lustre/Roli Books, 2011).

125 Mohd. Rafee cited in Dairianathan, ‘Cultural dependence in question’, p. 184.

126 *Ibid.*, p. 179.

127 Chandinjiraat and Sangam Boys were two groups who ‘were Malays, Indian Muslims or their wives were Malay or some were Urdu speaking Muslims ... these groups wrote the lyrics in Romanised Hindustani words’; S. Sivan, quoted in Dairianathan, ‘Cultural dependence in question’: 183.

128 Joel Kahn, *Other Malays: Nationalism and cosmopolitanism in the modern Malay world* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2006).

129 Christina Edmunds, Oral History Centre, Accession No. 003022, Singapore National Archives.

130 *Ibid.*, Dairianathan, ‘Cultural dependence in question’: 180.



**Figure 7.** The Singapore Press Holdings caption for this photo reads, ‘Thousands of people gathering at the *padang* for the climax of the two-day National Day celebration, a cultural show featuring grand pot-pourri of Malay, Indian and Chinese folk dances, songs and variety’, 1960. (Courtesy of Singapore Press Holdings)

musicians in cosmopolitan performance contexts were often of Goan, Sinhalese or Eurasian descent, others were from ‘majority’ Indian populations in North and South India, and the audiences, particularly at The Worlds, included a fair share of lower class and caste Tamil labourers who did not perform in the middle-class popular music events. Indian musics and musicians, then, were not isolated in Indian communities in Singapore: they contributed to the musical milieu of the city, feeding off the globalised, multicultural mix that surrounded them while becoming a part of the mix themselves, through which they influenced others.

Though the Malayan Indian sonic geography remains in existence today, Singaporean Indian musical identities were significantly altered after the island was

kicked out of Malaysia in 1965. What had been imagined as Malayan Indian cultural identities became Singaporean ones. Today, Malaysian Indian musicians performing rock, jazz, hip hop and traditional genres come to Singapore to perform in the city's music venues, while Malaysian Hindu drumming groups (*urumi melam*), such as the well known Masana Kali, perform at Singapore's Hindu festivals. But the centre of gravity has undoubtedly shifted: in today's Malaysia and Singapore, the latter is no longer the hub and conduit for Indian music-making in Southeast Asia, even though it remains recognised as a node of cultural connection.

### Conclusion

In a speech honouring the 150th birthday of the Maharaja of Travancore Sri Swalhi Thirunal at Singapore's Cultural Centre in 1963 (two years before Singapore was forced to go it alone as an independent nation), Minister for Culture and one of Singapore's founding fathers, S. Rajaratnam, remarked that Indians in Malaya 'must use traditional Indian music and dance to create new forms of expression which, though rooted in Indian culture, will produce flowers of a Malaysian colour and texture'.<sup>131</sup> In order to do so, he contended, they should look not just towards India for inspiration, but also Malaysia, to 'study, understand and absorb the art, music and drama of other communities as seriously as they do their own'.<sup>132</sup> He had perhaps missed the point, though, for not only had they already done just that, they had become Malayan — and Singaporean — precisely by promoting their art in a multicultural context, where they were at once aware of their neighbours, yet keen to keep their separate identities.

131 *Straits Times*, 2 May 1963, p. 5.

132 *Ibid.*