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# KALA MANJARI

FIFTY YEARS OF INDIAN CLASSICAL MUSIC AND DANCE  
IN SINGAPORE

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*Edited by*

Dr. Seshan Ramaswami  
Sarita Alurkar-Sriram

Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society



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# DEDICATION

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and P.S. Somasekharan

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This project is supported under the Singapore Memory Project's irememberSG Fund, as part of the Singapore50 (SG50) celebrations.



We dedicate this book to the pioneers of Indian classical music and dance in Singapore, the artistes, teachers and administrators, whose passion and untiring efforts have left us this legacy of a thriving Indian arts scene today, fifty years after Singapore's independence.





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# MR. LEE HSIEN LOONG

## PRIME MINISTER OF SINGAPORE

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On Singapore's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, it is timely that the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society has published "Kala Manjari". This book tells the personal stories of leading Indian classical music and dance artistes who have contributed to our vibrant cultural scene over the years. It also recounts how the Government, the media, the temples and the community came together to promote Indian classical music and dance in Singapore. It testifies to the efforts of a minority community to preserve its own cultural heritage and traditions, while integrating into our multi-racial and multi-cultural nation. Congratulations!

**MR. LEE HSIEN LOONG**

*Lee Hsien Loong*



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# SHRI NARENDRA MODI

## PRIME MINISTER OF INDIA

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"We have ancient relations of trade, religion, culture, art and traditions. We have enriched each other through our interaction."

*[Opening Statement at the  
12th India-ASEAN Summit at Nay Pyi Taw,  
Myanmar, on 12 November 2014]*

**SHRI NARENDRA MODI**





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# MS. VIJAY THAKUR SINGH

## HIGH COMMISSIONER OF INDIA TO SINGAPORE

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As we celebrate fifty years of India's diplomatic ties with Singapore, Kala Manjari is a timely and eloquent commemoration of five decades of performance practice of the classical Indian dance and music in Singapore. This has been possible due to the efforts of the artistes as well as those who promote art and culture as also art lovers. As this book illustrates, the expressive and vibrant classical Indian arts are timeless and global in their appeal.

I am glad that the High Commission of India, Singapore, in association with numerous Singaporean organisations, has played a role in the propagation of the Indian arts over the years. We look forward to continuing this partnership.

Our cultural ties go back a long way. These links have and will continue to be a strong binding force between our peoples for future generations.

Congratulations to SIFAS on this delightful book, which is a testament to the strong ties between our two nations!





## PREFACE

**K**ala Manjari literally means “a bouquet of art”. What we were tasked to do in this project commissioned by the National Library Board (NLB) as part of the Singapore Memory Project’s (SMP) irememberSG Fund to celebrate Singapore’s 50th birthday this year, was to collect a bouquet of “memories” from those associated with the Indian performing arts in the fifty years since Singapore’s independence. We decided to be more ambitious. Rather than produce a coffee table book with just photographs and snippets of memories, we would attempt to write a comprehensive history of the Indian performing arts in Singapore over the last fifty years, weaving the memories of all those associated with the Indian arts – artistes, administrators, Government and temple officials, and the enablers of the arts into this narrative. This proved to be quite a monumental task, especially since the book had to be ready in time for a launch during the year-long SG50 celebrations.

### **SCOPE AND STRUCTURE**

Our first task was to define the scope of the book. We decided that we would focus only on Indian classical music and dance. We would include Carnatic and

Hindustani music (vocal and instrumental), and all the major classical dance forms of India, to the extent they were taught or performed in Singapore. This meant that we would consciously avoid coverage of theatre in all Indian languages, and of the lighter forms of Indian music and dance such as film-based music and dance, devotional forms of music, folk music, and folk/social forms of dance. This definition would make for a more coherent story, one in which all parts of the book would be inter-related to each other. We also decided to cover the entire period from 1965 to 2015, including some very recent developments. We would also try to explore the history of the pre-independence period, but in the short time that we had to write this book, our research on the early years of Indian music and dance is perhaps not as comprehensive as on the years since independence.

The book is organised into two parts. The first part covers three historical periods, pre-independence (the entire period before 1965), 1965 to 2000, when the arts scene slowly took shape, and 2000 to 2015, which saw rapid growth and development in many different ways for the Indian arts scene in

Singapore. The two post-independence chapters focus mainly on the development of the four major institutions in Singapore, which we dubbed the 'Big 4', Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society (SIFAS), Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society/Bhaskar's Arts Academy, Apsaras Arts and the Temple of Fine Arts, as well as associated developments, primarily in South Indian music and dance.

The second part cuts across both post - independence periods, and has chapters on independent artistes and institutions, development of North Indian music and dance across time, impact of Indian music and dance on the other communities of Singapore, as well as supporting roles of the temples and other enablers of the Indian arts such as the Government, media, the Indian High Commission, donors and event managers. We end with a concluding chapter summarising our learning from the book, and describing trends that we see taking shape.

Throughout the book, we have highlighted, in the margins of the book, quotes from the memories of our interviewees, to fulfil the title's promise of a 'bouquet of memories'.

## THE PROCESS

While we had members of different ages, backgrounds and specialties in the Kala Manjari book project committee, we were very mindful that we were all associated, for different lengths of time, with the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society (SIFAS), the recipient of the irememberSG Fund. We have therefore made a sincere effort to avoid any bias in our coverage of artistes, institutions and topics, so as to be as balanced, objective, inclusive and comprehensive as possible. We summarise below the process that gave shape to the book.

We brainstormed on the topics, periods, and artistes and institutions to be covered. We researched the websites of various organisations in Singapore, and made a list of National Arts Council honourees. There is not a lot of previous literature about the Indian arts in Singapore, but we made our best effort to collect whatever we could about the early history of Indian arts in Singapore. We developed a broad outline of topics and how they might be developed into a series of chapters - some historical in nature,

and some devoted to special topics that would be more cross-sectional, cutting across different time periods, such as the roles of the temples, of artistes of non-Indian origin, and of the development of North Indian forms. We later assigned each broad topic area to a specific writer or a team of writers, whose inputs were then edited and sometimes broadened to form coherent chapters.

We began with a meeting of the pioneering and current administrators and artistes of SIFAS, Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society/Bhaskar's Arts Academy, Apsaras Arts and the Temple of Fine Arts. We had two separate meetings to solicit their help in refining and adding to our list of topics and interviews. Gauri P. Krishnan, Director of the Indian Heritage Centre had, over the last few years, already been through an extensive process of pulling together memories, artefacts, and source materials, relating more generally to "Indian Heritage" in Singapore, and we sought her advice to ensure that our book covered the most significant topics and interviewees for the Indian performing arts.



Initial meetings to define scope of coverage

Over the course of the project, we went beyond our initial scope and interviewed many others, as new names would be cited in the course of our research. We tried to include as many profiles in this book as possible, as we know every one of them has contributed to the development of Indian fine arts in Singapore.

We publicised our project through posts on the SIFAS Facebook page. The SIFAS page has over 2000 likes, so we were confident the message was going out to a large Indian arts-interested audience. A press release was published in the Tamil Murasu, encouraging the public to contact us to share their stories, and photographs of themselves and their family members if relevant to the project. We also asked each interviewee to suggest others who could complement their perspectives, and tried to ensure that most of the names suggested were either already on our list, or subsequently added.

Each person we decided to include was assigned an interviewer tasked with covering all topics of interest (across the book's scope) in his or her interview. These interviews were then transcribed by a team of transcribers, and the interview materials were made accessible online to all the writers of the various chapters to draw on.

In parallel, we collected photographs from the interviewees, and from sources recommended by the interviewees and others we consulted, and we tried to choose photographs which best complemented the stories told in each chapter. This was not always easy, because some of the most interesting materials had no (or only low resolution) photographic materials related to them, while some of the interviewees could only supply us with stock/portrait photographs unconnected to specific dates or locations.

Over the entire project, we interviewed 123 people, with over a hundred interviews done in person, and others by phone or email, and reviewed over a thousand photographs to select the ones printed in this book. The entire list of interviewees is published in the appendix.

As each chapter was completed, we had it reviewed by all members of the book committee team. The chapters were also read by P. Selvadurai and Dr.



Selecting photographs from Shashi Lal Kashyap's (second from left) impressive collection of photo albums over three decades

S.T. Kasinathan, President and Honorary Secretary, of SIFAS respectively, and both long term observers of the Indian music and dance field in Singapore. Of course, we, the members of the book project team, take the final responsibility for all errors of commission and omission.

## PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

The Co-Editors and Content Coordinator for the book share their personal reflections on their experiences working on this book.

### Dr. Seshan Ramawami, Co-Editor

In the midst of the hectic, economically focused frenzy that life in Singapore is for most of us, the Indian arts have been a source of great repose for me personally. Practically every weekend provides a few hours of high quality music or dance, elevating me to a blissful state, recharging me for the next week of frenzy. Soon after we arrived in Singapore in 2000, my choreographer wife, Dr. Siri Rama and I created a website, covering the Indian arts in Singapore. It was an exciting experience to constantly discover new artistes, new venues, and new teachers. Every month, we would uncover, for ourselves, a new part of the Indian cultural landscape in Singapore. Other than 3-4 cities in India, I think no other city in the world offers the sort of variety and quality of the Indian classical performing arts and artistes (both North and South) that we have in Singapore. The process of editing this book connected me back with those early days of discovering what a significant centre Singapore was, and is, for the Indian performing arts world.

I hope this book will play a small role in sharing that discovery with everyone - in Singapore, India and around the world! I am extremely grateful to the Singapore Memory Project for the grant, and to SIFAS for giving me an opportunity to play a part in this very meaningful project, giving me a way to say "Nanri! Dhanyavaad! Xie Xie Nin! Terima kasih!" to all those who have contributed to the haven that Singapore has become for the Indian arts!

#### **Sarita Alurkar-Sriram, Co-Editor**

The arts give my life meaning. They help me understand my world and leave me with a feeling of deep gratitude. My association with the arts space in Singapore has been over a decade-long, as a champion of Indian classical music and a student of music, as an arts researcher and curator, writer and narrator and as a passionate rasika.

When I started working on the proposal for this project in June 2014 with the team, the toughest part was to capture what we hoped to accomplish with Kala Manjari in a 2-3 page long proposal. However, nothing prepared me for the monumental task that lay ahead once we actually started work on this very ambitious 'bouquet of memories.' Many months later, as I wrap up work on this book, I am filled with gratitude for having been given this opportunity to open up this window into the fascinating world of Indian performing arts, to Singapore and to the world.

I believe that a love for the arts is not genetically pre-destined and can be nurtured through exposure and education. I hope this book will reach young audiences and inspire future generations to engage with the arts, ensuring that we have audiences for the arts tomorrow.

As award winning author Maria Shriver says, "Art is fundamental, unique to each of us... Even in difficult economic times - especially in difficult economic times - the arts are essential."

#### **Shankar Rajan, Content Coordinator**

When I was first approached to be the content coordinator of this historical book, I hesitated as I have never written a book before, although I have authored several articles on Indian classical music. I knew it would be my role to cover the historical

aspects of this book, given that my involvement in the music community overlapped with many of the key periods of Singapore's history. Working on this project, I often faced these fears - Was there enough material? Would artistes co-operate when posed leading questions? Would I be able to meet the very tight deadline? Very gladly, the answers to all the questions above were a resounding yes! After working on this book, I am more knowledgeable about the history of Indian classical music and dance in Singapore. My experience in conversing with musicians and dancers has also been a very humbling one.

I travelled to Bengaluru and Chennai in December 2014 to conduct interviews with artistes currently residing in India. Interviewing 15 artistes within 12 days in the thick of the hectic "music season" for all of them (and me!) was a real challenge. Collecting suitable photos with high resolution was another challenge. In Singapore, I interviewed some 60 arts practitioners and senior people with historical knowledge. Many pioneers had passed on and I had to try to extract information from their descendants, some of whom did not share the same passion as their forebears. It was all indeed an unforgettable experience. Everything went well eventually, and the artistes gave me complete respect and cooperation.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

An ambitious book like this, which we took on the task to complete within a few short months, would not have been possible without the support of many. We would like to thank them all.

We are deeply thankful to Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong for graciously consenting to giving us a message for the book. We are grateful to the High Commission of India, Singapore (HCIS), for its financial support and for its help in securing the permission of Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi to use a quote and an official photograph. We are also grateful to the High Commissioner of India to Singapore, Vijay Thakur Singh for her personal message.

We thank the National Library Board (NLB) for inviting us to apply for this fantastic opportunity to document the memories of Indian artistes and their families for this book, and to the Singapore Memory Project's irememberSG fund for their very generous

financial support for this project. We are particularly grateful to Ler Ka Leng and Lee Ying Ying from the NLB, who provided guidance throughout our project and helped manage the project.

We thank all our co-authors in this book, Dr. Uma Rajan, Dr. Siri Rama, Sushma Somasekharan, Eswaran Sukumar and Dr. Chitra Varaprasad for the chapters that they took ownership of, and for their well-researched and well-written contributions. We are deeply grateful to SIFAS, the Shaw Foundation and the Lee Foundation for their kind financial support.

Of course, this book would not have been possible without the generous co-operation of all the interviewees, and families of pioneers, who gave us their time, who shared their memories, and helped in sourcing some very rare photographs. We are extremely grateful to all of them.

The 'Big 4' organisations of SIFAS, Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society, Temple of Fine Arts, and Apsaras Arts were all extremely helpful in helping to vet our outline of chapters and topics to be covered for the book, and to help piece together a list of interviewees, and with giving us permission to use rare photos from their collections. In particular, we are thankful to Santha Bhaskar, Santhosh Bhaskar, and Mohan Bhaskar of Nrityalaya, Neila Sathyalingam and Aravinth Kumarasamy of Apsaras Arts, and Vijayalakshmi Menon and R. Srivathsan of the Temple of Fine Arts.

Gauri P. Krishnan, Director of the Indian Heritage Centre, was very helpful in outlining the book's scope into its component parts and in the process of chapterising.

Collecting high resolution photos with enough details about the photo to caption them appropriately was a very challenging task and many people helped us in this arduous task. In particular, we thank Geetha Bhaskaran of the Hindu Endowments Board, Shashi Lal Kashyap, Vice-President (Performing Arts) of SIFAS, Chitra Krishnakumar (of Soorya, Singapore), Rajeswari Ramachandran (of the Esplanade Co. Ltd.), Niranjana Nanthagopan from Sri Senpaga Vinayagar Temple and S. Pannirselvam from Sri Sivan Temple. Krishna Kumar M. of Soorya, Singapore was

generous in sharing his knowledge and memories of the late K.P. Bhaskar, as did Sonny Lim about the late Richard Tan.

Arun Mahizhnan, Special Research Adviser at the Institute of Policy Studies, and Kokila Rajan, a veteran management committee member at SIFAS, provided valuable advice in finalising the list of interviewees for this project.

Many of the SIFAS staff were of tremendous assistance throughout the project. We owe a huge debt of thanks to Krushna Kumaar, the CEO of SIFAS, for his invaluable help in co-ordinating SIFAS staff resources, even in the midst of many other pressing SIFAS-related administrative commitments. We thank Shruthi Prakash, Manoj Mathews, Vidhya Lakshmi, and especially Tripurashree Ramesh from the SIFAS office, for their unstinting administrative and logistical support for this huge project.

Vidhya Venkat was very helpful in conducting some key interviews in Chennai and transcribing the interviews along with Vinitha Nair who was helpful in researching the National Archives for more materials. Lavanya Ramesh helped with conducting an interview and identifying gaps in our coverage of topics. Viji Gopi helped with the editing of all the chapters in the book. Vaishnavi Anand helped to cover the international Bharatanatyam conference in December, 2014, and preparing detailed notes on the proceedings.

We gratefully acknowledge the enthusiastic support of our print partner, Sun Media. Nomita Dhar graciously accommodated all our varied and changing requests. The Sun Media team of Ho Hui Xin, Valerius Reza Boenawan, Dilipkumar Kanagaraj and Syed Jaafar Alkaff contributed greatly right up to the final production of the book. As you may be able to tell, the cover depicts the Singapore skyline over the years. Against this backdrop, the cover depicts a Bharatanatyam dancer's image, a sitar and tabla combination, and actual notation of a Carnatic piece for an orchestra performance by the Singapore Indian Orchestra and Choir (SIOC). We are grateful to photographer Lijesh Karunakaran for the picture of the Bharatanatyam dancer, to Dhanya Menon for the use of her image on the cover, and to the SIOC for the image of the notation.

**FEEDBACK**

Despite our best efforts in the very short period of time in which we completed this book, we may have left out some important figures and organisations. Our sincere apologies go to any artistes and administrators, whom we missed citing, in this first edition of this book. We are very receptive to feedback about lacunae in the book, about factual errors of commission and omission, about style, about balance, and about anything in the book that if fixed, would do better justice to the history of the first fifty years of Indian classical music and dance in Singapore. Please send in your feedback to admin@sifas.org with the subject "Kala Manjari" and we will try to attend to this feedback in the next edition. We would also be delighted to receive photographic and other documentary material that would enhance or replace some of the current photographs printed in this book. At some point, we may also publish a website that would become a more accessible, global repository of the historical materials sourced for this book. Your feedback would help improve the quality of that website too! So please write to us!

Yours, in the service of the Indian arts in Singapore,

**Dr. Seshan Ramaswami,**  
*Co-Editor*

**Sarita Alurkar-Sriram,**  
*Co-Editor, and Assistant Treasurer, SIFAS*

**Shankar Rajan,**  
*Content Coordinator*

**A. Sachithanathan,**  
*Kala Manjari Project Committee, and  
Vice-President (Publicity), SIFAS*

**P.S. Somasekharan,**  
*Kala Manjari Project Committee, and  
Vice-President (Academy), SIFAS*



The Kala Manjari team: (from left) Dr. Seshan Ramaswami, A. Sachithanathan, Sarita Alurkar-Sriram, P.S. Somasekharan, Shankar Rajan

## CHAPTER 1

# THE PRE-INDEPENDENCE YEARS: PIONEERING ARTISTES AND INSTITUTIONS

SHANKAR RAJAN

Indians are intrinsically a musical people. From birth and throughout an Indian's life up to the end, music, and to a lesser extent dance, play a vital role in the life of an Indian. The Indian arts are linked with temples, Indian festivals and even the many individual and organisational rituals commemorating milestones like weddings, inaugurations and event launches. The Indian arts have also been a major influence on the arts of many parts of South East Asia.

In the introduction to her book "A Growing Rhythm – The Story of the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society", Sumathi Vaidyanathan wrote how, "It is easy to be intimidated by classical Indian music

and dance. Not only are they ancient, dating back to more than 4000 years to the chants of the Vedas, they are also so intricately woven into the warp and weft of the Indian ethos that they seem to require, at once, an understanding of the religion, language, mythology, history and literature of the country." The book commemorated 50 years of SIFAS in 1999.

As we commemorate 50 years of Indian classical music and dance in Singapore, it is so interesting to see how that same basic principle of the Indian arts being enmeshed with the lives of Indians has played out in the lives of the Indian community in this island nation over the last five decades.

This first brief chapter covers the early years of the history of the Indian performing arts in Singapore, even before the nation was born.

### THE EARLY YEARS – 19TH CENTURY AND PRE-WAR YEARS

Dr. Rajesh Rai, Singaporean author of the recent book "Indians In Singapore: 1819 to 1945", describes how Indian workers brought by the British to Singapore from Indian states like Madras Presidency (currently Tamil Nadu and parts of Andhra Pradesh), Bengal, Punjab, Orissa and Gujarat carried with them rustic songs of those states to Singapore. Despite performing very menial work and hardly having time for leisure, they were able to continue to sing, dance and play various village musical instruments keeping their rustic culture alive.

From the early 19th century, waves of immigrants from India, China and South-East Asia have brought many people to the shores of Singapore. Many skilled and unskilled labourers, professionals and practitioners also came to this part of the world. Thus, the origins of the Indian diaspora in Singapore included impoverished indentured labourers and transported convicts, to wealthy traders, educated personnel and imperial auxiliaries. Gauri P. Krishnan, an acclaimed historian and museum specialist in Singapore mentions early documentary evidence from the National Archives of Singapore shows musicians, acrobats and dancers visiting Singapore and performing in public since the late 19th century. In the early 20th century, classical dance and music from South India were performed by visiting groups. There is evidence of Bharatanatyam and Kathakali dancers teaching and performing in Singapore along with Carnatic music.

Temples were the centres of music and dance from the 1920s to 1940s, providing artistes with a platform for performances, especially during the Navarathiri period. Some major venues included the Sri Mariamman Temple, built by convicts in 1827, and Sri Thendayuthapani Temple, established in 1858-1859. Another venue was the Sri Sivan Temple established in the vicinity of the dhobi (washerman) settlement, which shifted numerous times but was finally settled in 1850 at the start of Orchard Road (marked today by Dhoby Ghaut MRT Station). It had

a larger North Indian congregation and evidence has shown that Ganesh Chaturthi and Vasantha Navarathiri were important rituals. Devotees, mostly housewives and elderly men, used to congregate in temples and listen to concerts that would stretch for more than four hours – from early evening to past 10 p.m.

Dr. Eugene Dairianathan, a trained Western musician and currently Head of the School of Visual and Performing Arts at the National Institute of Education, Singapore, recalls the diversity of practices in different bands of the Indian community from the music and dance rendered during temple functions.

Nonagenarian Samuel Dhoraisingam, a well-known Singapore historian, educator and writer from a family with a strong Tamil literature and choral singing background, was actively involved in the development of the Ramakrishna Sangeetha Sabha



Historian Samuel Dhoraisingam

(which had started in 1939) together with prominent instrumentalist Radha Rajah and Hindustani musician Dr. Chotta Singh. He remembers the founding of the Indian Arts Centre by drama specialist Sambasiva S. Sarma, who was later honoured with the Kala Ratna Award by SIFAS in 2009. Samuel distinctly recalls the following incident, "In 1961, when I led a delegation to Delhi, India, as President of the United Nations Association of Singapore, we met with President S.Radhakrishnan at the Rashtrapati Bhavan. Over dinner, curious as Radhakrishnan was of my Tamil name Dhoraisingam, he asked if I could speak Tamil and was astounded when I sang some classical Tamil film songs of M.K.Thyagaraja Bagavathar and P.U.Chinnappa. I gave Radhakrishnan an insight into the multi-language policies of the Singapore government, which he listened to with immense interest and appreciation."



In 1961, we met up with President S. Radhakrishnan at the Rashtrapati Bhavan. Over dinner, curious as Radhakrishnan was of my Tamil name Dhoraisingam, he asked if I could speak Tamil, and was astounded when I even sang some classical Tamil film songs of M.K. Thyagaraja Bagavathar and P.U. Chinnappa.



Dr. R.D.Gangatharan, a Singaporean lawyer and grand-nephew of M. Amballigay, a multi-talented musician in the 1930s to 1950s, remembers how his grand aunt heard that S.G Kittappa, a veteran singer of that era, came to Singapore in 1912 as a 6-year old boy with a Theru-Koothu (street-drama) troupe and performed on a Tamil drama stage. Kittappa made his debut here before travelling to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and meeting up with the famous K.B Sundarambal. When the drama troupe was performing in the

Kallang Gas Works area, the excellent high-pitched voice of the young lad mesmerised the audience. Gangatharan's grandmother attested to the astonishingly wide vocal range of this boy-singer. The impact of this incident was the impetus for Amballigay and her two sisters to learn classical music. Teachers were brought to Singapore from India for this purpose. By 1933, the three sisters were ready to perform in public. M. Amballigay was posthumously honoured with a Kala Ratna Award by the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society in 1988.



M. Amballigay playing the violin before Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore when he visited Saigon in 1932



In 1912, when the drama troupe was performing in the Kallang Gas Works area, the excellent high-pitched voice of the six year old S.G. Kittappa mesmerised the audience.





M. Amballigay playing the veena

There is evidence that a well-known musician from Sri Thendayuthapani Temple (also often known as the Tank Road Temple), Gnanasundaram of Madurai, was a music teacher for several ladies from middle-class families. Gnanasundaram was closely related to Madurai Shanmugavadivu, mother of the legendary M.S. Subbulakshmi.

Gangatharan shared another memory. E.V Davies was the Principal of Rangoon Road Primary School. His wife Checha Davies founded the Ladies Club in Moulmein Road. As the sister organisation of the Indian Association in Balestier Road, the Ladies Club provided a social and cultural platform. Amballigay was in charge of the musical branch. She taught and played 10 musical instruments such as veena, sitar, violin, harmonium, Chinese harp, mandolin, bulbultara, xylophone, jalatharangam and western piano. When Jawaharlal Nehru and his daughter Indira made a sojourn to Singapore and Malaya in 1937, Amballigay choreographed a special performance in Farrer Park for the distinguished visitors. The Ladies Club was renamed Kamala Club in 1950 after Nehru's late wife.

Professor Davesh Soneji, Associate Professor of South Asian religions at McGill University, and researcher on social history of Tamil/Telugu Devadasis, shared his thoughts with Singaporeans at the recent "International

Conference on Bharatanatyam in Singapore" held in 2014. Since the 1950s, Singapore has been home to a "flourishing culture of mid-20th century re-invented dance forms of India, including Bharatanatyam." He argues that before the "dance revival" which took place in South India in the 1930s, "Madras" and "Hindustani" professional female dancers performed in various cities in the Malay Archipelago.

There are also early 20th century Tamil literary accounts of courtesans in Singapore. Women from both Tamil and Telugu-speaking Devadasi-kalavantulu communities had arrived in this region. Dr. Rajesh Rai, in his book, also talks about regular visits by Indian artistes, which included music and dance for the upper classes of society, as well as dancers/musicians almost akin to the "nautch-girls"



Namboodri (seated left) leader of Vallathol Kathakali Troupe, Narayana Narayana (standing left) in Singapore, 1954

traditions of India. Dance for pleasure for Tamil plantation workers, Eyal Isai Natakam (Literature, Music and Drama), was sometimes the euphemism for their work. By then, the Tamil cinema had begun to mature and cinematic Bharatanatyam was in vogue for the urban consumption of early cinema-goers who watched them in the cosmopolitan theatres of Singapore.

The immediate post-war years, to early 1960s, was a pulsating period for Indian classical music and dance in Singapore. With increasing migration of people from India to Singapore, the audience for Indian classical music and dance programmes grew several folds. The ease of travel, mostly by passenger ship, created opportunities for many musicians and dancers from South India to perform in Singapore. Vocalists like Karaikudi Manirajan and Ayalure Krishnan made several trips to Singapore to sing at concerts and stayed over for extended periods to train Singaporean singers. It was also a time when several Tamil and musical organisations began taking root. The Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society (SIFAS) was established in 1949 but it was much later in 1956 that a formal academy was set up. In 1952, Bhaskar's Arts Academy was set up by stalwart K.P. Bhaskar.

Narayana Iyer Narayana, 87 years, is a regular contributor to the forum page of The Straits Times and a pillar of the Malayali community in Singapore. Narayana recalls Musiri Subramania Iyer's concert in 1935 with fondness. He remembered how his father bought many 78 rpm records of Musiri and taught him the use of the crank-up gramophone. He also has vivid memories of an early contributor to Singapore Indian music.

"There was R. Parameswara Aiyer, lovingly called Parameswara Bagavathar, who taught Carnatic singing to many young women by going home to home after his day's work at the Public Works Department. He would take the trolley bus after work and come to my home to teach my sister. The contributions of Parameswara Bagavathar in the mid-1930s to early 1940s should never go unrecognised in Singapore's Carnatic music history."

He also recalls an incident in 1954, when the Vallathol Kathakali troupe came to Singapore to give

several performances. "On one occasion, with the enthusiastic stomping that was carried out during the Kathakali performance, the wooden planks cracked and all the dancers fell. The stage was not strong enough to sustain such stomping. Luckily, no one was hurt!"

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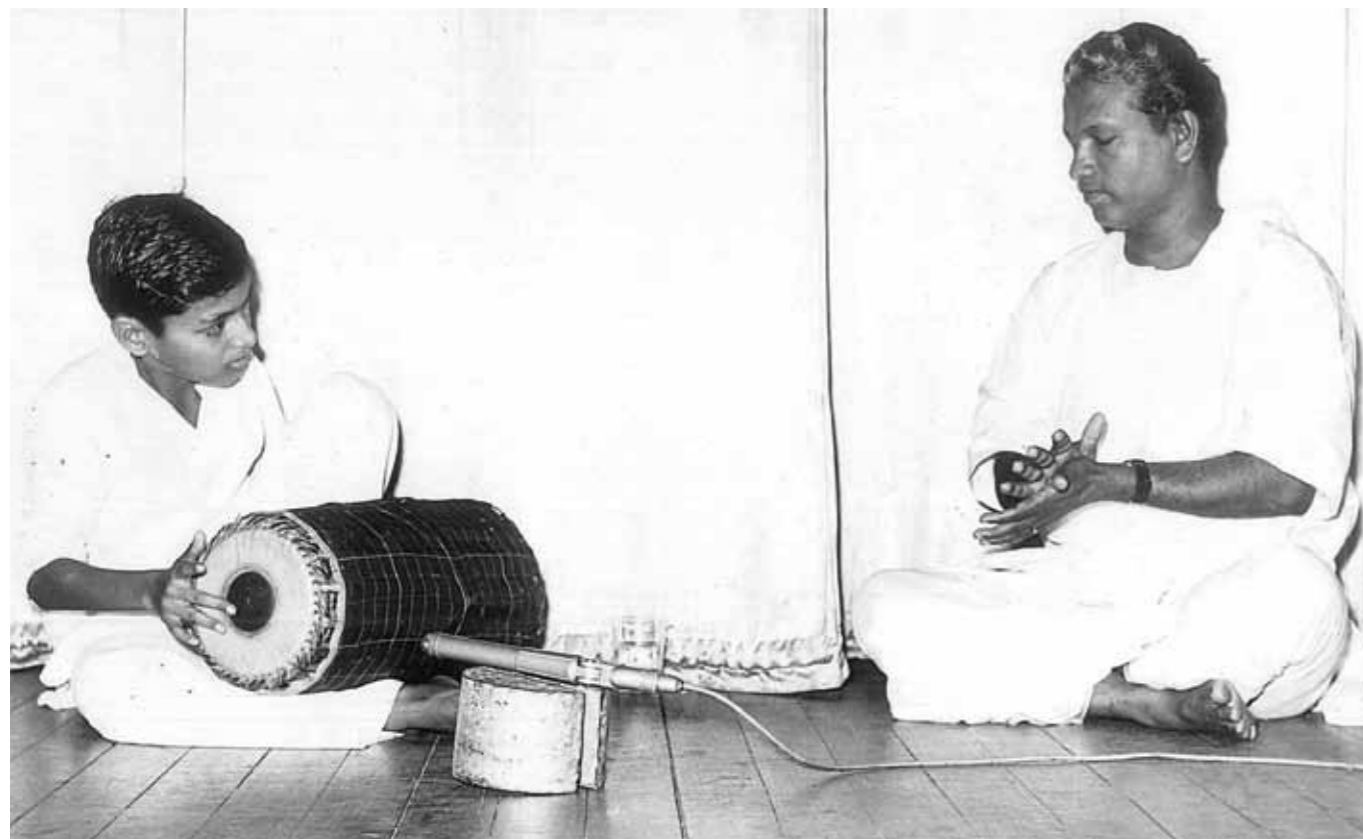
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#### M. RAMALINGAM

Among the pioneering musicians in Singapore was M. Ramalingam (often referred to as Pandit Ramalingam in recognition of his extensive knowledge of music), a graduate of Madurai's famed Tamil Sangam and a trained Carnatic musician. In 1937, when Ramalingam was 24, he came to Singapore and joined the Sri Thendayuthapani Temple in Tank Road as a temple singer. He subsequently joined Radio Singapore as a part-time Indian musician, and for many years, the radio station became an outlet for his classical compositions.

Highly proficient in Tamil, Sanskrit and Telugu, he could have gone on to academic teaching, which was in great demand in the formative years of Singapore but decided that his calling was Carnatic music. Ramalingam has trained many musicians and his disciples include Vijayalakshmi Balakrishnan, Vimala Krishnan, V. Ramachandran and Nagaratnam Suppiah.

Ramalingam set up the first Indian classical orchestra in 1958 and named it the "Sri Ram Orchestra." This orchestra toured and performed



M. Ramalingam teaching Shankar Rajan

in West Malaysia and Brunei. Recognising his talent and outstanding contributions in the field of Indian classical music and culture in Singapore, Ramalingam was awarded the Public Service Star Silver medal in the early sixties.

Despite all his achievements, he was a very humble person. His favourite instrument was the harmonium. Always dressed in Gandhian-style khadi clothes and cap, he was an awe-inspiring personality. He passed away in 1985, leaving behind a formidable tradition and a family which included several musicians like sons Ganamoorthy (violin), Guhan (tabla) and daughter Yogeswari (vocal and veena).

N. Prema Natarajan, who was a student of Ramalingam from the late 1950s for ten years, says, "My brother Sekar and I learnt Carnatic music for several years under Pandit Ramalingam, who was a teacher extraordinaire. He was not only proficient in Carnatic music, but was also well-versed in Tamil. He used to discuss both music and Tamil with us and our parents. We used to enjoy our times with him."

<sup>1</sup> Some of the biographical material about M. Ramalingam are from a Straits Times obituary published on November 1, 1985

### OTHER MUSICIANS

Several other musicians contributed to the musical scene:

<b>Jalatarangam and several other instruments</b>	• Radha Rajah
<b>Violin Maestro</b>	• Sharada Shankar
<b>Violinists</b>	• P.Sarangapani • Rama Sadasivam • S.Gopalakrishnan • Muthiah
<b>Veena Artistes</b>	• M. Amballigay • Krishnakumari
<b>Nadaswaram Players</b>	• Marimuthu • Gnanasundaram Pillai
<b>Mridangam Players</b>	• M.V.Gurusamy • C.R.S Mani Iyer

<b>Ganjira Players</b>	• K.S Sukumar • Shanmugam
<b>Ghatam Players</b>	• W.D Anthony • S. Govindasamy
<b>Vocalists</b>	• Swami Bagavathar • Shyamala Rao • Sarada Rajan • H.R Narayana • Vijayalakshmi Balakrishnan • Rajam Bagavathar • Yasodha Somasundaram • Sathyabama Sachithanathan • Mangala Krishnan • Rajamani Francis • Venkatachalam • Vimala Krishnan • Saroja Mahadevan • Meenakshi Swarnam • V. Ramachandran • Bulbultara Retnam
<b>Dancers and Dance Teachers</b>	• Stalwarts K.P. Bhaskar • Santha Bhaskar • Madhavi Krishnan • Komala Varadan • Prabhavathi Das • M.Nithianandam • Rathi Karthigesu • Ganesanathan • Rajakumari • Uma Rajan
<b>Other Young Dancers</b>	• Usharani Maniam • Vasantha Kasinath • Sisters Vasantha and Kala Vadivale • Sisters Vidhya and Jamuna Subramaniam

Among them were Hindustani music stalwarts like Dr. Mangal Chotta Singh and Seva Singh were responsible for the early setting up of Hindustani orchestras and teaching of vocal music. 1950s also saw regular exchanges between artistes in Singapore and Malaya. Malaysian

musicians like Nagaswamy Bagavathar, Krishna Bagavathar and Radha Subramaniam, violinists Yogeswari Nagalingam, Rajeswari Rajaratnam and Vijayalakshmi Kulaveerasingam, mridangist Thangavel Pillai performed regularly in Singapore. Many Singaporean artistes used to flock to Kuala Lumpur for the Mummoothigal Vizha (Thyagaraja Utsavam) organised annually on a grand scale by the Sangeetha Abivriti Sabha, managed by Malaysian stalwart S. S. Ratna Sarma.

Radio Malaya (renamed Radio Singapore later) and Television Singapura had a heyday with several Carnatic music and Bharatanatyam concerts being broadcast regularly. P.S Raman, then Director of Broadcasting, took pains to broadcast Carnatic concerts from All-India Radio on Radio Singapore. The cultural space was very rich in the 1950s to 1960s.

A.P. Raman, broadcast journalist, dramatist, writer and music reviewer, spoke of a time in the 1960s when radio and television stations in Singapore gave a tremendous boost to Indian classical arts. He had an opportunity to expound on over 50 ragas on radio, showing the relationship between classical songs and film songs. Media developments over the years are covered more extensively in the Enablers chapter in this book.

### KRISHNA PILLAI BHASKAR

K.P. Bhaskar was an award-winning dance artiste, a legend in his own time and a dance icon.

He was born in Mavelikkara in the current state of Kerala, India in 1925. He started learning dance under the tutelage of celebrated dancer Guru Gopinath at the Sree Chittira Thirunal Narthakalayam in Trivandrum (the capital city of Kerala today, and of the then princely state of Travancore) at a young age. The Maharajah of Travancore was a great patron of art and culture and Bhaskar, too, enjoyed royal patronage during his initial study. Subsequently, he learnt Kathakali under some Kathakali masters (asans). With his versatility, he worked under several Gurus and studied several dance forms such as Manipuri, Kathak, Sri Lankan dance and even ballet under a Russian ballerina. Bhaskar also learnt under the famous dancer, Uday Shankar, brother of sitar maestro Ravi

Shankar. He was a member of Gemini studios, one of the biggest film studios in South India. While at Gemini Studios, Bhaskar performed in the famous dance based movie, Kalpana, written and directed by Uday Shankar. Later, he formed a dance troupe and went on dance tours for the Indian army, under British rule, in the Middle East and East Africa.

Bhaskar went to Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) and became very close to the then High Commissioner, patriot and Indian freedom movement leader and author, K.P. Kesava Menon. While in Ceylon, he received an opportunity to travel to Australia. Menon was instrumental in having Bhaskar stop over in Singapore en route to Australia, and made all arrangements for Bhaskar at Singapore. By a strange twist of fate, Bhaskar remained in Singapore – it was fully Singapore's gain.

With his immense knowledge, Bhaskar started teaching dance at several centres during the Second World War and subsequently established a dance academy in Singapore in 1952. In 1955 he married Santha Bhaskar, a young and brilliant dancer in his native state. Together, they underwent advanced dance tutoring by the great Bharatanatyam master Kutralam Ganesan Pillai in Tanjore and later in Madras (now known as Chennai). They returned to Singapore and the couple literally took Singapore and Malaya by storm. In 1965, after Singapore separated from Malaysia, they closed down their Malaysian branches, and expanded their commitment to dance teaching in Singapore.

Bhaskar led the first Singaporean cultural mission to India in 1962, following which he was bestowed the high honour of Pingat Jasa Gemilang medal in 1963.

He was a member of the People's Association and the National Theatre Trust as well as Chairman of the first Dance Advisory Committee under the Ministry of Culture. Bhaskar served actively in the committee of many cultural bodies, including the Kreta Ayer People's Theatre, National Theatre Club and Singapore Arts Federation. He was the President of the Singapore Kathakali Yogam for 20 years. Among his many titles and awards included, Natya Kalanidhi from Indian poet Sudhananda Bharathiar, the Kala Vipanchee title from MBK Trust

of Dr. M. Balamuralikrishna in Chennai in 1999, and the Nritya Shiromani doctorate from the Pracheen Kala Kendra in Chandigarh in 2003. He served as the President of the Singapore chapter of the World Dance Alliance. He has written three books on dance and several articles for magazines and wrote the script for a 26-part television series called "Aspects of Indian Dance".

Among Bhaskar's most significant contribution to Indian dance is the huge effort he put into the



K.P. Bhaskar being honoured with Pingat Jasa Gemilang, by Yusof Ishak, 1963



K.P. Bhaskar and Santha Bhaskar, early Indian classical dancers in Singapore



K.P. Bhaskar, 1954



K.P. Bhaskar doing the Peacock dance, 1953



K.P. Bhaskar teaching young students



K.P. Bhaskar with Singapore's first Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew



K.P. Bhaskar (back row, centre) with the Kathakali Yogam group, 1963



K.P. Bhaskar as Bhima

propagation of Kathakali in Singapore and across the world. His innovations included producing Kathakali programmes with Tamil, Mandarin and Malay lyrics, based on classic themes as well as new ones such as Cherita Singapura (the story of Singapore), and a production based on Shakespeare's King Lear, subtitled them so that the reach of this complex art form could extend to the masses. Proficient Kathakali troupes, complete with dancers and musicians, are rare in the Indian diaspora worldwide, and Singapore is one of the few countries in the world that boasts of such a troupe, thanks to the untiring efforts of K.P. Bhaskar.

A leading light in the Indian arts community of Singapore, K.P. Bhaskar passed away on 17th April 2013. Many media outlets in Singapore and India reported news of his passing. Dr. Cheryl Stock, Secretary-General of the World Dance Alliance said, "I remember well Mr. Bhaskar's magnanimous nature and generous hospitality, not to mention his towering knowledge of Indian dance, culture and philosophy. He gave so much to the Singapore community and beyond and touched many lives." Notable dance scholar, Dr. Sunil Kothari said, "He was a generous man, upright, hardworking and always ready to help artistes."

## IN CONVERSATION WITH A MASTER

Krishna Kumar M. of Soorya (Singapore), who knew Bhaskar well, was invited to submit a tribute to K.P. Bhaskar. His interview, which appeared in the annual publication of the Singapore Malayalee Association in 2012, sheds light on the ideals that motivated K.P. Bhaskar and highlights his most creative and significant accomplishments in Singapore. Here are some extracts, translated from Malayalam into English:

**KPB:** Both “art for art’s sake” and “art for social commitment” are valid arguments. Both are important. Without society there is no art. The aim of Indian art is essentially spiritual. Without this essential spirituality, art will be reduced merely to a moneymaking business. A balanced life is very important.

**KPB:** After my marriage, my wife and I, underwent advanced training in Bharatanatyam by the renowned dance Guru, Kutralam Ganesan Pillai. Initially we stayed at his house at Tanjavur. He had great love and appreciation for both of us. He wanted to teach all he knew to Santha. It is our immense fortune to have blessings of such

*great teachers. I was fortunate to conduct the “padapuja” (ceremonial honouring of Guru), for my first Guru, Guru Gopinath at Victoria Theatre in Singapore. We also had the heartfelt blessings of another of my Gurus, the celebrated dancer and choreographer, Uday Shankar. It is my sincere belief that, if we have accomplished anything it is only through the grace of our Gurus and Masters.*

**KPB:** Indian classical art forms will never die. When there is a slight decay in the classical arts, someone will appear to rejuvenate and reform it. This has happened over history and our art forms have spread over several countries, such as Thailand and Cambodia.

K.P. Bhaskar lived a full life enriching the milieu of art in Singapore, making significant and long lasting contributions. His innovations in art include extending the scope of the classical art form, Kathakali, originating from his native state of Kerala in India. Typically, Kathakali recounts and enacts tales from Indian myths using music in a mix of Malayalam and Sanskrit, in a highly stylised and



Bhaskar's Kathakali troupe, a lasting legacy to Singapore, at Maha Mela, 2006

visually dramatic dance drama format. Bhaskar's artistic genius responded to the diverse cultural environment of Singapore by creating Kathakali performances that recounted the story of Singapore in Malay and in Tamil, a fundamental innovation and act of creativity. He also assisted in the retelling of the Ramayana in China by Dr. Chua Soo Pong using the Chinese Operatic form. From the interview, it is clear that Bhaskar was carrying on the torch of long held tradition and culture held aloft by great masters of the previous era, in a spiritual attitude of humility and respect. Bhaskar's Arts Academy and Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society and associated art-related facilities such as Bhaskar's Arts Gallery, are standing monuments to his skill in institution building.

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Mr Bhaskar's magnanimous nature  
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## SANTHA BHASKAR

Santha Bhaskar, a Cultural Medallion recipient of Singapore and Artistic Director of Bhaskars Arts Academy and Nrithyalaya Aesthetics Society, is one of the most accomplished of a new generation of Indian artistes who took centre-stage in the 1950s. Santha feels strongly, “My experiences formed across six decades of engagement with Singapore's cultural and performing arts scene negate the notion that Singapore is a cultural desert.”

Besides staging numerous productions from dance dramas to contemporary works in classical Indian dance, she has also presented several cross-cultural and experimental forms reflecting the unique Singaporean identity. Her choreography

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”**

over the years has imbibed Chinese, Malay, Thai and Western dance forms, starting from her early works such as the Chinese folk tale Butterfly Lovers (1958).

In December 2014, Santha Bhaskar gave the keynote address at a Bharatanatyam Conference held at the National University of Singapore (NUS). In excerpts of her address reproduced below, she shared her views on issues relating to dance in Singapore:



Santha Bhaskar, in dance pose



Santha Bhaskar, with Cultural Medallion winners, 1990



Santha Bhaskar

### On the classical Asian arts in the early days of Singapore:

“When the British colonised Singapore in 1819, it grew as a trade and military base, but the British didn’t do much for culture. They gauged culture only by their yardstick with respect to symphony orchestras, art galleries and operas. Many immigrants brought their cultural heritage with them. There is very little recorded evidence of classical dance in Singapore before the First World War. Social dance such as Ronggeng by the Malay community, Dragon and Lion dance by the Chinese opera and clan associations, cabaret dances at prestigious night spots in hotels and Sangeetha Natakam from India—these contained some dance elements.”

### On performance venues and early government Initiatives:

“Until 1954, Victoria Theatre was strictly reserved for Western artistes and international companies. The colonial government built a small theatre in Fort Canning Rise, the Cultural Centre (later renamed Drama Centre), which used to be more affordable. In 1959, the Ministry of Culture introduced public variety shows under Aneka Ragam Rakyat to build a Singaporean culture. It brought dance to the common man. But with the opening of the National Theatre in 1963, the scope for performances widened as even a South-East Asia Arts Festival could be staged.”

### On Bhaskar’s Arts Academy in the 1950s:

“Bhaskar’s Academy was the only school which taught Bharatanatyam in the 1950s. We held our first arangetram (debut dance programme) in 1959 at the Cultural Centre. The dancer was Sadhana Devi Gunaretnam who currently lives in Switzerland. Many arangetrams followed; some were even sponsored by the Lee Foundation.”

### On her disciples:

“I feel like every dancer in Singapore is my disciple – because in the 1950s and 1960s, all dance aspirants were our students. I can name Usharani Maniam (now a dance teacher in Singapore), Vijaya Rani Maniam (now in Malaysia), Vasantha Kasinath (who is herself a dance teacher today), Vadivale sisters Vasantha and Kala, Madhavi Krishnan (a cultural medallion winner), Richard Tan (who has passed away), Avadhani sisters, Sakakibara (a Japanese) and later Ajith Bhaskar Das (dance teacher in

Malaysia) and Veshnu Narayanaswamy (now in New Zealand).”

Over the years, Santha Bhaskar has staged over 100 classical and contemporary Indian dance productions, including Butterfly Lovers, Ramayana, Andal Thirukalyanam, Ardhanareeswarar, Manohra, Devi Mahatmiyam, and Ritu Mahatmiyam. Since 1977, Santha has also taught dance to local and foreign students and choreographed at the NUS Centre for Musical Activities, which later became the Centre for the Arts. Santha Bhaskar was awarded the Kala Ratna award by SIFAS in 1989.

### M.V. GURUSAMY

Mridangam artiste M.V.Gurusamy was born in Seremban, Malaysia in 1920 and spent varying periods of rhythmic training in Malaya and India: in 1935 he received specialised training under “Mridangam Sudaroli” Sivavadivale Pillai of India. In



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1942, on the invitation of M. Ramalingam, he came to Singapore and made it his home. Beginning from the war years, the young Gurusamy was determined to keep Indian classical music alive in Singapore and Malaya. His creative ability to blend with the multi-racial musical environment of Singapore was reflected in his contributions to shows organised by the National Theatre. He composed the Indian percussion music for the opening ceremony of the National Theatre in 1963. He was also a regular member of the “Aneka Ragam Rakyat” shows promoted by the Ministry of Culture in the early

1960s and went on overseas trips with Minister S. Rajaratnam to various cultural centres in Sarawak, Brunei and Sabah. Gurusamy chose to be a professional musician all his life, a remarkable achievement considering his large family and the somewhat meagre income received by musicians.

Gurusamy passed away in 1987, leaving behind a rich legacy in music. The author, who was a disciple of Gurusamy, has this personal reflection to share about his Guru's demise, "My Guru on the mridangam and I on the ganjira played several concerts together at Sri Senpaga Vinayagar Temple, on Saraswathi Pooja day. I dropped him at his house that night at about 11 p.m. and was shocked to learn the very next morning that he had suddenly passed away. His passing was on Vijayadasami Day, a very auspicious day for musicians. Gurusamy, who always said that he would play his favourite mridangam until his last breath, died, achieving that promise. A great soul indeed!"

His several sons, all outstanding percussionists and Tabla Maniam, his star disciple recall that Gurusamy was a very positive person, despite a difficult life as a musician and actively encouraged youngsters to study classical music.

Tabla Maniam shared this story about his Guru, "Gurusamy sir was often forgetful of what he had

taught his students. His favourite Korvai (rhythmic stanza played at the end of a concert) was Tha Tha Kum Tha Thaam.... - and he loved to play it often in his concerts. Once, several of his students, including me, were to perform for Navarathiri at Tank Road Temple as a rhythm group led by my Guru. We practised very hard for days with a different Korvai as we wanted to introduce a change. Imagine our surprise when Gurusamy Sir ended the concert with the same Tha Tha Kum Korvai and threw us off gear but we managed! Ever so often we used to remind him of the incident but he would just laugh it off."

M.V.Gurusamy was awarded the Kala Ratna award by SIFAS in 1986.

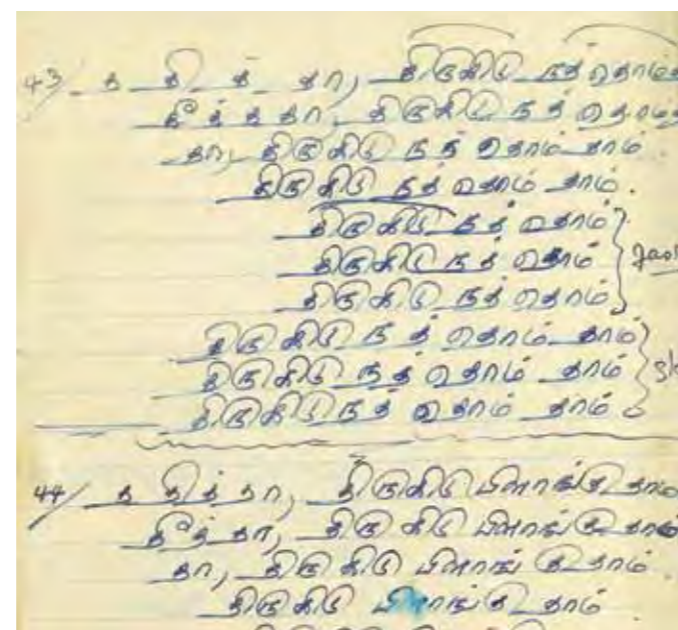
**SHARADA SHANKAR**

Violin virtuoso Sharada Shankar and her daughters Dr. Uma Rajan and Shobha Shankar contributed immensely to the cultural scene in Singapore. Sharada was a self-taught Carnatic violinist



Mridangam Methai, Kala Ratna M.V. Gurusamy

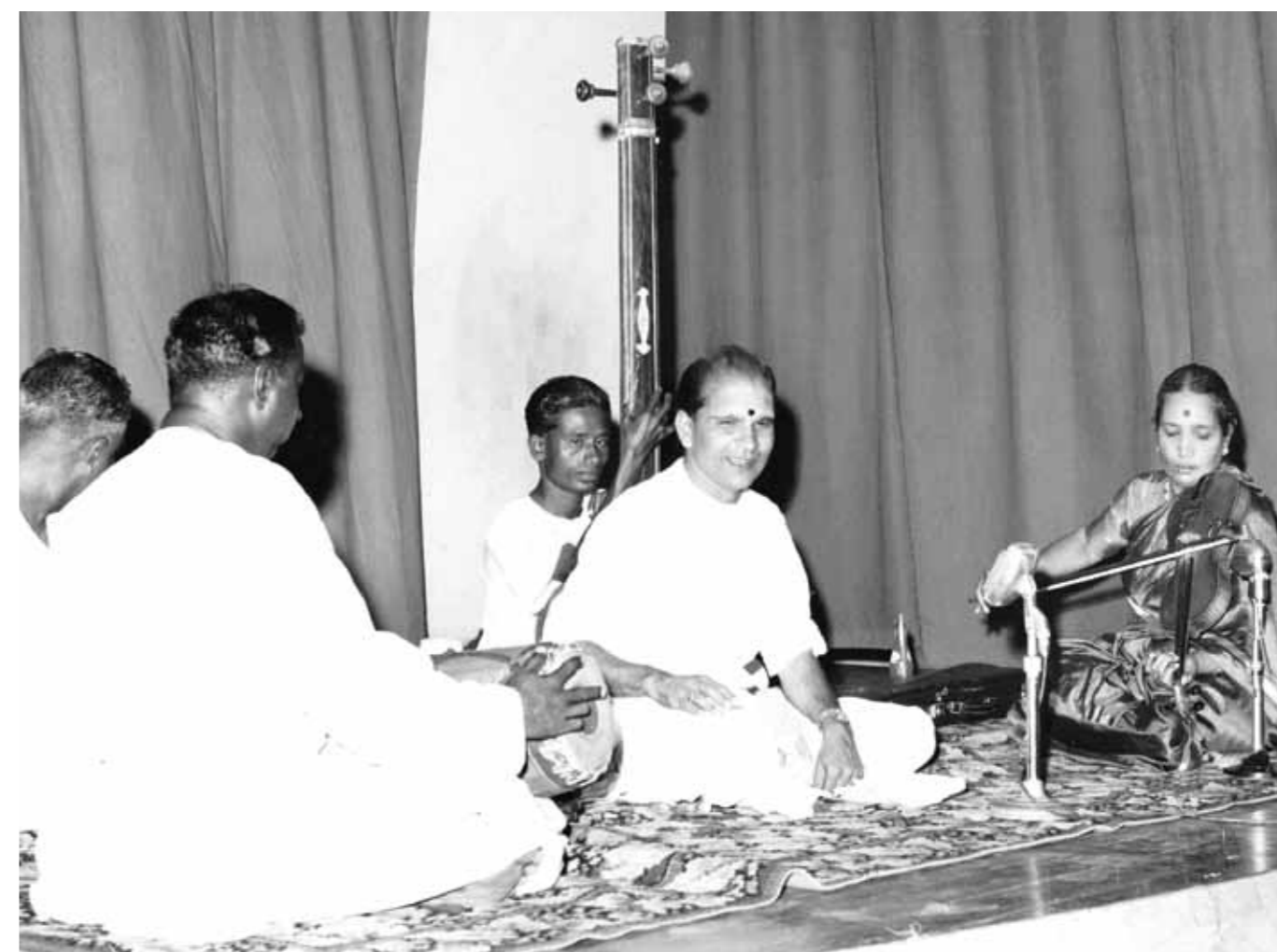
“Gurusamy, who always said that he would play his favourite mridangam until his last breath, died, achieving that promise. A great soul indeed!”



Handwritten mridangam score of M.V. Gurusamy

from a family of music enthusiasts. She married Dr E.A.Shankar at an early age to come to Singapore. Dr Shankar's family was also very musically inclined and this gave opportunities for Sharada to practise and fine-tune violin skills. During the WW2 period from 1942 to 1945, Sharada returned to India and used the period to hone her skills with several leading musicians there. Upon her return to Singapore, she was actively involved in performing, mostly in orchestral works by the Bengali Association, Kamala Club and the Ramakrishna Sangeetha Sabha of Dr. Chotta Singh, which provided several performing opportunities. The orchestra and the music were unstructured, says daughter Uma Rajan, and included North and South Indian instruments and music. For all leading artistes from India like P. Leela, Kaviyur Revamma and Bangalore Ramani Ammal, Sharada was always the accompanying violinist as she was for all performances on radio and the stage. She was honoured with the Kala Ratna Award by SIFAS in 1987.

Sharada's daughter, Uma Rajan was born in Singapore. She spent the WW2 years in India learning music and dance and had a dance arangetram in India in 1954, when dancing (and wearing make-up and costumes) was taboo in "good families". Uma took the stage by storm upon her return to Singapore. In the 1950s and 1960s she performed Bharatanatyam accompanied by a live orchestra. She recollects portraying "Valli" in Valli Thirumanam dance drama organised by SIFAS, mesmerising the audience to the extent that many elders were willing to prostrate before her and her co-dancer, who played the handsome Murugan, as if they were deities. She was just 26 years, a newly graduated medical doctor and recently married. Following a serious bout of jaundice, Uma was forced to vacate the stage early as a performer, only to completely immerse herself as a promoter of programmes. She has worked closely with Singaporean cultural stalwarts like Brother McNally, Professor Tommy Koh and Professor Bernard Tan.



Ayalure Krishnan accompanied by Sharada Shankar (violin) and M. V. Gurusamy (mridangam), mid-1960s



Dr. Uma Rajan in dance pose

Recalls Uma with nostalgia, "For dance arangetrams and shows, my mother and Mrs. Balasingam were the make-up artistes, the costume designers and tailors, the writers of the musical score and notations in several Indian languages and English, whereas my father was the everactive microphone adjuster, doubling up as the sound engineer. There were no specialists in light, sound or stage management and every activity was carried out by a dedicated group of ladies, including bringing food and drinks for the performing girls and helpers. There was no remuneration of course. It was almost always pro bono work – contrast that with the situation today. But what a spirit!" Such selfless behaviour defines the 'Gotong Royong', or spirit of volunteerism."

Uma Rajan has worn many hats in the cultural scene of Singapore since the mid-1950s - dancer, musician, choreographer, distinguished master-of ceremonies, promoter of classical programmes and adviser to cultural organisations including



Dr. Uma Rajan as Krishna, 1947

Community Centres, early member of National Arts Council, conceptualiser and first Director of Festival of Asian Performing Arts.

Sharada's second daughter Shobha Shankar was a star student of SIFAS in veena, vocal and dance and was a contemporary of Hema Dorai, both competing for top positions in the Television Singapore's Indian classical talentime contest. Hema Dorai's achievements are described in a later chapter. Shobha continues to be active in the cultural field in Singapore.

### RATHI KARTHIGESU

Rathi Karthigesu is a pioneering dancer who held centre stage for over 20 years beginning from the late 1950s.

Rathi says that she entered the dance arena at a time when families were afraid to send their daughters to this field because of the negative connotations associated with dance. She had resistance from her own family, but finally overcame it and took to training. As she puts it, in those days, there were no structured schools holding formal classes and no real syllabus, but passion was the over-riding force. Dancers learnt from whoever was competent enough to teach.

Dance veteran K. P. Bhaskar was her early teacher, but her turning point was when Sankari Krishnan, a Kalakshetra trained dancer, vocalist and veena player and her husband Vadakancheri S Krishnan, a mridangam player, were appointed as tutors at SIFAS.

Rathi even overcame an illness that rendered her dancing physically difficult at one stage, and performed benefit dances not only in Singapore but across the causeway in Kuala Lumpur and in the United Kingdom.

Her fondest memory is performing on Mediacorp Singapore for the English programme "Portrait of an Artiste", which was shot in a very limited time and broadcast to rave reviews. Rathi is multi-talented – she paints murals and has donated many paintings, sculptures and artefacts to a Buddhist museum in Singapore.

### V. RAMACHANDRAN

V. Ramachandran, a percussion virtuoso and singer, came to Singapore at the age of 10. He had a natural flair for music, especially rhythmic music, and joined a drama company even taking on female roles. His early training in Carnatic vocal music was under M. Ramalingam, and in mridangam under M.V. Gurusamy. But in many ways, he was a self-taught musician. Endowed with a rich sonorous voice, Ramachandran took to singing classical, devotional and film songs of the legendary T. M. Soundararajan, rendering them so melodiously



Rathi Karthigesu, pioneer classical dancer in Singapore

that he became known as the TMS of Singapore. Equally adept at playing the mridangam, tabla, ganjira and modern drums like bongo and congo, Ramachandran was a much sought after artiste by classical musicians and groups managing “music parties” – as modern orchestral groups were then known in Singapore.

A well respected artiste, he represented Singapore in musical programmes of the National Dance Company of the Government and travelled to countries like Russia, Australia and India for performances. Daughters Maheswari, a teacher and veena player and Rajeswari, a programming officer at the the Esplanade Theatres on the Bay and a qualified violinist recall about their father fondly, “If ever there was a stickler for Sruti and Tala, it was our Naina (father). He would go around practically the whole of the People’s Association Indian Orchestra and ensure that all instruments were correctly tuned. A single wrong note would ring a bell in his ear, even if 40 members were playing

at the same time. Such was his accuracy.” He was a man of many talents, including singing Carnatic concerts, providing rhythm accompaniment for music concerts, dance arangetrams, dance dramas and film songs concerts, and conducting school orchestras. “Naina was a man who was open with his criticism when it came to bad music. He did not mince his words. Once when Naina ascended the stage, he started imitating the previous singer (who was not very good) and surprised the audience. After the gasp subsided, he said that he had just demonstrated how not to sing Indian classical music. We did have difficult or humorous moments with him.” He was a teacher and mentor for all singers and rhythm players, and was greatly respected by all those whose lives he touched. He was the main singer of songs composed on Singapore and rendered them over radio and television with verve. He passed away in 2002, leaving behind a legacy of musicians and a family that performs regularly till today. He was conferred the title of Kala Ratna posthumously in 2003 by SIFAS.



V. Ramachandran, a collage

### WILFRED DOUGLAS ANTHONY

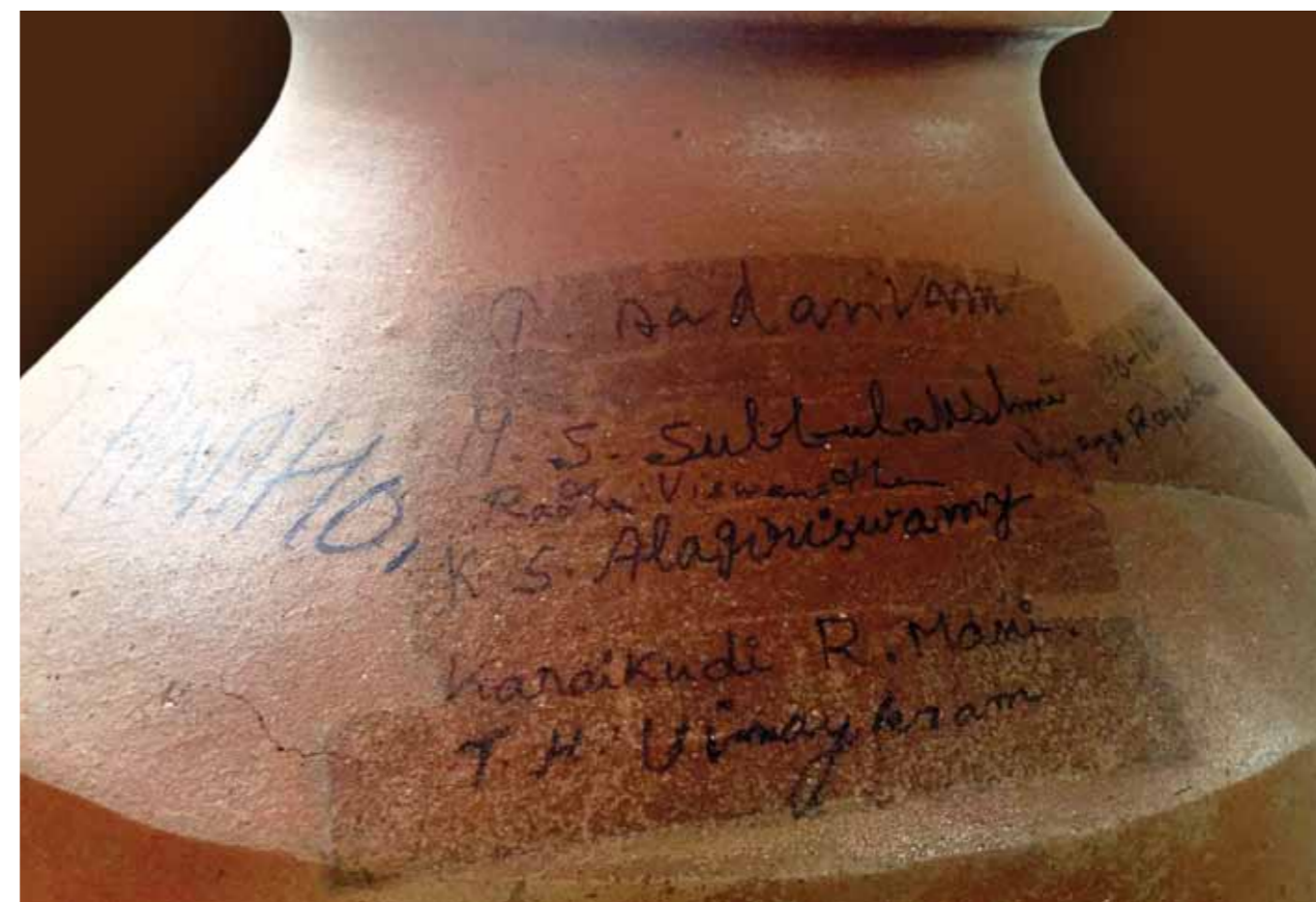
Wilfred Douglas Anthony, a specialist private investigator was awarded the SIFAS Kala Ratna award in 2007 for his mastery of the ghatam. It is difficult to reconcile the image of him as an investigator with his congenial, artistic side. Born in a Sri Lankan Christian family, Anthony developed a love for Indian classical music from an early age, especially rhythmic playing. Though he had some guidance from M.V. Gurusamy, Anthony is essentially a self-taught artiste. He took to the ghatam with alacrity and has been the reigning ghatam master for over 50 years in Malaysia and Singapore.

Anthony has accompanied artistes from India, Malaysia and Singapore and has an interesting memory to share. In 1967 after M.S. Subbulakshmi completed her United Nations concert, her whole group was brought to Singapore for a concert at Victoria Concert Hall. Luck was not with the upcoming ghatam player T.H. Vikku Vinayakaram, a very young man and enthusiastically looking forward to performing in Singapore for a world-renowned vocalist. His ghatam broke at Paya Lebar Singapore

airport! He was told it would not be possible in Singapore to get another ghatam of that sruti (pitch). I came to his rescue and managed to get a suitable ghatam just two hours before the concert was to begin. And what a concert and tani-avartanam (rhythm ensemble) that was!”

After the concert, Anthony decided that the particular ghatam was so special that he got all the musicians involved to autograph it. The ghatam was subsequently placed at the altar in Anthony’s home, never to be played again, but to be treated almost like a religious relic, for its important role in that historic concert by the divine M.S. Subbulakshmi.

The Cathay Subramania Iyer family, known affectionately thus, for living in Kirk Terrace adjacent to the famed Cathay Cinema and Radio Broadcast Centre, was also beginning to make its mark. Matriarch Sarada Subramaniam, daughters Vijayalakshmi and Vimala took to singing, daughters Vidhya and Jamuna were dancers and last daughter Lalitha, a trained violinist, ultimately became an orchestra conductor.



Autographed ghatam of W.D Anthony

### VIJEYA LAKSHMI RAJAH NEE KANAGARATNAM

In the 1950s Vijeya Lakshmi, sister of Professor K. Shanmugaratnam and aunt of Singapore Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam, was a well-known veena player and she also played the violin occasionally. Her younger sister Gnanalakshmi Rajendram was also very adept at the violin. Professor Shanmugaratnam was a great flautist but restricted himself to playing only at family functions and gatherings, and never really ascended the stage.

The fourth sibling Tharmaratnam, a Malaysian diplomat, whose last posting was as High Commissioner to Singapore in the mid-1980s, was a mridangam player and a good vocalist. The Kanagaratnam family was Malayan in origin but many moved to Singapore after marriage. A closely-knit family, they had their training from one

Guru Kandiah (father of Vijayalakshmi Kandiah, an outstanding violinist).

Kandiah was the most respected musical artiste in the Ceylon Tamil community of Kuala Lumpur in the 1950s. Vijeya Lakshmi and Gnanalakshmi were regular performers at Singapore's Sri Thendayuthapani Temple, especially during the Navarathiri season, which was the main performing stage in those days. Others in the extended family took to playing the guitar and western music.

Vijeya Lakshmi's son, Singaporean lawyer Chelvarajah, shares, "There was always music in the air during my pre-teen and teenage years. My cousin Santhan Shanmugaratnam became a famous guitarist and another relative Kamahl is a great western vocalist in Australia."



Vijeya Lakshmi Rajah on the veena

### SINGAPORE INDIAN FINE ARTS SOCIETY (SIFAS)

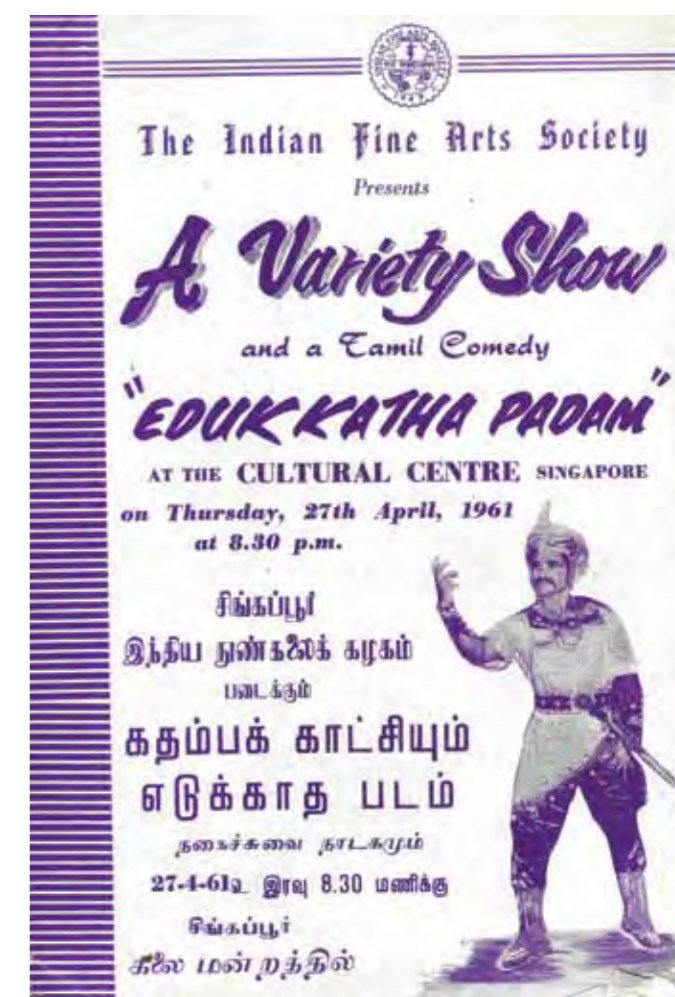
In 1999, to celebrate the 50th year of the founding of SIFAS, a book was released. Entitled "A Growing Rhythm – The Story of the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society", writer Sumathi Vaidyanathan communicated the origins of SIFAS with this vivid anecdote by S.N. Dorai, K.P.A. Menon and R.V. Subban.

*Dorai was indignant. He had just met a friend of his, made routine talk about the weather and family and was told that his friend's son was learning to play Western music on the violin. "I asked him why not Indian music and he said he could not find any teachers. It was very upsetting; we were losing our children." He took the story to K.P.A. Menon. It gave his passion an urgent edge. He had long wanted to set up a society for the Indian fine arts, and had spoken about it informally. Now here was a reason to move, he said to friends and acquaintances. Dorai, always practical, asked, "What are we going to do for money?" "We keep our fingers crossed," said Menon. On 7th May 1949, his colleague, Subban and Dorai walked to the Registrar of Societies and registered an application. The address was 132, Rangoon Road, the residence of Dorai, the first of many houses it was to occupy in its peripatetic history.*

With that, SIFAS was born in 1949 and the rest, as they say, is history.

While there were small groups teaching music and dance in Singapore during that period, the dominant organisation was the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society (SIFAS), established in 1949. Dorai Natarajan, former President of SIFAS and son of S.N. Dorai, a founder member, recalls with nostalgic feeling, "That was the beginning of a great step forward. Many stalwarts like Harris, Cherian, Dr. Sundararajan, Narasimhan, and subsequently Sachithananthan, and Professor A.N. Rao worked hard to expand the scope and reach of SIFAS." SIFAS President P. Selvadurai has been helming the organisation for almost 20 years. He says, "My family has always been into classical music and dance and my sister Rathi and her late husband Justice Karthigesu were very involved in SIFAS activities. In fact, SIFAS moulded my sister's cultural personality.

In the early days, SIFAS used to stage several dramas like Tagore's Shakuntala in English and Tamil dramas like "Edukkatha Padam" and "Gomathiyan Kaadhalan." Music and dance were taught, but it was at a slow pace since good teachers were in short supply. The academy was formally opened in 1956 by then Culture Minister S. Rajaratnam and that was the beginning of strong societal and government support. Luminaries like Justice A. P. Rajah and Minister Othman Wok were strong supporters of SIFAS. Sumathi writes, "If the founders chose the classical arts as the medium to achieve an identity, it was not only because of a shared proclivity; it was also because they recognised an old truth, that the arts offered the most pleasurable, least obvious way to induct the young into a way of life." Dr. Liu Thai Ker, then Chairman of the National Arts Council, in his message for the golden jubilee book stated, "SIFAS is more than a society steeped in tradition. It moves with the times. It has introduced new activities and has strengthened its performing programme for local and foreign



Poster of Edukkatha Padam, SIFAS Drama, 1961

artistes. Among its ambitious visions, the Society hopes to nurture graduates in Indian Fine Arts to pursue the arts professionally.”

Despite the political disturbances and economic difficulties that Singapore faced in the 1950s and 1960s, that period must surely be “regarded as the

golden era of Indian classical music and dance,” says musician Sarada Rajan. With the achievement of independence and a stable government in position she said that “Singapore could look forward to greater achievements in the next decades to come.”



Certificate issued to Rajam Bagavathar, music composer for SIFAS drama production of Edukkatha Padam, 1961



## CHAPTER 2

# POST-INDEPENDENCE: THE AWAKENING AND MATURING YEARS – 1965 TO 2000

SHANKAR RAJAN

This chapter covers the first major period of growth of the Indian arts in Singapore, from 1965 to 2000. The two pre-independence institutions, SIFAS and Bhaskar’s Arts Academy had laid a foundation for this growth, as had many independent pioneers described in the first chapter. As Singapore became an independent sovereign entity, it had to define a distinct identity in the midst of communal and racial tensions, and the arts would have a distinctive role in that process.

After separation, it became very difficult for the Bhaskars to continue teaching in Malaysia. As Santha recalled, “It became difficult to apply for a

work permit because all the forms were in Malay and we were not good in Bahasa Melayu. Each time we went, there would be different rules and regulations.” They eventually closed their branches in Malaysia, handed over the Johor Bahru branches to their senior students and set upon expanding their teaching in Singapore.

The Bhaskars performed at the first National Day Parade at the Old Parliament House in 1966.

Just after Singapore attained independence, the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society started hiring its first full time teachers, the husband-and-wife team

Sankari Krishnan and Vadakancheri Krishnan. Sankari, an alumna of Darpana (founded by Mrinalini Sarabhai) and Kalakshetra, taught Bharatanatyam, vocal and veena and Krishnan taught mridangam. By the end of 1965, the Society had 45 students. and Sankari organised six arangetrams. Dance pioneer Rathi Karthigesu recalls Sankari's dance classes, "It was not mere dancing, not just the technicalities. It was religion, mythology and drama. She was able to explain the how and the why."

Two other major institutions were founded in this post-independence period, Apsaras Arts and the Temple of Fine Arts. Towards the end of this period, the increased migration from India had an impact on the Indian arts scene, with accomplished musicians and dancers arriving, greatly enriching both the teaching and performance domains.

### THE 1970s, 1980s AND 1990s

By the mid-1970s, the immigrant feeling had completely disappeared in the Indian community and attention was focused on seeking good jobs,



K.P. Bhaskar and Santha Bhaskar at Old Parliament House - National Day Parade, 1966

“It was not mere dancing, not just the technicalities. It was religion, mythology and drama. She was able to explain the how and the why.”

improving careers and looking to India only as the land of their forefathers. Apart from the brief period of economic downturn in 1973, Singapore made dramatic strides in its economy. Indians in Singapore began to devote more time to cultural pursuits and the arts. The Hindu Endowments Board which was established in 1968 to administer the four major temples in Singapore, had advanced to organising large scale concerts



Choreographer and dancer Meenakshy Bhaskar

with invited overseas artistes, especially during Mandalabhishegam concerts.

Within the next two decades, Apsaras Arts was founded in 1977, SIFAS was maturing, Bhaskar's Academy was in top gear and the first Indian Singaporean, Madhavi Krishnan, was awarded the Cultural Medallion for dance in 1979. Temple of Fine Arts was founded by Swami Shantanand in 1982.

Neila Sathyalingam, founder and Director of Apsaras Arts was awarded the Cultural Medallion for dance in 1989 and Santha Bhaskar, Director of Bhaskar's Academy followed suit in 1990 with a similar award. The late 1970s and 1980s ushered in a tremendous symbiotic relationship between Singapore and Malaysia.

## ORGANISATIONS AND KEY PERSONALITIES

### BHASKAR'S ARTS ACADEMY AND NRITYALAYA AESTHETICS SOCIETY

Meenakshy Bhaskar, choreographer and dancer, and daughter of the Bhaskars, imbibed music and dance from a very young age from her parents and went on to be a trained Bharatanatyam dancer. She now weaves other genres of Indian dance into her choreography and productions. She played lead roles in the Academy's productions of Sita's Complaint (1993), the Thai mythological story, Manohra (1996) and Rasa and Dhvani (2003). For her contributions to the arts scene in Singapore, the National Arts Council conferred upon her the Young Artist Award for dance in 1996.

Ghanavenothan Retnam, lead flautist and music composer at Bhaskar's Arts Academy is the son of R. Retnam, a pioneer musician, affectionately known as Bulbultara Retnam for his prowess in mastering a seldom played stringed instrument called bulbultara. Ghanavenothan had his tutelage under maestro M. Ramalingam and has accompanied leading artistes in Singapore and India like Dr. M. Balamuralikrishna, Dr. Padma Subrahmanyam and P. Unnikrishnan. He also teaches and composes music for orchestras and dance ballets. For his contributions to the music scene in Singapore, the National Arts Council conferred on him the award the Young Artist Award in 1995.

Ghanavenothan shares the following, "I am proud to say that it was my homeland Singapore that made me a complete musician. In 1990 on National Day I was given an opportunity to write Indian scores to merge with the western score for the song "One People, One Nation, One Singapore" and present it on stage. I still remember with humility the standing ovation I received for my contribution."

In 1988, Bhaskar and Santha started Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society, which became the teaching wing of their endeavours, while Bhaskar's Arts Academy became the performance wing.

Nrityalaya teaches Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi, Kathakali, Mohiniattam, Carnatic and Hindustani vocal music as well as several musical instruments like flute, mridangam, tabla etc.



Flautist and music composer Ghanavenothan Retnam

### MADHAVI KRISHNAN

Madhavi Krishnan was the first Indian artiste to be awarded the Cultural Medallion of Singapore in 1979. With her "captivating movements and choreography skills" she was a deserving winner.

Born in Singapore, and tutored early in Bharatanatyam, her father recognised her dancing talent and sent her to India when she was just 15 years old for advanced training in

Bharatanatyam and Kathakali under Gopinath Thangamani. Maturing as an experienced dancer, she formed a dance company called “Madhavi and Ganga” and performed all over India, returning to Singapore to teach and to dance. Madhavi says, “I realised very early that I had skills in choreography and drew in persons from theatre to augment my efforts.”

She then returned to Chennai, where she embarked on an acting career in Tamil films, mostly as a comedienne alongside famous comedian Nagesh. Several years into that industry, Madhavi decided to return to Singapore to pursue a career in dance. She was appointed as the Director of the newly formed National Dance Company of Singapore. She choreographed three dance items with 9 Indians, 20 Chinese and 20 Malay dancers, and the group represented Singapore in the Adelaide Festival in 1971. Following this highly acclaimed performance, Madhavi went on to bring groups to perform in Russia, Korea, Indonesia, Malaysia, Belgium and the US and became a household name in the 1970s and 1980s.

Her successful dance productions include “Meera” and “Savitri.” Inspired by ballet opera maestro Gustav Holst, Madhavi choreographed a Bharatanatyam dance performed in theatrical form with English dialogue.

After marriage, Madhavi migrated to Perth with her doctor husband. However, she kept up with dance and introduced Bharatanatyam to Australian audiences.

Madhavi constantly returns to Singapore to perform at dance showcases. Her daughter Anjuli Sinniah carries on her dancing talent with aplomb.

### SINGAPORE INDIAN FINE ARTS SOCIETY (SIFAS)

By the end of 1968, SIFAS had some 100 students studying Bharatanatyam, Carnatic vocal, veena, violin and mridangam. The Krishnans returned to India in 1969. That same year, SIFAS rented an apartment on St. Michael’s Road to conduct classes (at a monthly rental of \$220!).



Madhavi Krishnan, Director, National Dance Company with A. Sachithanathan, Vice-President, SIFAS

Dorai Natarajan, former President of SIFAS, says that all the achievements of SIFAS did not come about easily. In the 1970s, the coffers were almost empty and SIFAS was in dire straits. Fund-raising activities had to be carried out, including holding conferences on music to drum up financial assistance and to create a participatory spirit within the Indian community in Singapore. With the assistance of S. Chandra Das, former parliamentarian, SIFAS was able to recruit good teachers as the Government agreed to upgrade their work permits to professional employment passes.

M. Bala Subramanion, a nonagenarian-retired Postmaster General of Singapore and another SIFAS stalwart shares these memories, “When I was on the Board of Governors in the 1970s, I saw that pupils were actually writing all their notes given by the tutors, sometimes with the help of parents for those weak in Tamil and this process took a good 10 minutes of every class time. So I actively embarked on a process to publish textbooks and solicited the assistance of Natarajan. With much difficulty, SIFAS came up with the first textbook Shadjam and subsequently Rishabam and Gandharam. Teachers like Padmavathy Ananthagopalan and Dr. Karaikudi Subramaniam put in tremendous efforts and must be acknowledged for this venture.” When asked about SIFAS’s most proud achievement, he singled out the accreditation of its music and dance diplomas by the University of Madras in 2007 and 2008.

Natarajan shared that, “In the initial years, the Society functioned at various places - like in a flat at 29 St Michael’s Road (which SIFAS bought but had to move out for lack of space and noise complaints by neighbours) and later 71 Bournemouth Road, donated generously by R. Balasubramaniam, before moving to Branksome Road.

SIFAS President, P. Selvadurai acknowledges the efforts of C.V. Devan Nair, then Secretary-General of the National Trades Union Congress, in prevailing upon his government colleagues to make available 2 Balestier Road (the former Rumah Miskin Police Station) for a few years. Member-of-Parliament Chandra Das also played a key role in getting these new premises in the early 1980s. In 1992, in recognition of SIFAS’s contribution to Indian fine

“

I saw that pupils were actually writing all their notes given by the tutors, sometimes with the help of parents for those weak in Tamil and this process took a good 10 minutes of every class time.

”

arts in Singapore, National Arts Council allotted the former Rangoon Road Primary School building at 2A Starlight Road for the exclusive use of SIFAS.

Dr. S.T. Kasinathan, Honorary General Secretary of SIFAS for the last 20 years shared his thoughts, “I feel very proud when all musicians visiting or performing at SIFAS tell us that we are the only large music and dance organisation that gives equal importance to both South and North Indian disciplines. Sudha Ragunathan, T.K.Govinda Rao, Nedunuri Krishnamurthy all have repeatedly praised SIFAS about this matter.”

“Another important achievement was the revamping of the teaching syllabus. The original one drawn up by Veena Balachander and Dr. Seethalakshmi was more suited for full-time music students and our SIFAS students found it too difficult. The revision was done by Natarajan, with professional advice from famed musicians Rudrapatnam brothers. We used to have major examinations at the 5th year (certificate-exam) and 7th Year. The latter was subsequently changed to 8th year with the award of a diploma. The Singapore Labour Foundation (SLF) building was our key venue for the holding of Academy Day function and overseas performances.”

Dr. Kasinathan also has vivid memories of VIP visits to SIFAS in the 1990s. Dr. S. Pinakapani, regarded as one of the top Indian musicologists of the 20th century, visited SIFAS in the mid-1990s, despite his ill health. Dr. Nedunuri Krishnamurthy, who passed away in December 2014, was the person who completely revamped our examination

system when he visited us as External Examiner in 1994. He spent 18 days with us, gave a key-note address and a comprehensive report with academic recommendations on the exam system, which we still follow today.”

### HEMA RANGANATHAN

Hema Ranganathan nee Dorai was born in Singapore in 1958, trained in various forms of classical arts in Singapore, and now lives in Bengaluru. Hema was the first recipient of the Isai Vaanar title from SIFAS. This title was the forerunner of the current Sangeetha Visharad title that SIFAS awards, and was won by Hema in 1979 in the presence of music Jambavans (maestros), violin maestro Lalgudi G.Jayaraman and veena maestro S Balachander.

Hema comes from a very music oriented family and is the daughter of S.N Dorai, founder-member of SIFAS, and the younger sister of Dorai Natarajan, ex-President of SIFAS. Introduced to Carnatic music by veteran Singapore musician Rajam Bagavathar, Hema spent all her free time at SIFAS from the age of 7 under SIFAS tutors Sankari Krishnan, and later under Padmavathy Ananthagopalan and her husband Ananthagopalan, where she learnt vocal music and veena. She also learnt violin from C.V.Dhanalakshmi and mridangam under Palghat Krishnamani – Hema was thus a complete musician.

Hema recalls, “The two important turning points in my music life were the winning of two competitions: 1st prize in veena from the University of Singapore in 1970 and second prize for vocal Carnatic music from Radio Television Singapore in 1973. It gave me lots of encouragement and exposure. After graduating from SIFAS, I was given an opportunity in 1979 to sing at Music Academy Chennai and several other Sabhas in Chennai in 1979 and then went on to become a graded artiste at All India Radio.”

Hema distinctly remembers her veena arangetram in 1978, which was the first veena arangetram in Singapore. “Veteran ghatam artiste Kala Ratna W.D Anthony played as ghatam accompanist for me and I am really proud of that.”

Her two sons are active musicians; the first a violinist trained by Dr. L. Subramaniam and the second a

western trained guitarist. She continues to teach and perform in India.

### APSARAS ARTS - S. SATHYALINGAM AND NEILA SATHYALINGAM

Sangita Siromani Suntharalingam Sathyalingam, musician and Neilambikai Sathyalingam, dancer, both expatriates from Sri Lanka and trained at Kalakshetra, India, set up Apsaras Arts in 1977. Starting with only 20 students, Apsaras has expanded in size and significance very quickly to reach dizzying heights. In subsequent years, several senior dancers of Apsaras branched out to form their own dance institutions in Singapore, Malaysia, Australia, Japan, France and the United Kingdom. Neila's forte was dance training and choreography while husband Sathyalingam was an outstanding singer, musician and composer.

Winning the Gold Medal at the All-Ceylon Dance Festival in 1950 at the tender age of 12, Neila was determined to take up dance as a career even in the early days. She says, “Dancing was considered to be an undignified art form in those days having been associated with temple devadasis and my grandmother was dead against my entering that field. But God had willed otherwise- dancing became my life.” When Queen Elizabeth visited Ceylon soon after her coronation in 1954, it was Neila who danced before her. She moved to Kalakshetra, Madras after her “A” levels, where she met her future husband, who was teaching music there.

Neila also learnt Kathak, Kathakali, Mohiniattam, and Manipuri from top Gurus in Kalakshetra. She taught at Kalakshetra for a few years and married Sathyalingam. The couple moved to Singapore in the mid-1970s as Sathyalingam secured a job as Regional Manager in a chemical company. Thus started her illustrious career in Singapore.

Neila recalls that when she was first asked to choreograph a dance show in Singapore, there was a struggle within her to decide whether she should continue to work in Singapore or return to India, as the standard of dancers was way below her expectations. But with family encouragement, especially from her daughters Mohana, Nandana and Shantana – all outstanding artistes today -



Hema Ranganathan as a teenager performing at Navarathiri concert accompanied by Rama Sathasivam on the violin, Gurusamy on the mridangam and Shanmugam on the ganjira



Vocal tutor A.K. Karunakaran, violin tutor Thanathevy Mithradeva, mridangam tutor K. Deenadayalan and ganjira player V. Ramachandran

and a determination to work hard at training and concentrating on productions, she remained in Singapore.

Neila ran classes at Cairnhill and Tanglin Community Centres and was appointed in 1982 by the People's Association (PA) to form a dance group and perform at various community centres. This was in alignment with the government's

intent to involve people across all strata of society in cultural activities. Chingay, PA's offering of a celebration of the arts during the annual Chinese New Year period grew tremendously in reach from humble productions and began involving all racial groups in Singapore and, in later years, foreign performing groups. Neila recalls with pride that she has choreographed dance productions for over 13 Chingay parades.

Boasting a panel of distinguished Advisers like Ambassador K.Kesavapany, Singapore's cultural stalwart Liew Chin Choy and the famed Dr Padma Subrahmanyam, Apsara Arts has done over 20 productions over the last three decades ranging from Bharatanatyam to folk dances and multi-cultural productions like Angkor, Nirmanika and Anjasa. The dancers have traversed the world with their outstanding dance productions.

Neila's interactions with choreographers and dancers from different cultural backgrounds and traditions in Singapore inspired her to create new Indian dance steps on classical foundation. "Kannagi" featured at the Singapore Dance Festival in 1988 was one such example. These achievements and the fact that her community-based dance productions provided the impetus for mass training of young talent won her Singapore's highest accolade for culture, the Cultural Medallion, in 1989.

Neila and Sathyalingam were also recognised for their efforts in India and were both awarded the title of Viswa Kala Bharathi in 1994 by Bharat Kalachar, a leading arts organisation in Chennai, India.

Neila took her group to perform at the Australian Youth Musical Festival in August 1983, ASEAN Festival held in Malaysia in 1983, Hong Kong Arts Festival in 1990

“  
Dr. Nedunuri Krishnamurthy spent  
18 days with us, gave a key-note  
address and a comprehensive report  
with academic recommendations  
on the exam system which we still  
follow today.”

and National Cultural Festival in Nong Khai, Thailand in 2003, amongst many overseas performances.

Neila shares her concern about the future. "Young people work very late today and are unable to devote sufficient time to the arts. Commitment is falling and this worries not only me but also several arts practitioners in Singapore. The Government should consider giving more financial grants to young artistes so that they can worry less about making money, otherwise talented people just move away from the arts field."

Neila was inducted into the Singapore Women's Hall of Fame in 2014 for her contributions to arts and culture.



Former ministers S.Dhanabalan and George Yeo in SIFAS sitar classroom

When asked about her achievements, Neila humbly says that her main happiness stems from having produced almost 500 disciples worldwide. "Even today, an old disciple called me and thanked me for sending my make-up artistes to assist in her dance show. She was ever grateful and said that the make-up done by them was of a very high professional standard. Besides training dancers in the art form. I got them exposed to all the peripherals involved in production – like make-up, costumes, design, lighting, sound and stage management. That way we provide a comprehensive training to the present generation."

“  
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dancing became my life.”

### S. SATHYALINGAM

Sangita Sironmani Suntharalingam Sathyalingam graduated with a degree in music from the University of Madras and joined Kalakshetra for further training under several Gurus. He later became a lecturer there, where he met his wife Neila. Since 1955, Sathyalingam performed classical music and conducted Bharatanatyam recitals in India, Sri Lanka, Singapore, Malaysia, Australia, Japan and the United Kingdom.

The couple jointly set up Apsaras after moving to Singapore.

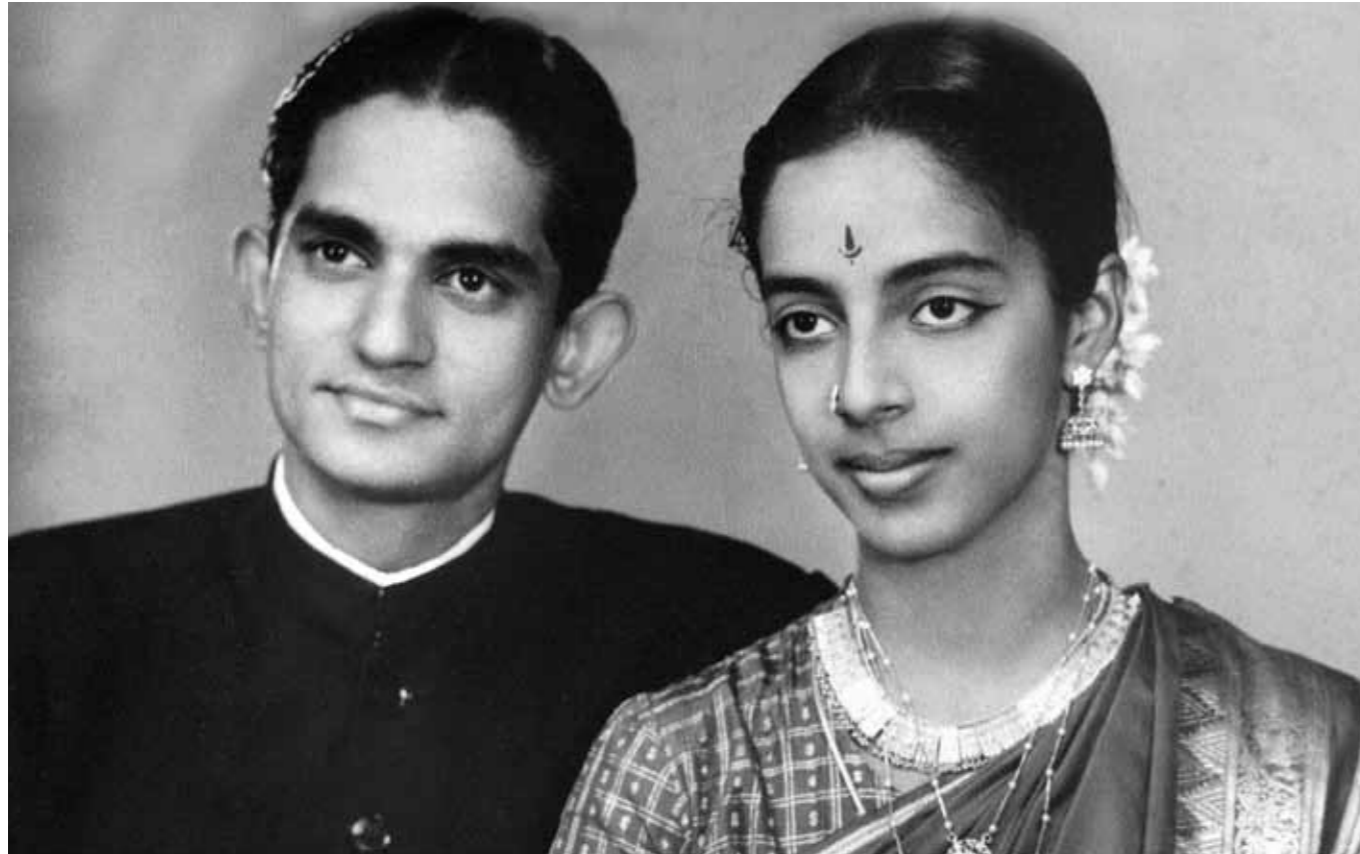
Sathyalingam passed away in June 2011 after a short illness. Neila says she misses her husband very much. "Every production had his input: he was our guiding star. Now I don't have anyone to share and discuss. But his spirit lives on in all our productions and his disciples pay homage to him every year by holding elaborate memorial concerts."

### ARAVINTH KUMARASAMY

Aravinth Kumarasamy is the current creative director of Apsaras Arts. As a young lad in Sri Lanka, Aravinth learnt vocal Carnatic music, dance and veena in his pre-teen years and went on to enroll



S. Sathyalingam (third from left) with the legendary Nehru family when they visited Kalakshetra in the 1950s. Also seen in picture are Indira Gandhi (third from right), Vijayalakshmi Pandit (extreme left) and Sarojini Naidu (extreme right)



Apsaras Arts founders Neila Sathyalingam and S. Sathyalingam in their younger days.



Neila Sathyalingam inducted into Women's Hall of Fame in 2014

in the Vada Elangai Sangeetha Sabha (the North Ceylon Music Institute) in Jaffna, this institution now formally under the University of Ceylon. Armed with a degree in music from University of Madras and specialised dance training under Vazhuvur Ramiah Pillai, he came to Singapore in 1987 and joined the Temple of Fine Arts as a faculty member, while still pursuing an info-tech career. He subsequently worked with Santha Bhaskar and other groups in



Aravinth Kumarasamy, Creative Director of Apsaras Arts



Neila Sathyalingam at Indian Fine Arts, Madras, 1959

Singapore before joining Apsaras Arts and went on to produce many major dance shows.

Aravinth fondly reminisces about a production for the Singapore Arts Festival in 1992 called "Ritu Mahatmyam" choreographed by Padma Subrahmanyam. Dancers and musicians from most of



Apsaras Arts mega production, Angkor - An Untold Story, 2013

the established organisations like SIFAS, Bhaskar's Academy, Apsaras Arts, Temple of Fine Arts, PA Indian Orchestra and Choir and other individuals got together and participated in the production and staging of the dance. In Aravinth's opinion, a number of diverse Indian groups and arts personalities getting together for a common programme was indeed an achievement, and he wonders if the community could ever have such a spirit again.

NAC awarded Aravinth with the coveted Young Artist Award for music in 1999.

### TEMPLE OF FINE ARTS (TFA)

Also known as Kala Mandhir in different countries, TFA was founded in 1981 by Swami Shantanand Saraswathi of India, following a ten-year presence spreading religion and culture in Singapore. Starting as a humble school for Indian classical music, the institution has grown exponentially in the last quarter century, thanks to its founder's vision and strong support from its members. Their initial offerings were student presentations and short dance ballets. These have grown in stature to full length dance dramas and musical productions.

“  
The guiding spirit of Swamiji is what remains in my memory.  
Swamiji taught us to experience spirituality through the arts and to serve the community.”

TFA Singapore offers the whole gamut of Indian musical and dance genres, including North and South traditions, as well as an Arts Education Programme. Its forte has been its mammoth productions.

Founder member Dr R.Rajagopalan said, “The guiding spirit of Swamiji is what remains in my memory. Swamiji taught us to experience spirituality through the arts and to serve the community. His ability to influence youngsters to learn the classical arts through spirituality is the epitome of TFA's achievement.”



TFA - Dandiya in Hong Lim Park

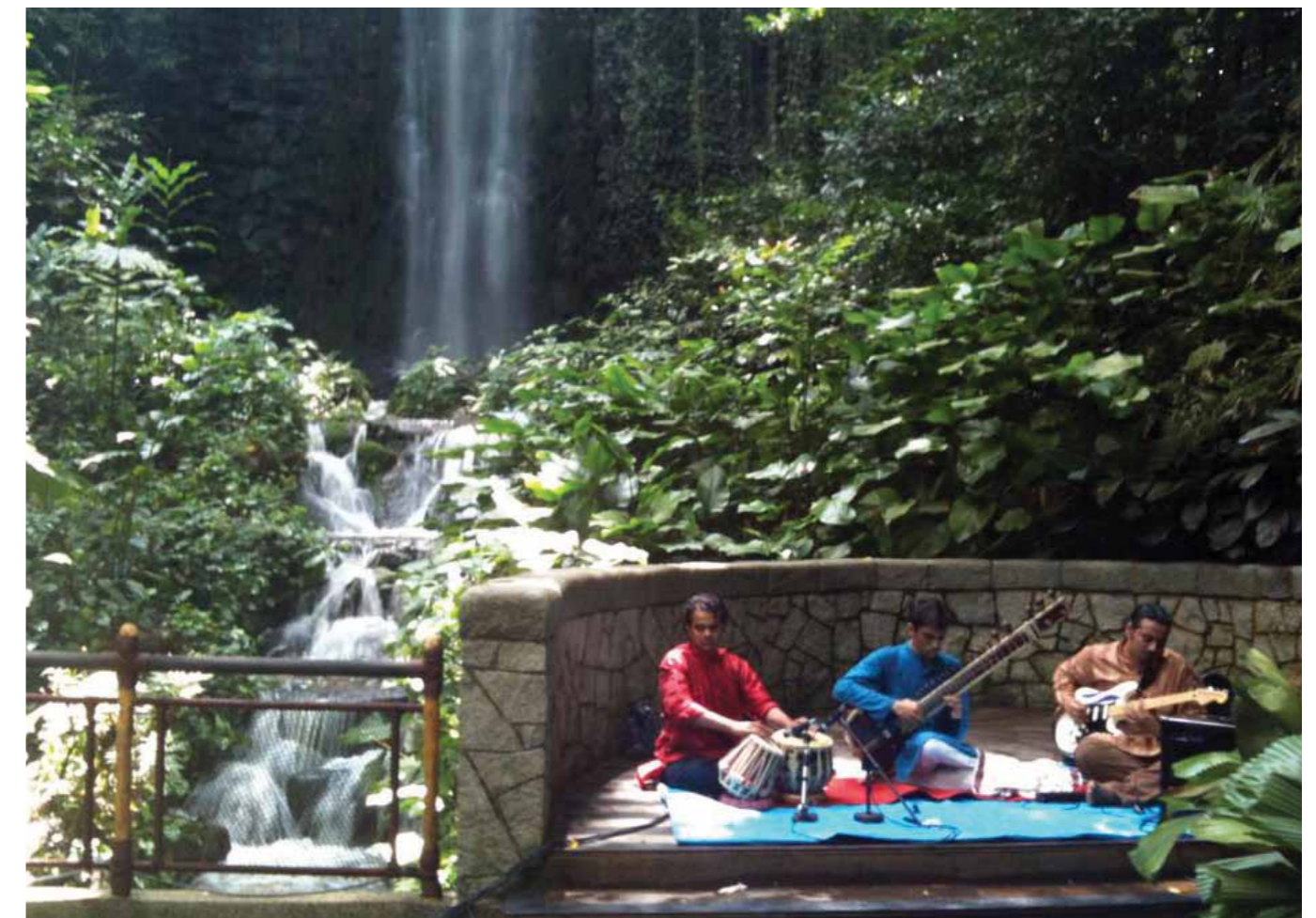
R.Srivathsan, son of Dr. Rajagopalan and Honorary Secretary has been associated with TFA since the early days. He lovingly recalls, “We started with just 20 students but today we have more than 700 – and the profile of our students is interesting. We have students from the ages of 6 to 65 and a mix of Indians, Caucasians, Chinese and Japanese. Our biggest achievement is that we have cultivated a special TFA spirit where everybody, whether trained or otherwise, joins in during the preparatory stages of productions – home grown musical and dance talent, script-writers, painters, backdrop creators, housewives doing make-up and tailoring costumes and even designing jewellery and costumes-activities performed with a strong family spirit and lots of fun. We have a remarkable potpourri of talent indeed that has evolved to acquire great production expertise!”

Today, TFA operates in several countries besides Singapore with a strong presence in several cities in

Malaysia (particularly Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Melaka and Johor Bahru) in India (Coimbatore, Pune and Chennai), Sri Lanka, US and in Australia (Perth).

Vijayalakshmi Menon, another TFA stalwart and currently President of TFA, Singapore says that in the last 20 years, several large scale productions linger in her memories – Swan Lake, Madame Butterfly, Legend of Princess Mahsuri –and particularly Ramayana, with varying storylines from different Asian countries comprising Indian, Indonesian and Thai dance forms with colourful costumes. The total amalgamation of various dance traditions was scintillating and thrilled the audience. Musical productions like Nadopasana, Taal Express, Damaru and Water contained elements of Indian, Chinese and Indonesian gamelan music.

Kamakshi Jayaraman, a disciple of Vazhuvur Ramaiah Pillai, a doyen in the field, served as dance tutor at TFA from 1984 to 1996 and subsequently went on to serve at the Coimbatore wing of TFA. But



TFA – Jurong Bird Park performance in 2011

she continues to keep in touch with TFA's Singapore activities through periodic visits. She shares, "The greatest impact TFA had on me was the concept of staging dance concerts with sophistication and divinity. Swamiji had a penchant for authenticity and detail. When we staged "Sundara Keralam" a Malayalam language based dance drama, he brought down Kathakali dancers from Kerala to train our local dancers."

Rajalakshmi Sekar has been teaching Carnatic music for the last 25 years at TFA. She says, "If you ask me what quality I have learnt at TFA, the first one that comes to my mind is teamwork – TFA as an institution promotes teamwork and all persons are equal when a production needs to be carried out. The spirit of camaraderie is unbelievable!" She recalls how Swami Shantanand struggled with the pronunciation of Malay words in a production. "So much laughter was generated but Swamiji took it in his stride and practised until he got it right. There was no ill-will of course, just fun." When asked what changes they had observed in today's dance programmes compared to those 30 years ago, both Kamakshi and Rajalakshmi stated that the use of Tamil lyrics, like those of Bharathiyar and Oothukadu Venkatasubaiyer, dominates today's programmes, unlike those days when Sanskrit and Telugu compositions were the norm.

In keeping with its objective of offering arts and culture to the masses with less emphasis on financial returns, TFA's approach is not to charge admission



Swami Shantanand struggled with the pronunciation of Malay words in a production... So much laughter was generated but Swamiji took it in his stride and practised until he got it right. There was no ill-will of course, just fun.



fees for public performances, but instead to extend invitations to the public and accept donations to defray production costs – a formula that has worked surprisingly well in the rather mercenary climate of Singapore.

### **SINGAPORE INDIAN ORCHESTRA AND CHOIR (SIOC) OF THE PEOPLE'S ASSOCIATION (PA)**

SIOC was set up by Lalitha Vaidyanathan (nee Subramaniam), PBM in 1985. Lalitha's family lived in Kirk Terrace, next to Singapore's first radio station at the Cathay Cinema Building. Her mother Sarada Subramaniam, affectionately called Cathay Mami and her five siblings were all musicians and dancers. She started a revolutionary experiment in 1985, leading to the formation of the People's Association Indian Orchestra, which ultimately became the SIOC. It is one-of-its-kind in Singapore and can boast that no similar permanent Indian orchestra exists elsewhere in the world.

"The Hindu" newspaper in India describes it as "...an orchestra of a different kind... shows lucid planning, perfect execution and a relentless urge to excel." The Business Times, Singapore states, "Singapore can lay claim to an Indian Orchestra that even India can't boast of. SIOC proudly wears its made-in-Singapore badge regularly all over the world."

SIOC showcases the richness of Indian music with its wide traditional and contemporary repertoire. SIOC is also one of the few orchestras to successfully use traditional Chinese and Malay instruments to performing Indian music. PA's Orkestra Melayu Singapura and PA Chinese Orchestra are regular partners in performance.

Assisting Lalitha is "Kalaichudar" Vicknesvari Vadivalagan and the vibrant group of SIOC musicians, consisting of graduates from various performing arts schools in Singapore and overseas. Lalitha shares that the turnover for SIOC is high since many young people move on in their careers, get married, go overseas etc, but the challenge is to continually recruit new musicians, re-train them in orchestral style playing and maintain standards. She is overjoyed that SIOC continues in its successful journey of 30 years.

Taking over the Ramakrishna Sangeetha Sabha after the passing of Dr. Chotta Singh and with no model orchestra as reference, Lalitha embarked on a unique journey to produce music of a different kind. In 1990, with the support of two musicians Shankar Rajan and Saradha Shankar, a choral wing was added. Lalitha is grateful to the musical family of Mrs Rajah for early guidance and the late M.Y. Kama Shastri of All-India Radio for making available orchestral scores suitable for SIOC and encouraging her.

The progression from Carnatic music to Hindustani music, to vocal and choral acapella music, orchestral works culminating in fusion pieces was not without pain but an extremely "gratifying experience", as Lalitha puts it.

Apart from over 300 performances in Singapore on stage, television, Chingay festivals, community centres and events by the beach, SIOC has travelled to Japan to perform at the Fuji International Youth Musicale, to Perth in Australia,

Malaysia, Thailand for the ASEAN Composers Forum, Sweden, Mexico and Russia. Lalitha talks with pride about the performance in Moscow in 2005 at the Tchaikovsky Hall, where SIOC was personally selected from various Singapore groups by the Russian orchestral conductor. It has 2 CDs to its credit – Gana Varshini and Sonic Orders. Productions like Navarasa Ramayana, Cinema Ragas, Taj Mahal – the Romance of India and Mystique Seven are all feathers in her cap.

Lalitha reminisces that she has worked with composers like M.S. Viswanathan, T.V. Gopalkrishnan, L. Vaidyanathan, Dr. L. Subramaniam, Raj Kumar Bharathi, Baradwaj, Rajhesh and Mohan Vaidhya, but she singled out (late) L.Vaidyanathan as the musician who placed fusion music on the highest pedestal by performing with Chinese, Western and Malay music in his composition of Vivaldi's Concerto fused with Indian classical music at the Singapore Arts Festival in 2002. The show drew equal amounts of acclaim and criticism, but opened a new perspective to fusion music in Singapore.



SIOC's concert *Mystique Seven* conducted by Lalitha Vaidyanathan in October 2014

**THE EXTENDED RADHA RAJAH FAMILY** Matriarch Radha Rajah, musician par excellence – has a unique place in Singapore's music history.

Radha Rajah, the queen of melody in Singapore since the 1950s was an expert at the Jalatarangam (a melodic percussion instrument made of a series of water bearing porcelain cups struck with a stick) as well as several other instruments. She formed a Ladies Orchestra at a time when women were afraid to take the stage. Her daughter Selvaluckshmi Thambiah was a violinist, son-in-law Thambiah an outstanding tabla player and his sister Manuneethivathi Muthusamy, a mridangam maestro.

Manuneethivathi, born in Singapore, was equally adept at singing, composing orchestral music and playing the harmonium, having been trained in

India during the war years. Manuneethivathi's fond memory is one where all the ladies in the orchestra dressed in all their finery performed before an awe-struck audience and kept them spell-bound with excellent Carnatic music.

Manuneethivathi's daughter Vicknesvari Vadivalagan is a multi-faceted artiste. Equally at home with Western music having being trained in the western piano for many years, she plays the veena, keyboard, harmonium, sings Carnatic and Hindustani classical music and dances Bharatanatyam as well as other Indian genres of dance. During her formative years, Vicknesvari took a decision that she will live her life as a professional arts practitioner – at a time in the early 1980s when everybody wanted to be a lawyer, doctor or engineer.



Manuneethivathi on the mridangam , Sharada Shankar on the violin



Vicknesvari's performance in China, for Mediacorp, Singapore, 2010

### THE NAIDU SISTERS

The Naidu sisters Praemalatha, Pushpalatha and Priyalatha, three of four daughters of the (late) P.N.Ramoo Naidu, an aficionado of classical Indian arts in Singapore, hold a special place in Singapore.

Praemalatha trained under Rajam Bagavathar in her teen years and subsequently took up Carnatic lessons at SIFAS. Pushpalatha learnt music from Rajam Bagavathar, but concentrated on Bharatanatyam since her late teens under Sankari

“Victoria Theatre and Concert Halls are venues entrenched in my psyche ... every time I perform at Victoria Theatre, it is like home coming to me.”

Krishnan of SIFAS. The young singing pair in their teens had several memorable concerts over the stage in temples in Singapore, especially during the Navarathiri season. The trio also participated in the annual Mummoorthigal Vizha in Kuala Lumpur for several seasons.

It was Karaikudi Krishnamurthy, mridangam Guru at SIFAS, who exposed Praema to the techniques of singing for dance and put her on track to perform for more than 20 arangetrams in Malaysia, Australia, India and Singapore. Recalls Praema fondly, “SIFAS gave me excellent exposure and my violin teacher Thanathevy Suppiah introduced me to the nuances of Carnatic singing.”



Naidu sisters performing in a concert, as teenagers, 1962



Priyalatha Naidu in dance pose

Pushpa, took a back seat after her early marriage re-emerged as an active dancer for a short period in the late 1970s with the support of SIFAS Gurus, but again withdrew upon the demise of husband Kathirvelu.

Priya, currently the most active of the three sisters, trained actively and attained the position of a top dancer in Singapore. She says, "Victoria Theatre and Concert Halls are venues entrenched in my psyche. It was in these halls that I spent so much of my youth, dancing, rehearsing and performing and every time I perform at Victoria Theatre, it is like home coming to me."

Priya's creativity and skills in choreography led to her appointment as Assistant Choreographer for the National Dance Company (NDC) of Singapore which then had Madhavi Krishnan, a Singaporean Indian Bharatanatyam dancer as the main Indian choreographer.

Priya recalls fondly, "It was Karaikudi Krishnamurthy

who was a turning point in my dance endeavours when he introduced me to the art of Nattuvangam, which I absorbed with alacrity. I went on to do nattuvangam for luminaries like Lakshmi Viswanathan in Chennai, actress Srividhya in Singapore and several others like dancer V. Balakrishnan in Singapore."

Priya led NDC groups to Korea, Philippines, Indonesia, Australia (Adelaide dance festival), Russia and Malaysia for numerous dance performances. Priya also recalls several joint performances with Maalika Girish Panicker, a former tutor at SIFAS and who now runs her own school.

### THE AVADHANI SISTERS

The four daughters of Professor and Mrs P. Avadhani - Mrinalini, Nirmala, Shobha and Radha - have all been part of Singapore's dance scene from the 1970s. Nirmala Seshadri, currently the most active in the field, is a Bharatanatyam dancer, choreographer and researcher. Trained in dance for several years



Nirmala Seshadri with Neewin Hershall in "Crossroads", 2003

under K.P. Bhaskar and Santha Bhaskar, in music at SIFAS under Karaikudi Dr Subramaniam and in nattuvangam under Karaikudi Krishnamurthy, Nirmala has, in the last 15 years, been seeking new dimensions in Bharatanatyam and has gradually moved into a cross-cultural interdisciplinary and feminist choreographic approach.

She lived for many years in India and learnt dance from several stalwarts like Kalanidhi Narayanan. Her arangetram was in 1985 and she continued traditional dancing up to 1999. She chanced upon an opportunity to work with the musician Radhika Srinivasan on an exploratory theme in 1999 that led to her first woman-centric production called "Outcaste Eternal".

Nirmala recalls, "I did not embark on the project with a feminist theme in mind, but somehow got into it because the story had a strong Malayali background. That was a sheer accident! But that gave me the encouragement to work further on such themes, including the use of theatre and other inter-disciplinary and multi-ethnic forms. In this connection, I must record my eternal gratitude to (late) L.Vaidyanathan for composing the music for "Outcaste Eternal." It was a new approach to music: it was brilliant and it grew on me. In fact one song

styled along the melody of "Kai Kotti Kali" was useful for my subsequent work with Malay dancers as it had a "ronggeng" type of rhythm."



Saradha Shankar performing at Kamaraj Hall, Chennai, 1999



Nirmala Seshadri in a pose for her production "I Carry Your Heart", 2015

Her works continued in mostly the contemporary style, especially later in the 2000s, “Moments in Time” (2002), “Crossroads” (2003) and “Radha Now” (2006). She is currently experimenting with the Japanese art form of Butoh.

Nirmala says her achievements include the negotiation of gender identity, staging of cross-cultural works and the 2014 Bharatanatyam Conference spearheaded by her. Nirmala received the National Arts Council’s Young Artist Award in 1995 and has served on the NAC’s Arts Resource Panel. She is currently Artistic Director of N Dance & Yoga.

### **KALA RATNA SARADHA SHANKAR AND THE RAJAN FAMILY**

In 1952, pharmacist S.V. Rajan, his young wife Sarada and two very young children came to visit Rajan’s sister in Singapore. Rajan impulsively decided to settle in Singapore, “a land of good fortune”. A multi-linguist in English, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada and Hindi, Rajan was also well-versed in Carnatic Music, having served as Secretary of Rasika Ranjana Sabha in Madras in his early years. Sarada was a trained Carnatic vocalist and, with the strong support of her husband, linked herself to the musical world in Singapore.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Radio Malaya – subsequently called Radio Singapore – broadcast regular classical concerts over the air and Sarada availed of several opportunities to sing over radio. Eight-year-old son Shankar was taught vocal music by his mother and also introduced to the art of playing mridangam by training under Mridangam Methai M.V. Gurusamy. He had his arangetram at the age of eleven in 1961 – the first mridangam arangetram in the history of Singapore. When Television Singapura started in 1963, Sarada Rajan was in the first line of singers to perform over television and in the second series, Shankar accompanied his mother by being the mridangist. Over time, both Sarada and Shankar were able to give regular performances over the air and stage, especially in Navarathiri programmes in temples.

In 1975, Shankar married Saradha (coincidentally with the same name as his mother). A Singapore-trained Carnatic vocalist, Saradha went to India to train under Trivandram R. Venkataraman and had her vocal arangetram at the young age of 15. After her return and her marriage, she and Shankar began a series of performances over radio, television, the stage and included in their repertoire classical, devotional, semi-classical and even film-songs and began to be called “the singing couple.”



C.N. Thyagaraju on the flute and G. Manikantan on the violin

Saradha carved out a special place in Singapore and participated in programmes of the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society (SIFAS), Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society, Singapore Indian Orchestra and Choir of the People’s Association and performed extensively in Singapore, Malaysia, India, Australia, Japan, Thailand etc.

She was decorated with several awards. Together with Shankar, they jointly received the Singai Gamma Award in 1992 and the Veterans Award in 2004. Her untimely death in January 2006 was a real loss to the music community in Singapore. SIFAS awarded her the title of Kala Ratna (posthumously) in 2006 for her achievements and accomplishments in the field of Indian classical music.

In his later years as the leader of SIOC and principal of SIFAS, Shankar had several opportunities to travel with his orchestra, students and faculty staff. Shankar says, “These were very enriching experiences as we got to perform in such diverse countries as India, Japan, Australia, Malaysia, Thailand, Myanmar, China and Indonesia. We not only learnt to appreciate the music and dance of various societies, but also understood that there was unity in diversity – though very different genres were displayed. As students of music and dance we learnt that we were one community. How wonderful it was for our tutors to dance Bharatanatyam side-by-side with the Indonesian Kecak dancers on a beach in Bali in the open and under a moonlit night!”

Shankar regards the accreditation given by the University of Madras for the 8th Year SIFAS diplomas in dance and music as his major achievement during his six year tenure as Principal of SIFAS.

### **ENTRY OF NEW TALENT IN THE 1990S**

In the 1990s, Singapore began seeing the entry of several musicians from India; they made Singapore their home and some of them continue to teach and perform. Their long presence in Singapore has greatly enhanced the availability of musicians for music and dance concerts.

### **CHILKUNDA NARAYANA THYAGARAJU**

C.N.Thyagaraju is a multi-talented musician, versatile on both the flute and the Indian violin.

He spent several years teaching at SIFAS and at Alapana Arts, and subsequently freelanced in Singapore before returning to his native Mysore a few years ago. He keeps returning to Singapore for performances. Thyagaraju was also active with the Singapore Indian Orchestra and Choir (SIOC) of the People’s Association during his stint in Singapore and travelled overseas with SIOC to Australia and other countries.

### **GURUNATHAN MANIKANTAN**

Violinist Manikantan hails from India and came to Singapore in 1993 to teach at Nrityalaya. He has held highly acclaimed performances in Malaysia, Australia, South Africa, Mauritius, Indonesia, Russia and Switzerland. In Singapore, he is a regular performer at arangetrams, Singapore Youth Festival and the Singapore Chinese Orchestra. He is currently the conductor of the Indian Orchestra of Raffles Girls School.

### **LAZAR THURAKKAL SEBASTINE**

Arriving in Singapore at the turn of the century, Lazar is trained in western violin, Indian violin and keyboard. He is a regular performer with the Singapore Indian Orchestra and Choir of the People’s Association. He teaches at Global Indian International School and Sri Senpaga Vinayagar Temple.



Lazar performing at ACS Barker Road auditorium

Freelance mridangists like V. Devarajan (originally a disciple of Kumbakonam T.V. Balu), N. Balasubramanian (originally a disciple of Shencottai Rajamani), S. Krishnan (originally a disciple of Kumbakonam Rajappa Iyer) also immigrated to Singapore in the 1990s. With intensive training in mridangam under accomplished Gurus in India and some years of performance experience already under their belt, their arrivals in Singapore heralded the arrival of more talented musicians in the immigration wave that followed from India in the 2000s. They continued to learn and perform at concerts and festivals. This phenomenon of immigrant musicians arriving in Singapore in large numbers is one of the reasons the concert activity in Singapore took off in the next two decades.

The teachers employed primarily to teach at the institutions are quite constrained in terms of being able to perform as accompanists for concerts as they have their teaching schedules to keep to. Having a large number of independent musicians – especially violinists and mridangists – available in the talent pool locally in Singapore has been a boon for solo artistes and organisers.

The inaugural National Arts Council's National Indian Music Competition was held in December 1998. The competition aims to improve music standards,

identify potential talents and develop performing skills. The list of all winners of this competition is in the Appendix.

World of Music and Dance (WOMAD), which has its origins in 1982 in the United Kingdom, opened in Singapore in 1998 at the National Arts Council's Festival of Arts. A highlight of WOMAD Singapore in 1999 was a concert by the late renowned violinist, Kunnakudi Vaidyanathan.

The period from independence to the turn of the century was one of gradual growth, accelerating towards the end. The 'Big 4' consolidated their position as the leaders in this industry, and government initiatives, such as those described in the Enablers chapter, started slowly paying off, breathing much energy (and valuable financial support) into the fledgling Indian performing arts scene. The internet and mobile communication revolutions were only in their nascent stage, and it was not easy to stage large scale productions and festivals. Bhaskar's Arts Academy, Apsaras Arts and the Temple of Fine Arts managed to stage numerous "mega" productions in those years are commendable efforts.

SIFAS focused primarily on providing high quality education from resident Indian Gurus and grew rapidly in student strength and reputation.



### CHAPTER 3

# THE 2000s: NEW VENUES, NEW FESTIVALS AND NEW ARRIVALS

SHANKAR RAJAN <sup>1</sup>

The dawn of the new millennium brought with it a sparkle for the cultural scene in Singapore. Singapore moved in one generation from a third-world country to a first-world country. Some of the recommendations of the Renaissance City Plans' reports (described in the Enablers chapter) began to take shape, including greater and more targeted Government expenditure on the arts and most significantly, the establishment of the Esplanade complex of theatres, as the most prestigious and central cultural venue in Singapore. This was followed by the renovation of the landmark cultural venues of the last millennium, the Victoria Theatre and Victoria Concert Hall. Old venues gave way to

new. The Drama Centre at Fort Canning, the site of many a Bharatanatyam recital and arangetram, was demolished, and the YMS auditorium, which was just right for small concerts was shut down. A host of new venues sprung up in the city centre and in the suburbs, including:

- University Cultural Centre Hall (with a capacity of 1714) and Theatre (capacity of 450), founded in 2000 at the National University of Singapore
- Lee Foundation Theatre at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (capacity of 380), in a campus established in 2004
- The new Drama Centre, which incorporated a 615 seat proscenium and a 120 seat black box,

<sup>1</sup>The author acknowledges the contributions of Dr. Seshan Ramaswami for this chapter.

in the new building of the National Library, which opened in 2005

- The Concert Hall, Drama Theatre, and Studio Theatre, with capacities of 560, 420 and 300 respectively, at the School of the Arts, founded in 2008
- The renovated Capitol Theatre, with a capacity of 800 seats, opened in 2015, and with the goal of hosting “in-house theatre and dance productions, featuring local and Asian repertoire” in addition to special screenings of movies

Some of the polytechnics, like Singapore Polytechnic and Republic Polytechnic, also now had large user-friendly auditoriums at lower rental rates than the city centre ones, and became the venue for many Indian cultural events.

Simultaneously, there was a spurt in the arrival of new Indian immigrants, some taking up temporary residence on employment passes, and others converting to permanent residence and citizenship. A significant number of these new arrivals already had many years of training and performance experience in India. Their presence gave a new impetus to the already flourishing Indian arts community.

The most significant outcomes of these

immigration developments on the teaching side have been covered in the Outside the ‘Big 4’ chapter in this book. That chapter describes the establishment of a large number of new schools in the last fifteen years and the journeys of many newly arrived independent artistes, as well as the setting up of performance companies. On the performance side, the noteworthy outcomes were the burgeoning of new festivals of Indian music and dance, and of performances by these newly-arrived, highly proficient and expert musicians and dancers who seamlessly collaborated with the large pool of local talent to create a cultural calendar of high quality Indian events that lasted all year long. There is now hardly a weekend, in which a rasika does not have a choice of high quality music and dance events to attend. New media like the magazine India Se (literally translated as “from India”), the weekly newspaper, Tabla, in English published by Tamil Murasu, and a profusion of media on the internet made it easier than ever to spread news of all these events to the Indian community at large.

The newly opened Indian Heritage Centre (IHC), provides yet another cultural landmark for the Indian community. Its opening was celebrated with a three week long inaugural CultureFest. Its



The Indian Heritage Centre, which provides yet another cultural landmark for the Indian community in Singapore, was opened by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in May 2015

opening ceremony concert by the Singapore Indian Orchestra and Choir and a dance number featuring 60 classical dancers from major dance schools in Singapore performing on the façade steps of the IHC building before Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and invited guests was a first ever attempt to showcase local talent in a contemporary architectural setting. They also organised a dance concert Natya Darpana featuring some of Singapore’s leading Bharatanatyam dancers and choreographers and a three day music festival Dina Raga Malika featuring Singapore’s established and upcoming Carnatic and Hindustani musicians. Lauded by the pioneers and audiences alike, it provided a new opportunity that brought all practitioners together on the same platform after many decades, creating a watershed moment in Singapore. In the past two decades, national museums managed by the National Heritage Board have also provided performance opportunities in their heritage festivals and exhibitions.

Described in this chapter are these phenomena, among other developments over the last fifteen years in Singapore.

### ESPLANADE SINGAPORE

One of the biggest cultural developments in Singapore in recent times was the opening of the Esplanade Theatres on the Bay in the year 2002. A 650-million dollar investment, the Esplanade is a world-class venue with world-class facilities, developed after a thorough study of the great opera houses and concert halls of the world. Dr. Liu Thai Ker, master architect, arts patron and the second Chairman of the NAC, points out the level of detailed thinking that went into its design. As an example, he pointed out, “The architects realised that a high quality green room was the first impression that artistes would get of the new facility. No expense was spared to make the accommodation in the green room as plush and inviting as possible, to put the artistes in the right mood for the concert.” Now, all top musicals, dramas and theatre shows are ready to be staged in Singapore and the less-travelled local population shares in the opportunity to viewing top class productions.

Benson Puah, the Chief Executive Officer of the Esplanade since inception, shares his thoughts, “It was visionary on the part of the Government and the



Benson Puah, CEO of the Esplanade

Board of Directors of the newly formed Esplanade Company to adamantly want a Singaporean to helm the national cultural institution. Unlike many countries that bring in overseas experts to head their cultural institutions, the Government recognised that only a Singaporean CEO would have an understanding of the aspirations of the people and of the larger community. He or she would be fully invested in that community. A cultural company is not the same as a normal for-profit company and has to be handled differently.”

A man with a history of growing up in the arts, with music, dance and drama being central to his early development, Benson understood that the Esplanade had a critical social role to play in the fabric of Singapore. To resonate with the multi-cultural mosaic, Esplanade started rightly with three main festivals for the three main races in Singapore. Fortuitously, having started in October 2002 with Deepavali round the corner, Kalaa Utsavam was the first festival. “The Indian community being so divergent in their language background, even the selection of the name of the festival itself had to ensure that it included both North and South Indian content,” Benson said.

When asked to comment on more contemporary content in their programming, Benson said that Esplanade had to cater to the major shift in our society and the “hunger” of the younger generation which looked at culture differently – more as a reflection of the “self”. This approach also caters to local and regional talent availing more opportunities to hone their skills and perform.

Benson said that Esplanade’s crowning achievement was in establishing a comprehensive calendar of events and planning a programme structure that gave a platform for arts practitioners to perform and connect with local and overseas audiences.

The Esplanade has four separate closed venues, the Concert Hall and Theatre, with capacities of 1600 and 2000 respectively, and smaller venues such as the Theatre and Recital Studios, with capacities of 220 and 245 respectively, suitable for more intimate, smaller dance and theatre productions and music recitals. There are also open venues, such as the Concourse, and the outdoor amphitheatre in which music and dance can be presented in more informal settings.

### KALAA UTSAVAM

Launched in 2002, Esplanade hosts an annual Indian festival called Kalaa Utsavam during the Deepavali festive period. Started as a 3-day festival, it has since grown into a 10-day festival that presents an exciting selection of contemporary and traditional performances by acclaimed Indian artistes from Singapore and abroad.

J.P. Nathan, until recently, Director of Programmes at the Esplanade, says that the Esplanade was set up as an arts centre for everybody. Its objective was to reach out to all communities and cut across all genres including classical and contemporary ones. Kalaa Utsavam’s vision is “to produce and expose Indian arts not only to the Indian community but to all communities in Singapore”.

Over the years, Kalaa Utsavam has featured many of the leading lights of Indian music and dance. In recent years, the emphasis increasingly has been on presenting the classical genres, but in new ways targeted at a wider audience than the traditional concert rasika, who is used to a 2.5 hour traditionally formatted concert by solo artistes. Many unusual



“A Musical Voyage”, by Madras String Quartet, at Kalaa Utsavam 2008

duets and ensembles have been featured. Carnatic vocalist Sikkil Gurucharan has performed a few times with the pianist Anil Srinivasan. Classical artistes have created new formats. In 2011, the festival featured “Raga Sudha Rasa” – Musical Moods, which had original compositions and arrangements by Carnatic flautist and composer B.V. Balasai, using a mix of Indian and Western instruments such as bamboo, susato (whistle), piccolo and key flutes, and percussion instruments such as mridangam, konnakkol, and tabla. In the 2012 edition, Bombay Jayashri designed a programme entitled “Listening to Life”, a musical journey that explored the shades and colours produced by the seven notes of emotion—of joy, sorrow, happiness—experienced by a rasika throughout his or her music journey through life. It featured an eclectic mix of folk and Carnatic music, Hindustani thumri, bhajans, film music and ghazals, accompanied by Navin Iyer on woodwinds and flute, Embar Kannan on the electric and acoustic violin, Sai Shraavanam on the tabla, Navneet Sundar on the grand piano and harmonium, and J. Vaidyanathan on the mridangam. In 2014, vocalist Shubha Mudgal presented “Koshish”, in which multilayered texts of medieval Indian poets, as well as contemporary literary giants such as Faiz Ahmad Faiz and Gulzar were rendered musically, accompanied by an orchestra, which included Sudhir Nayak (harmonium), Srijan Mahajan (drums), Aneesh Pradhan (tabla), Anil Chawla (keyboards), Aditya Balani (guitar) and Gaurav Balani (bass).

In recent years, contemporary dance performances, have included “Samhara”, presented by the Nrityagram ensemble in collaboration with the Chitrasena Dance Company of Sri Lanka in 2011, “Within” by Aditi Mangaldas Dance Company, and “Disha” by Leela Samson’s Spanda group in 2014.

The Kalaa Utsavam also features free concerts in the concourse and outdoors, and numerous local groups of musicians and dancers are given a wonderful opportunity to present their art to the general public in family friendly venues.

In order to encourage local artistes to take to the stage and to create opportunities for them, Esplanade started a Raga series of concerts in 2009. This is a series that showcases Indian performances throughout the year at the Theatre Studio or the

Recital Studio. There are also year-long Indian music and dance performances by local or visiting groups, free of cost at the concourse – an open stage setting at a mezzanine level or the outdoor amphitheatre. Almost ten groups performed in 2014 with shows including the genres of classical and Bollywood music, folk and classical dance and story-telling sessions.

### THE OTHER FESTIVALS

Another significant development over the last fifteen years has been the curation and presentation of other regular festivals of music and dance over the entire year by local institutions, both new and old. Significant among them are the SIFAS Festival of Indian Classical Music and Dance, the Soorya Fest, and Madhuradhwani.

### SIFAS FESTIVAL OF MUSIC AND DANCE

Born in 2003, the SIFAS festival of Indian Classical Music and Dance has had a successful run for thirteen consecutive years. It has become a significant and much anticipated event in the Indian cultural calendar of Singapore. SIFAS President P. Selvadurai described the festival as the brain-child of Vice-President P.S. Somasekharan, whose idea it was to conduct a festival in Singapore in March/April every year, modelled on festivals conducted during the music season in Chennai, in December of each year.

In its first year, in 2003, SIFAS put together a modest offering at the Khoo auditorium in the Singapore Chinese Girls School with performances by the Sikkil sisters, Debu Chaudhuri and Sreekala Bharath. That year, Singapore was plagued with SARS, and overseas artistes as well as local artistes were hesitant to visit and perform in Singapore. However, SIFAS soldiered on; the festival was inaugurated successfully with the then President S.R. Nathan as the Guest of Honour.

Encouraged by the positive feedback the Festival moved to the University Cultural Centre, NUS in the second year, featuring a jugalbandi of N. Ravikiran and Vishwa Mohan Bhatt, and solo recitals of Alarmel Valli and Shivkumar Sharma at the Victoria Theatre. From then on there was no turning back.

The stature of the Festival grew by leaps and bounds as it blossomed and moved to the prestigious venue of the Esplanade Theatres on the Bay. The first Festival at the Esplanade in 2005 was a huge success. Sudha Ragunathan and Sanjay Subramanyan drew record crowds. The dance segment featuring Urmila Sathyanarayan and the Hindustani/Carnatic Jugalbandi were also well received. The combination of Shivkumar Sharma and Zakir Hussain in 2006 was spell binding and was performed in the august presence of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

The SIFAS Festival was conceived with 2 objectives in mind. The fact that there was an audience in Singapore who had the aspiration to experience the Indian arts a la the music season in Chennai was recognised by the organisers. To cater to this segment

the festival would bring in acclaimed artistes from India in the field of Carnatic and Hindustani music, and the various Indian dance forms. The second objective was to present a platform for local artistes, both junior and senior, from all over Singapore (not just SIFAS students and alumni). These would be free concerts staged on weekday evenings and all day on weekends, replicating the festival atmosphere of Chennai sabhas. Thus, young aspiring artistes who otherwise had opportunities to render 15 to 30 minute concerts during Navarathiri and Kumbabishegam celebrations in temples, could now present full length concerts. This would give the budding artistes an opportunity to hone their performing skills and gain the confidence to perform full length concerts on stage to discerning audiences. Artistes for the local segment are carefully selected following an audition assessed by an invited overseas judge. Each festival



Aruna Sairam accompanied by B.V. Raghavendra Rao (violin), Neyveli Narayanan (mridangam), Aarthi Devarajan (tanpura) at the SIFAS Festival, 2009

"Rising Stars" Ganesh and Sriram Balasubramanian, accompanied by Venkatram Subramony (violin) and N. Balasubramanian (mridangam), SIFAS Festival 2009



edition features almost fifty concerts held at the SIFAS auditorium.

The festival has proved to be a training ground for young artistes. Many of them have gone on to perform internationally. Sushma Somasekharan, Nishanth Thiagarajan, Sudarshan Narasimhan, Mythili Rajaraman, Chitra Poornima Sathish, Srikanth Radhakrishnan, Janani Ganesh, Sneha Ramesh Mani, Ganesh Balasubramaniam, Sriram Balasubramaniam, Sai Vigneshwar, Sai Akileshwar and Aarti Devarajan are some of the younger generation artistes, who have now performed to critical acclaim in India and other countries.

Another important objective is to promote young learners of the arts. A whole day is devoted to the "Rising Stars" section, for those aged below 16 years. These are typically shorter time slots wherein the youngsters, with even just a few years of musical or dance training, are given a feel of performing on stage.

Year on year, the festival has gained in popularity. Emboldened, the organisers have gone on to present more variety, tweaking the format to suit the

audience. The festival has grown in size and stature over the last 13 years. On an average, over 5000 people attend the festival every year. The festival attracts not only the ethnic Indian community but also the other communities in Singapore as well as the floating international community. It also provides a gala festive atmosphere with a canteen, visual arts exhibition, and stalls selling CDs, DVDs and handicrafts. In recent years, a Visual Arts Exhibition has been hosted, beside the auditorium, featuring selected works of the students and staff of the Visual Arts department of SIFAS.

The festival concludes with a homage to the Trinity of Carnatic music on the last day with the conduct of the Mummoorthigal Vizha. The congregational singing of the Thyagaraja Pancharatna kritis, is followed by a musical homage, presented in solos, duets, and groups, to the Trinity of Thyagaraja, Muthuswami Dikshitar and Syama Sastri. Very often, leading vocalist and instrumentalists featured in the festival, join in the congregational singing, adding an inspired feel to the ambience. Over the years, artistes such as T. M. Krishna, Aruna Sairam, Sikkil Gurucharan, and R. K. Shriramkumar have all joined in the performance of the Pancharatna kritis.



Mummoorthigal Vizha at the end of SIFAS Festival 2008; front row (from left) Poorna Pragna Rao, Seetharama Sharma, T.M. Krishna, R.K. Shriramkumar, Gomathy Nayagam, Mangalam Shankar and K.R. Shyama

### SOORYA (SINGAPORE)

The Soorya organisation was started in India 37 years ago by Soorya Krishnamoorthy. It now has chapters all over India and in over 20 countries across the world. The 365 day long cultural festival held in India is considered the longest cultural festival in the world. Its Singapore chapter, Soorya (Singapore), was registered in 2005, as a non-profit, voluntary society, focusing on the Indian classical arts. Its objectives were to showcase the finest in Indian art and culture through performances by high quality talents, to deliver outstanding classical events to the Singaporean audience at very affordable prices and to encourage and cultivate promising young and old local talents.

Soorya (Singapore) has featured some of the great dancers and musicians like Dr. Padma

Subrahmanyam, Alarmel Valli, Kunnakudi Vaidyanathan, Dhananjayans, Kadri Gopalnath, Mattannur Sankaran Kutty, Shobana, Chitra Visveswaran and many others. Soorya has also organised two heritage events, which featured the very first Koodiyattam and Nangiarkoothu (2000 year old art forms from Kerala in India) in Singapore and Theyyam, the ancient ritualistic traditional art form, at the Singapore Arts Festival, 2012. Soorya has also organised charity events and other events with local artistes.

Dr. Chitra Krishnakumar, President, Soorya (Singapore) says, "Considering that we are celebrating our 10th anniversary this year, I would like to say that through the years Soorya (Singapore) has contributed to raising art appreciation, setting high standards as well as creating a discerning audience."



Meera Das and group presenting an Odissi recital for Soorya at the Esplanade, 2008

### MADHURADHWANI

The Music Circle was set up in 2007 to promote high quality listenership and performance standards to the Singaporean audience, both lay and music students and connoisseurs. The circle runs regular chamber concerts of visiting and local artistes through the year. The organisation also hosts Madhuradhwani, a music festival, featuring some of the top names in Carnatic classical music. A brain child of vocalist V. Shankar Narayanan, it started as a celebration of the birth centenary of musical legend G. N. Balasubramaniam in 2010. Vocal maestro T. N. Seshagopalan sang a special pallavi that year, in Shanmukhapriya raga, "Guna Nidhi Balasubramanya" marking the centenary. A stupendous success, the initial edition motivated the organisation to continue with the festival for the subsequent years and Madhuradhwani today is a much awaited festival.

Doyens Dr. M. Balamuralikrishna, T.N. Seshagopalan, Umayalpuram K. Sivaraman, Hyderabad Brothers and current day stars Sudha Ragunathan, Bombay Jayashri, S. Sowmya, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, P. Unnikrishnan, V. Shankar Narayanan, Priya Sisters, Carnatica Brothers and V.K. Manimaran have performed in this festival. The festival has

recorded audiences of around 2000 over the length of the festival each year.

"This is the fourth year and we are looking at stretching musical boundaries and presenting varied concepts through innovative programming", says Vanitha Shankar who manages the planning, publicity and execution of the festival.

About her experience at the festival, Bombay Jayashri commented, "I have performed to many international audiences, but somehow this concert brought special vibes in me." Veteran Dr. M. Balamuralikrishna and maestro mridangist, Umayalpuram Sivaraman teamed up in 2013 after several years to offer a splendid fare. An interesting incident about this concert is recalled by Bala Shankar, a festival organiser, "Balamuralikrishna stopped midway in his concert to comment about his accompanist, "Umalaypuram Sivaraman does not know how to play the mridangam..." and with his trademark dramatic way of presentation, he paused, while the audience and UKS gasped, and then he completed his comment, "... he sings along with his instrument!" Unnikrishnan commended the festival effort and exhorted the audience to support the endeavour.



T.N. Seshagopalan accompanied by Vittal Ramamurthy (violin), T.R. Sundaresan (mridangam), and S.Sripriya (Tanpura) at Madhuradhwani, 2010



Percussionists Selvapandian Shunmugasundaram, Nawaz Mirajkar and Paskaran Sreekaram played non-stop for 27 hours at the Kolam Ayer Community Club 2001

Other additions to the festival calendar which are well on their way to becoming permanent annual fixtures, include "The Other Festival" hosted by SYAMA, featuring local artistes, the Asian Dance festival, Samarpana (described in the chapter Outside the 'Big 4') featuring local and overseas Indian and non-Indian performers, Vocal Traditions of India, a festival of Hindustani music (described in the "Evolution of Hindustani Art forms in Singapore" chapter) and the annual workshop and performance event, Dance India Asia Pacific, hosted by Apsaras Arts in collaboration with Milapfest, UK's Indian Arts Development Trust, in which distinguished Indian dancers of different genres conduct workshops to enhance the training of local dancers.

Two other highly unusual events in the 2000s were percussion marathons. On February 2, 2001, three percussionists, Nawaz Mirajkar, Paskaran Sreekaram and Selvapandian Shunmugasundaram set a record by playing non-stop for 27 hours at the Kolam Ayer Community Club, Singapore. May 1, 2005, 5:00 a.m. heralded the start of a herculean effort by SIFAS instructor, mridangam Guru, T. R. Sundaresan who played non-stop for 42 hours at

the SIFAS auditorium, while accompanying a variety of concerts, solos, duets, trios and ensembles. The attached photo and photomontage are tributes to their superhuman efforts of artistic endurance.

### THE SIFAS PERFORMING ARTS COMPANY

"It is under your direction and leadership (that) SIFAS has emerged as a premier organisation promoting Indian fine arts in Singapore. Your devotion to the Indian arts scene is particularly commendable and forward-looking as you continue to steer the society to experiment with alternative art forms and different presentation styles", wrote Dr. Liu Thai Ker, then Chairman of the NAC, commending the achievements of A. Sachithanathan, long time Vice President of SIFAS, and first CEO of the SIFAS Performing Arts Company, while conferring on him the high honour of the Public Service Medal, in 1998. The company was founded soon after, in 2000, as a natural continuation of Sachithanathan's efforts over the years at SIFAS. Sachithanathan, set out the raison d'être for the company thus, "The difficulty of balancing the teaching and performance aspects of the institution had slowed down the professionalisation of the society's own performance

activities. The time of our teachers and students was our most critical and valuable resource and it was difficult balancing the needs of teaching and performance. At the same time, it was not easy for a primarily teaching-focused institution like ours to work freely with freelance artistes and other local institutions for performances." The company was hence formed as an independent body, fully owned by the Society, but free to collaborate with external artistes and associations, to create and stage productions, to employ staff and to raise funds. Over the several years of its existence, the company staged a number of high quality performances, by local and visiting artistes. In 2001, the company presented "Mirror of Love", a dance recital based on the life and works of the Sanskrit poet Jayadeva, choreographed and presented by SIFAS tutor Maalika Girish Panicker (then Girish Panicker) with a SIFAS alumna, Priyalatha Arun in Chennai. Other SIFAS teachers V. Balagurunathan and Minal Amit Dhamelia (then Minal Merai) staged full length dance

productions in Singapore with their students under the aegis of the company. The Fifth Lotus, and Maya Dhvani, two collaborative Indian dance productions, based on Buddhist themes, involving Chinese and Malay artistes, with Sanskrit lyrics set by noted Canadian composer, Professor V. Subramaniam, and with English and Chinese subtitles to reach out to the entire Singapore audience were choreographed by Dr. Siri Rama and performed by local and overseas dancers in 2002 and 2003. Choreographers and dancers such as Meenakshi Chittaranjan, Saroja Vaidyanathan, Lakshmi Viswanathan, Japanese sisters Yumiko Tanaka and Miki Nakatsuji, and Meenakshi Srinivasan and musicians such as Anoushka Shankar, S. Shashank, O.S. Arun and Sugato Marjit were presented in a variety of venues in ticketed concerts. In 2008, for a variety of reasons, and as the SIFAS Festival increasingly started occupying the management resources of SIFAS, as well as overlapping in the objectives of the company, it was decided to close the company.



Cast of Fifth Lotus, a SIFAS Performing Arts Company production, Victoria Theatre, 2002



### Mridangam Marathon

SIFAS mridangam Guru T.R. Sundaresan attempted a Guinness World record (breaking the then existing record of 36 hours of non-stop solo percussion), starting on Sunday, May 1, 2005 at 5:00 a.m. at the SIFAS auditorium. He planned to stop at 9:00 p.m. on Monday, May 2, but eventually concluded the marathon at 11:06 p.m. that day – a total of 42 hours of non-stop drumming. He accompanied a variety of combinations of vocalists and instrumentalists, over 40 in all of solos, duets, trios, and ensembles, interspersed with many tani avarthanams or solo performances on three instruments, mridangam, ganjira and morsing. For those who attended various parts of this event, it was a thrilling event – to witness a tremendous feat of physical and artistic achievement.

### NEW ARRIVALS

The 2000s also saw the arrival of numerous highly experienced Indian performers and teachers, who had moved to Singapore following either their own job transfer or that of their spouse from around the world. These were artistes and teachers who had already established a flourishing career of performance and teaching in India or elsewhere in the world, and their presence in Singapore in such large numbers meant that many of the festivals, temple celebrations, house concerts, and other events suddenly had a much larger and highly qualified talent pool to tap into. This also resulted in a sudden increase in the number of accompanists available for both local and visiting performers of both Carnatic and Hindustani music.

Further, as an important transport hub and tourist destination close to India, and with much better connectivity to Indian cities and lowered airline prices, Singapore also has attracted many professional musicians and dancers either transiting through Singapore to concerts in other parts of Asia, Australia or North America, or visiting Singapore on a holiday. This has enabled a large number of both informal and formal concerts, again facilitated by the availability of a much bigger pool now of experienced accompanists.

Notable among these new arrivals were two A grade Carnatic musicians, the vocalist V.Shankar Narayanan, disciple of Vaigal Gnanaskandan, Prof. T.R. Subramaniam, and T.V. Gopalkrishnan and Srividya Sriram, vocal disciple of Kamakshi Balasubramanyam and L.N. Gurumurthy, and violin disciple of Vasantha Kannan, who have given numerous full length concerts in Singapore in the 2000s. Various other musicians and dancers who arrived in the last couple of decades (starting in the 1990s) are affiliated with various existing schools of music and dance who were eager to absorb this new talent. Dancers like Jyoti Unni (Odissi), M.S. Srilakshmi, Bharathi Murthy and Shobhinya Karthikeyan (all Bharatanatyam artistes) were absorbed by GICC, as described in the chapter Outside the 'Big 4'.

Among the independent, freelance new entrants in the last couple of decades are Carnatic vocalists Pavan Rangachar, Vaishnavi Anand, Shruti Anand, Praveena Arjun Thodge, S. Hariharan, Manasi Prasad, P.B. Madhavan, Rajalakshmi Mahesh, Rasika Viswanath, Ashwini Satish, and Jayashri Prakash, violinists Bombay Anand, Srinath Iyer, Bharati Murali, Adithya Sathyanarayana and Pavan Sughosh, flautists Suresh Thiagarajan and R.



V. Shankar Narayanan, with V.V. Ravi (violin) and Mannarkoil J. Balaji (mridangam) at SIFAS concert, 2009



Srividya Sriram, Carnatic vocalist, violinist and teacher

Seenivasan, and percussionists, Satish Chandra Sista, Muthu Subramaniam, R. Subramaniam, Mahesh Parameswaran, and K. Srinivasan and Hindustani musicians Suman Bhattacharya (sitar), Nikhil Bidwalkar (santoor), Pratima Bellave (vocal), Sachin Bhide (tabla) and Rahul Parasnis (harmonium), and Bharatanatyam dancers, Sreelatha Vinod and Meenakshi Srinivasan, Odissi dancer Indu Vijay, Kuchipudi dancer Amrita Lahiri, Odissi and contemporary dancer Raka Maitra, and Bharatanatyam/Kuchipudi dancer Dr. Siri Rama. Some of the new arrivals turned out to have been temporary migrants, and left Singapore after briefly enriching the local music and dance scene with their presence. Others have stayed on and become permanent residents and citizens, permanently enriching the local Indian cultural landscape.

This looks to be a pattern set to continue with the global trends of migration, and country-hopping for many young dual career artistes, who pursue Indian classical music and dance alongside a professional

career. The years to come promise an even greater profusion of concerts, and a greater level of collaboration between visiting Indian artistes and local resident artistes, and more and more new schools of Indian music and dance, even as some existing schools close down, when their founders move out of Singapore.

### EMERGING TALENTS

The best news of the 2000s perhaps is the development of a new breed of Singapore-trained artistes, who have taken to classical music and dance as a career, either full time or as serious part-time exponents. Many have gone on to receive advanced training from Gurus in India.

### SUSHMA SOMASEKHARAN

Sushma Somasekharan is a Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society (SIFAS) alumna. Currently learning from Lalita Sivakumar (daughter of Mridangam legend Palghat Mani Iyer and daughter-in-law of D.K Pattammal), she was the first Singaporean to win the All India Radio Carnatic Vocal Award in 2006. She was one of the top 2 winners amongst several competitors and was awarded an All India Grade. A regular winner at the National Arts Council's Carnatic Vocal Competitions, Sushma now performs every year at several prestigious platforms during the December Music Festival. Sushma was part of the 10th Year Anniversary celebrations at The Esplanade in 2012 and was invited to perform in 2013 at the Recital Studio as part of their annual Kalaa Utsavam Festival. Sushma has also been invited to sing by the Indian Consulate by Luxembourg Indian Embassy in Brussels, Belgium and Indian High Commission in Kandy, Sri Lanka.

Recognised for her resonant and mellifluous voice, she has collaborated with Bharatanatyam virtuoso Mythili Prakash, one of India's prominent playwrights Gowri Ramnarayan and eminent percussionist Bernhard Schimpelsberger just to name a few. Sushma also writes regularly for arts magazines and runs a column named 'Young Voices' in Sruti Magazine, India's premier Carnatic music magazine. Apart from performing and writing, her passion also lies in educating people in classical arts. She was invited to be a guest lecturer at National Institute of Education on Indian Classical Music.



Chitra Poornima Sathish performing in Mylapore Fine Arts Club, Chennai



Sushma Somasekharan in concert

### CHITRA POORNIMA SATHISH

Born a Singaporean and exposed to the country's diverse cultural landscape, Chitra Poornima Sathish's introduction to the arts was in the Temple of Fine Arts (TFA), Singapore. TFA was her home, sanctuary and a place where she spent most of her days as a child, attending music and dance classes. She holds fond memories of singing and dancing with people from various walks of life and from different ethnicities coming together for the sake of the arts. Poornima had her Carnatic music arangetram under TFA in 2001 in Singapore.

Between 2005 and 2009, Poornima took several trips to Chennai, India, setting aside two to three months every year to learn and to perform alongside musician Bombay Jayashri. The experience gave her opportunities to sing in old as well as reputed concert halls, and to teach music to children from villages in the interior of Karnataka State. Upon completing her Bachelor's degree at NUS in 2009, she moved to Chennai as a full-time pupil and musician.

Recently married, she now resides in Singapore but plans to move to Chennai to continue her art form. Poornima wishes to continue using her music as a means of connecting people, and inspiring others to embrace the arts in their everyday lives.

### SAI AKILESHWAR

Akilesh was initiated in mridangam by Thaamarai-kudi Vijayakumar and Palghat S.V. Ramani at the TFA, Singapore. After years of training, his formal stage debut was in 2002 under the guidance of S. Paskaran. He later had advanced training under T.R. Sundaresan in SIFAS and graduated with a Diploma in Mridangam and a Vadhya Visharad title.

Akilesh is an NAC Postgraduate Scholarship Recipient for the year 2012, and completed his Masters in Rhythmology at the University of Madras with distinction. During his time at the university, he attended the master classes of many doyens of Carnatic music like Dr. T.V. Gopalakrishnan, Dr. T.K. Murthy, P.S. Narayanswamy and Neyveli Santhanagopalan.

Being a "B High" grade artiste in mridangam with All India Radio, Akilesh had opportunities to perform at many prestigious sabhas in Chennai like the Madras Music Academy, Narada Gana Sabha, Bharatiya Vidhya Bhavan, Karthik Fine Arts and Nungumbakam Cultural Academy. Akilesh states that, although it is generally felt that Carnatic musicians in India are at a dauntingly high level, Singaporeans can reach that level with determination and hard work.

### SRIKANTH RADHAKRISHNAN

Arriving as a child of 5 years in 1998, Srikanth joined SIFAS in 1999 and did his basic music training under teachers like Mangalam Shankar, A.K. Karunakaran and N.R.Prashanth. It was Guru Prashanth who kindled the music in Srikanth and encouraged him to also learn violin from K.Sivaraman. Both Srikanth's parents were into music and hence Srikanth was a fast learner. He outshone all his class-mates and completed his 8th year Carnatic vocal diploma in 2007 winning a Sangeetha Visharad title as well. And in 2009 he got the diploma in violin and a Vadhya Visharad – there was no looking back for Srikanth then onwards. In the meantime he also won first prize in NAC's National Indian Competition for vocal and violin.

Srikanth recalls, "One of the best concerts was the duet-violin I played with Sandeep Ramachandran for SIFAS Festival in 2008. Of us, competitors all throughout the music course, were asked to play together and that really opened our eyes – it emphasised how important was co-operation and team playing in a musician's life." He went on to perform in the University of Madras-SIFAS joint concerts in Chennai.



Sai Akileshwar playing the mridangam in concert series organised by Chennai Cultural Academy Trust, Dec 2014 to Jan 2015



Srikanth Radhakrishnan performing in India

Srikanth did SIFAS proud by singing and playing violin in Bangalore and Chennai after the family moved to India in 2012. Srikanth shares, "SIFAS has produced a whole number of outstanding young musicians – Sai Vigneshwar, Sushma Somasekharan, Sudarshan Narasimhan and Nishanth Thiagarajan all in vocal Carnatic music and Sai Akhileshwar in mridangam. In fact if there is any young musician from Singapore who does well in the Chennai festival, the audience straightaway assumes that the performer is from SIFAS. That is the image of SIFAS," says Srikanth proudly.

### THE 'BIG 4' IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

There were a number of noteworthy events and achievements in the continued growth and development of the 'Big 4' institutions of SIFAS, Nriyalaya Aesthetics Society/Bhaskar's Arts Academy, Apsaras Arts and the Temple of Fine Arts.

SIFAS continued to grow with its student enrolment almost doubling over the last fifteen years. The

North Indian departments of vocal, sitar, tabla and Kathak grew especially rapidly, with the faculty strength now at seven. Indian President Abdul Kalam visited the SIFAS campus. SIFAS finally realised its dream of creating its own orchestra. SIFAS dance Gurus collaborated on a dance production Dasaavatharam which went on to perform in Jakarta. SIFAS celebrated its 60th anniversary with a series of concerts throughout 2009. SIFAS students gave their first ticketed musical concert at the Esplanade, "Bhakti Shringara", featuring Carnatic and Hindustani vocal students. SIFAS music and dance alumni staged two major productions, Krishna Bharatham and Pravaha, choreographed by Sheejith Krishna, at the SIFAS Festival at the Esplanade, and will be staging a third, Aham, choreographed by Shyamjit Kiran in July this year.

Bhaskar's Arts Academy staged a significant number of overseas performances, including an Indian tour with three Kathakali productions,

a performance of Chakra: the Philosophies of Vivekananda in Bangalore, invited performances at the International Ramayana Festival in Bangkok, the Bali Arts Festival in Bali, the Children's Festival in Shanghai, the CanAsian International Dance Festival in Toronto, and the Wellington Diwali Festival. Bhaskar's Arts Gallery opens and holds its first Contemporary Art Exhibition. The 'First International Conference on the Emergence, Development and Future Directions of Bharatanatyam in Singapore and Malaysia' was organised by Nirmala Seshadri's N Dance & Yoga and Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society in 2014.

Apsaras Arts presented a series of stunning dance productions, on innovative themes, including space and architecture (Nirmanika, Glimpses of Angkor, Angkor an Untold Story, and Anjasa) and painting (the Heroines of Raja Ravi Varma). They were also a recipient of major grants from the Asia Pacific Breweries (APB) Foundation and the National Arts Council.

The Temple of Fine Arts continued its tradition of high quality, large scale events with mega productions such as Vishwa Vinayaka, The Butterfly Lovers,



The Indian President Abdul Kalam with SIFAS dance students and faculty, 2006



A. K. C. Natarajan inaugurating the 60th anniversary celebrations of SIFAS, accompanied by K. Sivaraman (violin) and T. R. Sundaresan (mridangam), 2009

Damaru, Ramayana, Taal Express, collaborations with L. Subramaniam and many melas (carnivals) of music, dance, Indian food, arts and crafts presented in outdoor settings which enjoyed a large audience from across the races.

Today, the aspiring student and the ardent rasika are spoilt for choice. Every Singaporean neighbourhood

now seems to offer access to either a branch of an established school, or an independent teacher of a variety of Indian art forms. In addition, there are numerous opportunities to learn by Skype from teachers worldwide, while honing performance skills on the local concert stage. Teachers resident in Singapore have also taken to Skype to continue teaching their Singaporean students,



Cheritha Singapura - Kathakali in Mexico tour, 2005



Audience at the opening session of International Bharatanatyam Conference, 2014

who moved overseas to pursue higher studies or employment. For example, Meenakshi Somasundaram, veena Guru at SYAMA and Sonali Sinha Biswas, Hindustani vocal Guru both conduct regular classes by Skype for their ex-

students. For the rasika, almost every weekend offers a bouquet of concert opportunities and the year is regularly punctuated by more meaty festivals lasting anywhere from a whole day to three weeks.



A scene from Angkor - An Untold Story, an Apsaras Arts production which premiered at the Esplanade Theatre as part of Kalaa Utsavam, 2013



Apsaras Arts' presentation of Nirmanika, at the Esplanade Theatre Studio, as part of the Rega series, 2011

On a sadder note, recent years have also witnessed the demise of some pioneering artistes and organisers. S. Sathyalingam, vocalist, Guru and founder of Apsaras Arts, whose chaste tastes in music and dance, and booming presence and frank and honest appraisals of Indian performances, were a boon to the community breathed his last in 2011. K. P Bhaskar, a long standing pillar of the Indian arts community, whose magnificent vision, high classicism, and versatility led to Nrityalaya

Aesthetics Society and Bhaskar's Arts Academy reaching global heights of excellence passed away in 2013. They leave behind a wonderful legacy of artistes and institutions set up by their former students across the world.

The 2000s have been truly prosperous and happy times for the Indian music and dance field in Singapore. The investments made by the Singapore government, as detailed in the Enablers chapter in



TFA dancers performing Balinese dance Ramayana- an Asian Cultural Confluence, TRCC Theatre, Republic Polytechnic, 2012

this book, and the untiring efforts of the pioneers of Indian music and dance in Singapore over the last three decades of the last millennium, are paying rich dividends for Indian classical music and dance enthusiasts.

There are likely many more artistes who have learnt

most of their art in Singapore in the 2000s and who have decided to make the artistic profession a central part of their lives. Their advancements in this challenging field calls for intense practice and advanced study for several years. Future books on the Indian arts in Singapore will no doubt feature them as ground breaking contributors.



Three stalwarts of the Singapore Indian Cultural scene, S.Sathyalingam (Apsaras Arts), A. Sachithanathan (SIFAS), K.P. Bhaskar (Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society) sharing the stage at a public reception for Padma Subrahmanyam, 2008



## CHAPTER 4

# OUTSIDE THE 'BIG 4': INCEPTION AND GROWTH OF INDEPENDENT ARTISTES AND INSTITUTIONS

DR. SESHAN RAMASWAMI<sup>1</sup>

**S**ingapore's resident Indian population, inclusive of citizens and permanent residents of Indian origin, has been steadily rising alongside the country's explosive growth in the last two decades. As of June 2014, according to the Population Trends 2014 report of the Department of Statistics, this number stood at over 350,000,

and this does not include employment pass holders. While the Indian migrants in the early part of Singapore's history were mainly Tamil speakers from Tamil Nadu in India or from various parts of Malaysia, recent times have seen a large number of professionally qualified Indians and business persons from across the subcontinent migrating

<sup>1</sup> The author gratefully acknowledges the contributions of Dr. Siri Rama (interviews with Dr. Bhagya Murthy, Raka Maitra, Gayatri Sriram, Maalika Girish Panicker), Lavanya Ramesh (interview with Sitaravamma Sandrasegaren) and Sarita Alurkar-Sriram (interview with Chitra Shankar) to this chapter. While most of the material in this chapter is based on personal, phone or email interviews with the artistes and institutional founders, some materials have been sourced through the artistes' websites and based on the author's personal correspondence, and interactions with these artistes and other institutional leaders.

to Singapore. This phenomenon has affected the Indian classical music and dance scene in Singapore in several different ways. There has been a large increase in the number of “serious amateur” musicians and dancers who have received training for many years under accomplished Gurus in India. There is a huge new market for Indian music and dance education for these migrants and their children. Concurrently, there has been a growth spurt in the audience for all genres of Indian arts, including classical Indian music and dance. Finally, there has been a diversification of the interest from Carnatic music and Bharatanatyam, to other forms of music and dance from across India – Hindustani music, Kathak, Odissi and others.

In this chapter, we look at the numerous smaller Indian art institutions that have sprung up across the island in the last couple of decades, perhaps as a response to these trends. We also document the stories and memories of independent Singaporean artistes (outside of the four large institutions of SIFAS, Nriyalaya, Apsara’s and TFA) and how they have grown and evolved over the years. The list of individuals and institutions, whose stories are covered in this chapter, is not meant to be exhaustive, but rather to give a glimpse of the tremendous institutional and individual artistic activity in both performance and education related spheres in the independent, or unaffiliated sector of the Indian performing arts field in Singapore. As we recount these stories, it is interesting to note the repeated interaction and sometimes central role of the ‘Big 4’ institutions in the formation and development of these numerous institutions. Indeed, it is a noteworthy characteristic of the Indian arts field in Singapore, that despite the sometimes competitive pressures (for audience, for students, for donors, for venues), there is a wonderful symbiotic relationship too that makes for a very vibrant ecosystem beneficial to all those who have a stake in the Indian arts in Singapore – the institutions themselves, artistes, teachers, students, parents and *rasikas* (or connoisseurs/fans). Teachers and students sometimes leave one institution to join another, teachers or students of the ‘Big 4’ institutions sometimes set up their own institutions, artistes from one organisation collaborate with or provide accompaniment to artistes from other institutions, and every once in a while, there is a

formal collaboration of several institutions in staging a performance, or raising funds for a cause.

This chapter is organised into three parts. The first part covers multi-disciplinary institutions, Prenavam Sangeetha, Alapana Arts, SYAMA and the Global Indian Cultural Centre. The second part covers individuals and single-Guru institutions focusing on music, Mirra Arts (founded by Radha Vijayan) and Dr. Bhagya Murthy. The third part covers independent dancers and dance Gurus, Vasantha Kasinath, Usharani Maniam, Shanta Ratii and Dr. Siri Rama, and dance institutions, Bharathanjali (V. Balakrishnan), Kala Peetham (Sitaravamma Sandrasegaren), Bharathaa Arts (Kesavan Sisters), Shruti Laya (Gayatri Sriram), Chitrakala Arts (Chitra Shankar), Chowk (Raka Maitra), Maya Dance Theatre (Kavitha Krishnan), and Aakash Ganga (Maalika Girish Panicker).

## MULTI-DISCIPLINARY INSTITUTIONS

### PRENAVAM SANGEETHA

Prenavam Sangeetha (earlier Prenavam Kala Sadhana) was established by the couple, M.R. Lenin and Rahana Lenin in 1999. Rahana Lenin is a Singaporean. M.R. Lenin was initiated into music at an early age by his spiritual Guru, Nithya Chaithanya Yati in Kerala. Both are graduates of the Swathi Thirunal Music College in Kerala, where Lenin completed both the four year Ganabhooshanam diploma and the three year Gana Praveena post-diploma programmes, while Rahana completed Ganabhooshanam and one year of the post-diploma programme. They arrived together in Singapore in 1991 after their wedding. Lenin first started teaching in the Narayana Gurukulam along with K. S. Ganapathy and Yazhpanam A. K. Karunakaran. In those early years, he found it difficult to get students motivated to learn and practise Carnatic music with the huge competing emphasis on academic studies by their parents. After three years, he left to set up an independent freelance practice, teaching at various community centres all over Singapore. In 1999, when he had about a hundred students, the Lenins set up Prenavam Kala Sadhana as a full-fledged arts institution with its own premises at the Selegie Complex, offering different disciplines such as violin by ex-SIFAS

teacher Kannan Packiarajah, veena by Gowri and Meghana, mridangam by Deenadayalan and Vignesh, Bharatanatyam by V. Balakrishnan and Sadhana Rajaram, tabla by Dattatreya, and of course, the Lenins themselves teaching Carnatic vocal. An annual system of exams was instituted.

In 2008, the Lenins decided that running a full-fledged arts institution was proving to be a complex administrative task, and so downsized back into a Carnatic vocal music institution, Prenavam Sangeetha. A unique characteristic of Prenavam is that every student is admitted, with the goal of preparing them for an *arangetram*, or a first solo concert. Also, uniquely, they do not admit every student who applies, but have an audition to screen out students who they think do not have the right motivation and aptitude to learn music. Despite the screening process, they now teach over 250 students at three centres in Singapore. They have examiners from Swathi Thirunal Music

College for the annual assessments, and have brought out a series of CDs covering the basic music exercises necessary for learning Carnatic music. Prenavam has conducted four vocal *arangetrams* so far. Rahana sees a very bright future for Carnatic music education in Singapore. She says, “Compared to the past, I think there is more interest now in traditional music. Students are also interested in mastering the basics. In about nine years, we are able to prepare them for an *arangetram*. When some of them move abroad for higher studies, they continue to learn from us via Skype.” M.R. Lenin also conducts, teaches and composes for one of the only two Indian orchestras in secondary schools in Singapore, at the Unity Secondary School, where a multi-racial orchestra performs sitar, flute, violin, veena, harmonium, mridangam and tabla, and recently won the silver medal at the Singapore Youth Festival. The Lenins say that they find it challenging to get NAC funding for programmes, as they are considered a “private” institution.



M.R. Lenin and Rahana Lenin, founders of Prenavam Sangeetha



SYAMA- Shruthi Anand and Pratima Bellave at Civil Service Auditorium, 2015

## SYAMA

SYAMA (Society of the Youth for Artistic Music Appreciation) was instituted as an informal group in 2000, and registered as a society in 2004. Its founder, Ramkumar Vasudevan started learning the veena under Kamala Viswanathan, during his college days in Chennai studying Engineering. Within four years, he had started playing on All India Radio for short programmes. He arrived in Singapore in 1994 on a holiday, and while on vacation, managed to find a job. A fortuitous visit to a temple in 1998, where he witnessed a veena recital led him to discover SIFAS. He proceeded to get admission directly as a fourth year student under Jayalakshmi Sugumar. He recalls that SIFAS used to conduct in-house competitions for their own students, and winning the third prize in a competition at SIFAS was a great impetus and encouragement that eventually led to him getting the best student award in his fifth year at SIFAS. The arrival of R. Parthasarathy as veena teacher after his sixth year was a turning point in Ramkumar's life and raised the level of his understanding of the aesthetics of music production on the veena. He also has happy memories of his early years at SIFAS, "The musical environment at SIFAS was something special. Being able to listen to so many

concerts in that atmosphere led me to discover the nuances of mridangam playing and other basic things like the structure of a concert – what the different parts were like swaram and nerval." Another turning point was his initiative to form and manage the ensemble, SIFAS Octet, in 2000. They won the NAC's Indian Music Competition, playing a composition of R. Thyagarajan, a SIFAS tutor and son and disciple of flute maestro N. Ramani. That win led to a number of performances for the group. They also won the subsequent competition in 2002, this time including vocalists performing a composition of T.R. Vijayakumar, then SIFAS violin tutor and a disciple of the legendary violinist, late Lalgudi Jayaraman. Ramkumar proceeded to form a small group of young musicians including Aravind Ratnam Ganesh, Pavan Rangachar, Sai Vigneshwar, P.B. Madhavan, Srividya Sriram, S. Krishnan, N. Balasubramaniam, Usha Hariharan, Shanti Mahadevan and Satish Chandra Sista who met informally and practised music together to get ready to give monthly concerts. Sakti Vilas, a spiritual centre that had its own vegetarian restaurant on Serangoon Road, was very helpful in giving them rehearsal space and concert space at very nominal rates. In 2004, the NAC gave them

funding for conducting twelve concerts in twelve months. That was a great experience, with all the founding members giving concerts regularly. They realised then, that to make SYAMA a sustainable organisation, it had to be institutionalised.

So in 2006, an academy was set up, and it was also decided to scale up the performances to bigger events, performing at least once a year. Today, the academy is a thriving one, offering lessons in Carnatic vocal, harmonium and keyboard (by Kalakshetra graduate Karthik Balasubramaniam), Veena (by ex-SIFAS tutor Meenakshi Somasundaram), mridangam (by Harish Kannan), Hindustani vocal (by Mou Bhattacharyya) and tabla (by Supriyo Banerjee). On the performance side, SYAMA has staged a string of innovative programmes, by themselves and in collaboration with other local artistes and institutions. These include Thyagaraja's opera Prahlada Bhakti Vijayam, Dhvani, a musical festival that involved musical collaborations, Taj Mahal an audio-visual presentation of the emotions evoked by the monument, Devadasi and the Saint – a Bharatanatyam ballet depicting the times and travails of Bangalore Nagarathamma, Daasaru, a dance drama based on Purandaradasa's perspective of Lord Krishna, and many others.



The musical environment at SIFAS was something special. Being able to listen to so many concerts in that atmosphere led me to discover the nuances of mridangam playing and other basic things like the structure of a concert.



## ALAPANA ARTS<sup>1</sup>

Alapana Arts was founded in 1999 by V. Raghuraman and Banumathy Raghuraman. Carnatic vocal and veena teacher and performer, Banumathy Raghuraman arrived in Singapore to join the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society as a teacher in 1992. Daughter of the illustrious scholar, musician and composer, Dr. S. Ramanathan, she was a top ranking masters student from the renowned Universities of Madras and Delhi. She also received advanced training from the eminent violinist T. N. Krishnan, who was responsible for encouraging her, and recommending her as an instructor at SIFAS. Since 1999, Banumathy and her husband, V. Raghuraman, who is an experienced mridangam player and teacher, have been training students at Alapana Arts at various locations in Singapore. Their daughter, Lavanya Raghuraman (now based in the US), serves as the honorary head of the dance department. A Bharatanatyam and alumna of SIFAS, and currently a disciple of the Dhananjayans, Lavanya has performed several solo performances, and in 2009, she was awarded the Natya Chudra title by Kartik Fine Arts, a noted arts organisation in Chennai. She is also an accomplished musician, having won prizes at the bi-annual NAC Indian Music Competition for violin.

The institution offers multi-year courses of training, with systematised annual examinations, in veena, Carnatic vocal, violin, flute, mridangam, and Bharatanatyam. The institution recently secured its own permanent home in a Housing Development Board (HDB) shop space on Race Course road, in addition to teaching at satellite centres at different locations in Singapore. Over the years, Alapana Arts has published text books on Indian music and percussion, Sruti Manjari and Laya Manjari, and hosted concerts by leading Carnatic vocalists, such as P. Unnikrishnan, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, T. V. Sankaranarayanan, S. Sowmya, T.N. Seshagopalan, and Neyveli Santhanagopalan at their annual anniversary concert series, held in memory of the late Dr. S. Ramanathan. Their annual celebration of the Thyagaraja Aradhana as an homage to the saint composer is another noteworthy regular event. Over 150 Alapana Arts students took the standard level exam in 2014-15 across the various disciplines.

<sup>1</sup> The coverage of Alapana Arts is based on information available at the institution's website and personal knowledge of the author.

## GLOBAL INDIAN CULTURAL CENTRE (GICC)

Global Indian Cultural Centre (GICC) was started in 2004, soon after the establishment of the Global Indian Foundation which runs schools under the name Global Indian International School (GIIS) in many Asian countries including India, Japan, Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore. Though physically housed in the GIIS campus, GICC is a separate organisation from the school. The school itself is one of the first Indian international schools in Singapore, another outcome of the large numbers of Indian migrants who have moved to Singapore in the last two decades. The school offers Indian dance and music as part of its curriculum until Grade 5 in primary school. But GICC has full time professional teachers, and is more of a corporate social responsibility initiative of the Foundation with the mission to enable the Indian diaspora to remain connected with their traditional roots by imparting

a multitude of educational programmes in Indian languages, and yoga, and also in a variety of Indian classical music and dance disciplines. Enrolment is open to the entire Singaporean community.

The Indian music and dance disciplines offered currently are Carnatic vocal (taught by Ashwini Sathish and Srividya Sriram), violin (taught by Srividya Sriram and T.R. Vijayakumar), keyboard (taught by Tiruchy L. Saravanan and T.S. Lazar), flute (by Tiruchy L. Saravanan), Hindustani vocal (taught by Dr. Namita Mehta, Sucheta Bhattacharya and Rakhi Chatterjee), tabla (taught by Sarfraz Ahmed), and the dance forms of Bharatanatyam (taught by M.S. Srilakshmi Arun, Shobhinya Karthikeyan and Aarti Chidambaram), Kuchipudi (taught by Athira Venugopal), Odissi (taught by Jyoti Unni) and Kathak (taught by Irene Manual). Interestingly, some of these teachers were formerly associated with the 'Big 4' institutions (such as Tiruchy L. Saravanan



Music performance by GICC students at UTSAV 2013

and Sarfraz Ahmed with SIFAS). Latha Pradeep, the co-ordinator says, "We are also keen to tie up with Indian institutions such as Dr. L. Subramaniam's music school in Bengaluru to get our programmes certified. We are in talks with well-known Hindustani music institutions in India for suitable tie-ups. For the last nine years, we have been hosting Chennai-based musician Ashok Ramani's annual Papanasam Sivan music and dance competition. We thus are providing a platform for children to build their confidence and get exposure. Over a third of GICC's students are not GIIS students. Recently at a temple performance, our students were mistaken to be students of SIFAS, one of the premier cultural organisations in Singapore. For a young organisation like ours, that was a tremendous compliment! Now I am happy to say that there are a lot of invitations for GICC to perform at temple and community events." GICC started with around 30 students and now has around 500 students. Annual examinations are conducted in a rigorous manner, with highly qualified assessors including Saroja Srinath and Prema Hariharan for Carnatic music, Ravindra Parchure for Hindustani music and Dr. Siri Rama for dance. Interestingly, the centre tries to have the same assessors every year, so the students' progress can be monitored by the same examiners over the years.

GICC has also collaborated with SYAMA on three dance productions, with the GICC dance teachers doing all the choreography and also on an orchestral performance. Some of their students have also been performing regularly at the annual SIFAS Indian Classical Music and Dance festival. Rajiv Vasudeva, country director for GIIS, says, "We also get invited for a lot of government related functions, particularly during Indian Independence Day. For Singapore's National Day, very often, our students get invited to perform at dinner functions organised by Members of Parliament in their constituencies. This is part of our small effort to promote integration of immigrants with Singaporeans. I am especially proud of our yoga classes which are offered at a very nominal fee of \$12 for 12 classes and many of our students are Singaporean Chinese. And most of our teachers in that programme are volunteers from our network." GICC's future plans include starting orchestra training, especially in the singing of Tyagaraja's pancharatna kritis, at their annual aradhana event to which they invite local students and artistes, and also artistes from India.

“

Recently at a temple performance, our students were mistaken to be students of SIFAS, one of the premier cultural organisations in Singapore. For a young organisation like ours, that was a tremendous compliment!

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## MUSIC INSTITUTIONS AND INDEPENDENT MUSICIANS

### RADHA VIJAYAN

Radha Vijayan of Mirra Fine Arts had made several trips to Singapore starting in the seventies, as part of music orchestras, but his first compositional and conducting assignment was in 1992, at the invitation of the renowned dancer and choreographer Padma Subrahmanyam. She was choreographing a dance production Ritu Mahatmyam, to be danced by performers from SIFAS, Nrityalaya and Apsaras Arts. She wanted him to notate the compositions, and to arrange the music orchestra which comprised Indian, Chinese and Malay instrumentalists for two performances at the Victoria Theatre. K.P. Bhaskar of Nrityalaya was so impressed with Vijayan's talents, that he asked him if he would be interested in returning to Singapore on a full time basis. At that time, Vijayan was doing very well for himself in the Tamil movie industry in Chennai. He had been trained in veena by R. Pichumani, but had a greater inclination for western music, which he learnt from masters such as guitar maestro Philips and from Dhanaraj master who taught him the basics of piano playing. As an apprentice to these masters, Vijayan picked up the art of making music arrangements, and also began playing regularly in recordings. His first ever recording was as a lead guitarist for the music director Subbiah Naidu for the M.G. Ramachandran starrer Aasai Mugham. He has fond memories of his association

with the legendary composer Ilayaraja, "I knew Ilayaraja before he became a guitarist. He used to play the harmonium and we had a music group called Star Links, in which he used to play the harmonium and the accordion." All this was while the young Vijayan was working full time at Indian Organic Chemicals, in their polyester fiber manufacturing, a job more consonant with his basic gold medal winning degree in Textiles Engineering. But music remained his passion and his first love. At age 26, after his wedding, when his first daughter was born, he gave up his corporate career to enter into the music industry full time.

In the early 1990s, the movie music industry was very competitive and when he had the chance to move to Singapore with Bhaskar's offer, Vijayan enthusiastically took it up. He worked for almost ten years with Nrityalaya, composing music for a dance production Om Muruga, produced for Thai Pusam, based on Melakarta ragas, with Santha Bhaskar composing the jathis. He also worked on different productions based on stories from the Panchatantra with Ghanavenothan Retnam, Aravinth Kumarasamy and him, each creating music for an episode. "For the first time ever, I played guitar in flamenco style for a Bharatanatyam performance. I converted Santha Bhaskar's jathis into Western rhythms. It was so interesting!" he says. Another early innovation was his starting a choir under the guidance of K. P. Bhaskar,



Radha Vijayan, guitar and keyboard player and teacher and founder of Mirra Arts

performing Subrahmanya Bharatiyar songs, with singers such as Shankar Rajan, Saradha Shankar, Bhagya Murthy, Vigneswari, Sathyalingam, and Ramachandran at an a cappella performance at the DBS auditorium in 1992. It later developed into a 40 member choir, and Vijayan is now on the Advisory board of the Singapore Choral Development Secretariat. But his primary job at Nrityalaya was teaching music – innovatively teaching students to read Western musical notation in Carnatic notation style and insisting that they learn to notate every piece of music, even just one rhythmic cycle, either in Western or in Carnatic style. In 2000, Vijayan wanted to move to focus exclusively on Western music, which is when, with Bhaskar's permission and blessings, he started Mirra Fine Arts, first in Fortune Centre on Middle Road, and now in Jurong, where he currently trains over 140 students in keyboard and guitar, preparing them for the Trinity College examinations.

### DR. BHAGYA MURTHY

Dr. Bhagya Murthy is an institution by herself in Singapore, especially in the field of singing for dance programmes. Already a graded artiste in Bengaluru who had the honour of singing alongside greats like R. K. Srikantan, she admits feeling completely lost when she arrived in Singapore in 1979, not knowing Tamil, not being able to understand Singlish, and having no musical network. It all changed when a move from her Ang Mo Kio residence to Katong in 1981 meant that she was close to the then SIFAS campus on Branksome Road. She was initiated into the art of singing (and in Tamil no less) for dance by the ex-Kalakshetra duo of SIFAS dance teacher K. Vijayalakshmi and mridangam maestro Karaikudi Krishnamurthy. She remembers with a chuckle, "The dancer Shubhangini's arangetram, was also my arangetram! And in those days, we would practise for months for an arangetram." There was no looking back after that initiation.

Since then, she has sung in over 300 arangetrams in Singapore, accompanied dance programmes in the US, UK, Cambodia, Australia, Malaysia and India and lent her voice to numerous group dance productions, contemporary dance recitals, and large dance dramas. She is also grateful to the Sathyalingams of Apsaras Arts for being a great source of encouragement and giving her many



Dr. Bhagya Murthy, Carnatic vocalist

opportunities to sing for dance, including her first overseas arangetram in Australia for one of their students. Bhagya has also been closely associated with the Tamil media, starting in the late 1980s, singing a song, Kannanethaan composed by Re. Shanmugam for Radio Singapore, following which she was invited by Singapore Broadcasting Corporation to sing on television. She has sung numerous times on local broadcast media and is also often invited to judge talent competitions.

Bhagya was also a pioneering member of the Singapore Indian Orchestra and Choir. A prolific teacher, she has taught hundreds of students at Nrityalaya, and also independently. At Nrityalaya, she remembers that in one particular year, they had an arangetram every month! K.P. Bhaskar of Nrityalaya also helped her organise the staging of the first ever Kannada play in Singapore. Bhagya feels Singapore has really helped her develop as a musician. In particular, she is thankful for the many opportunities to interact with and learn from maestros. She says, "In India, it is very difficult to get quality time with eminent musicians. In Singapore, I was very fortunate to meet and learn from musicians like the late Dr. M.L. Vasanthakumari, Dr. M. Balamuralikrishna, the late L. Vaidyanathan, Dr. L' Subramanian and Maharajapuram Santhanam. M.L.V. Amma's words of praise still linger in my ears - Unnodiya shaareeram romba nalla irukku; God bless you! (your voice has such strength and resonance)." Bhagya is also very proud of some of her ex-students who have gone to

great heights in both classical and light music. In particular, Saraswathi Thayalan, whom she initiated into music and whose foundations she laid, went on to Chennai for advanced training under the musicologist S. Rajeshwari and at Kalakshetra, and today, runs her own music school, Lahari in Singapore. Priya Raman, another student is now an established playback singer in Bengaluru, singing alongside film music greats like Hariharan and S. P. Balasubramaniam. As a native Kannada speaker, Bhagya had to struggle to master the Tamil language after coming to Singapore, but she managed to learn it so well, that she was called on to sing the invocatory pieces for a Tamil conference, with an attendance of Tamil poets and scholars from around the world. Other happy memories that Bhagya has about her musical life in Singapore include her experiments in dance accompaniment, especially with Raka Maitra, Jayanthi Siva and Dr. Siri Rama, who encouraged her to explore new facets of free form singing in contemporary dance productions. She also takes special pride in the annual Purandaradasa Day that she organises as homage to the composer considered the grandfather of Carnatic music education. Recently, Bhagya was awarded an honorary doctorate from a Sri Lankan University. She has also been honoured with titles of Singai Gamma, Sangeetha Kala Nipuna and Gaana Kogile.



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## INDEPENDENT DANCERS AND DANCE TEACHERS AND INSTITUTIONS

### VASANTHA KASINATH

Vasantha Kasinath started training in dance in India, at a very early age. She has learnt from many renowned Gurus including P. R. Viswanathan, Mylapore Gouri Ammal, Tanjore Venkattu Nattuvanar, Pathakudi Ramasamy, S. K. Dandayuthapani Pillai and Uday Shankar. She performed her arangetram at the age of twelve. As a member of the Uday Shankar dance troupe, she went on Indian government sponsored performance tours to over fifty cities across the world. About significant memories in her distinguished dance career in Singapore, some stand out. She says, "I remember dancing at the official opening ceremony for Singapore television in 1963. Another great experience was choreographing almost 70 students in a performance in celebration of Singapore's silver jubilee in 1990. Also special was being chosen to represent Singapore at parades and airport openings in the Japanese town of Osaka." While she currently has over fifty students, Vasantha has taught over three thousand students over the years, in schools, junior colleges and as an independent dance instructor. She has conducted fourteen arangetram performances for her long term disciples thus far. Vasantha is delighted with the current status of Bharatanatyam nationwide. "Tremendous encouragement is given in all spheres for the art of Bharatanatyam to spread across the country and to all communities. The annual SYF Dance Competition for schools has made Bharatanatyam the preferred art form among Malay and Chinese students too. Almost all community centres in different parts of Singapore offer space for Bharatanatyam teachers to conduct their regular classes for a very nominal fee. Temples promote the art in a big way by conducting special programmes for all the traditional Hindu festivals. That is a great encouragement for the Gurus to showcase their students' talents and to inspire students to learn and perform better," Vasantha says. She is also very sanguine about the future. "With so many different styles of Bharatanatyam taught in different schools in Singapore, I think the future is very good for Bharatanatyam in Singapore. There is encouragement to produce creative performances



Vasantha Kasinath, Bharatanatyam dancer, choreographer and teacher

with new ideas that relate to the mass audiences. I am happy that so many arangetrams are being held on a regular basis with the full support of teachers and parents." In 2013, Vasantha was honoured with the "Natya Aacharyamani" award in recognition of her teaching efforts by Apsaras Arts.

### USHARANI MANIAM

Usharani Maniam is a veteran dancer and dance teacher of the local dance scene in Singapore. She started learning at the age of four at Nrityalaya and performed her arangetram at the age of 14. Among her most distinct memories are being presented a gold medal as a child prodigy, by the Chief Minister of Penang, and being awarded the title "Natya Thilaga" (Jewel of Dancers) in 1971 by the Indian Movie News Club.

She has wonderful memories of her experience in the Singapore National Dance Company, and of performing to rave reviews in Australia and Russia. Also significantly, she was selected by the then Tourism Promotion Board to be an ambassador of the arts, and she travelled to sponsored dance tours of Malaysia, Holland, France, Germany and the US between 1973 and 1980.

Over the years, Usharani has taught over three hundred students, and more than a tenth of them have performed arangetrams, which is a remarkable achievement for a dance teacher. She has also been training students in numerous schools and junior colleges to gold level performances at the

Singapore Youth Festivals. Her daughter, Sanjana Subramaniam, completed her arangetram in 2000 and now runs her own school in New Jersey in the US. Many of her students have also become full-fledged teachers in their own right, teaching at temples and community clubs across Singapore. Usharani has been recognised by the 'Big 4' institutions in the form of titles such as "Nritya Kala Nipuna" from Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society in 1995, and "Natya Aacharyamani", by Apsaras Arts in 2013.

Talking about the current Indian dance scene in Singapore, Usharani says, "I see a lot more attempt at fusion in Indian dance today. And yet, classical Indian dance is still thriving with the setting up of so many more schools. Also, there is increased interaction with artistes from India who often come to Singapore to conduct workshops and talk at seminars." She is a little rueful about the support from the media as compared to the past. "The support for Bharatanatyam continues to be strong from schools, community centres and temples. However, Bharatanatyam used to be featured significantly on local television, but that is no longer the case these days."



Usharani Maniam (third from left), Bharatanatyam dancer, flanked by her students

### SHANTA RATII

Shanta Ratii is a multi-disciplinary dancer, trained in Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi and Kathakali under many Gurus such as Adyar Lakshman, Kalanidhi Narayanan, Oyur Govinda Pillai, Raja and Radha Reddy, Vempati Chinna Satyam, K.P. Bhaskar, Santha Bhaskar and Neila Sathyalingam. She remembers the vibrant dance scene on television at the age of twelve under the direction of people such as E.S.J. Chandran and Manickam Pakkirisamy who would produce a lot of variety shows on television which always included dance. Shanta remembers, "In those days, we would do everything from scratch. It is not like today when we can buy everything on quick trips to Chennai. We would design thalai saman (head-dress and jewellery) and costumes and get them made on a just-in-time basis for these television shows which would sometimes happen on a twice-a-month basis." The young Shanta was fascinated by all forms of music and dance, including Chinese opera and street performances of wayang, which she would get a glimpse of while travelling by car. Her father noticed her secretly watching some of these performances on television too, and thought she might enjoy learning Kathakali. Several Malayalees, under the direction of K.P. Bhaskar had organised a Kathakali yogam, and Shanta was among the very few girls who learnt Kathakali at this yogam. At a young age, she also started teaching dance to girls at Narayana Mission and she and her students got multiple opportunities to perform at the then Kerala Association's cultural events and other community celebrations like Onam. In the seventies, Shanta had the grand opportunity of being invited to be part of the National Dance Company which performed around the world. She says, "We were a fantastic group, so much camaraderie, so much discipline. And it was run like a professional company. Madhavi Krishnan, the first Indian Cultural Medallion winner was there, and five or six other dancers. We had a live orchestra with Ramachandran singing, Shanmugam (son of veteran mridangist M.V. Gurusamy) playing mridangam, and Rajeshwari on the violin. Our dances would depict festivals like Thaipusam and Deepavali. And we always got a standing ovation."

In 1984, after her wedding, Shanta migrated to Baghdad in Iraq, where she had barely any

opportunities to dance, and was mainly doing social work centred around the welfare of the Oberoi hotel workers. But she did meet Raja and Radha Reddy, who strongly encouraged her to learn Kuchipudi. Later in 1987, when she moved to Delhi, the Reddys were in dire need of a replacement for a character in their dance production, and they asked Shanta to fill in – and she learnt the part and performed it in a very short time. And later, when she had health issues, and was looking to revive her dance career as a way of breaking out of that low period in her life, with a Kuchipudi performance, the owner of the Oberoi chain of hotels stepped in and offered to present her in a dance performance as soon as she was ready! And that first performance with Raja Reddy conducting the orchestra got her some of the best reviews she has ever received. Later she moved to Chennai to learn from Vempati Chinna Satyam in a Gurukulam setting. Subsequent years saw her travelling and living in various parts of the world including Malaysia, New York, Mumbai and London, until she returned to Singapore in



Shanta Ratii, Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi and Kathakali dancer

2009. These travels enabled her to learn other art forms such as pottery, television production and film-making even while it was difficult to maintain a full time dance performing career.

On her return to Singapore, Shanta notices the invaluable role played now by the NAC in nurturing the arts. She is also appreciative of the growing institutionalisation of the arts in terms of major organisations and structured exams, but she also feels that the magic of learning in a Gurukulam is somehow lost, and wonders if these institutions will be able to produce star performers. "There is something in the magic of cleaning the prayer room of your Guru. Something undefinable happens and enters into your very soul. Travelling with your Guru, applying oil to your Guru's knee, dancing in small villages – these experiences are difficult to describe. In institutions, you can learn technique and learn it well. But I cannot help feeling something is also lost in this institutionalisation." She has started teaching Kuchipudi to a handful of students, but admits that she finds it tough to maintain a performing career dancing around the world, and to also do justice to these students.

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### DR. SIRI RAMA

Dr. Siri Rama is an independent Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi dancer, choreographer and teacher. She arrived in Singapore in 2000, after having lived for several years in Hong Kong and the US. Prior to her Singapore arrival, she was the first overseas dance instructor at Pandit Hariprasad Chaurasia's institution, Vrindaban in Hong Kong. She also took advantage of her tenure in Hong Kong to complete a PhD in the Fine Arts at the University of Hong Kong, writing a thesis on the dance sculptures of Belur and Halebid temples. In Singapore, she was initially a dance instructor at Alapana Arts, and has choreographed and presented three major multi-cultural dance-drama productions for the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society. Two of these were based on Sanskrit compositions of the renowned scholar, the late Professor V. Subramaniam, on Buddhist themes, the Fifth Lotus (about five women whose lives were affected by the Buddha) and Maya Dhvani (an enactment of a Jataka tale) and the third was Rama Katha, the Hindi version of the Ramayana composed by the saint poet Tulsidas, a commission of SIFAS for its sixtieth anniversary celebrations in 2009. Three significant features of all these productions were the joint participation of dancers from the 'Big 4' (from SIFAS, TFA and independent dancers) and from Mumbai, collaboration with Malay and Chinese dancers, and the subtitling of the lyrics in English and Mandarin, enabling a wide swathe of the audience, across language groups in Singapore, to appreciate the finer nuances of the dance-dramas. Recalling her early years in Singapore, Siri says, "After spending many years in Hong Kong, where language was an issue in being able to communicate with local artistes, it was fascinating to move to Singapore. Singapore is a wonderful country for Indian dancers to thrive in, especially if you are interested in Asian themes and working with artistes from the other Asian genres. First, there is a huge amount of Indian classical singing and instrumental musical talent, which makes it easy to put together an outstanding orchestra. Then, there is generous funding from the National Arts Council and charitable bodies like the Lee and Shaw Foundations. English is spoken widely among the Malay and Chinese communities of artistes too, making it easy to collaborate on projects together. And finally, there is the resonance of themes and motifs like the Ramayana, the lotus,

Buddhism, which makes it easy to combine our artistic visions across choreographers from different genres. I have enjoyed a close working relationship with Madam Som Said of Sri Warisan Som Said Performing Arts and Dr. Chua Soo Pong, the erstwhile director of the Chinese Opera Institute, and I have learnt so much from both these fine artistes." Other collaborative experiences of Siri's in Singapore include themed performances "Samvaada", with Odissi dancer Jyoti Unni, "Silk Roots", about pan Asian stories of silk fabric, and artistic direction of the contemporary dance recitals "Borobudur Re-visited" and "Rhy-Morphs", by students of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, where Siri has taught Asian dance courses. The proximity of Singapore to India, has also meant that unlike Indian diaspora dancers in other parts of the world, Siri has been able to continue to supervise the growth and development of senior students at her Mumbai institution, Kanaka Sabha Centre for the Performing Arts. Her deep involvement with the Singapore chapter of the World Dance Alliance Asia Pacific, of which she is currently a second term President, and the support of the NAC, enabled her to travel to conferences in Delhi, and Taiwan, which further led to her ability to collaborate with a

Taiwanese dance troupe for multiple performances in India in 2014. Siri has conducted five dance arangetrams of Singaporean students, and fifteen in all across her dance teaching career in three countries.



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Dr.Siri Rama, Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi dancer , choreographer and teacher, creating a Merlion image on stage with Rangoli Artiste Vijaya Mohan for GOPIO 2010

## INDEPENDENT DANCE INSTITUTIONS

### BHARATHAANJALI

Bharathanjali's founder V. Balakrishnan was fascinated by dance as a child, entranced by the magic of dance on the silver screen by well known danseuses like Padmini, Ragini, Kumari Kamala, and Vyjayanthimala Bali. But in the 1950s, there was a taboo on males taking up dance, so he was never given a chance to learn. He would also see dances in the temples, during Navarathiri and other functions, not always pure classical dance, but sometimes dances to film songs. They all left an indelible impression on his mind. When he later took a job as a script assistant at Radio Television Singapore (now Mediacorp) in 1976, a year later, he met his first Bharatanatyam Guru, Balagopalan, who was then a SIFAS dance tutor, in the course of his television work. He learned with him for a year before Balagopalan left in 1978. In 1980, at the age of 25, he joined Kala Mandhir (now TFA) as a student and learnt for six years. In the same institution he learned Carnatic music under late K.S.Ganapathy, and later, under Nageswaran. But he had a burning desire to be a solo dancer, so in 1986, he joined Apsaras Arts where he was taught by Neila Sathyalingam. At the same time, he also joined the People's Association dance troupe. He remembers, "Neila Mami brought out the best in me. She gave me a lot of opportunities. On the very second day of class, she taught me Kanda Alarippu; I didn't even know what *kanda* meant! It is because of her blessings that I am what I am today. I learnt my first varnam, *Swami Naan Unthan Adimai* in Raga Nattaikurinji, a varnam I just performed at the Natyanjali festival 2015 in Chidambaram." Balakrishnan performed many roles in all Apsara's productions and brought in more male dancers, like Charles, Moorthy and Dinahar.

At the same time Balakrishnan started conducting his own first class at the Anson CC, and later at Radin Mas, Thomson, and finally at Bishan North CC and Jurong Spring Community Club. In 1990, he began calling his classes Bharathanjali.

The desire for becoming a solo dancer was still very strong, so Balakrishnan took it upon himself to learn all aspects of dance – he learnt nattuvangam



V. Balakrishnan, Bharatanatyam dancer and media person , and founder of Bharathanjali

as a special student of Karaikudi Krishnamurthy in SIFAS, took Thevaram classes, and learnt Sanskrit from Swami Raghunand at Sri Ramakrishna Mission. In 1987, Balakrishnan had an opportunity to tour the world with the Singapore Tourism Board's promotional programme, for which he was chosen after an audition. He danced solo as well as in group performances in Europe, Australia and many parts of Asia. In 1996, he performed in India for the first time, performing Surprise Singapore at the Music Academy, and Navarathiri Nayaki at the Kalakshetra auditorium.

In 1993, he did his first solo, Bharathanjali, choreographing it entirely himself, with the late Sathyalingam and M.R. Lenin singing for him. Since then, Balakrishnan has presented many thematic solo performances such as Prathishta, Aadum Vel, Uma, Shuka Vaani and Sivam Sivakaram.

In 2007, Balakrishnan resigned from his job, and formally registered Bharathanjali as an institution. Classes are conducted in Bharatanatyam and in Carnatic music, and there are annual exams with external examiners. Bharathanjali has staged two arangetrams so far. Balakrishnan is very particular about whom he allows to stage an arangetram performance. Another unusual aspect of his solo dance career, is that he has made it a point to always dance with a live orchestra, even for temple programmes. He is a regular invitee at two temples, Sri Mariamman Temple and Sri Krishnan Temple, both of which appreciate that he always arranges live music for his dance recitals.

Professor Hari Krishnan of the Wesleyan University has also been a great supporter of Balakrishnan and encouraged him to write his own compositions. His compositions include varnams on Harihara (in Vachaspati raga), Muruga (in Karaharapriya Raga), Durga (in Todi raga) and the latest on the Divine Parrot (Shuka Vaani). The first two had music set by T. S. Lazar and the next two by G. Manikantan. Balakrishnan has also written many compositions for Ajith Bhaskaran Dass's Suvarna Fine Arts organisation in Johor Bahru (Malaysia) including a varnam on Fire, two full length productions Vismaya Vriksha and Bhoomi Pranam, and several songs for Anarkali and Shakunthalam.

Balakrishnan was awarded the title of Nritya Sahitya Choodamani by Suvarna Fine Arts in 2013, and in 2014, he was given the title of Natya Aachaarya Mani by Dance India Asia Pacific and Apsara's Arts. Earlier, he was awarded the titles of Bharatha Kalaimani by Apsaras Arts in 1997, Bharata Thilakam by Prenavam Kala Sadhana in 2002 and Natya Kala Nipuna by Nrityalaya in 2005. As he approaches 60 this year, Balakrishnan continues to go strong in his performing career, with three productions planned for this year. While he owes a lot to his many illustrious Gurus in dance, it is creditable that he has managed to educate

himself on so many aspects of Bharatanatyam, and that he has continuously tried to learn from every opportunity he received.



**Neila Mami brought out the best in me. She gave me a lot of opportunities. ... It is because of her blessings that I am what I am today.**



### KALA PEETHAM

Kala Peetham's founder Sitaravamma Sandrasegaren grew up in Vijayawada, India, as a neighbour of the highly accomplished singer, composer and dance Guru Seetharama Sharma. She had her initial lessons in music from him, and when he moved to Chennai to become a faculty member at Kalakshetra, he encouraged her to continue her studies there, from age seven onwards. After his wife moved to the Kalakshetra campus, Sitaravamma was invited to stay at his house, rather than in the hostel, almost as his adopted daughter. She completed her post graduate training, at the very young age of 16 and has the happy memory of being given the diploma by the legendary Tamil composer, Papanasam Sivan. She grew up in this art-filled environment, in a dance dress all day, being called in for a dance demonstration here, to teach a class there, to practise, to rehearse, to teach senior students, playing various roles in the Kalakshetra productions staged across India and around the world. While she had no formal arangetram as such, she was getting invited to many sabhas like Rasika Ranjani Sabha and Music Academy to give solo recitals, even personally receiving a Kasi Malai from the late Tamil superstar and Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M. G. Ramachandran at one of these recitals. While at Kalakshetra, Sitaravamma also learnt some Kuchipudi items from Vempati Chinna Satyam. Soon after completing her diploma, she was appointed to a teaching post at Kalakshetra, where she would mainly teach senior and post graduate students. After being hesitant to play negative roles like Surpanakha,

but being encouraged by Rukmini Devi Arundale to expand her repertoire of roles, there was no looking back and she eventually started performing many leading roles in their dance productions. Arundale was unhappy to lose her, after ten years as a tutor at Kalakshetra, since she was a key teacher and a central character in many dance productions. But her wedding into a Mauritius based family led her to migrate to Mauritius. Her performing and teaching career also ground to a halt as she took up an arts advisory role in the Mauritius government. But she did have some Japanese students in Kalakshetra, and in the early nineties, she once flew to Japan to perform with her Japanese student, Yumiko Tanaka and her German student Anjali Sriram.

On the way back to Mauritius, she stopped over in Singapore, which she had heard a lot about, since so many Kalakshetra graduates had become teachers at SIFAS over the years and she had heard fascinating stories about the country. She expressed a desire to perform in Singapore to Seetharama Sharma, who passed her vita to A. Sachithananthan at SIFAS. Happily SIFAS was looking to start teaching Kuchipudi, so she was recruited first as a Kuchipudi teacher, and stayed on for many years

as a Bharatanatyam teacher. She was delighted to have the company of her junior at Kalakshetra, Shanta Ponnudurai at SIFAS, and at the peak, had over 120 students at SIFAS, conducting over thirty arangetrams. She staged many productions including Sanghamitra, Raga Dhvani, Andal Charitram, and Harihararpanam. She has some very fond memories of her teaching stint for ten years in SIFAS, and she felt she always had the full support of the management, her colleagues and many appreciative students. Sitaravamma was reluctant to move out of SIFAS, but as her son wanted to stay on in Singapore for his higher studies, it was more conducive to move out and to set up a branch of Kala Peetham, an institution founded by Seetharama Sharma with branches in many parts of the world. Today, she leads a very contented life as a permanent resident in Singapore, grateful for the love and affection she has received from so many students, for the opportunity to spread her art as a cultural ambassador, as wished for by Rukmini Devi and for never having to compromise on the basic artistic and spiritual values she imbibed at Kalakshetra. She has 80 to 100 students currently, with some ex-students coming back to her to learn new items, on a part time basis as and when they visit Singapore from abroad.



Sitaravamma Sandrasegaren, founder of Kala Peetham, Bharatanatyam dancer and teacher, with Lavanya Ramesh, Bharatanatyam dancer and Carnatic vocalist



Suganthi Kumaraguru, Bharatanatyam dancer and co-founder of Bharathaa Arts



Jeyanthi Balasubramaniam, Bharatanatyam dancer and co-founder of Bharathaa Arts

### BHARATHAA ARTS

Bharathaa Arts' founders Suganthi Kumaraguru and Jeyanthi Balasubramaniam (or the Kesavan sisters as they are popularly known) had their initial training in Bharatanatyam under Jayalakshmi Menon in the Kalakshetra style for ten years. In 1982, they joined Apsaras Arts under the direction of Neila Sathyalingam and participated in numerous productions of the institution. They had their formal arangetram in 1984. Later, they received post-arangetram training under renowned ex-Kalakshetra teachers and performances such as late Krishnaveni Lakshmanan, late Adyar K. Lakshman and the Dhananjayans. They began teaching soon after their arangetram, first as teachers at Apsaras Arts and later, in their own institution Bharathaa Arts. The Kesavan sisters currently have over a hundred students, and over the years, they have conducted fifteen arangetrams. Their students have performed across many

countries in Europe and Asia. Jeyanthi says "Dancing is my passion. But as dance teachers, we have the opportunity to see our students grow and maximise their potential. Knowing that part of this was achieved through our love, guidance and nurturing, makes our hearts feel joyful and contented." The consistent creative output of the Kesavan sisters over the years led to their being awarded the "Bharathaa Kalaimanigal" title in 2002 by their own Gurus at Apsaras Arts. Other noteworthy recognitions include, most significantly, the "Artistic Excellence" award received from the then President S.R. Nathan in 2000, and the title "Natya Chudra" awarded in 2006 by Indian Activity Executive Committee of Bishan Community Club. The Kesavan sisters have performed widely in India too, at important festivals and temple events, and have also been invited to perform in Australia, China and Indonesia.

### SHRUTI LAYA

Shruti Laya's founder Gayatri Sriram first arrived in Singapore in 1993, just out of University and as a fairly novice dancer, disciple of Kalakshetra trained Minal Prabhu. She joined SIFAS under the tutelage of Shanta Ponnudurai, who gave her many opportunities to perform. She has distinct memories of that early period of her life in Singapore, "It was a huge deal to have a Kalakshetra sort of platform available in Singapore and especially that generation, because they were all seniors, absolute stalwarts." Gayatri left for Chennai for a year, and then returned in 1996, and continued training with Shanta Ponnudurai. It was around then that she decided that dance would be her full time career. When Ponnudurai left for Canada, Gayatri continued studying and performing under the supervision of another Kalakshetra graduate, Balagurunathan. Gayatri sees her performance Purush Prakriti with Balagurunathan at the opening of Kalaa Utsavam at the Esplanade as a major turning point in her dance career, as it opened up opportunities provided by the event management company Teamworks, to perform at the Nehru Centre, in London with Meenakshi Srinivasan, who was another Bharatanatyam dancer who had newly arrived in Singapore. Her first big solo in Singapore was the production of Panchakanya in 2006, which she also got opportunities to perform in India. This was followed by several other productions over the years, Ramakatha, Seetha Swagam, Hridayam, and Mukti Marga, all of which have had several more showings in the Chennai season and in several European cities. A very significant recognition came from the Krishna Gana Sabha in 2013, in the form of the Rukmini Devi Arundale award. In early 2000, Gayatri established Shruti Laya as a dance institution dedicated to teaching only those students seriously interested in dance beyond a hobby. Gayatri says, "You know how much effort it takes to teach. And if they are not going to make something of themselves, then it's really not worth the effort. Unless they are planning to take it side by side with studies, which is the way we all learnt, it's not worth it." Gayatri is happy that many of her students, Tanvi, Diya, Aditi, and Meenakshi have all become serious dancers, and are regularly winning awards in the Chennai season.

A few years ago, Gayatri began organising what has



Gayatri Sriram, Bharatanatyam dancer and founder of Shruti Laya

now become an annual and much awaited event, the Samarpana dance festival. She says the main objective of the festival is to give a platform to young artistes, both here in Singapore and in India. So she makes it a point, to have organisers, critics, scholars present too at the festival, as the networking and recognition that can happen from close encounters with such significant individuals can do wonders for a junior dancer – not just in confidence, but also in actual concert opportunities in India. She has also opened a chapter of Samarpana in Bengaluru. Gayatri has also been deeply involved with the Republic Polytechnic and has done a lot of productions with Zaini Tahir, including Moksha Mudra. Her future plans include trying to get a foreign artiste to do a residency, to teach for three weeks and then to put up a performance, and to work with the People's Association Indian Orchestra and Choir to perform both in India and here. She is hopeful that the Samarpana festival will grow into a ten day festival.

Gayatri also sees Singapore as providing a very conducive environment for Indian dance relative to most cities in India, "There is enough place for everyone to survive, to dance, to perform, to create. The government is so wonderfully giving. The NAC is always there. You organise an appointment, they are there to meet you, they are there to help you, how to apply for a grant, what you should do. It's been incredible. If you have the talent and merit, things fall into place. It is such a meritocratic society."



It was a huge deal to have a Kalakshetra sort of platform available in Singapore (at SIFAS) and especially that generation, because they were all seniors, absolute stalwarts.



### CHITRAKALA ARTS

The founder of Chitrakala Arts, Chitra Shankar hails from Delhi originally. She was trained in Bharatanatyam by Saroja Vaidyanathan and in Odissi by the late Hare Krishna Behera and Madhavi Mudgal. She has vivid memories of the dance scene in Singapore, when she arrived in 1998, "When I first came to Singapore, there were a couple of Kathak dancers, a few local Singaporeans too. But surprisingly none practising Odissi. There had been someone earlier who had returned to India and the Temple of Fine Arts group had moved to Malaysia along with their Swamiji. So it was like starting from scratch." Her school, Chitrakala Arts, specialising in Odissi and Bharatanatyam has grown from one student in 1998 to over ninety students in 2015, and is completely self-sustaining without any external support. Among her proudest achievements in Singapore, is that Chitrakala Arts is the first school here to have trained Chinese and Japanese students in Odissi to performance level. Chitra is also happy that she was instrumental in introducing Odissi to the local community through



Chitra Shankar, Bharatanatyam and Odissi dancer and founder of Chitrakala Arts

numerous performances at community centres, temples, and at the Singapore Youth Festival competitions. Chitra says, "In fact, we were the first school in more than 15 years to have an Odissi manchapravesh (or graduating performance) in 2010, by a Singaporean." In 2014, she was awarded Ambassador of Odissi by Odissi International,

Bhubaneswar for her efforts in promoting Odissi in the SEA region. Chitra has benefited tremendously from the Indian cultural eco-system pillared by the 'Big 4' institutions. "One person I would like to mention here who has guided me and was a pillar of support in my initial years in Singapore is none other than Mrs. Neila Sathyalingam or Mami as we dearly call her. Back then, PA used to organise a lot of community events and I have done several shows for them. I consider that a big support as it gave me and my students a platform to perform. SIOC and its conductor Mrs Lalitha Vaidyanathan have also given me several opportunities to collaborate with them including a tour of Mexico in 2005. SIFAS has had its role to play too; I was invited to perform at their first annual festival in 2003 and also for some of their collaborative performances. I should make a special mention of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA), where I have been teaching since 2002." Chitra is hopeful about the future of the Singapore dance scene in Singapore. "Now we hear and see new names of new Bharatanatyam dancers coming up every other day. I believe that the future of Odissi in Singapore is also very bright. Many of my students are willing to take it forward and pursue it seriously."



One person I would like to mention here who has guided me and was a pillar of support in my initial years in Singapore is none other than Mrs Neila Sathyalingam or Mami as we dearly call her. Back then, PA used to organise a lot of community events and I have done several shows for them. I consider that a big support as it gave me and my students a platform to perform.



### RAKA MAITRA

Raka Maitra, founder of Chowk, received training in Odissi under Madhavi Mudgal and has attended advanced workshops with Kelucharan Mahapatra. She also studied Serraikeella Chhau under Sashadhar Acharya. But she came to Singapore in 2004 at a time in her career when she was already moving away from traditional Odissi towards contemporary dance. Raka became an associate artiste at the Substation and started creating contemporary dance works for staging at the Substation. Some of her work caught the attention of some NUS students who pushed her to start teaching Odissi. So while Raka had come to Singapore thinking that she wanted to start something new in a new country



Raka Maitra, founder of Chowk

of residence, and had never imagined she would teach Odissi, she could not but respond to the needs of these students who were so passionate about the art form. In 2010, the Substation changed its leadership and the new rules forced out the associate artistes. Raka's Odissi class had grown to 25 students and led her, in a happy discovery to find a studio space in Emily Hill. These students were also deeply committed and indeed initiated to move to incorporate more formally into an institution, Chowk. Raka always starts training students, even for her contemporary dance students, with the rigour and discipline associated with the classical form of Odissi. She is delighted that one of her first students, Kiran Kumar, a mechanical engineering scholarship student at NUS, is now back in Chowk, working full time as associate artistic director. Raka strongly feels that all dancers in Singapore, but especially Indian dancers, need to work hard to create an environment in which dance performance is a paid occupation. She discourages her students from performing in any festival or event in which there is not a reasonable payment. Raka says "Western contemporary dancers get paid. Theatre artistes get paid. Indian dance seems to be the only field of performing arts in which dancers are expected to perform for free. This must change. I will feel like we have achieved something only when that starts happening, when dancers begin to see this profession as a viable alternative to becoming accountants and managers."

Over the years, Chowk has produced many dance works, and most recently, was commissioned to perform a new work, *Blind Age* at the 2014 Kalaa Utsavam at the Esplanade. Some of Raka's other notable productions in the past include *Boundaries ... Dreams ... Beyond* (2008), *Circular Ruins* (2009), *Variations on a Theme* (2010), *Hungry Stones* (2011) and *Khayyam's Rubaiyat: Echoes In Dance* (2013). Raka also co-organised the Grey Festival, a contemporary Indian dance festival featuring performances, workshops, screenings and forums. In 2014, Chowk received a seed grant of \$80,000 from the NAC, a big recognition for a small contemporary dance institution rooted in the traditional forms of Odissi and Chhau. In this coming year, she is planning a series of small Studio performances for small audiences in the Chowk Studio and also a yet untitled work based on Bengali poetry in September.

### MAYA DANCE THEATRE

Kavitha Krishnan, founder of Maya Dance Theatre, started learning dance with K. P. Bhaskar at the age of 4, at the insistence of her mother, who had always wanted to learn dance but was simply not allowed by her parents or her circumstances. After a couple of years of the fairly strict tutelage of Bhaskar, she enrolled in SIFAS under Balagopalan, whose wife also turned out to be a pretty tough task master leading to Kavitha quitting again, and finally joining Apsaras Arts, where she immediately took to the imposing but affectionate Neila Sathyalingam. Among her co-students were Roshni Pillay and Dr. Chua Soo Pong. She performed her arangetram at the age of nine to a full house Victoria Theatre audience and then for the next two decades, she performed in most of Apsaras Arts productions and festivals in Singapore and around the world. She was encouraged to start choreographing while in Apsaras with her first choreographic experience at the age of fourteen. She was also a keen hockey player throughout her school years, and the constant wear and tear, combined with an accident on the hockey field, eventually led to a serious spinal injury in her early twenties which had to be operated on. Her doctors gave her little chance of ever being able to dance again post-surgery. But in less than a year after recovering from the surgery, after a lot of hard work and discipline, Kavitha willed herself to dance again, within the limitations and constraints of the surgical intervention, amazing her surgeon, V.K. Pillay.

Also, in the early 2000s, Neila recommended Kavitha to represent Singapore as a Bharatanatyam dancer in the ASEAN flagship, a joint dance production called "Realising Rama", involving dancers of different genres, from around ASEAN and the group toured India, Korea, China, Japan and Philippines under the direction of Denisa Reyes, artistic director of Ballet Philippines. Kavitha was involved in the World-in-Theatre programme in the company of dancers like Priyalatha Arun and Sonny Lim in 2003. She was also greatly influenced by contemporary dancer Jayanthi Siva. These experiences experimenting with modern forms of performing arts led her to quit her full time job as an occupational therapist. Also, learning that some of these other ASEAN dancers were making a living as full time dancers inspired her to set up an Arts event management



Maya Dance Theatre production Grey, Penang, 2013

and performance company, Apsara Asia. She had also decided to now focus on contemporary dance going forward. The first production, *Bitter Chocolate*, was in collaboration with World in Theatre artiste and staged at the Substation in 2004. Her next performance was "End of the Beginning", created in Solo, Indonesia, along with two of her Realising Rama colleagues, and then showcased again in the Bali Arts festival. In late 2006, following the advice of the NAC, Kavitha created Maya Dance Theatre as a performance company, separate from the events management company which was incorporated as Apsara Asia Pte Ltd. Kavitha speaks of her vision for Maya Dance Theatre, "Maya wants to speak through body expression that incorporates Asian body culture." She finds that most dancers who come to her are modern dancers with no training

“  
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in traditional Asian dance. Maya exposes them to Asian dance technique and then to use this language to create new evolved forms of body movement. In early 2007, Bophana was presented by Maya Dance Theatre as their premier production at the Arts House. Subsequent productions include Grey, Atma, The Legend, Invoking Rasas, Standing in the Line in the Order of Height, Seeking Sita and Anwesa. In 2012, Maya Dance Theatre received a seed grant of \$50,000 from the NAC. While she appreciates the support of the NAC, Kavitha would like to see more support from the community in the future, "Right now I am forced to bargain with organisers when they approach me for an event. I have to tell them that I am doing a job, just like they are doing a job. And I wish they would realise the important role of artistes in society."

### AAKASH GANGA

Aakash Ganga's founder, Maalika Girish Panicker is a Kalakshetra graduate who arrived in Singapore in 1996 as a Bharatanatyam tutor at the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society, where she served for almost fourteen years. In 2009, she set up her own dance school Aakash Ganga, where she teaches Bharatanatyam, Mohiniattam, folk and contemporary dance. Over the SIFAS tenure, where she was then known as Girish Panicker, Maalika trained hundreds of dancers, conducted more than 25 arangetrams, including one of a British national, who was an employee of the British High Commission, and choreographed and presented numerous thematic dance recitals. In 2007, she was awarded the Natya Kala Vipanchee title by Dr. M. Balamuralikrishna in Chennai.

Her choreography and training at several schools and junior colleges in Singapore have been awarded gold at the bi-annual Singapore Youth Festival dance competitions. She is also a regular judge for dance competitions on local television, and her senior disciple won the best choreographer award in Salangai Oli, a dance competition on Vasantham. Over the years, she has performed with distinguished dance Gurus such as C.V. Chandrasekhar, Vyjayanthimala Bali, Saroja Vaidyanathan and Lakshmi Viswanathan. Some of her own choreographic works include Sthri, Mohini, Ganges, Valli-Devayani Kalyanam and Bharata. She has performed over 200 solos and



Maalika Girish Panicker, Bharatanatyam and Mohiniattam dancer, and founder of Aakash Ganga

group productions in Singapore, India, Malaysia, Indonesia and Australia. Maalika takes particular pride in her detail orientation; she says "I am particular about every aspect of a performance, from the music to the hairdo to the stage setting, down to the decoration of the reception area, and even the food being served to guests!"

The list of artistes and institutions covered in this chapter is only a fraction of the numerous talented independent Gurus, performers and institutions who continue to thrive and grow in the vibrant Indian music

and dance scene in Singapore. There are many more independent artistes and teachers currently in Singapore, and some others who have passed away (like the late K. S. Ganapathy who founded Sabari Fine Arts) or who have left Singapore (like C.N. Thyagaraju, and Bharathi Murthy who established the dance school Bharatham School of Dance in 2009) after having contributed tremendously to the Singapore Indian arts community. There are also many other independent dance and music institutions such as Omkar Arts (set up by Sreedevy Viju-Pany in 1987), Jayakshetra Arts (founded by Kalakshetra graduate Shobhinya Karthikeyan in 2005), Tripataka school of dance (founded by Durga Devi Mani Maran in 2007), Indu Vijay's Taal School of Odissi and Centre for Holistic Enrichment Through Arts, CHETAS, (founded by Vaishnavi Anand and Bombay V Anand in 2014). Several ex-SIFAS teachers now have thriving private practices as independent teachers, such as violinist K. Sivaraman, sitar teachers Chandranath Bhattacharya and Sharafat Khan, flautist Tiruchy L. Saravanan (who set up the institution Vamshidwani in 2007), vocalist Gowri Gokul, Bharatanatyam dancer Minal Amit Dhamelia, and veena artistes Y. Bhagavati and Jayalakshmi Sugumar. There are likely many others whom we have missed in our documentation of these independent efforts.

Listening to the accounts of their artistic lives in Singapore, there are some common themes that run through these narratives – the repeated

influence of and interaction with the 'Big 4' institutions, the support of the National Arts Council without whose financial support it would be difficult to sustain performances, the growing numbers of collaborative and inter-disciplinary projects, the difficulty of making a livelihood as a performing artiste without any income from teaching, the increasing number of modern themes and attempts at group productions of what are still fundamentally solo art forms (Carnatic music and most genres of Indian classical dance), and the spread of centres of teaching across the island. Also commendable is the lack of competitiveness or divisiveness and indeed, instead, the thriving of a supportive ecosystem of musicians, dancers, teachers, community institutions like CCs and temples, students, parents, fans and connoisseurs of Indian classical music and dance. The 'Big 4' have enabled, rather than stifled, the growth of these independent endeavours over time, and today, a young prospective student of Indian classical music or dance is spoilt for choice. In most parts of Singapore, students should be able to find a teacher within a short commute of their home.

As more and more students graduate from the 'Big 4', and independent institutions, we can expect perhaps even greater growth in the coming years in this sector of the Indian classical music and dance industry. These developments bode well for a vibrant future for the Indian performing arts student, teacher and rasika!

## CHAPTER 5

# EVOLUTION OF NORTH INDIAN ART FORMS IN SINGAPORE

SARITA ALURKAR-SRIRAM

As the chapters thus far in the book document, Indian classical music and dance have had a fascinating history in Singapore, and recent years have seen an accelerated growth in their development. The astute reader would have noticed the predominance of music and dance of the South Indian genres in the story so far.

However, Hindustani classical music or the classical music traditions from the north of India, and Kathak dance, to an extent, have also been a part of this burgeoning. For Hindustani music, the 1990s signalled the start of a period of growth which

intensified in the past decade, resulting in a vibrant ecosystem for this art form with experienced Gurus to impart rigorous training, a rapidly expanding student base and frequent performances by overseas artistes as well as locally trained talent. This journey started with the humble efforts of Dr. Mangal Chotta Singh in the middle of the last century.

This chapter focuses on the history of North Indian music and dance in Singapore, touching briefly on the core themes in the other chapters of this book – the chronology, prominent teachers and artistes, the India connection, the enablers and the promoters.

## EARLY DAYS UNTIL INDEPENDENCE

The early years of the 20th century saw the emergence of the North Indians in the Indian diaspora in Singapore. The phenomenal growth of Singapore attracted various North Indian businessmen such as the Parsees, Sindhis, Marwaris and Gujaratis. In fact, the (late) Professor Kernal Singh Sandhu, former Director of the Institute of South-East Asian Studies of the National University of Singapore, had stated in his book "Indians in Malaya; Immigration and Settlement 1786-1957" that the wholesale textile trade of post-war Singapore was controlled by North Indian textile merchants, particularly from the Sindhi and the Sikh communities. He said, "Music making was prominent at social, ritual and religious festivals, like Holi."

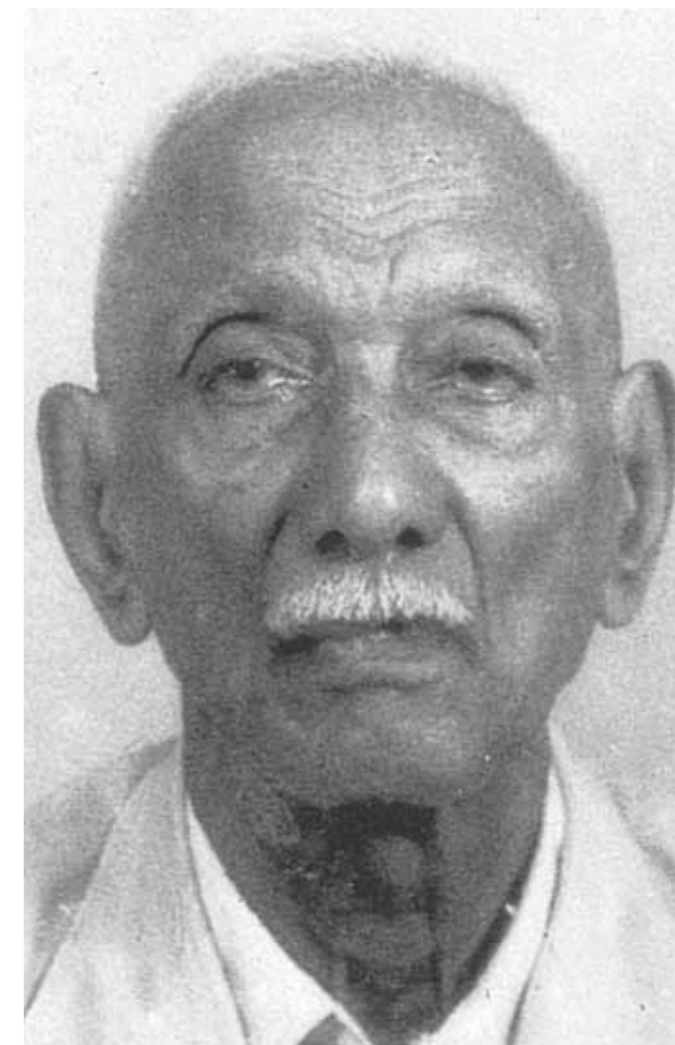
## DR. MANGAL CHOTTA SINGH

In 1939, Mangal Chotta Singh, a medical practitioner trained in Hindustani music founded what was probably the first orchestra that played music loosely based on classical music. The Ramakrishna Mission Orchestra, which later came to be known as the Ramakrishna Sangeetha Sabha, realised that in order to cater to the largely South Indian audience, they would also need to play Carnatic music, for which they wrote notation in English. The orchestra held several concerts, both in Singapore and in what was then Malaya.

Dr. Mangal Chotta Singh can be counted amongst a handful of outstanding individuals who were pioneer promoters of Indian fine arts in Singapore as early as the 1930s. Unlike most medical professionals who would have been content with settling into a life of successful practice, he chose to culturally enrich the lives of Indians in Singapore by devoting his life to the propagation of Indian music and dance here.

His grandson Brij Mohan Singh has fond memories of his maternal grandfather. He says, "I was very close to him. He used to take me everywhere with him, especially to all his concerts, during my growing years, but unfortunately, he passed away in 1971 when I was 19."

Apart from being a seasoned musician himself, Dr. Mangal Chotta Singh was also an accomplished playwright, linguist, poet and dramatist. His strong sense of community well-being drew him into



Dr. Mangal Chotta Singh was a pioneer promoter of Indian fine arts in Singapore as early as the 1930s

various organisations such as the Arya Samaj, the North Indian Hindu Association and the Hindu Association.

Simplicity was the hallmark of this exceptional man. To recognise his exemplary achievements and contribution to the Indian performing arts, he was awarded the title of Kala Ratna (Gem of the Arts) posthumously by the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society in 1986.

Apart from Dr. Mangal Chotta Singh, there were others like Seva Singh who set up Hindustani orchestras and taught vocal music too. In fact, old timers recall Seva Singh and Dilip Kumar often presenting Hindustani classical compositions and Kathak dance respectively at temples during Navarathiri performances and at other venues.

Just as the South Indian temples were centres of music and dance from the 1920s, the North Indian places of worship, like the Central Sikh Gurdwara, Silat Road Gurdwara and the Shri Lakshminarayan Temple also served as communal and cultural hubs for the community, where devotional music formed an important part of the activities. The gurdwara was essentially a sacred site, but it also became a site for music, as the vocal incantations and shabads (Sikh devotional songs) were accompanied by musical instruments like the tabla, the harmonium and sitar. A photograph in the Khalsa Association book describing the scene in the late 1950s and early 1960s reveals the presence of at least these three instruments for the singing of Gurbani or the Sikh hymns, which are based on Hindustani ragas.



Dilip Kumar, Kathak dancer

### THE 1970S AND 1980S - A PERIOD OF TRANSITION AND CHANGE

In the 1970s, the size of the North Indian population in Singapore was relatively small and it was not very economically viable to conduct classes in the North Indian disciplines of music and dance.

Among the first known attempts to teach Hindustani music in Singapore was that by Bhaskar's Arts Academy in 1972, which brought in Zia Ul Hassan, a student of sitar legend Vilayat Khan as sitar tutor. Two years later, in June 1974, Kamala Sharma commenced Hindustani vocal classes at the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society. Kamala was primarily a teacher of Carnatic music, but because she had studied Hindustani music at the University of Delhi, the Society started a new class hoping to draw in the North Indian community. Dorai Natarajan, an ex-President of SIFAS, recalled that his experiment did not work, "It was clear that we needed somebody who specialised in Hindustani music. The question was whether we could afford a teacher whose fee income would be less than his or her salary. At that point in time, we could not."



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Though there was no critical mass for classes in various North Indian disciplines in the early years, there were certainly visits and concerts by Hindustani artistes. Sitar players Jaya Bose, Kalyani Roy and Ravi Shankar are known to have performed as early



From early days the Sikh Gurdwaras or temples served as cultural hubs for the Sikh community in Singapore. Seen in picture Gurcharan Singh, tabla teacher taking tabla classes to help the younger generation be in touch with their Indian heritage

as 1959, 1969 and 1972 respectively, based on previews and reports by newspapers in Singapore.

As the oldest Indian institution hosting Indian performing art performances in Singapore, SIFAS regularly hosted North Indian artistes too. Ratnakar Rao, First Secretary, High Commission of India in Singapore between 1976 and 1980 recalls, "I was in charge of Consular work, Information and Cultural relations. SIFAS provided a ready platform for fostering and developing Indian cultural relations with Singapore." He recalls many such concerts during his tenure, including one by noted Kathak danseuse, Shovana Narayan.

The 1980s saw the commencement of regular classes offering the North Indian art forms of vocal music and sitar, as well as Kathak dance.

Prabha Rao was trained in Kathak, the classical dance form of the North and her arrival in 1980 at SIFAS was a cautious experiment, given that the number of North Indian members of the Society was modest at best, as was the size of the North Indian population of Singapore. She began with 10 students and by the time she left in 1987, there were only around 20. However, it was decided to continue the classes. Natarajan recalled that as a pan-Indian organisation, the Society felt it necessary to cover as many regional forms as possible.



Coming from a Malayalee Catholic background, I had no knowledge of Hindi and a very basic understanding of Hindu mythology. But when I saw a Kathak performance for the first time, it was love at first sight!



Irene Manual is a Kathak teacher and choreographer in Singapore. She recalls her lessons in 1985 when she joined Prabha Rao's Kathak class at SIFAS. My first Kathak Guru was Prabha Rao. I was her student for seven years. Coming from a Malayalee Catholic background, I had no knowledge of Hindi and a very basic understanding of Hindu mythology. But when I saw a Kathak performance for the first



Irene Manuel started her Kathak lessons with Prabha Rao at SIFAS in 1985. She is a Kathak teacher and a choreographer at Global Indian Cultural Centre

dance forms was not an easy task! Getting musical accompaniment was also a big problem. We did not have any singers trained in the North Indian style who could sing for Kathak. Even the tabla players were versed in the Carnatic style. We had to use whatever resources were available then.”

There were other teachers like Gurcharan Singh, who came to Singapore in 1978 and taught tabla, as well as sitar, violin, classical vocal, light and devotional music in the 1980s. Gurcharan Singh says, “I often played for Bhaskar’s Arts Academy and SIFAS in their concerts. My association with these and several other institutions in Singapore were to ensure that the younger generation understood Indian heritage.” He continues to be a part time musician even at the age of 69 today and plays the violin as and when required, with Indian orchestras in Singapore.

It was in 1981 that Kala Mandhir (which was later called the Temple of Fine Arts) was founded by Swami Shantanand Saraswati. This institute started with the South Indian performing arts disciplines.



It was tough being a Kathak dancer in those days. The influence of Bharatanatyam is very strong here; it was then and it is now. Not very many Singaporean Indians had heard of Kathak. Most of the time, their knowledge of Kathak was based on the Hindi films which portrayed Kathak dancers as courtesans or court dancers during the Mughal period. Educating people that Kathak is also one of the well known classical Indian dance forms was not an easy task!



### KALYANI PURANIK

In 1988, Swami Shantanand Saraswathi invited Kalyani Puranik, the daughter of Balkrishna Kapileshwari, a doyen of the Kirana gharana from India, to set up the North Indian classical section at the Temple of Fine Arts. Recalls Kalyani (affectionately and respectfully called Didi or elder sister) by all her students and staff of TFA) “When I joined TFA, I taught vocal, sitar and tabla singlehandedly. I wanted to teach only vocal, but there was no one else to teach sitar and tabla at that time.”

She has vivid memories of a concert of both North and South music that she conceptualised along with Meena Mahadevan, the Carnatic vocal teacher at that time. It was titled Uttara Dakshin Sangeetha Darshan and press reviews reported that “when North meets South, it is a feast of music.” It signalled the start of many more such collaborative concerts of the North and South disciplines in the years to come.

Kalyani relates an interesting anecdote when a visitor from the US came up to her and asked her to teach her Indian music on the violin. This got her thinking about how to write Hindustani music with western notation and very soon, she put together a team at TFA which included a gentleman who

she says was only referred to as Lawrence and Suresh Natarajan. This team devised a computer system which allowed Western musicians to read Hindustani music in Western notation and even play it on a computer via a floppy drive.

Kalyani adds, “In fact, when Pandit Ravi Shankar visited Singapore in 1988, he expressed an interest in listening to this ‘computer music’ and was impressed.”

After successfully setting up the North Indian section, Kalyani returned to India in 1990 because of her performance commitments. She eventually returned to TFA, Singapore in 2000.



When Pandit Ravi Shankar visited Singapore in 1988, he expressed interest in listening to this ‘computer music’ and was impressed.



Kalyani Puranik with Ravi Shankar (centre) when he visited TFA in 1988

### SHARAFAT KHAN

In 1986, Sharafat Khan was transiting through Singapore when he was asked if he would be interested in teaching at the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society. Sharafat had trained with sarod maestro Amjad Ali Khan in India and it was in 1987 that he came back to SIFAS as a sitar tutor. When he arrived here, Sharafat remembers being one of the few full-time tutors for Hindustani music. There were others who taught part time. In fact,

as Hindustani music was still to become part of mainstream arts teaching, Sharafat came with an open mind and played all kinds of music on the sitar – Malay, Chinese and even Korean and encouraged his students to do the same.

Sharafat Khan says, “When I came, I befriended the other teachers and we shared our music. One of my colleagues, Thanathevy taught Carnatic music and I asked her to teach me her music and offered



Sharafat Khan brought out several books and CDs, so that more Singaporeans could appreciate and understand Hindustani classical music



Sharafat Khan at a performance. Also in picture is his student, Urmila Rani Kashyap

to teach her North Indian music.” This ultimately resulted in their releasing a cassette in 1992 titled ‘North Meets South’ which blended both the Indian classical musical traditions. Sharafat Khan taught sitar, along with vocal and tabla.

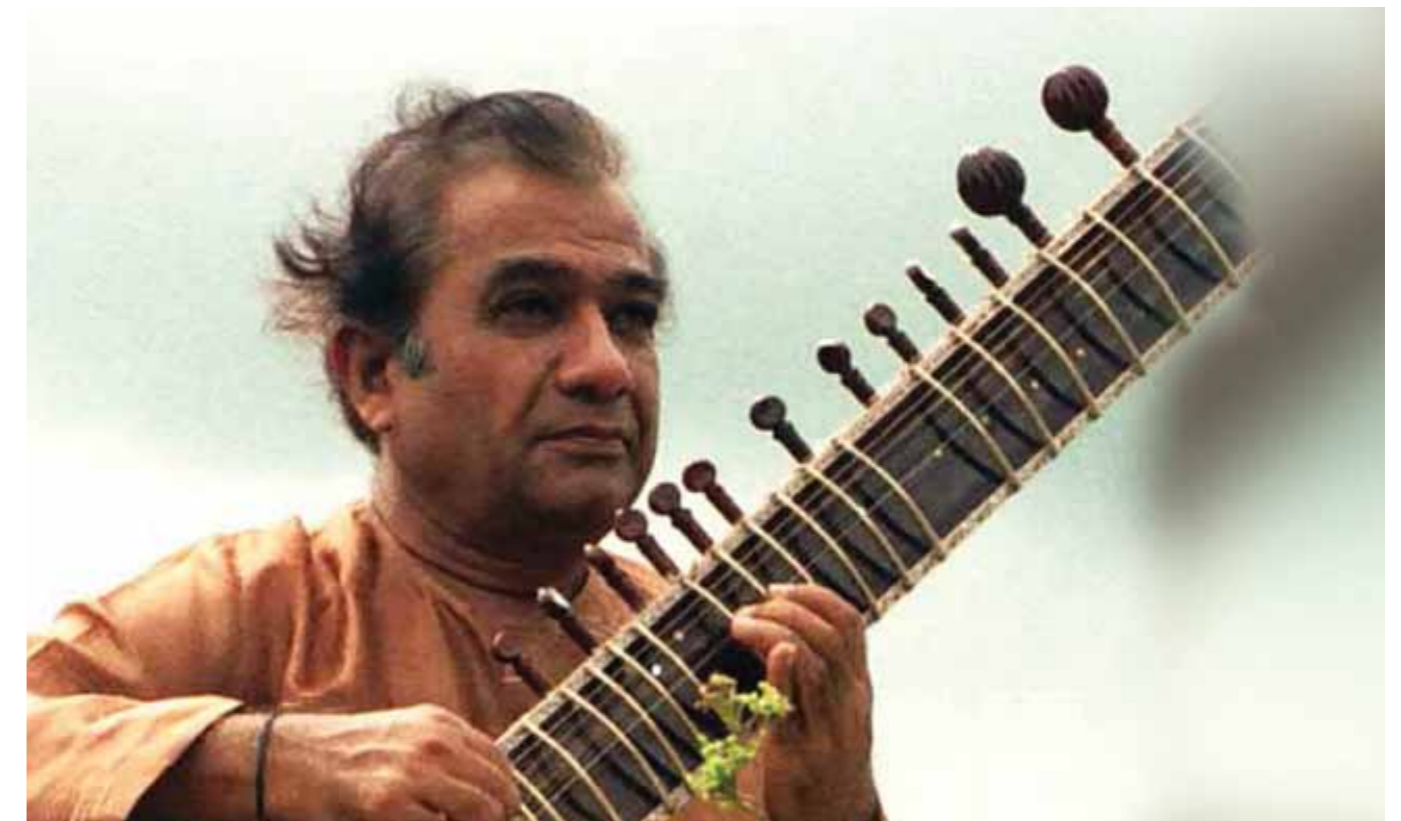
Sharafat Khan inspired many Singaporeans to get interested in Hindustani classical music. One such individual is Shashi Lal Kashyap. Apart from being a student of Hindustani music, Shashi Lal Kashyap actively contributed to the propagation of this art form in Singapore. He reminisces, “I was born in Singapore in 1936. From a very young age I had a keen interest in Hindustani music. It became more intense when I joined Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society in 1987 as Vice President, a position I have held ever since. That same year, I met Sharafat Khanji, then a tutor at SIFAS. I learnt to play the tabla from him for five years. In 1995 I started learning Hindustani vocal music from him and am his student even today. My wife Urmila Rani Kashyap has also been his student since 1987 and learned to play the sitar. Together Urmila and I have recorded five music albums based purely on classical Hindustani music.”

### USMAN KHAN

Usman Khan, from Pune in India, had a long association with Swami Shantanand Saraswati of the Temple of Fine Arts (TFA). Usman Khan came from a prominent family of musicians, originally from Dharwad and it was on the invitation of his spiritual mentor, Swami Shantanand Saraswati that he made his first trip to Singapore in 1989 to be part of an orchestra of Hindustani music. That was the beginning of a long association with TFA and Singapore which has continued until today.

Usman Khan says, “When I came for the second time to Singapore in 1991, it was to compose musical pieces for one of the many big musical productions that Temple of Fine Arts was doing at the time. I was invited in 1993 to compose the music for Taj Mahal, a highly successful production that was inspired by Princess Diana’s visit to this beautiful monument. I used a variety of musical forms for this, from classical to semi-classical and folk music.”

Usman Khan was instrumental in starting sitar classes at TFA Singapore. Students trained at his institute, Naad Mandir in Pune were sent as



Usman Khan first came to Singapore in 1989 and that was the beginning of a long association with the Temple Of Fine Arts

teachers. These included amongst others, the late Vijayalakshmi Devi, a Singaporean trained at his institute. Usman Khan is the International Dean of the faculty of Hindustani music at the Temple of Fine Arts.



I was invited by Swamiji in 1993 to compose the music for Taj Mahal, a highly successful production that was inspired by Princess Diana's visit to this beautiful monument.

I used a variety of musical forms for this: from classical to semi-classical and folk music.



### THE 1990s - A DECADE OF GROWTH AND OPPORTUNITY

This decade was defined by growth and opportunities. With the influx of Indian expatriates from all parts of India, there was a significant increase in the number of North Indians and therefore a larger audience base for both teaching and concerts of North Indian art forms.

The spectacular productions put up by TFA in the 1990s, incorporating specially created music based on both Carnatic and Hindustani musical traditions, were also responsible for generating interest in Indian art forms among the local audience. These included, amongst others, Swan Lake, Jonathan Livingston Seagull, Taj Mahal, A Midsummer Night's Dream and the oldest Indian epic, Ramayana, staged by Kala Mandhir in 1993 with an elaborate setting. This dance-drama lasted about four hours and used a montage of musical and dance ideas from Bali, Thailand and Sarawak.



TFA production, A Midsummer Night's Dream, 1994



Ramni Kashyap in Charan Girdhar Chand's mega production, Trinetra performed at the Victoria Theatre, 1998



Ghungaroo was an ambitious project for the 1990s, since the form of Indian dance most common at the time was Bharatanatyam. We did several productions after that, including Trinetra, Amrapali, Rang Bhari Shaam Hari Ke Naam and Om Namah Shivaay, all of which received good responses from the audience.

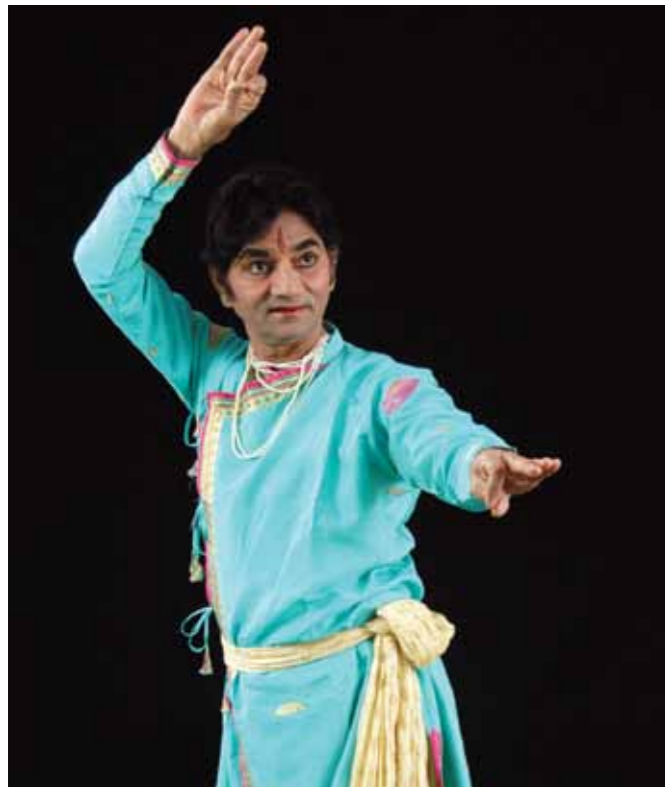


During the same period (late 1980s to 1990s), Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society presented some of the all-time greats of North Indian classical music; maestros par excellence Ravi Shankar, Birju Maharaj, Amjad Ali Khan and Jasraj, giving Singaporean audiences exposure to some of the biggest names of Hindustani music and Kathak.

### CHARAN GIRDHAR CHAND

In the early 1990s, SIFAS recruited full time Kathak tutor Charan Girdhar Chand, who represented the 8th generation of Kathak dancers from the Jaipur gharana (or school of dance). He remembers putting together a large scale production titled "Ghungaroo" at the World Trade Centre in Singapore. Several productions followed including Trinetra, Amrapali, Rang Bhari Shaam Hari Ke Naam and Om Namah Shivaay, all of which received good responses from mixed audiences.

Ramni Kashyap, who started learning from Charan Girdhar Chand in 1995, says that though she had learned from other teachers in Singapore from 1987, Kathak came to Singapore in the true sense with the arrival of Charan Girdhar Chand.



Charan Girdhar Chand, Kathak Guru, came to Singapore in the early 1990s

supportive and that is very encouraging for artistes like me.”

Kedar Kharat arrived from Pune, India in 1992 at TFA as a tabla tutor and also conducted Hindustani vocal classes. He enjoyed the opportunities to interact with so many different cultures in Singapore, during his 5 year stay. He says, “I remember the ASEAN Composers forum organised by the National Arts Council where I did a workshop on Indian music for all ASEAN composers. It was very well received. We also had an exchange of musical ideas and got together to compose music and record it on two CDs. That workshop became the model for all the school workshops that TFA conducted subsequently.”

### NAWAZ MIRAJKAR

Nawaz comes from an eminent family of tabla artistes from Pune, India. He is the grandson of the legendary tabla maestro, Mehboob Khan Mirajkar. From the tender age of seven, Nawaz began playing the tabla under the tutelage of his father, Mohammad Hanif Khan Mirajkar. Nawaz came to Singapore in 1996 at the age of 21, accepting an invitation from the Temple of Fine Arts. He expected to stay for a year, but his stay extended well beyond that. Nawaz remembers, “When I came here, I was very young and excited about being exposed to so many cultures, including the Chinese and Malay cultures. Within 6 months of starting my tabla classes, I had over 60 students, which really encouraged and motivated me to stay on and make this country my home.

Nawaz Mirajkar conceptualised and created productions like Damaru, Water, and Taal Express which were performed to near full houses. He also has a very interesting collaborative venture with Singapore-based Spanish dancer, Antonio Vergas. Nawaz says, “When I met him for the first time, Antonio told me that he loved Indian rhythm. And he also said that Spanish dance has been derived from the Indian Kathak dance. Isn’t that fascinating? He said that gypsy dancers from Rajasthan went to Spain and therefore the similarities between these two dance forms.”

Talking about one of his productions, Damaru, Nawaz says “Damaru, meaning drum was first done in 2009. This production involved the various

“Students started taking a lot of interest in this art form and participating in the large-scale productions choreographed by him.”

Ramni has worked closely with Charan Girdhar Chand, teaching, holding workshops and assisting him in his productions.

“We had a lot of Kathak-based programmes almost every year, initially under the SIFAS banner and later under the Nrityalaya banner. Our objective was to keep alive traditions, which are a part of Indian heritage and to preserve and promote these traditions. We reached out to different schools, local and Indian, and to institutions like National University of Singapore (NUS) and the Polytechnics through workshops, which we enjoyed doing.”

### TABLA TEACHERS

Jatinder Singh Bedi, a tabla player who came to Singapore in 1989 and taught tabla at Nrityalaya, and at NUS, talks about his myriad experiences in the 1990s. “I have performed with the Chinese Orchestra and collaborated with several local performers including Dr. M. Joyce Goh, a gold medal winning pianist. The audience here is very

percussion instruments of Singapore as well as Japanese, Persian and African drums. The result was very innovative music that appealed to audiences of all ages and all races.” The production was telecast on Doordarshan, India’s national television channel.

Nawaz was awarded the Young Artist Award by the NAC in 2011. He credits Singapore with having shaped his career as a world musician.

“

Damaru, meaning drum was first done in 2009. This production involved the various percussion instruments of Singapore as well as Japanese, Persian and African drums. The result was very innovative music that appealed to audiences of all ages and all races.

”



Nawaz Mirajkar received the NAC Young Artist Award in 2011



Damaru, meaning drum was first performed in 2009

## 2000 ONWARDS

It was in the new millennium that there was a surge of interest in North Indian classical art forms. Within the 'Big 4', SIFAS and TFA had well established departments imparting training in the North Indian art forms by the mid 2000s with many others following suit with full-time faculty, dedicated to vocal or instrumental music.

At SIFAS, a full-fledged department of Hindustani classical arts (which today has 7 permanent tutors teaching Kathak, Hindustani vocal music, sitar and tabla) was established. Student numbers grew manifold. Hindustani teachers like Sonali Sinha Biswas (vocal), disciple of the maestros, Rajan and Sajan Mishra, Susanta Chowdhury (sitar), disciple of Shyamal Chattopadhyay and Mihir Kundu (tabla), student of Sankha Chatterjee and ex-SIFAS Kathak tutor Anjum Bharti, student of Geetanjali Lal nurtured a strong student base that continues to grow. The addition of tutors like Chiradip Banerji (tabla), Shibani Roy (vocal),

Jyotika Joshi and Mulla Afsar Khan (both Kathak) have increased interest and helped grow student numbers.

Sonali Sinha Biswas remembers, "When I came to Singapore 8 years ago, Hindustani music was in the budding stage: there were few students and definitely few music lovers for this art form. We used to wait eagerly for the occasional Hindustani concert. When I look back and compare it with the situation today, I find a remarkable change, and dramatic growth in the appreciation of Hindustani music. There is a much wider understanding of this art form than before, both among students and music lovers."

Shashi Lal Kashyap, Vice President at SIFAS believes that the growth of North Indian teaching disciplines at the institutes here has been accelerated in the 2000s by the migration of a large Indian expatriate community of whom the North Indians form a significant percentage. He says,



Hindustani vocal Guru, Sonali Sinha Biswas performing at the SIFAS Festival, 2009. Accompanying her is SIFAS tabla Guru, Mihir Kundu and SIFAS sitar and vocal Guru Chandranath Bhattacharya on the harmonium

"This is very evident in the rapid expansion of the North Indian Hindustani faculty of the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society."

At the Temple of Fine Arts, Kalyani Puranik, Ravindra Parchure, Nawaz Mirajkar and Shweta Baskaran (disciple of Usman Khan) pass on the legacy of their illustrious Gurus to an ever growing student population.

Apart from being a tutor at the Temple of Fine Arts since 2007, Ravindra Parchure, disciple of Arun Kashalkar is a regular performer in Singapore and also in India and the region.

Ravindra says, "In Singapore today, we have serious students of Hindustani classical music and it is a pleasure to train them. Two years ago, I started the tradition of the Guru Purnima Utsav annually where all my students (almost 100) perform to commemorate the day dedicated to the Guru. Everyone sings classical ragas and preparations start six months in advance."

Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society, the teaching wing of Bhaskar's Arts Academy has classes in Kathak and Hindustani vocal by Pallavi Sharma and harmonium by T.K. Arunkumar. The society has discontinued their sitar and tabla classes for the past few years.

In 2014, Apsaras Arts commenced Kathak classes by Nayantara Parpia.

SYAMA which started classes in 2000, offering all the South Indian disciplines, recently commenced courses for Hindustani vocal and harmonium by Mou Bhattacharyya and tabla by Supriyo Banerjee. Several smaller institutes have opened in the 2000s, some solely with the purpose of teaching Hindustani classical music. Husband-wife duo Chandranath Bhattacharya and Sucheta Bhattacharya started their own institute, Srutilaya School of Music to teach the sitar and vocal disciplines. At the Global Indian Cultural Centre which has classes in multi-disciplinary Indian arts, Dr. Namita Mehta, Sucheta Bhattacharya and Rakhi Chatterjee teach



TFA vocal Guru, Ravindra Parchure performing at the Siglap South Community Centre in 2012. Accompanying him is TFA tabla Guru Nawaz Mirajkar

Hindustani vocal while tabla is taught by Sarfraz Ahmed, and Kathak by Irene Manual.

As a result of the significant increase in the number of students trained in Hindustani music in the 2000s, the National Arts Council included a Hindustani vocal category in its biennial National Indian Music Competition in 2014.

Among those who were part of the steady inflow of Indian expatriates in the 2000s, were many who had strong Hindustani classical training in India. They have been performing regularly at numerous concerts in Singapore. Some like Meenal Bhide (vocal) Nikhil Bidwalkar (santoor) and Sveta Kilpady (vocal) have since moved out of Singapore. Others like Pratima Bellave (vocal), Sachin Bhide (tabla), Suman Bhattacharya (sitar), and Rahul Parasnis (harmonium) continue to perform. These musicians have enriched the Hindustani arts space in their own way.

Performances by established Hindustani artistes from overseas have multiplied manifold in the 2000s. As part of the Kalaa Utsavam cultural extravaganza held in November every year at the Esplanade Theatres on the Bay, several artistes

of North Indian disciplines have been showcased. With innovation being the key, performances have ranged from 'traditional Kathak with a yoga spine' by contemporary Kathak danseuse Aditi Mangaldas to a book reading by author William Dalrymple accompanied by Hindustani music by Vidya Shah which attempted to transport the audience to the Mughal court.

Rajeswari Ramachandran, Programming Officer at The Esplanade, says, "It is not necessary to be knowledgeable about the performing art forms in order to appreciate them. All that is required is a little curiosity and the willingness to immerse and savour the experience."

It was in April 2003, that the first SIFAS Festival of Indian Classical Dance and Music was started. Now in its 13th year and hosted in collaboration with Esplanade Theatres on the Bay, this festival has also played an important role in presenting top practitioners of classical Indian art forms to audiences in Singapore. P.S. Somasekharan, who was a founding member of the SIFAS Festival committee, said that the objective of the festival was to present the best artistes, from both North and South Indian classical art forms. Sarod maestro



Arshad Ali (left) Hindustani vocalist is felicitated by SIFAS Vice-President Shashi Lal Kashyap. He performed in the SIFAS Mehfil Series concert in 2014. Also seen in picture (centre) is Susanta Chowdhury, sitar Guru at SIFAS



In an effort to take the art form to the grassroots in Singapore, Engage collaborated with the Siglap South CC Indian Activity Executive Committee (IAEC) to organise the 'Baithak Series' in 2014. In picture, Manjusha Patil, Hindustani vocalist in concert

Amjad Ali Khan, vocalist par excellence, Rashid Khan and legendary vocalists Rajan and Sajan Mishra, have been among the several world class Hindustani artistes presented at the SIFAS Festival.

SIFAS also presents Hindustani classical music concerts (through the "SIFAS Mehfil Series") and Kathak concerts throughout the year, along with the South Indian music and dance forms. These high quality concerts are free and aim at exposing Singaporeans to the beauty of Indian classical arts.

Since 2004, Anu Raju and Sarita Alurkar-Sriram through their company Engage, have championed Hindustani classical music and presented some of the most renowned artists from India. Engage has hosted Hindustani vocalists like Kaushiki Chakraborty, Jayateerth Mervundi, Venkatesh Kumar and Ulhas Kashalkar, in its flagship event, 'Vocal Traditions of India.' Anu Raju says, "Our mission is to expose Singapore audiences to Hindustani classical music through artistes who are masters of their craft and maestros of tomorrow." The duo is active in organising as well as conducting lecture-demonstrations, to enhance knowledge and music appreciation.

In an effort to take the art form to the grassroots in Singapore, Engage collaborated with the Siglap South CC Indian Activity Executive Committee (IAEC) to organise the 'Baithak Series' in 2014. "We have seen our audience grow over the years to become our biggest supporters. We are delighted that people from all walks of Singapore life enjoy Hindustani music. Our dream is to have a full scale festival dedicated to Hindustani music, with multiple concerts over 3 to 4 days," says Anu Raju of their plans for the future.

More recently, organisations like the Singapore Art Circle, founded in 2013, promotes various art forms, including Hindustani music to ensure that the next generation of art appreciators is promoted and sustained."

Several community organisations in Singapore like the Maharashtra Mandal (which has a music lovers circle called Swargandh) and the Bengali Association have included North Indian dance and music forms in their cultural offerings from time to time. Tagore Society, founded by Dolly Davenport within the last decade focuses on propagating the rich literary works of Tagore, often through



We have seen our audience grow over the years to become our biggest supporters. We are delighted that people from all walks of Singapore life enjoy Hindustani music.



two decades, apart from governmental agencies, several individual patrons have supported Indian fine arts, of all genres, including the North Indian forms. Among these, names like Sat Pal Khattar, Murli Chanrai and NG Chanrai (of the Olam group), the late Manik Shahani, (who was the Chairman of the SIFAS Festival Committee from 2007 to 2013) and Shashi Lal Kashyap stand out. In the last decade, the Manik Shahani Art Foundation supported several events by top Hindustani musicians in Singapore through SIFAS, Tagore Society and others.

The stars look bright for Hindustani art forms. Benson Puah, CEO, Esplanade sums it up aptly when he says, "There is now a sizeable resident population of North Indians as much as South Indians. So as I look at moving forward, there is going to be an interesting evolution as to how it is going to influence the vocabulary and the presentations that are going to take place."

Hindustani classical and semi-classical music and dance.

Patronage of the arts is so crucial for its survival. The initial boost to North Indian performing arts was given by Dr. Chotta Singh in the 1930s. In the last



## CHAPTER 6

# BRIDGING CULTURES: IMPACT OF THE INDIAN ARTS ON MULTI-RACIAL SINGAPORE

DR SIRI RAMA<sup>1</sup>

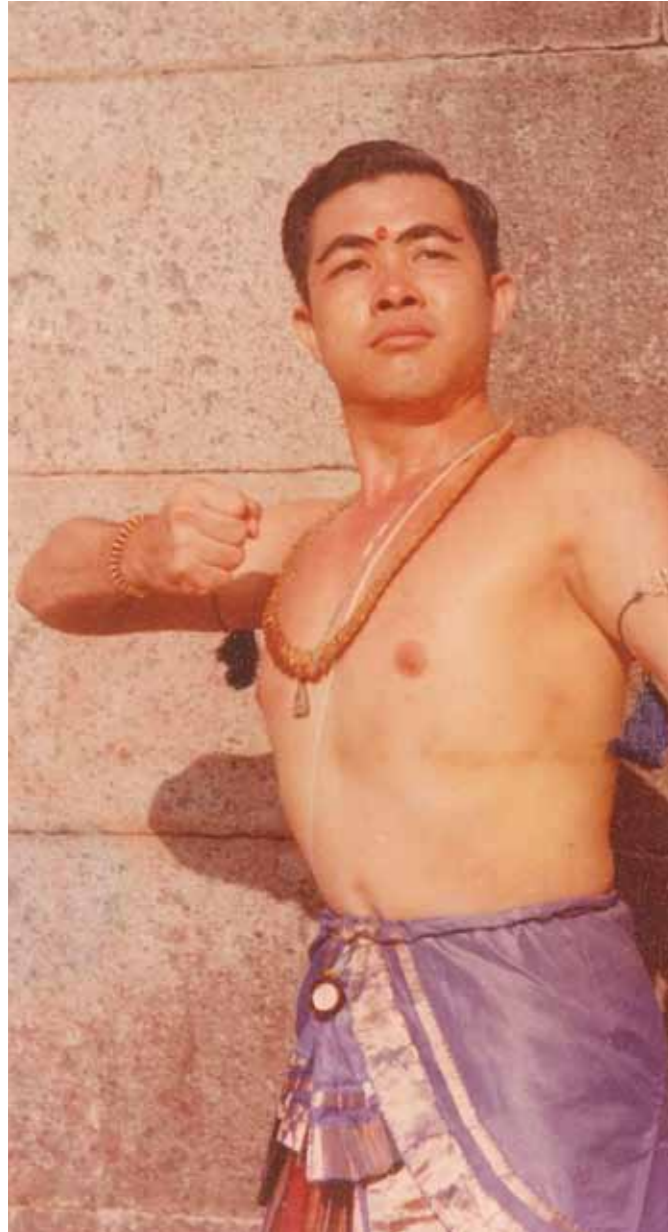
One wonders at what motivates artistes to explore and learn from other cultures, especially when an artiste is creatively engaged in exploring his/her own art. The answers lie in stories of the artistes featured in this chapter, who are testimonies to the fact that living in a multicultural society helps in exploring arts of cultures and traditions other than your own. This leads to a regenerative cycle in which the parent culture benefits from such explorations. Many distinguished Chinese and Malay artistes have been influenced by the Indian performing arts and Indian culture. This chapter provides a bird's eye

view of some of these artistes who have made those cross cultural artistic journeys. This chapter is not intended to be an exhaustive listing of all these artistes. But in a book about the history of the Indian performing arts in Singapore over the last fifty years, it is certainly interesting to tell some of these stories of Chinese and Malay dancers, choreographers and musicians.

### RICHARD TAN

The late Richard Tan<sup>1</sup> is the first Singaporean citizen of Chinese origin to have learnt Bharatanatyam professionally at Kalakshetra and perform his

<sup>1</sup> The author is grateful to Sonny Lim for lending materials related to the late Richard Tan.



Richard Tan, pioneering Chinese Bharatanatyam dancer

on board a ship, his struggles in Kalakshetra and the support he received from teachers there is an enthralling tale. He returned the favour to his alma mater by arranging a programme for the Kalakshetra troupe with the help of SIFAS, which was very well received. He left again for India to learn music and trained in Thevaram and Tiruppugazh singing. He performed in the Madurai Meenakshi and Chidambaram temples in India. A rich and colourful life enthused with a crazy love for Indian dance marked his journey and when asked why he learnt Indian dance, he said, "My answer is that my interest in Indian dance and music was not a conscious choice. I did not deliberately pursue this interest at the expense of my own Chinese cultural heritage. From the first instant when I encountered Indian dance, I was hooked. It seized my interest and imagination as no other art form had done. It was irrelevant that it was Indian dance, because you could say that the dance form I fell in love with just so happened to be Indian. As far as I was concerned, the dance I saw transcended questions of culture. It was beautiful – as simple as that. It was beautiful in a universal sense."

“

As far as I was concerned, the dance I saw transcended questions of culture. It was beautiful – as simple as that. It was beautiful in a universal sense.

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### DR. CHUA SOO PONG

Dr. Chua Soo Pong has blazed a different trail working with Indian artistes and making a mark by adapting Indian epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata into his own artistic journeys. A doyen and scholar of Chinese opera in Singapore, Dr. Chua Soo Pong collaborated and worked with dance pioneers Santha Bhaskar and Neila Sathyalingam for many years, as part of Singapore's early initiatives to



Dr. Chua Soo Pong, doyen and scholar of Chinese opera

build multicultural harmony and a Singaporean identity. As a child, he was exposed to different cultural influences and was part of the multicultural initiatives at school. Interested in Indian dance, he began learning under K.P. Bhaskar and at a young age, he was already thinking about performing the Ramayana as a Chinese dance production. So in 1971, he first staged a puppet show showcasing the Ramayana with Indonesian puppets and Chinese dialogues. Almost twenty years later in 1988, he wrote the Ramayana as a Chinese play for children, which he has successfully staged in Singapore and

later adapted as Teochew, Hokkien, Cantonese and Huang Mei opera. These different genres of Chinese opera productions have been performed by leading companies in International Theatre Festivals in 17 countries since its première in Stuttgart, Germany, in 1991. He also performed in a SIFAS production, 'The Fifth Lotus' (2002) as the astrologer who predicts Siddhartha's future, and in Rama Katha (2009), in which he enacted the role of Maricha.

He says, "My operas always keep the aesthetic principles intact. For example, in Ramayana, I kept the storyline but reset it in ancient China." In other renditions of Indian epics like the Mahabharata, he uses the Javanese costume as it was done in Wayang Wong style. In the Hokkien opera version, Indian costumes were used. Keeping the original names of the characters, he choreographs in the Chinese opera style. In late October 2009, Dr Chua Soo Pong took the Chinese Opera Institute to the International Theatre Festival in Pesaro and to the 19th International Theatre Festival in Gorizia, Italy to perform the Ramayana. He worked with K. P. Bhaskar in the multicultural production of 'Mala Mala-Dharma Margam' in 2008, which was part of the Singapore Arts Festival's Fringe Programmes. He was also invited recently by the Nanjing City Theatre Company and Zhejiang Wu Opera Troupe, in China, to stage his Chinese opera version of the Ramayana. Dr. Chua Soo Pong's creations are a great example of multicultural experiments that can travel beyond Singapore shores.

### SOM SAID

Another cultural medallion winner who has blazed a very successful trail in the field of dance is Som Said, the founder of Sri Warisan Som Said Performing Arts Ltd. Som Said recalls her first encounter with Indian dance. "When I joined Sriwana in 1965, I was already introduced to Indian dance, because K.P. Bhaskar and I had the same rehearsal studio at the National Theatre Club. I was attracted to learn Indian dance but before that, it was just about sharing the platform. I moved on to wanting to learn the technique, because I found it so beautiful. So, I went to Santha Bhaskar's home and I took about 10-12 lessons. These 10-12 lessons became the turning point for me to create Indian dance pieces." After completing the lessons, she created her own piece called 'Anunaya.' She continued to learn Indian dance and to teach Malay



Som Said at Anunaya, organised by the People's Association for Nippon Maru Youthship Programme, 1980

dance to other performers through the efforts of the National Dance Company. She later met Neila Sathyalingam in the 1980s and has continued working with her in collaborative projects till today. Som Said continues to work with newer entrants into the Indian arts scene in Singapore. "I hope that the future generation, while busy with promoting their own ethnic dance and moving towards contemporary, will still find time to continue this legacy to work together as one across races."

Her son, Adel Ahmad has kept her legacy alive and is part of the new generation taking Malay

dance forward in Singapore. He is currently the Managing Director of Sri Warisan Som Said Performing Arts Ltd. and his wife Marina Yusouff is the Creative Director. Adel reflects the views of the new generation and talks about the collaborative efforts established after Sri Warisan Som Said Performing Arts was established in 1997. He recounts his recent experiences of collaborating with Bhaskar's Arts Academy in school education forums, where besides Bharatanatyam, they have included the Bhangra folk dance of Punjab. They have also travelled to India for a Ramayana project, in which they collaborated with Kathakali artistes and then performed it again in Singapore. In the NAC's outreach programmes, they have collaborated with Apsaras Arts and Maya Dance Theatre. He also talks about how they work towards introducing Chinese and Indian dance in their lec-dems to have a more multicultural approach to dance education for the Malay audiences. He imagines the future where there will be smaller productions with more collaborative interactions.

### SONNY LIM

Sonny Lim, Assistant Director, Arts and Culture, Student and Alumni Affairs Department, Temasek Polytechnic, had a very distinguished career as a Bharatanatyam artiste. As a young boy, his earliest memories of Indian dance were viewing a broadcast of the South East Asian Festival of Arts on television. It was much later, when he was studying in Australia that he began to appreciate his Singaporean heritage. He joined Dr. Chandrabhanu's Academy as a hobby and learnt all the basics of Bharatanatyam. After a two-year break, Sonny joined Shanti Rajendra's classes, where he performed his arangetram. He was so moved by the arangetram experience that he decided to replicate it in Singapore. Seeing his performance, the President of SIFAS invited him to perform again the following year. He continued giving solo performances with a live orchestra and later collaborated with dancer Sharmila Gunasingham for several productions. When asked whether being a non-Indian caused any impediment to learning he says, "Being non-Indian, I had no pre-conceptions of anything. I had no context for it. All I appreciated was the dance form and no other thing about it. It has been fantastic. I enjoyed so much of it. It was both intellectually and physically satisfying as well. It strengthened me physically because I was not

physically strong. My dancing was a tremendous exercise for me. It was a challenge in every way."

He moved to theatre work later, but he continued to use Indian dance in his theatrical experimental works. In 2004, he played the role of Satan in a production in which he used Indian dance movements to depict a snake, which was greatly appreciated. He continued to be invited to write articles and review Indian dance performances for local papers and magazines. At Temasek Polytechnic, he has formed an Indian dance group, where he hopes to have the group perform classical and folk dance forms. Sonny Lim has had an extraordinary journey in Indian dance which he continues to pursue.

### OSMAN ABDUL HAMID

Acclaimed dancer and choreographer Osman Abdul Hamid joined the People's Association and the former Sriwana Malay Dance Group in 1979. A tutor and choreographer of the NUS Ilsa Tari since 1995, he is also the choreographer of the People's Association Malay Dance Group. Osman was



Sonny Lim, Assistant Director, Arts and Culture, Student and Alumni Affairs Department, Temasek Polytechnic and Bharatanatyam dancer



Osman Abdul Hamid with Neila Sathyalingam, backstage at the production of Angkor, 2013

conferred the prestigious Singapore Youth Award (Service) in 1993 and the Young Artist Award by the National Arts Council in 1994. He was also appointed as a member of the Board of Directors of the Malay Heritage Centre from 2007 to 2009. Osman has worked with a number of Indian dancers over the years including Neila Sathyalingam, Santha Bhaskar (at the CFA, NUS), Madhavi Krishnan (for the National Dance Company), Manimaran (for the PA) and Maheshwari. He has fond memories of playing the roles of Jatayu and Hanuman in Ramayana productions, and of working with the Dhananjayans in the 1984 Singapore Arts Festival. Most recently, he collaborated with Neila Sathyalingam on Angkor. He says, "It has been an enriching experience and journey as a choreographer or as a dancer. I always want to face new challenges. All these experiences made me what I am today in the dance circle or even within my Malay dance community, being Osman Abdul Hamid."

### YAM BOON FONG

Yam Boon Fong is a Senior Specialist (Dance) of the Student Development Curriculum Division, Ministry of Education. Her interest in dance has led

her to develop her knowledge and skills in various genres including Bharatanatyam. She studied Bharatanatyam under the guidance of Santha Bhaskar and Neewin Hershall at the Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society and staged a Bharatanatyam solo performance titled 'Margam' in 2011. Before working at the Ministry of Education as a dance education officer, she taught dance in a secondary school for more than 14 years. Boon Fong has a Masters of Education from the University of Adelaide and a Bachelor of Science (Mathematics) from the National University of Singapore. Among her projects in dance education, she has developed dance modules for the Programme for Active Learning (PAL) to engage primary school children through creative movement and cultural dance, as well as led research projects on the assessment of dance, dance learning outcomes and safe dance practice.

### KRSNA DASA TAN GUO MING AND RADHA GOVINDA DASA TAN GUO JUN

Two unique instances of siblings being involved in Indian arts are worthy of notice. Two such pairs are the Tan brothers, who are musicians and the Low brothers, who are involved in music and dance.



Yam Boon Fong, Senior Specialist (Dancer) of the Student Development Curriculum Division (MOE) and Bharatanatyam dancer



Krsna Dasa Tan Guo Ming, sitar player



Radha Govinda Dasa Tan Guo Jun, tabla player

The Brothers Govin and Krsna Tan are well on their way to establishing themselves in the alternative music scene in Singapore. Their story started with their musician father Krsna Lila Dasa Tan Thiam Teck, who insisted on nurturing their Indian musical skills, thanks to his own training from a student of sitar legend, Ravi Shankar. Though smilingly complaining at the restrictions put on him at a very young age in learning the sitar, Krsna Dasa Tan Guo Ming, the elder of the two brothers, is at a stage where he enjoys and owns the music, making it his own artistic journey.

Younger brother Radha Govinda Dasa Tan Guo Jun who plays the tabla and other percussion instruments, followed his elder brother's footsteps in Indian music but charts his own rhythmic journey. Krsna won the 2002 National Indian Music Competition open category, playing the sitar while his younger brother Govin, won the same National Arts Council competition in 2006 in the tabla category. Krsna and Govin have performed extensively, presenting nearly 200 concerts, programmes and shows for senior government officials in Singapore, Members of Parliament and distinguished personalities at various events and award functions. The duo has forged their own music group called the 'Flame of the Forest', where they play fusion music and regale audiences with their own brand of Indian musical performance.

### LOW KOK LEON

Low Kok Leon is the elder of the two Low brothers and continues to be a student and performer of Carnatic music. He is currently working as the manager of traditional arts at the National Arts Council. Since an early age, he loved music as a child and enjoys exploring different musical forms. He is glad for the multicultural exposure in Singapore. He was inspired from the age of 19, when he listened to Ravi Shankar. Beginning his training in SIFAS, he had planned to learn the sitar, but he was introduced on the very first day to Carnatic vocal through his teacher Padma. He found this form of music interesting and scales and ragas caught his interest. He also got to learn Telugu, Tamil, Malayalam, Sanskrit and other languages. He passed his first year exam at SIFAS with distinction, and was then introduced to another teacher, Dr. Bhagavathi Yerramilli. In his Carnatic music classes he found that he had to learn the songs word by word, as he was not familiar with the language. But this did not deter him and he continued to learn under her for almost a decade. This led him to perform in many temples and festive occasions as part of an orchestra. In 2004, his teachers asked him whether he would like to pursue a higher degree in the University of Madras. He went to Chennai for both theory and practical examinations and found that people were very appreciative of his efforts to attain mastery



Low Kok Leon, Carnatic singer

over Carnatic music as a non-Indian. He sang in the Genting World Telugu Congress to an audience of over 5000 people as well as in the presence of stalwarts in Chennai. He completed a master's degree in music from the Madras University, and went on to perform extensively in Carnatic music forums, festivals and concerts in Singapore and received appreciation for his renditions.

### LOW KOK WAI

His brother Low Kok Wai trained as a dancer in various styles like contemporary, jazz and western ballet, but was always attracted to the Indian classical style of Bharatanatyam. Encouraged by his brother who had joined SIFAS at that time, Kok Wai joined Bharatanatyam classes in SIFAS under Guru Balagurunathan. Having already trained as a dancer, he was able to pick up steps and take part in productions of his Guru. Later,

“  
 He found the Indian Guru – shishya parampara (tradition of learning through close association with a Guru) very fulfilling. It helped him in his artistic journeys and presented a bigger canvas for him to explore.  
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Low Kok Wai in Kanaka Sabha Centre for the Performing Arts' production of Buddhavataara, at the Shanmukhananda Hall, Mumbai, Dec 2003

he started learning under Dr. Siri Rama. He was culturally close to Buddhist philosophies and found that he connected with this aspect in the Buddhist productions performed in Singapore under the SIFAS banner, and later in major cities in India with Dr. Siri Rama's Indian dance troupe, the Kanaka Sabha Centre for the Performing Arts. After performing in India, his experience was so intense that he found himself identifying and connecting with his identity as an 'Asian' dancer. He continued exploring Javanese dance and Indian dance at his Master's programme at the National Institute of Education.

Today, Kok Wai continues his journey by using elements of classical Indian dance in contemporary performances and in theatre. He is presently lecturer of theatre and drama studies in the Universiti Brunei Darussalam. The Low brothers have previously teamed up with the Tan brothers to present a performance piece. As a student who started learning

Indian dance when he was older, he found the Indian Guru – shishya parampara (tradition of learning through close association with a Guru) very fulfilling. It helped him in his artistic journeys and presented a bigger canvas for him to explore.

### DR. TONY MAKAROME

Assistant Professor Dr. Tony Makarome is a founding faculty member of the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music at National University of Singapore. Dr. Tony Makarome says he was influenced by the many programmes on Indian, Chinese and Malay music and dance, which were part of the cultural landscape in the 1960s and 1970s. He was particularly fascinated by Carnatic music vocals and by the rhythmic syllables of the drummers. Later, while pursuing higher studies in music abroad, his interest in Indian music was further nurtured by listening to experiments by John McLaughlin and the Shakti group. After returning to Singapore in 2003, he was introduced to T. R.



Dr. Tony Makarome, founding faculty member at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory, NUS and Indian percussionist, conducting a workshop

“

Indian music is now a part of my artistic life and often feels like a new instinct which leads me to new musical adventures in the same way that our sense of smell and taste can lead us to discovering a new restaurant.

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Sundaresan, a mridangam Guru at SIFAS. He went on to learn mridangam and continues to learn under his new teacher, Thrippunithura Sreekanth at SIFAS. Continuing to be a bridge between the genres of western music and Carnatic music, Tony includes Indian rhythms in his teaching at NUS and in performances which explore new paths. In his own words, “Indian music is now a part of my artistic life and often feels like a new instinct which leads me to new musical adventures in the same way that our sense of smell and taste can lead us to discovering a new restaurant. It is difficult to predict how Indian music will continue to lead me but imagine yourself in an interesting new city you have never visited... new vistas, new peoples, new sounds, new smells,



Tan Swie Hian, visual artist and Kala Ratna award winner

new habits. This is how I am following the call of Indian music... just wander through the city and see what I find.” He recalls with pleasure, the time spent at his Guru Sundaresan’s home in Chennai and being able to appreciate Carnatic concerts better, because of his training in SIFAS. He says, “The obvious help in my work as a performer and professor is from the

new skills I acquired as a direct result of my lessons in mridangam. The rhythmic skills I have acquired have helped me a lot as a performer.”

### TAN SWIE HIAN

Tan Swie Hian, a cultural icon of Singapore, a Cultural Medallion winner in 1987, recently made news for the record for the most expensive work sold at an auction by a living Singapore or South-east Asian artist. He was bestowed the Kala Ratna Award in 1988 by SIFAS and the Singapore Ramakrishna Mission Award in 1997, and he was invited by the Indian Government to be the distinguished visiting artist on a two-week cultural exchange tour in 2002.

He has recently worked with Indian dancers, most recently, in a dance performance “I Carry Your Heart” in February 2015, with Nirmala Seshadri and Nrityalaya’s Neewin Hershall. It was expressed through Bharatanatyam and Butoh with inspiration from the Sculpture Garden at the National University Hospital Heart Centre created by Tan Swie Hian. Earlier, in 2002, he generously accepted a commission to create a painting of a lotus for the brochure of the Buddhist dance

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The Government, institutions, media and the public should all play their parts in encouraging this cross-cultural, inter-communal exchange so that an even greater awareness of how important the role of arts is in achieving racial and cultural understanding and harmony in our society could be fostered.

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production 'The Fifth Lotus,' choreographed by Dr. Siri Rama and produced by SIFAS. Born in 1943 in Indonesia, and a graduate in English Language and Literature, Tan Swie Hian creates with various media. Since 1968, he has published twenty-four volumes of poetry, prose, essays, stories, criticism and translated works. Since 1973, he has held fourteen solo exhibitions of paintings, calligraphy, engravings, and sculptures at home and abroad. Winner of many national and international awards including the Singapore Cultural Medallion and the Gold Medal of le Salon des Artistes Francais, Paris, Tan Swie Hian is also a correspondent of the Institute of France. He is the first Singapore artist who has a museum built and devoted entirely

to his works by a collector, Tan Tien Chi. His first book in English is titled "Fables of Tan Swie Hian". A practising Buddhist, he draws inspiration from Indian Buddhist philosophies and continues to explore the world of art.

It is perhaps appropriate to conclude this chapter with these words of advice from Tan Swie Han, "The Government, institutions, media and the public should all play their parts in encouraging this cross-cultural, inter-communal exchange so that an even greater awareness of how important the role of arts is in achieving racial and cultural understanding and harmony in our society could be fostered."



## CHAPTER 7

# RHYTHM OF THE ARTS IN HINDU TEMPLES

SUSHMA SOMASEKHARAN AND ESWARAN SUKUMAR

**T**he Indian classical arts have thrived in Hindu temples since time immemorial. Upholding spiritual and cultural values, Hindu temples reflect a confluence of the arts, ideals of dharma, beliefs, faith and the way of life cherished under Hinduism. The moment a devotee sets foot into a Hindu temple, he/she is awed by the profusion of art – from paintings and sculptures, symbolic icons and engravings, to the sound of the bells and the distinctive music of the nadaswaram and the thavil. It is no wonder that temples serve not only as a sacred place for prayer and practice of the Hindu religion; they also serve as a base where social, cultural and heritage activities take centre stage.

The ancient Hindu scriptures or the Vedas speak of the importance of the various art forms. The deities are synonymous with music and dance as well; the devotee is reminded of how the mischievous Lord

Krishna serenaded his gopikas with his melodious flute. The Hindu devotee is enraptured by the first Guru and the Adiyogi Lord Shiva's cosmic dance and its ability to bring everything in this material realm to a standstill. Goddess Saraswati, the Patron Goddess of the arts and learning is always depicted playing the veena. There is thus, a synthesis of heritage, culture and arts in Hindu temples, and the lack of any one of them can result in an incomplete temple experience.

### THE EARLY DAYS

Singapore has a multi-cultural legacy drawn from the rich traditions of its immigrant population. Hinduism and Indian culture, with their illustrious ancestry, form an important component of our multi-racial and multi-cultural society. Singapore now boasts of 25 Hindu temples – dedicated to various deities and located in the heartlands, as



Old photo of Sri Mariamman Temple

well as in the heart of the city. Each one of them has rendered extensive support and helped to foster a strong affinity towards Indian arts and in upholding Indian culture and heritage. Many temples have had humble beginnings. Some like Sri Mariamman Temple in South Bridge Road and Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple were mere thatched structures when they were first established in the years following the founding of Singapore in 1819. Some have had to make their way through different locations over the years, before finding their home in current sites. However, their vision has been the same throughout – to sustain and seamlessly interweave the Indian arts with heritage, culture and religion.

Sri Thendayuthapani Temple, or Tank Road Temple as it is popularly known, has been hailed as one of the earliest temples in Singapore to incorporate Indian classical music and dance as part of the rituals of festivals and religious worship. It was built in 1859 by the Nattukottai Chettiar community. As

a Murugan Temple, the festival of Thaipusam (a typically Tamil festival in honour of the God Muruga that usually falls in January or February) was and continues to be celebrated with much grandeur and spectacle.

To Vijayalakshmi Balakrishnan, a doyenne among local Carnatic musicians, what made the Tank Road temple very special was the Navarathiri festival that it celebrated annually with nine days of classical music and dance. Vijayalakshmi recalls that the festival dates back to as early as the Japanese occupation of Singapore during the WW2 days or even earlier. During those difficult years, the excitement of performing on a stage as a young girl to an equally eager audience was the highlight in Vijayalakshmi's musical journey and endeavours.

“Back then, resources were scarce. Opportunities were hard to come by. The Tank Road Temple had both the means and resources to conduct their Temple activities with great splendour. The temple



Vijayalakshmi Balakrishnan singing during Navarathiri in Sri Thendayuthapani Temple- mid 1960s

would invite another young girl named Nagarathnam (who later became popularly known as Nagarathnam Suppiah – an accomplished musician and radio personality) and me to perform at their Navarathiri festival every year. War or peace, rain or shine, the temple upheld the Navarathiri tradition of celebrating music and dance for nine days. For young singers like us, this was our stepping stone,” reminisces Vijayalakshmi with nostalgia.

Apart from believing that music and dance were integral in sustaining the true essence of the Hindu culture, the festival also provided a platform for aspiring students, and helped the audience to appreciate the diversity of Indian classical music and dance.

Today, most Hindu temples in Singapore host nine day festivals of music and dance during Navarathiri.



Back then, resources were scarce. Opportunities were hard to come by. The Tank Road Temple had both the means and resources to conduct their temple activities with great splendour. The temple would invite another young girl named Nagarathnam and me to perform at their Navarathiri festival every year. War or peace, rain or shine, the temple upheld the Navarathiri tradition of celebrating music and dance for nine days.



### THE GROWTH YEARS

The formation of the Hindu Endowments Board (HEB) in 1969 provided the impetus for the proper management of the endowment temples and, as a result, the establishment of more Hindu temples in Singapore. Together with the Hindu Advisory Board (HAB), HEB played a huge role in ensuring that the religious needs of Hindus were met. The Board ensured that a devotee in Singapore would have the same divine experience that he or she would have in India. HEB also set the direction for temples to get involved in social causes, including the propagation of Indian arts as part of the temples' efforts to strengthen community bonding. An office was established in the premises of the Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple in Serangoon Road.

Also in the mid-1960s, the well-known Indian community leader and philanthropist, P. Govindasamy Pillai (affectionately called PGP), provided funding support to re-develop Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple as well as build a kalyana mandapam (wedding hall) at the temple grounds. Aptly named as PGP Mandapam after its donor, the



Children performing at Navarathiri celebrations at Sri Vairavimada Kalamman Temple, 2008



Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple, 2001

first purpose-built Indian wedding hall also served as a venue to enliven and enrich cultural and artistic performances. When the rajagopuram (the tall pyramidal tower built at the entrance to a Hindu temple) was completed in 1966, PGP invited the legendary Carnatic vocalist M.S. Subbulakshmi to perform at the hall for three consecutive days.



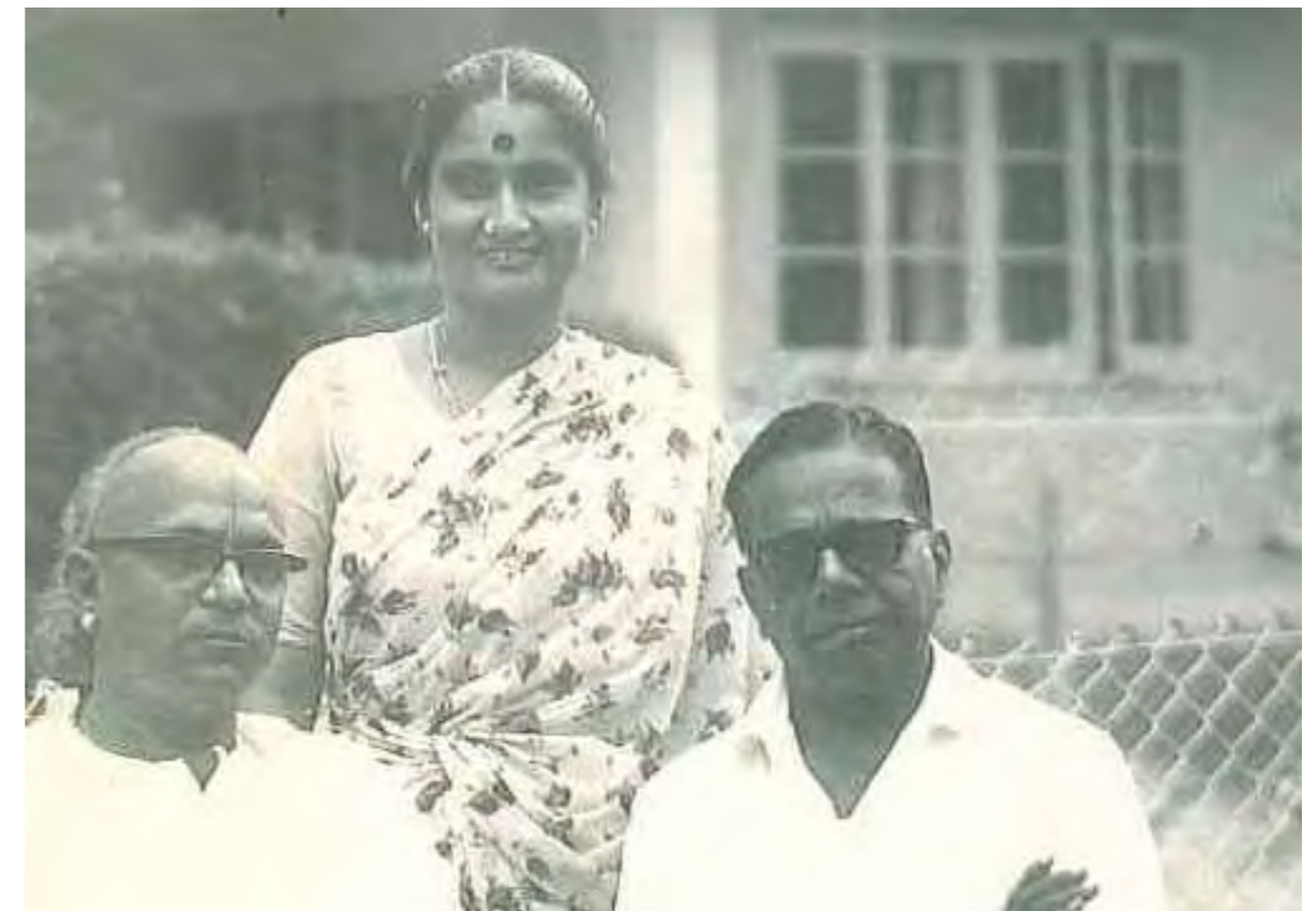
Philanthropist P. Govindasamy Pillai featured on a Singapore one dollar stamp

It was also during this time that Embar Vijayaraghavachariar, a popular kathakalakshebam (religious discourse with musical interludes) artiste then, was invited to Singapore with his brothers to hold a discourse for 40 days. The trio performed Kamba Ramanayanam to a packed audience every day.

N. Balasubramanyan, 63, a connoisseur of Carnatic music and a Tamil language enthusiast shared this about Embar Vijayaraghavachariar, "The art of Kathakalakshebam (religious discourse) is a very demanding one and is thus not popular today - one can say that it is almost a dying art form, even in India. A good Kathakalakshebam artiste has to have several skills - he must be musically talented, an interesting storyteller, have very good knowledge of religious texts and philosophy and deep knowledge of Tamil and Sanskrit languages. More than that, he has to have good acting skills when he delivers his discourse, by changing the tone, volume and pitch of his voice when he assumes various characters

in the story. Back then, I was eight years old and we never had radio or television to entertain us. Attending Embar's discourses was the best thing that happened to me. I listened intently to Embar and developed my knowledge of Tamil and classical music. Great childhood time for 40 days - that can never happen today."

The PGP family's intent was for the temple to be more than a place of worship. It should also be a venue for the development of not only the performing arts, but also the literary and visual arts. Cultural programmes involving local dancers and singers would take place throughout the whole day during Vaikunta Ekadesi (a ritually significant day for worshippers of the Hindu God Vishnu, that falls in December or January). The popular Naidu sisters, Praemalatha Naidu, Pushpalatha Naidu and Priyalatha Naidu, were regular performers during cultural programmes held at Perumal Temple. The ever-graceful Bharatanatyam virtuoso Rathi Karthigesu performed several times during festivals.



Embar Vijayaraghavachariyar (left) with Singapore hosts S.V. Rajan and Sarada Rajan, 1960

The 1960s also saw other temples gain a presence amongst the Indian community. Sri Veeramakaliamman Temple, Sri Vadapathira Kaliamman Temple, Sri Mariamman Temple in South Bridge Road, Sri Sivan Temple, Sri Senpaga Vinayagar Temple and many more started attracting a large number of devotees and worshippers.

Before its present abode in Geylang East, Sri Sivan Temple used to be located at Orchard Road (near Dhoby Ghaut) and was even temporarily housed on the grounds of Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple when it had to vacate its Orchard Road site for the development of the Dhoby Ghaut MRT.



Sri Mariamman Temple nadaswaram players accompanied on mridangam by T. Ramanan, Viknash and on flute by Sundar at outdoor event, 2002



Padmanabhan Subramaniam on nadaswaram and Sambandham Ramesh on thavil at the Sri Veeramakaliamman Temple, 2015

Former Chairman of the Hindu Advisory Board, E Sukumar mentioned that even when the temple was restricted to a small land area in Dhoby Ghaut, Sivan Temple ensured that its religious festivals and cultural performances went hand-in-hand. "During observance of Maha Sivarathri (an annual event commemorating the wedding of Siva and Parvathi that falls in February or March, and is often celebrated with night-long events at Siva temples), there were, in some years, Villu Paatu (musical story telling) performances as well as Kathakalakshebams. In Perumal Temple for instance, Upanyasams (religious discourses) and even mythological films were screened on certain festival days like Vaikunta Ekadesi, he recalled. The Sri Sivan Temple continues to host a festival of music and dance during the Sivarathri festival.

In keeping with ancient Hindu temple tradition, nadaswarams and thavils continued to be a part of temple rituals in Singapore. Even those who were less musically inclined were eased into classical music through the nadaswaram, as they offered their prayers. During the post-war years in Singapore, the nadaswaram vidwans such as Gnanasundaram Pillai also taught Carnatic music to students as there were no formal teachers in Singapore during that time. Sri Mariamman Temple started conducting nadaswaram and thavil classes in its premises in the early 1970s, but it declined in popularity after a while. On the other hand, Sri

Senpaga Vinayagar Temple started Thevaram and Thiruppugazh classes, which continue till today. The classes brought together Hindus, especially the youth and fostered a stronger bond amongst them as they were initiated into classical music, devotional poetry and literature.

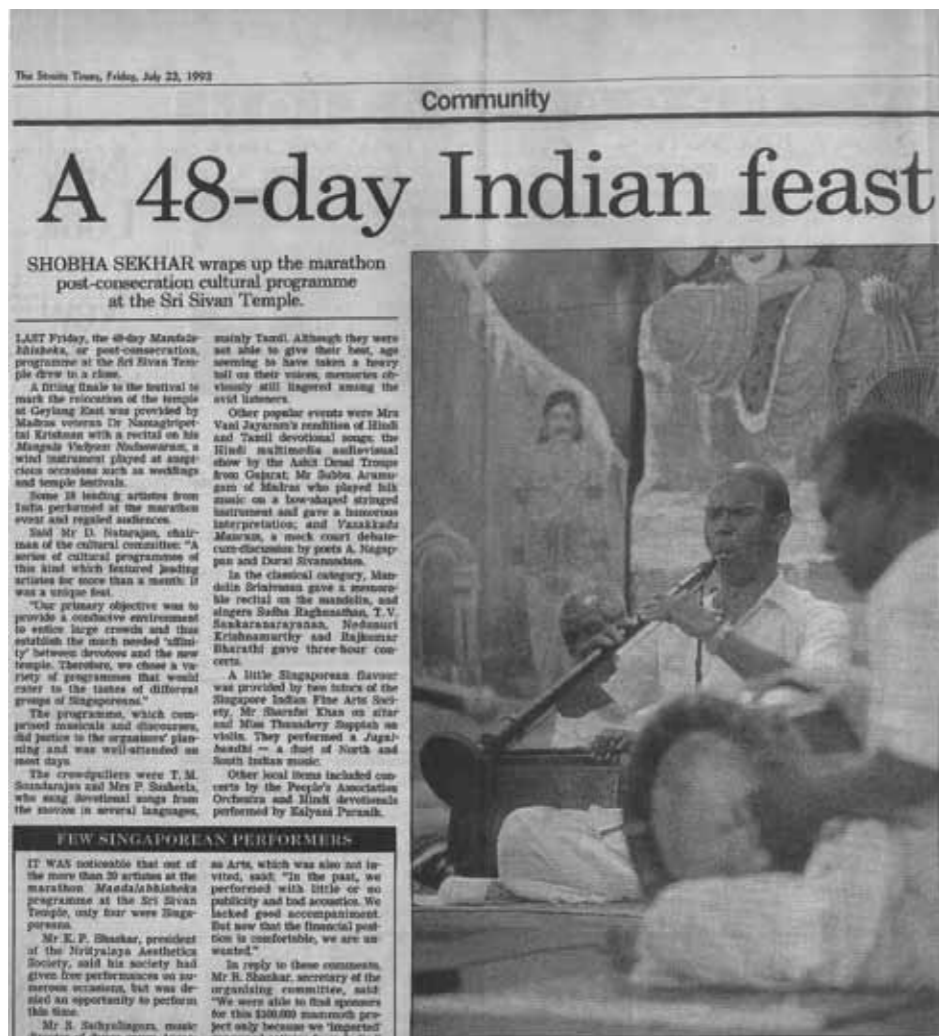
### REACHING OUT THROUGH THE ARTS

The 1980s saw an intensity of concentrated Indian arts activities not seen before in Singapore. D. Natarajan, former President of the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society remarked, "While the 1960s might have marked the rise of more number of temples in Singapore, it was not until the 1980s that we saw a huge change in the music scene in the temples. There was a rising number of immigrants from India, which resulted in an increase in the need for more temples and led to greater interest in Indian culture, heritage and form. There was also an increase in the number of music schools and arts organisations. This resulted in more participation in temple celebrations and festivals."

1993 was an important year when Sri Sivan Temple under HEB celebrated a grand Maha Kumbabhishegam (the ritual consecration of a temple) and Mandalabhishegam (special daily prayers and rituals performed for over a month and a half following the consecration). The first time that a temple was able to conduct 48 days of music, dance and religious discourses as part of the Mandalabhishegam, which included both overseas and local artistes. This was all made possible by funds raised by the Committee through community support. Rising stars of Carnatic music, such as Sudha Raganathan and the late Mandolin Shrinivas had their debut Singapore performances at the Sivan Temple Mandalabhishegam. Renowned devotional singer Pithukuli Murugadass also performed to a packed audience.

The temple committee recognised that in order for Singaporean artistes to hone their skills, they needed to be exposed to as many professional artistes from India as possible. A bridge between students and connoisseurs of Indian classical arts in Singapore and artistes from India had to be built and the series of performances held over 48 days was crucial in enabling interactions and forming a relationship between Singaporean and

“ During observance of Maha Sivarathri, there were, in some years, Villu Paatu performances as well as Kathakalakshebams, and in Perumal Temple for instance, Upanyasams and even mythological films were screened on certain festival days like Vaikunta Ekadesi. ”



The Straits Times article on Sri Sivan Temple, Mandalabhishegam, 1993

Indian artistes. M. Param, former Vice-Chairman and currently a member of HEB, mentioned that the growing congregation and support for the fund-raising efforts ensured that the Kumbabhishegam was a grand success, with the showcasing of Indian classical arts at the forefront of the celebrations.

Following this landmark event, other temples including Sri Vairavimada Kaliyaman Temple in Toa Payoh, Tank Road Temple and Sri Maha Mariamman Temple in Yishun also had many local and foreign artistes participating in the Mandalabhishegams, after their respective Kumbabhishegams.

Another annual occurrence in the cultural calendar is the Vasanta Utsavams, ten day festivals of music and dance, mainly featuring local musicians and dancers hosted in May/June by the Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple and the Sri Vadapathira Kaliyaman Temple.



Dance group performing at Sri Sivan Temple Mandalabhishegam, 2008

Special mention should be made of the Sri Senpaga Vinayagar Temple (SSVT) in Ceylon Road, which had its humble beginnings in the 1850s. Formed by the Ceylonese (now Sri Lankan) Tamil community in Singapore, the temple recently celebrated its 6th Mahakumbhabhishegam in a grand way with several top musicians and dancers performing as part of its Mandalabhishegam celebrations. The temple has come a long way since the early days, with its majestic façade and gopuram and with its impressive list of activities which included Thevaram, music and dance classes by its Academy. The Academy itself began in 2003 and now boasts of over 250 students. Says Dr. S.T. Kasinathan, Chairman of SSVT, "Our classes are very structured and training is very thorough. We are proud that although we are a minority community within the minority race in Singapore, we have made great strides in propagating Indian classical music and dance in Singapore. Kasthuri Subramaniam, in her 60s, and having lived much of her life in New Zealand, spoke very happily of the concert opportunities at the Sri Senpaga Vinayagar Temple's recent Mandalabhishegam. She said, "It was thoroughly enjoyable attending so many good concerts by both Singaporean and Indian musicians. Often temples bring only top-



It was thoroughly enjoyable attending so many good concerts by both Singaporean and Indian musicians. Often temples bring only top-grade artistes from India to attract crowds but they forget that there is the next rung of musicians who are very proficient but seldom heard for lack of overseas opportunities. I must thank the temple profusely for bringing young artistes like Akkarai sisters and Jayanthi Kumaresh who simply thrilled the audience with the mastery over their instruments.



TFA Hindustani choir performing at Sri Sivan Temple Mandalabhishegam, 2008



Odhavar Madurai Pon Muthukumar, Odhavar Mayavaram Sivakumar, flute by Tiruchy L. Saravanan, mridangam by Thiruvannamalai Sivakumar at Sri Senpaga Vinayagar Temple Mandalabhishegam, 2015

grade artistes from India to attract crowds but they forget that there is the next rung of musicians who are very proficient but seldom heard for lack of overseas opportunities. I must thank the temple profusely for bringing young artistes like Akkarai sisters and Jayanthi Kumaresh who simply thrilled the audience with the mastery over their instruments.”

Temples like Sri Krishnan Temple, Darma Muneeswaran Temple and Sree Ramar Temple have also played a role in the propagation of Indian classical music and dance as part of their religious activities.

The Hindu Advisory and Endowment Boards and other organisations like Narayana Gurukulam, Sri Dakshina Bharatha Brahmana Sabha, Sri Aurobindo Society, and the Hindu Centre have organised concerts in connection with their religious and cultural activities and contributed to the development of local talent.

Besides temples, community organisations have also played a small role in the promotion of the Indian Arts. Umar Pulavar Tamil Language Centre (UPTLC) is a Tamil language teaching centre of the

Ministry of Education, where formal Tamil classes are conducted daily for students from Primary and Secondary Schools that do not directly offer the Tamil language. Since 2005, UPTLC has been running the Indian Performing Arts Programme, where arrangements have been made for South Indian classical music and dance classes to be conducted by established Singaporean artistes on Saturday mornings. The classes are taught free of charge to all UPTLC students.

Social and cultural community groups such as the Bengali Association of Singapore, Kannada Sangha, Maharashtra Mandal, Singapore Gujarati Society, Singapore Malayalee Hindu Samajam and Singapore Telugu Samajam are some of the Indian sub-community-based organisations that celebrate religious, cultural and language-related events as part of their activities. Indian classical music and dance have a distinct place in some of their events.

### TOWARDS GREATER ARTISTIC EXCELLENCE

In a period where formal performance spaces and organisations such as the Esplanade. The Substation and National Arts Council had yet to establish themselves, temples provided the stage

and platform for many eager students who were engaged in the arts. They continue to provide these opportunities for artistes to showcase their talents. The veteran artistes in Singapore will continue to remember the contributions of the temples very fondly, while the young, upcoming artistes of today will be the beneficiaries of these temples' support and a glowing testimony to the efforts of these temples.

The two essential ingredients for a thriving and lively arts environment are nurturing artistic skills and developing an audience base. The Hindu temples continue to be actively involved in promoting this development on both fronts, in collaboration with various agencies and organisations. Mention should also be made of Sri Lakshminarayanan Temple in Chander Road, which has combined cultural festivities and religious functions to give popular expression to artistic traditions. The temple's celebration of festivals like Krishna Jayanti and Holi

(the spring festival of colours) are often followed by cultural performances, dance, music and bhajan sessions. Even organisations like Krishna Our Guide and Hindu Centre are consciously engaged in promoting spiritual knowledge through bhajans and cultural engagements.

Many new Singaporean Indian arts organisations and independent artistes have also benefitted extensively from the cultural events that take place throughout the year in the various temples. Gayatri Sriram, Bharatanatyam dancer and founder of the dance school Shruti Laya, remarked that despite the growth of many arts organisations and venues over the years, the only curated yearly programme that artistes are assured of being a part of are the temple festivals. Every artiste, every dance school and every music school is given a platform to perform without discrimination and this openness with which they are supported is unique to Indian temples alone.



Kathak dancers at Deepavali event in Little India, 2011

## CHAPTER 8

THE INDIA  
CONNECTION

SHANKAR RAJAN

The Singapore – India connection in the field of arts goes back more than 100 years. Over the decades, numerous Indian artistes came to Singapore as teachers at various schools, community centres and other grassroots organisations. Many remained for several years in Singapore and contributed greatly to the arts scene.

They did a splendid job in promoting the Indian art forms to a wider audience. Some took up permanent residence in Singapore and opened their own dance and music schools, contributing in a large way to the vibrant Indian performing arts scene in Singapore. Some others returned to India or migrated to other parts of the world. Some came as guest composers, choreographers or conductors for specific events, especially those

who did interesting collaborative work with local organisations like the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society (SIFAS), Singapore Indian Orchestra and Choir (SIOC), Apsaras Arts and Bhaskar's Academy. Without hesitation, it can be said that, thanks to their efforts, Singapore audiences and artistes benefitted from the raising of standards in performances and choreography.

In this chapter, we provide a glimpse of some prominent teachers, choreographers and composers who left an indelible mark on the Indian music and dance scene in Singapore. This list is in no way a comprehensive one, as the artistic links between India and Singapore are very strong ones, and many other artistes from India have played a role in shaping the vibrant and ever-growing field of Indian music and dance in Singapore today.



Dhananjayans being felicitated with the Lifetime Achievement Award by Dr. R. Theyvendran as Soorya President Chitra Krishnakumar applauds, 2009

THE PERFORMERS/COMPOSERS/  
CHOREOGRAPHERS

## THE DHANANJAYANS

Shanta Dhananjayan has a curious connection with this part of the world. She was born in Melaka, Malaysia as her father was working there, but was sent to India at the age of five. Kalakshetra was her early training ground and she spent 10 years mastering Bharatanatyam and having her arangetram. That was where she met her husband V. P. Dhananjayan. Returning to Malaysia in the early 1960s, Shanta spent several years in Kuala Lumpur and struck up a great friendship with Uma Sambanthan, wife of Minister V.T. Sambanthan. She returned briefly to Kalakshetra, but came to Singapore to participate in the Singapore International Cultural Festival for the opening of the new (now demolished) National Theatre. Merdeka (independence) activities were at a high in Malaysia. Shanta recalls, "I was given an opportunity to perform Bharatanatyam for a Malay song as part of the Malaysian contingent for a South East Asian Dance festival. I was an unusual creature – representing Malaysia, Singapore and

India at different times for different items at different venues. I hid from Rukmini Devi, worried that she may object to my multi-national identity but she was very encouraging and even taught me to dance to a Malay classical song Asli Melayu." Rukmini Devi was the founder director of the Kalakshetra Foundation, India.

As the only Kalakshetra graduate in those days, Shanta was a much sought-after dancer and presented a joint venture with SIFAS – a dance-drama called Rama Natakam and later on Sanghamitra. Shanta now resides in India with her husband, V.P. Dhananjayan, who has done great work in India and South East Asia.

The Dhananjayans were invited to choreograph Sita Rama Katha in 1986 and Sanghamitra in 1994 for the Singapore International Festival of Arts. In the 2000s, the Dhananjayans have been regularly courted by Singapore institutions such as Alapana Arts, Shruti Laya, Apsaras Arts and independent dancers to choreograph dance productions and to conduct workshops. The Singapore chapter of Soorya International honoured them in 2009 with a Lifetime Achievement Award.

“

I was an unusual creature – representing Malaysia, Singapore and India at different times for different items in different venues.

”

### DR. L. SUBRAMANIAM

LS, as he is affectionately known to most people in Indian music circles, ranks among the world's greatest musicians. Subramaniam spearheaded a new era in violin playing with his individualistic, brilliant and masterful style. He has been hailed by critics and connoisseurs alike as one of the greatest performers of all times.

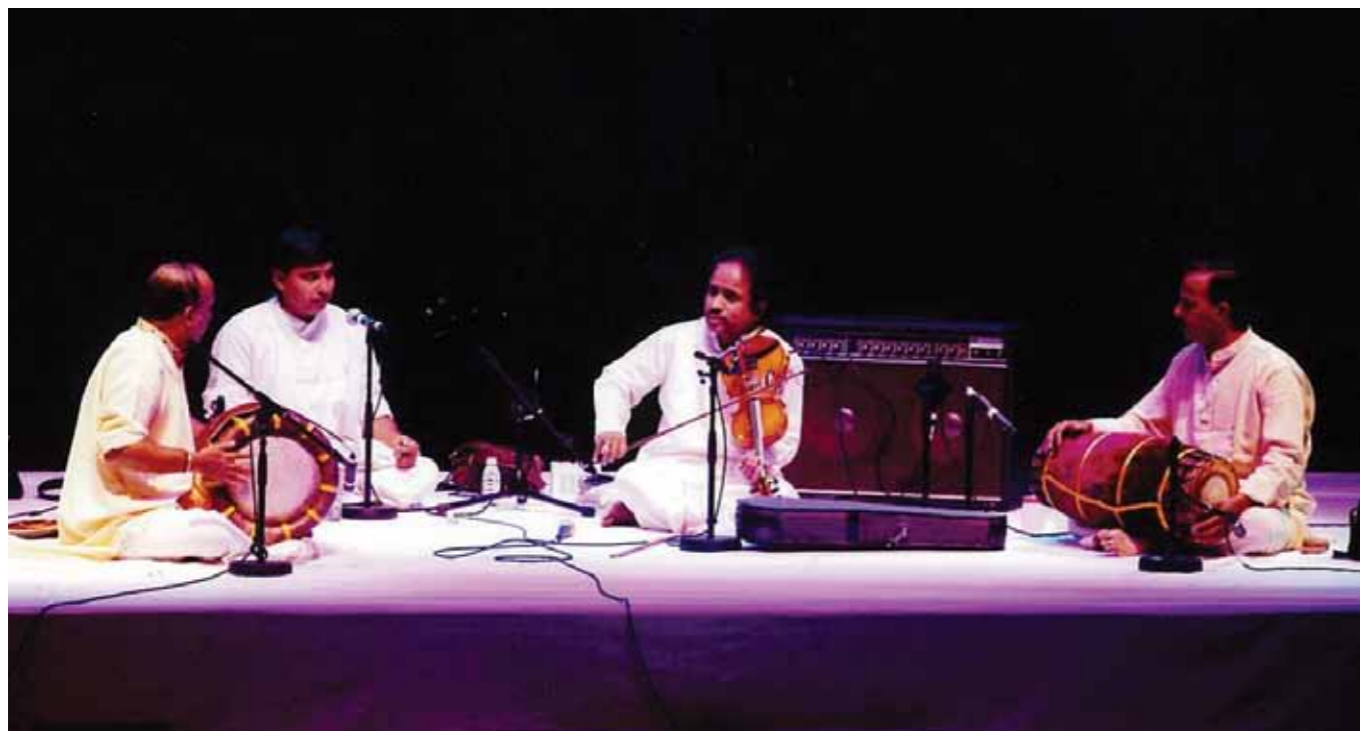
His prodigious talent was evident at the early age of two, when he could repeat musical phrases that he heard from his father, Prof. V. Lakshminarayana. He took the world by storm when he gave his first full-length concert at the tender age of six. He completed his medical studies and registered as a medical practitioner, but never practised medicine as his love of music transcended all else. He has performed

in prestigious venues like the Bolshoi Theatre, The Lincoln Center and Royal Albert Hall, just to name a few. Besides solo and trio performances (with his brothers) he has also collaborated with several legendary musicians like Sir Yehudi Menuhin. He has recorded and produced over fifty recordings and has scored music for award winning television series and movies.

LS shares, “My first performances in Malaysia and Singapore were in 1965 when we three brothers – L. Vaidyanathan, L. Subramaniam and L. Shankar – were invited by Malaysian Minister Manickavasagam to perform in fundraising concerts in Malaysia. We also performed in Singapore then.”

In 1990, LS did a solo programme during the celebration of the Singapore's 25th anniversary at the Victoria Theatre under the auspices of SIFAS. Subsequently, the People's Association invited him to perform in 1993. Named “Double-Bill”, the outstanding concert consisted of two parts, one with SIOC and the other with the Singapore Symphony Orchestra playing his compositions.

Subramaniam was subsequently appointed as consultant for the planning of Esplanade. He was also appointed as International Dean for the Temple of Fine Arts in Singapore. He performed



Dr. L. Subramaniam performing at the Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay in 2002

“

Dr. Subramaniam's compositions had very complex raga and tala structures and we, in our infancy, struggled to master the nuances. But he was a very patient teacher and continued to work with us for long hours until we reached perfection.

”

several times for TFA in Singapore, as well as for the National University of Singapore together with his wife Kavita Krishnamurthy and son Ambi Subramaniam.

SIOC conductor Lalitha Vaidyanathan says, “The 1993 concert was a very memorable one. His

compositions had very complex raga and tala structures and we, in our infancy, struggled to master the nuances. But he was a very patient teacher and continued to work with us for long hours until we reached perfection. All our musicians are indebted to him for our orchestration skills, especially the violinists who benefited from his superb bowing techniques.”

### MOHAN AND RAJHESH VAIDHYA

Mohan Vaidhya is a much sought-after multi-talented artiste – classical vocalist, dancer, violinist, actor, composer, playback singer, television host and choreographer. Mohan hails from a family of musicians; his late father K.M.Vaidhyathan was a rhythm artiste specialising in ghatam and his late uncle G.Ramanathan was a prominent contributor to the Tamil film industry as music director for over 15 years. Mohan's professional work in Delhi with Saroja Vaidyanathan exposed him to the various aspects of Bharatanatyam.

His connection with Singapore began in 1999, when he was asked to score the music for SIOC's “Gaana Bimbhangaal” for the Singapore Arts Festival and again in 2003 for “Gaana Yathra” for the 4th Summit of the Alliance of the Orchestras in the Asia Pacific



Mohan Vaidhya performing at Sri Sivan Temple for Mahasivarathri 2008 along with K.R. Shyama

region, held in Singapore. “Navarasa Ramayana” in 2007 and “Mystique Seven” in 2014 were additional commissions for composition and conducting.

On the invitation of Lalitha, SIOC conductor and former principal of SIFAS, Mohan worked as a music tutor at SIFAS for over two years. He fondly recalls, “I gathered the best students and graduates of SIFAS and formed an Orchestra which has become the Alumni Orchestra, certainly one of my main achievements in Singapore.” During his two year stint at SIFAS, Mohan availed of opportunities to perform on Vasantham TV, acting in teleserials and hosting musical programmes.

Rajhesh Vaidhya has been described as an “intriguing and technically beguiling artiste on the veena with his blistering speed and electrified strings.” Rajhesh had advanced veena training from the late veena maestro Chitti Babu. His style is

unique and quite often described as contemporary, although it does not lack classicism. He has produced several albums and has worked with film music producers like Deva, Vidyasagar, Harris Jayaraj and Bharadwaj. He has performed around the world with his orchestral group in Europe, US, Canada, Australia, Malaysia, South Africa, Brazil and Singapore.

His first connection with Singapore came in 1999, when he composed and played with the Singapore Indian Orchestra and Choir. His special composition in raga Keeravani, equivalent to a western minor scale won him accolades and Rajhesh says that performance “continuously lingers in my mind.”

He enjoys performing in Singapore tremendously as he feels a strong sense of audience presence with him during every performance.



Rajhesh Vaidhya and group at Soorya Festival, 2008



Rajkumar Bharathi

“That was a unique experience, something that we cannot replicate in Chennai -the stage, the technical facilities and the fact that 150 dancers from Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Singapore and Cambodia all worked harmoniously together – I really applaud the organisation.”

## RAJKUMAR BHARATHI

Rajkumar is the great grandson of the renaissance poet of India, Subrahmanya Bharathi. A qualified engineer, Rajkumar styles himself more as a musician and composer. He shares, “Singapore is like a second home to me. I find so much of common interest in Indian music, philosophy and tradition in Singapore.”

Rajkumar has visited Singapore several times, as a singer for a Kumbhabhishegam concert, as a recording artiste for Vasantham TV, to perform at SIFAS, and several times to compose for SIOC and Apsaras Arts. Outstanding in his memory is his music composition for “Angkor” performed with Apsaras Arts. Rajkumar says, “That was a unique experience, something that we cannot replicate in Chennai - the stage, the technical facilities and the fact that 150 dancers from Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Singapore and Cambodia all worked harmoniously together – I really applaud the organisers.”

He contemplates, “Differences dominate the world today. There is so much fighting, hatred and vengeance-seeking – only music and dance will be able to create harmony.”

## THE TEACHERS

### PADMAVATHY ANANTHAGOPALAN

Padmavathy Ananthagopalan, born into a family of musicians with a lineage of seven generations, moved to Singapore on the advice of veena maestro S. Balachander in the late 1960s. Her husband Ananthagopalan (who passed away in April 2015) joined her after a year and both of them taught at SIFAS for 10 years.

Padmavathy taught veena, vocal Carnatic music and flute and rendered musical support for several dance concerts.

She fondly recalls S.Harris, a SIFAS stalwart in the early years, “Harris was a very strict administrator. He was punctual and expected tutors and students to be punctual as well. He introduced the concept of examinations and requested me to write a text-book “Shadjam” as a reference text for students. Later on, two more books Rishabam and Gandharam were published by SIFAS. I have tremendous respect



Padmavathy Ananthagopalan on the veena

for Mr. Harris." Hema Dorai was her star student in Singapore and she went on to do her Ph.D in music in Chennai. Padmavathy states that among her proudest achievements was organising the course structure and time-table, which were both lacking when she arrived. She also has happy memories of organising the Thyagaraja Aradhana and preparing students for radio and television shows. She recalls fondly that several luminaries like M.S.Subbulakshmi, K.J.Yesudas, Ravi Shankar and Allah Rakha visited Singapore and SIFAS during her tenure. She particularly recalls the visit of her late brother Lalgudi Jayaraman who was such an inspiration to her and to all her students.

#### DR. LEELA SAMSON

Leela Samson is an international figure and has had a long history of interaction with Singapore. She recalls her earliest visit in the early 1970s as an examiner for SIFAS. For her first performance at the Victoria Theatre, she was interviewed by the Singapore

Broadcasting Corporation Television, and remembers fondly how much the dance was appreciated. She saw Singapore becoming a cultural hub, especially with the presence of a highly cultured Indian community. "Performing in 2014 at the Esplanade was a very enriching experience," says Leela. "Such a venue gives tremendous scope and ample opportunities to experiment." When asked about experimentation she says, "Language changes. Words change. Expressions change. In natyam and music there are generational changes. One needs the heart, vision and creative impulse and plenty of "dairiyam" (courage) to make the change." But she laments, "Because of the lack of patenting or copyright laws, when some new genre of dance is created, everybody just follows suit without acknowledging the original creator. This is also happening in the Indian music industry."

Leela Samson was also an invited faculty member and performer at the inaugural Dance India Asia Pacific workshop in 2012.



Leela Samson lighting lamp at Apsaras Arts' Dance India Asia Pacific, 2013

#### KARAIKUDI R. KRISHNAMURTHY

If there is one overseas artiste who can be singled out as having an affable, flamboyant, creative, and impulsive yet down-to-earth personality, it would definitely be mridangam maestro and Guru Karaikudi

R. Krishnamurthy. He made a tremendous impact at SIFAS and in the Singapore art scene during his years in Singapore in the 1980s. Born into a family of nine generations of vainikas, he preferred to master a rhythm instrument, mridangam. He was teaching at Kalakshetra for almost 20 years when dancer Lakshmi Viswanathan asked him to accompany her on a concert tour of Hong Kong and Singapore in 1979. In Singapore, he was asked by SIFAS Vice-President Sachithanathan to join SIFAS as a mridangam tutor.

After much persuasion, Krishnamurthy wound up his affairs in Chennai and started work at SIFAS and there was no looking back. Krishnamurthy shares, "I now realise that the foundation had been laid for what was to become a world renowned institution."

SIFAS was then not financially strong and Krishnamurthy felt guilty of not having too many students initially. "I don't think I generated enough

“  
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”

revenue for them to even pay my monthly salary. So I became a semi-administrator. Even buying bedding, pillows, furniture became part of my duties!”

When asked about his achievements, Krishnamurthy lists reviewing the examination process as being high on his list. “SIFAS needed to maintain standards and there was a dire need to bring in overseas examiners to review and revamp the examination process. But SIFAS could not afford to pay and bring down external examiners. So I suggested bringing leading artistes for performances and asking them to double-up as examiners. The management agreed and I arranged to bring down famous dancer Chitra Visveswaran and her singer husband Visveswaran for a ticketed dance programme. Chitra and Visveswaran then went on to become external examiners at SIFAS in dance and music. This system evolved with Lakshmi Viswanathan and Charumathi Ramachandran coming as examiners in later years.”

Talking about teaching styles, Krishnamurthy said there are two distinct styles – one which includes teaching the basic requirements as

per the syllabus, for students to attain sufficient proficiency – but the second more important style is to diverge a little and train students to assimilate the art form holistically i.e. developing listening skills or “Kelvi Gnanam” (knowledge that comes from listening), explaining concert readiness and taking care of basic matters like maintenance and tuning of instruments. He remembers T. Ramanan as his foremost student and others like Paskaran, Devarajan and Selvapandian as outstanding students of rhythm. Today, all four of his senior students are among the top rhythm

“  
A. Sachithananthan and  
Dr. V.S. Rajan fully immersed  
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of SIFAS.  
”



Karaikudi Krishnamurthy (right) with A. Sachithananthan, Vice President, SIFAS

players in Singapore and play other instruments like ghatam and ganjira too.

Krishnamurthy says that he has great regard for A. Sachithananthan and Dr. V. S Rajan as arts administrators – “They fully immersed themselves and never deviated from a commitment to the progress of SIFAS.”

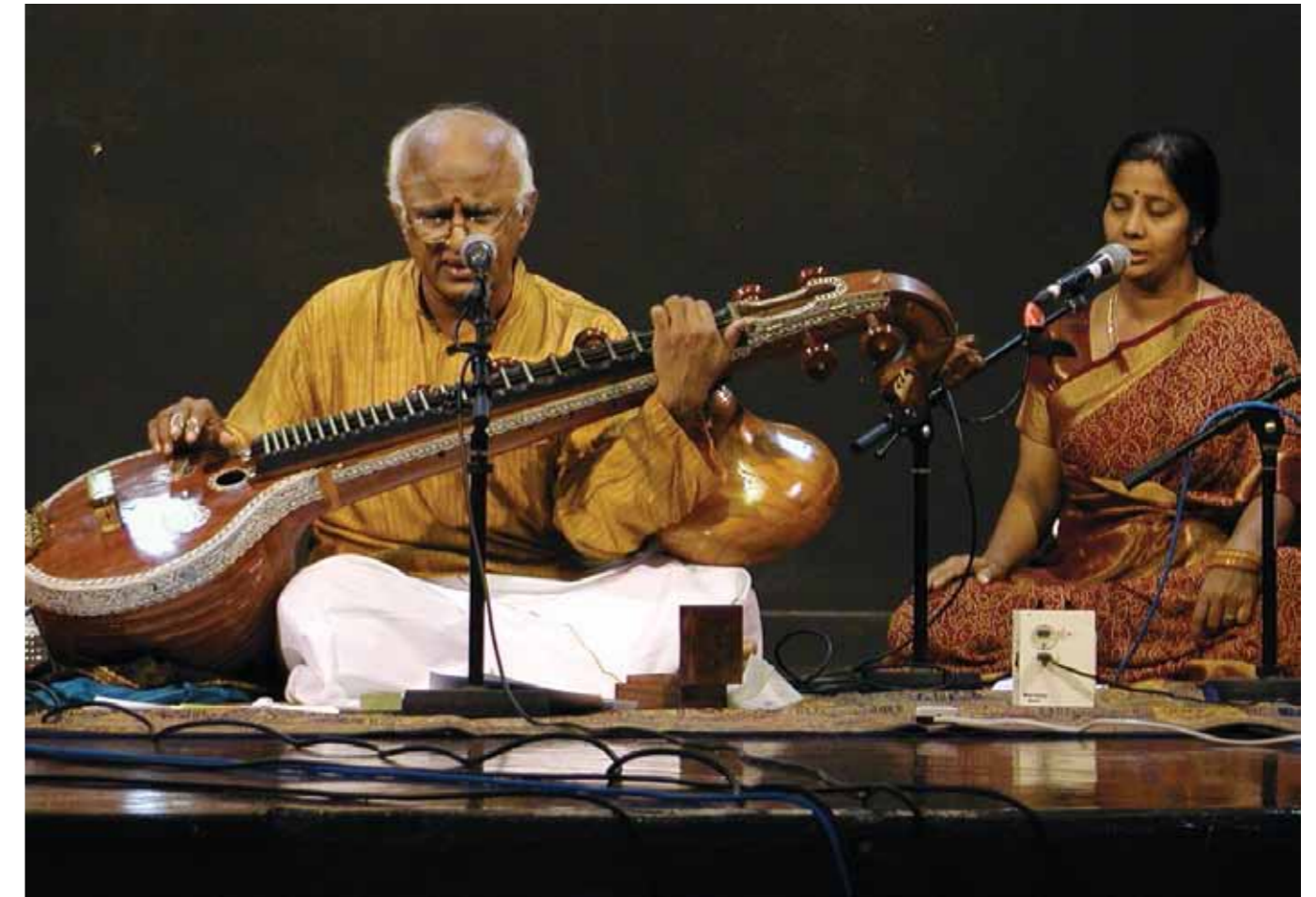
### KARAIKUDI DR S. SUBRAMANIAM

A one person thinktank, a musician and a future-oriented person, Dr. S. Subramaniam (from the Karaikudi tradition of nine generations of veena players) is a veena player par excellence. More than that, he is a scholar who experiments with music and has prepared teaching materials and methods to attract even young children to music. Subramaniam spent a few years teaching at SIFAS in the 1980s and went on to Wesleyan University in the US, where he obtained a Ph.D in ethnomusicology before going back to Chennai to start a school called Brhaddhvani.

He shares, “SIFAS is the one of the few institutions worldwide which has combined the best of both North and South Indian traditions in its teaching programme, something that even Delhi or Chennai institutions have not been able to do because of various constraints in India.” He acknowledges the political foresight of the Singapore Government in ensuring amity between different races and groups that came and settled in Singapore.

He says that his school Brhaddhvani was inspired by SIFAS, which had visionaries like Dr V.S Rajan and Sachithananthan, passionate people who created a unique model in Singapore. He says, “A good arts school needs a strong leadership which can integrate the arts in all its manifestations. The most difficult aspect in an arts institution is to have a leader with a long term vision and the freedom to work.”

In his view, “Singapore is a happy country and has set aside valuable space for the arts. Singapore is certainly in a great position to develop into an international arts hub.”



Karaikudi S. Subramaniam in SIFAS concert, 2008

**MADURAI G.S. MANI**

A veteran with over six decades of contribution to the field of music, Madurai G.S. Mani, an active octogenarian, is a performing artiste, musician, singer, composer and orchestral conductor. He has been associated with SIFAS for over 35 years and has conducted workshops and served as external examiner but his most memorable achievement was, in his own words, "...an opportunity to train and conduct an orchestra for performance at an international programme in Singapore in the 1990s. My genre was Indian classical music and I represented SIFAS. More than 100 students, vocalists, sitar, veena, violin and rhythm players,



Singapore is a happy country and has set aside valuable space for the arts. Singapore is certainly in a great position to develop into an international arts hub.



some only in their rudimentary stages of learning, were trained by me with the help of SIFAS tutors like violinist K.Sivaraman and mridangist Thiruvarur Vaidyanathan. The show was held at Victoria Theatre and received much acclaim from the audience which included several non-Indian musicians as well." In Mani's view, youngsters in Singapore are evincing a lot of interest in the classical arts and are being groomed well – what is lacking is sufficient practice. Mani shared a simple yet effective technique in voice culture. "Akaara, Ookara and Mmkara Sathakam – practising by singing Aa with an open voice, Oo with a contracted voice and Mm with a nasal voice with depth and weight."

Mani's view is that Singapore is no lesser a city than Chennai in Carnatic music. "You have many good arts institutions with excellent teachers. Students have ample opportunities for performances. Look after your "pokkisham" (treasure)."

**PROFESSOR PREMEELA GURUMURTHY**

Premeela is currently Professor and Head of the Music department of the University of Madras and has had a long association with Singapore.



Madurai G. S. Mani

Her grandfather and parents had spent several years in Ceylon in the late 1950s and 1960s. They had a special relationship with Professor Lakshminarayana Iyer (father of the violinist Dr. L. Subramaniam) who was then running the music



You have many good arts institutions with excellent teachers. Students have ample opportunities for performances. Look after your "pokkisham" (treasure).



academy in Ceylon. Premeela had her music training in Ceylon from her mother and several others. In 1969, as a young 15-year old, Premeela had her music arangetram in Colombo. It was the first under the patronage of T.K.Govinda Rao. Subsequently, Premeela began giving benefit concerts and by providence, S.M.Vasagar, a Sri Lankan stalwart of

Singapore, who was known to Premeela's mother, invited Premeela to perform at the Sri Senpaga Vinayagar Temple in 1970 - this was the beginning of the long association Premeela has with Singapore. She shares, "I was only 16 years old but was given a full stage of accompanists including W.D.Anthony, the Singaporean ghatam artiste. I even sang "Majulah Singapura" Singapore's national anthem at the end of the concert. It was a very enriching experience for me."

Premeela subsequently went to Chennai and embarked on a career in music. She went on to do her B.A., M.A and Ph.D in Carnatic music and became a faculty member of the University of Madras. She also had extensive training in Harikatha during this period. She made several trips to Singapore in the 1980s for performances, mainly at the Senpaga Vinayagar Temple. From 2002 onwards, she has been invited by SIFAS as external examiner, audition judge for the SIFAS Festival, and to conduct workshops. She relishes her interactions with SIFAS. "I was very impressed with SIFAS holding classes in Carnatic and Hindustani music, Bharatanatyam and Kathak and even visual arts, all in one campus. More than that, I was very impressed with the examination process. It was very structured and the paperwork was even



Premeela Gurumurthy in concert in late 1970s

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I was only 16 years old but was given a full stage of accompanists including W.D.Anthony, the Singaporean ghatam artiste. I even sang “Majulah Singapura” Singapore’s national anthem at the end of the concert. It was a very enriching experience for me.

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superior to those I have seen in universities in India. This perhaps contributed to my recommendation for the accreditation of SIFAS’ 8th year diploma courses in Carnatic music and Bharatanatyam which I made in 2007, when I was appointed by the Governor of Chennai as a Syndicate Member of the University of Madras.”

This bridge between SIFAS and the University of Madras continues in many ways. For 3 years, a joint festival was held in December at the University with participation by SIFAS’ top dancers and music students and the University’s students. Premeela says, “I am indeed happy that SIFAS for the last 5 years runs its own festival in Chennai in December and I must say that the performance standards are very high, even matching the standards of Chennai performers.”

### THANATHEVY MITHRADEVA

Born in Ceylon, Thanathevy started learning violin at the young age of 6 and did her schooling up to her “O” levels. Recognising her talent in music, her father sent her to Madras for higher studies and music training. Thanathevy says that she had a wonderful time in Madras Music College. “Musiri Subramani Iyer was an effective Principal and I was introduced to Professor T.N. Krishnan, a world renowned violinist, who greatly influenced me. I was the top student in the class of 200 students

and won the gold medal. I then went back to Sri Lanka to teach at a school and subsequently became a young faculty member at the Ramanathan School of Music, which later became part of Jaffna University. The 1970s were great years in music as I was able to accompany luminaries like Maharajapuram Santhanam, T.K.Govinda Rao and Chittoor Subramania Pillai. The experiences were unforgettable.”

At the suggestion of T.N.Krishnan, Thanathevy took up a teaching job at the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society in 1984 by taking a 3-year leave of absence from the University of Jaffna. The three years turned out to be 10 years and Thanathevy loved Singapore and SIFAS so much that she took up permanent residence in Singapore.

“Those were glorious years. The exposure that I enjoyed was remarkable as I had opportunities to accompany great musicians like Nookala Chinna Satyanarayana, Rudrapatnam brothers on stage as well as for television and radio recordings. My concert tour with M.L. Vasanthakumari to Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong and Australia was

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Those were glorious years. The exposure that I enjoyed was remarkable as I had opportunities to accompany great musicians like Nookala Chinna Satyanarayana, and the Rudrapatnam brothers... My concert tour with M.L. Vasanthakumari to Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong and Australia was unforgettable.

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Thanathevy Mithradeva in jugalbandi with Sharafat Khan (sitar) accompanied by Deenadayalan (mridangam) and Vignesh Kumar (tabla) at a Navarathiri programme

unforgettable. Karaikudi Krishnamurthy was the resident mridangam tutor and he helped chart my career. Shanta Ponnudurai, the dance tutor, gave me umpteen opportunities to perform for dance programmes and arangetrams.”

The formidable SIFAS trio of Shanta, Krishnamurthy and Thanathevy was unbeatable and was regularly invited to several neighbouring countries for music and dance performances.

But Thanathevy had to think of her future and family life. She got married to Mithradeva, a Canadian citizen, and moved to Toronto.

Shares Thanathevy, “I really felt a tremendous loss leaving Singapore but had no choice as I had to go with my husband. I faced a cultural shock in Canada initially as the standards of the students were below those in India, Sri Lanka or Singapore and I had

to lower my expectations. I am really glad that it is much better now.”

Thanathevy is very happy that SIFAS is now conducting the annual festival every March in Singapore and a December festival in Chennai. “Some of SIFAS’s top students are making waves in Chennai and I am really proud that many of the SIFAS graduates were once my students.”

### PROFESSOR ARAYAMBATH JANARDHANAN

If there is an artiste today who breathes “Kalakshetra”, it must be Professor Janardhanan. He was born in Kalakshetra, where his late father Kathakali Acharya T.K. Chandu Panicker began teaching soon after Kalakshetra was founded by Rukmini Devi Arundale. At 14, Janardhanan was already in the dancing circuit. He has taught many batches of students who have created a name for

themselves in the Bharatanatyam scene in the world.

His first visit to Singapore and SIFAS was in 1996 as an external examiner in dance. His entry itself was very dramatic. Never having travelled out of India before, he did not know that a visa was needed for Singapore until he reached the immigration counter at Chennai. Naturally he was turned back, but a kind soul came to his aid and promised that the visa would be ready the next day. He made it by the next day and reached SIFAS just minutes before the examination was about to commence.



Singapore students are very earnest learners and very disciplined.



“I went directly to the exam feeling a little tired, a little shy but the sheer standard of the dance candidates took all these thoughts away from my mind. It was an unforgettable experience” Janardhanan recalled. He was to come again for the next 3 years as an examiner. Janardhanan continues, “The best part was that I was able to do several lecture-demonstrations at SIFAS and we even included students from other arts organisations. Singapore students are very earnest learners and very disciplined.” He concludes his interview thus, “If Kalakshetra is my right eye, SIFAS is my left eye.”

### THE CONNECTION CONTINUES

Over the years several artistes from India have served as external examiners for arts organisations in Singapore. In particular, “Prenavam Sangeetha” has been prolific in bringing down many artistes like Trivandrum V.Surendran (mridangam) and Trichur C. Rajendran, V.K.Haridas and Ulhas Gopinath as violin examiners. K.V.Pramod has served as examiner for vocal music and mridangam. Most of these musicians hail from the Swathi



A. Janardhanan speaking at the SIFAS Chennai festival 2014, during the dance recital of Meera Balasubramaniam, as Dr. S.T. Kasinathan (second from right) and Niranjan Nanthagopan look on

Thirunal College of Music in Trivandrum. Other artistes include K.N.Ranganatha Sharma and M.K.Sankaran Namboodri.

Usman Khan has served the Temple of Fine Arts with distinction. He is covered in full in the Hindustani chapter.

Barun Kumar Pal, hansveena maestro, has assisted SIFAS Vice-President Shashi Lal Kashyap over the last 20 years in the recruitment of Hindustani faculty members. Barun trained under Ravi Shankar and plays a modified version of the Hawaiian guitar, which is an Indian classical guitar and he calls it the hansveena.

Aswathi Thirunal Rama Varma of the Travancore Royal family, affectionately called Prince Rama Varma, is a classical singer and has served as external examiner for Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society

as well as given performances in Singapore. Shetalai Ranganatha Sharma has also served Nrityalaya as external examiner.

This chapter provided a glimpse into the intense interactions of artistes of the Indian subcontinent with the Indian music and dance field in Singapore. Clearly, Singapore has gained a lot from these interactions – and the mere presence and aura of these artistes sometimes has proven inspirational to young Singaporean students and teachers.

There are numerous other luminaries who have been invited to Singapore by various organisations. These include many external examiners, choreographers and composers for dance productions and orchestral recitals. Such artistes enrich the arts environment in Singapore.

The connection continues.



Rama Varma (fifth from left) flanked by faculty members of Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society, 2012



## CHAPTER 9

# THE ENABLERS OF THE INDIAN PERFORMING ARTS: GOVERNMENT, MEDIA, THE INDIAN HIGH COMMISSION, DONORS AND EVENT MANAGERS

DR. CHITRA VARAPRASAD, DR. UMA RAJAN, SHANKAR RAJAN  
AND DR. SESHAN RAMASWAMI <sup>1</sup>

Arts institutions and artistes thrive in an ecological system of supporters and facilitators. They enable artistes to focus their attention and energy on practice and teaching of the art forms and on creating new productions. They enable institutions to slowly grow and attain

self-sustainability in the long run by subsidising expenses on housing, productions, and fees of visiting artistes. They also provide a platform for students to perform and to improve through competition. Students also benefit from scholarships for advanced study. In this chapter, we describe

briefly the roles played by various enablers of Indian performing art forms over the last five decades. Various parts of the Singapore government have been major enablers, helping artistes and arts institutions with grants and housing support, organising competitions (such as the National Music competitions and the Singapore Youth Festival) and funding arts related research and travel. The media (press, radio, television and increasingly online media) is an integral part of the music and dance scene. The High Commission of India has been a significant source of support, throughout the five decades, but especially in the 1970s, as the official representative of the Indian government in Singapore. There are also many individuals and corporate donors who have played a vital role in financing artistic productions. More recently, the Indian performing arts field has been enhanced by the launch of event management companies, which both bring in big productions from overseas, and provide technical and professional support to local organisers of Indian classical music and dance events.

Enablers such as the temples have been covered in a separate chapter, while some other institutional supporters such as the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies and the Institute of South Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore have been described elsewhere in the book.

## THE GOVERNMENT

Three specific government and quasi-government departments deserve particular mention, the National Arts Council, the Ministry of Education and the People's Association.

## THE NATIONAL ARTS COUNCIL

The focus of Singapore's early years of independence was clearly on urban, economic and educational development. The new government had greater priorities in housing, schools, job creation and economic well-being. The focus on arts and culture came much later in the form of a landmark report in 1989 led by former President, then Deputy Prime Minister, Ong Teng Cheong. This report of the

Advisory Council provided the basis and a boost for nurturing cultural identity and artistic development.

It believed in a tripartite approach with the government, corporate and civic organisations and the public working in unison. In short, it provided focus and direction.

Subsequent efforts have developed based on the fundamentals established in this report. The reports by the National Arts Council which drew upon this report are the Renaissance City Plan in three phases: Phase 1 in 2000, Phase 2 in 2005 and Phase 3 in 2015. The need to strengthen the Singaporean identity and national unity with the onset of globalisation resulted in the 2012 Arts and Culture Strategic Review.

As an outcome of the 1989 report, the National Arts Council was formed on 15 October 1991 from the amalgamation of the Singapore Cultural Foundation, Cultural Division of Ministry of Community Development, Festival of Arts Secretariat and the National Theatre Trust. It has been extremely supportive in promoting and sustaining the Indian performing arts in many ways, especially through its arts spaces and grants framework.

The National Arts Council has helped Indian performing artistes and institutions in the following ways:

- Arts housing scheme
- Arts grants – to individual projects and seed grants to institutions
- The biennial National Indian Music competition
- Recognition of veteran and young artistes through honours supplemented by cash awards
- Arts Education programme

## The Arts Housing Scheme

Rising real estate costs in Singapore over the years have made it prohibitively expensive for arts institutions to survive, with a large proportion of the funds raised through fees, memberships and donations going towards rentals. Also, not having

<sup>1</sup> The authors acknowledge the contributions of P.S. Somasekharan and Sarita Alurkar-Sriram to this chapter. The authors also acknowledge the assistance of several other artistes and administrators interviewed for the Government section of this chapter including Santha Bhaskar, Dr S. T. Kasinathan, Kavitha Krishnan, V. Ramkumar, Nirmala Seshadri, and Gayatri Sriram.

a stable base has meant that arts groups have had to move from time to time, disrupting teaching activities and creating a constant sense of instability. The Arts Housing Scheme was implemented in 1985. Its main purpose was to give arts groups and artistes a subsidised home within which they could develop their activities and thereby contribute to an active Singapore arts scene. A review of the Arts Housing Scheme was conducted at the start of 2010 which included extensive consultations with stakeholders from the people, public and private sectors. After a 12-month review period, the Framework for Arts Spaces was developed.

Three major Indian cultural institutions, SIFAS, Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society and Apsaras Arts have benefited tremendously from this scheme.

From temporary homes in an apartment on St. Michael's Road, to locations in Branksome and Bournemouth Roads, and then to the former Rumah

Miskin Police Station, SIFAS has now been housed for the last two decades and longer at its current premises on Starlight Road.

Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society moved from the Ceylon Tamil Association under the auspices of Kamala Club to the National Theatre Club. Based on NAC's Framework for Arts Spaces, it moved to Telok Ayer Performing Arts Centre (TAPAC) first and finally to Stamford Arts Centre on Waterloo Street.

Apsaras Arts was given Arts Housing by NAC at TAPAC, based on subsidised rent. In 2011, it moved to Goodman Arts Centre under another arts housing scheme. Aravinth Kumarasamy, the creative director of Apsaras Arts says, "We could organise dedicated space for our wardrobe, spaces for classes and rehearsals, and for the first time a proper office with administrative staff. This allowed us to operate in a professional set-up. With the Arts Housing in place we were able to create more



Bhaskar's Arts Academy premises, subsidised by the Arts Housing Scheme

dance productions, host in-residence artistes and provide opportunities for Singaporean talent to perform more regularly."

N. Subramaniam, a former committee member at SIFAS, says, "NAC's initiative took SIFAS to a new level altogether. SIFAS could now boast of having its own home, and this resulted in an increase in student numbers, new courses were added, and the reputation of the institution received a boost. This inspired the Management Committee and other Committees to become more professional in their deliberations and an air of confidence could be seen in the way the Society was managed."

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With the Arts Housing in place we were able to create more dance productions, host-in-residence artistes and provide opportunities for Singaporean talent to perform more regularly.

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#### Grants

Almost all major institutions, smaller independent institutions and artistes have benefited from periodic grants awarded by the NAC for staging productions, and for travelling overseas for performances and conferences.

V. Raghuraman of Alapana Arts says, "These performance grants certainly help organisations project themselves better. NAC's support for such arts events instills a higher sense of responsibility to produce the best possible show, benefiting both artistes and organisations."

Another recipient, Anuja Varaprasad, a Bharatanatyam dancer and a SIFAS alumna is one of them. She says, "These grants signify that the state supports the arts, and more importantly, that the state recognises the different and diverse types of art forms in Singapore's culture."

Sai Akileshwar, an alumnus of the Temple of Fine Arts and SIFAS, shares his sentiments about the benefits of the NAC postgraduate scholarship, "I studied Masters in Rhythmology at the University of Madras. The scholarship was invaluable in making my studies financially viable. By being in the heart of the Carnatic music world in Chennai, I have benefited tremendously, not only through performances but also by observing other performers. It also helped me realise that the best talents in Singapore are not far off from the best in Chennai, and that gives me tremendous hope and confidence."

As documented in the Outside the 'Big 4' chapter, many independent artistes and institutions have also benefited tremendously from travel and performance grants. Notably, performance companies like Chowk and Maya Dance Theatre have received seed grants that gave them the base to hire administrative staff and the financial breathing space to attempt to build stable and sustainable companies.

#### National Indian Music Competition

The National Arts Council organises the biennial National Indian Music competition. A platform to identify potential musical talents, the competition also enables musicians in Singapore to develop their performing skills, raise their musical standards, and

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These grants signify that the state supports the arts, and more importantly, that the state recognises the different and diverse types of art forms in Singapore's culture.

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provide opportunities for musicians to perform in a competitive environment. The entire list of winners of this biennial competition since the first edition in 1998 is documented in the appendix.

Eminent judges are invited from India to assess

the participants and adjudicate. Over the years, these have included renowned artistes such as N. Ravikiran, Vishwa Mohan Bhatt, S. Sowmya, Bombay Jayashri, Sikkil Mala Chandrasekhar, Neyveli Santhanagopalan, Lalgudi G.J.R. Krishnan, Mannargudi Easwaran, Srimushnam Raja Rao, Jayanthi Kumaresh and Sriram Parasuram. Over the years, the number of categories and genres have increased. The increasing number of students of Hindustani music has seen the recent introduction of Hindustani vocal music as the latest new genre in the 2014 edition of the competition, which attracted 182 entries across all categories.

Nishanth Thiagarajan, a Carnatic vocalist and a recent winner says of the competition, "It attracts musicians from all across Singapore and allowed me to meet people in the field beyond just those local musicians whom I know. In doing so, it establishes a sense of awareness of the music scene in Singapore at large, as it is rare that musicians gather for any other purpose. Furthermore, the judges told us what we did well and what we did not, and learning from them through the master-class session is always a delight."

### Honours and Awards

The Cultural Medallion was instituted in March 1979 as an initiative of former President Ong Teng Cheong. The award recognises individuals who have attained artistic excellence in the fields of dance, theatre, music, literature, photography, art and film. The Cultural Medallion is presented by the President, Republic of Singapore and administered by the National Arts Council. The Young Artist Award was introduced in 1992 to encourage the

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The Indian Music Competition establishes a sense of awareness of the music scene in Singapore at large, as it is rare that musicians gather for any other purpose.

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Nishanth Thiagarajan, winner of the NAC Indian Music Competition, in a SIFAS concert accompanied by Sai Akileshwar (mridangam) and Shreya Gopi (violin), 2014

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Thanks to the influence of the NAC grant, an outlook of reaching out to other Asian art forms is reflected in my new works, even as I stay rooted to traditions of the Indian classical music.

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development of young artistic talents in Singapore. The award is accorded to young artistes who have shown promise of artistic excellence.

As documented in the Chronology in the Appendix, three Indian artistes have thus far been awarded the Cultural Medallion: dance pioneers Madhavi Krishnan, Neila Sathyalingam and Santha Bhaskar. Young Artist Awards have been won by veena artiste and composer Aravinth Kumarasamy, flautist and composer Ghanavenothan Retnam, dancers Nirmala Seshadri and Veshnu Thamizhvanan and tabla player Nawaz Mirajkar.

The honours also come with cash awards that can be used for new creative productions and ventures. Neila Sathyalingam used the funds to stage a mega production Sivagami with more than 75 artistes participating. Santha Bhaskar used her award for a project, "Rasa and Dhvani", setting local poems in all the four languages of Singapore to Indian dance.

Flautist Ghanavenothan Retnam, winner of the Young Artist Award used his grant to study Thai music at the Fine Arts Department, National Theatre, Thailand and the Cultural Centre in Bangkok, the study of Indonesian music at the prestigious Fakultas Seni Pertunjukan – Institute of Seni Yogyakarta, and the study of Applied Indian Music at the Music Academy, Chennai. He says, "Thanks to the influence of the NAC grant, an outlook of reaching out to other Asian art forms is reflected in my new works, even as I stay rooted to traditions of Indian classical music."

### Arts Education Programme

The National Arts Council Arts Education Programme (NAC-AEP) was devised to help expose students to a wide variety of high quality art performances. The programme primarily consists of a database of quality arts education programmes. Thanks to the Tote Board Arts Grant, schools which purchase programmes from the NAC-AEP can receive up to a 50% subsidy on the programme cost. This helps students attend performances at a highly subsidised cost and also allows arts groups to tap into a new audience segment. The hope is that some proportion of these students would develop into a stable adult audience with a life-long interest in the arts. Many Indian institutions such as the Temple of Fine Arts, Rhythms Aesthetics Society, Apsaras Arts and Bhaskar's Arts Academy are regular presenters in this programme.

We conclude this section with insights from some previous NAC chairpersons. Professor Tommy Koh, the first Chairman of the NAC, appointed in 1991, says he has a great affinity for the Indian performing arts, "I have always loved Indian classical music and dance. When I was a university student, I would often attend such performances. I also loved the films of Satyajit Ray and the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore. You could say that, culturally, I am an honorary Indian!"

As Chairman, he reached out to all the cultural institutions and groups in Singapore, including the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society (SIFAS). He says, "I encouraged SIFAS in its important mission of promoting Indian fine arts, especially music and dance. I helped them in their fund raising activities and in securing housing for the group. I also encouraged SIFAS to cross racial boundaries and to encourage non-Indians to enjoy Indian music and dance. Culture should unite us and not divide us."

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You could say that, culturally, I am an honorary Indian! .... Culture should unite us and not divide us.

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Prof Tommy Koh (third from left), alongside Cao Peng, conductor of the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra, and Ravi Shankar after a concerto at the Singapore Conference Hall in June, 1995

Dr. Liu Thai Kher, the second Chairman of the NAC says, "Multi ethnicity is our national personality and an asset to be developed. This is one way, perhaps, to strengthen the Singaporean identity and national unity." He remembers that his father, a painter, who was interested in all artistic traditions, enrolled his sister in Indian dance classes. Dr. Liu says he also admires how for Indians in general and for Singaporean Indians in particular, the arts are seamlessly woven into daily life, from classical musicians performing in temples, and the henna arts used at weddings, to the way in which homes are decorated artistically. He believes that this is a great model for how the arts should be integrated into every Singaporean's life, and to not just remain an occasional intrusion into life through a visit to an arts event or gallery.

Another former CEO of the NAC, Benson Pua, currently the CEO of the Esplanade Theatres on the Bay advocates the importance of strong fundamentals. According to him, "It is insufficient to have a brushing and fleeting understanding of classics. Artistes need patience and a long period of apprenticeship and training before they can innovate. NAC tries to balance these two needs to be modern and relevant to today's world. This was the reason why NAC was initially pushing to



Dr. Liu Thai Ker, second Chairman of the NAC

invest in facilities and administrative structure so the schools' structures are sound and they can perpetuate their practice and systematise it."

### THE PEOPLE'S ASSOCIATION

The People's Association (PA) was established in Singapore as a statutory board on 1 July 1960 to promote racial harmony and social cohesion. Its mission is to build and bridge communities in achieving "one people, one Singapore."

PA offers a wide range of programmes to cater to Singaporeans from all walks of life, connecting people to people and people to government. Its work is done through its network of 1,800 grassroots organisations, over 100 Community Clubs, five Community Development Councils, the National Youth Council, and many more such networks.

S. Chandra Das, ex-Member of Parliament for 16 years and an outstanding businessman in the Singapore Indian community for over 40

years, started the Singapore Indian Development Association (SINDA), helped start the Indian Activities Groups (IAGs) in the Community Centres and persuaded People's Association to start an Indian Orchestra in 1985. He was also instrumental in helping to secure housing for SIFAS both at Rumah Miskin Police Station in Balestier Road and later, in Starlight Road.

The Indian Activity Executive Committees (IAECs) of the PA organise cultural, educational, social, recreational and sporting activities to promote mutual respect and harmonious relations between Indians and other communities. The Indian Activity Executive Committees Council or Narpani Pearavai is the co-ordinating body for the IAECs. Narpani Pearavai was formed in 1987 with the objective of co-ordinating the activities of the IAECs, currently numbering 95 across the island. The Pearavai organises many events annually at the constituency, district and national levels.

Indian cultural activities include the conducting of



S. Chandra Das, addressing the audience at SIFAS Annual Day event at Drama Centre in October 1985. Also on stage, (from left) Shashi Lal Kashyap, Dr. S.T. Kasinathan, Prof. Tommy Koh and P. Selvadurai



Kokila Rajan (left) at the SIFAS Festival reception desk, 2009

varying genres of music and dance classes and the holding of cultural shows at the different community centres during Indian festive occasions like Pongal, Indian New Year and Deepavali.

Chandra Das says, "I started the IAGs more for a social and educational cause to get the wayward youth in Singapore to have a structure in their lives and to move forward in their lives. Culture did not take a front position. But over the years, the IAGs have got into the cultural act and are making slow but steady progress."

Kokila Rajan, who worked for almost three decades at the People's Association, and is also a veteran committee member at SIFAS, remembers several Singaporean dancers and musicians who benefited from the arrangements at the Community Centres for teaching Indian music and dance. She remembers, "In the 1980s, the fees used to be very reasonable, something like \$36 for twelve sessions, with the fees being shared in a 70:30 ratio between the teacher and the PA. Fees have certainly gone up, over the years, but remain very affordable because there is no fixed rental cost to be borne by the teachers."

Her duties at the PA included helping recruiting teachers for these classes in the CCs and managing the administration of the Orchestra. These heavily subsidised music and dance classes have been a great boon for both students to be initiated into these art forms, at convenient locations, and for beginning teachers to develop a base of students and to develop their teaching skills.

As documented in the Outside the 'Big 4', chapter, artistes such as musician M.R. Lenin, and dancers V. Balakrishnan, Usharani Maniam, Vasantha Kasinath and the Kesavan sisters all had thriving professional teaching careers at various CCs across the nation. Another beneficiary of this scheme was the late Carnatic vocal teacher, K.S. Ganapathy. Kokila has also seen the PA Indian Orchestra raise its standards over the years into its fine current avatar as the SIOC.

### MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

Students of the arts in local schools eagerly look forward to the Singapore Youth Festival (SYF), supported by the Ministry of Education (MOE). Launched on 18 July 1967 by then President Yusof

Ishak, today it has 40,000 students participating in the months between April and July. The Indian dance category sees the students, teachers and the choreographers working hard. The judges are drawn from a pool of eminent local dancers and choreographers, supplemented by invited overseas judges.



In the 1980s, the fees used to be very reasonable, something like \$36 for twelve sessions, with the fees being shared in a 70:30 ratio between the teacher and the PA. Fees have certainly gone up, over the years, but remain very affordable because there is no fixed rental cost to be borne by the teachers.



At the most recent edition in 2015, the judges were Ajith Bhaskaran Dass (Suvarna Arts, Malaysia), Dr. Urmimala Sarkar (Jawaharlal Nehru University, India), and from Singapore, Dr. Siri Rama, Sanjit Lal (SIFAS) and Neewin Hershall (Nriyalaya). In the past, judges have included Dr. Uma Rajan, Neila Sathyalingam, Santha Bhaskar, Nirmala Seshadri, Mohana Harendran, V. Balagurunathan (India) and Meenakshy Bhaskar (US).

Dr. Siri Rama, who has been a judge at the SYF competitions since 2007 and presented a paper "The Role of Bharatanatyam in the SYF" at the recent International Bharatanatyam conference in Singapore, says the event used to draw a much larger number of schools, even over a hundred. In the most recent edition in 2015, 29 schools participated. She says, "Most of the choreographers are trained in Bharatanatyam and it is commendable that the MOE regularly organises workshops conducted by experienced dance Gurus to raise the standards of training and choreography of these teachers."



SYF dancers from Methodist Girls School, who won a "Distinction" under the supervision of Sreedevy Viju-Pany (second row, extreme right in white salwar), 2015



Judges at the SYF at NUS UCC, flanked by MOE officials Peter Gn and Yam Boon Fong; from left, Dr. Siri Rama, Santha Bhaskar, Dr. Uma Rajan, Neila Sathyalingam and Ajith Bhaskaran Dass, 2007

Also impressive are the painstaking efforts taken to ensure that the judging of the competition is as objective, unbiased and consistent as possible.”

The immense effort results in some captivating performances in terms of dance quality costumes and choreography. Lavanya Ramesh, Indian dance instructor with secondary schools and junior colleges, says about the lasting impact of the SYF, “Students continue to dance even after the competition. Depending on the teacher-in-charge, they get to perform at different spaces and venues outside the SYF (i.e. inter-school competitions, CCs, national events etc) which encourages students to continue engaging with the art form.”

At the tertiary level too, performing arts are encouraged. For example, at the National University of Singapore, there is the Centre for the Arts (CFA) which was founded in 1993 with Professor



It is commendable that the MOE regularly organises workshops conducted by experienced dance Gurus to raise the standards of training and choreography of these teachers. Also impressive are the painstaking efforts taken to ensure that the judging of the competition is as objective, unbiased and consistent as possible.



Neila Sathyalingam, being congratulated for ten consecutive years of Distinction awards at the SYF, 1993

Edwin N. Thumboo as its founding Chairman and Director. The Centre aims to build knowledge and nurture an inquiring spirit through various art forms. It supports numerous students' art groups. One of NUS's longest existing dance companies, NUS Indian Dance Group was established in 1977. Under the guidance of its Artistic Director and Resident Choreographer, Santha Bhaskar, NUS Indian Dance mainly focuses on three different styles of Indian dance, Bharatanatyam, Kathak and Bollywood dance. The ability of the dancers varies, but its warm welcoming environment allows dancers to grow and learn. The demanding training sessions aim at maintaining high standards of performance, for dancers to not only hone their dance skills, but to also develop a deeper sense of self-confidence and cultural identity through their exploration of contemporary and classical themes.

Notably, in 2004, various groups including the Indian, Malay and Chinese dance groups as well as the Chinese Orchestra toured Pondicherry, Cochin, Kaladi, Mysore, and Chennai in India staging five multi-cultural performances. Shankar Rajan, then the Deputy General Manager of the CFA, reminisces, “It was indeed an eye-opening trip for our students.

Chinese and Malay students who had never been to India before, appreciated the richness of Indian culture, as they had opportunities to attend good concerts and visit Kalakshetra. Indian audiences really enjoyed the multi-cultural performances that our Singaporean artistes put up.” The whole trip was also the subject of a television series which was aired over Vasantham TV.

Since then, CFA's Indian dance group has been involved in several productions including The Search for Nalanda in 2011. In the NUS Arts Festival 2014, they collaborated with the NUS Indian Instrumental Ensemble to present Chudar – Shiva's Fire which featured music by prominent Indian composer and flautist B.V. Balasai. Rajandra Vadivale was appointed Music Director of the NUS Indian Instrumental Ensemble (IIE) in 2004.

## MEDIA

Mainstream media that have played an important vital role in sustaining and nurturing Indian arts in Singapore over the last 70 years include print media like Tamil Murasu, The Straits Times and Tabla, and broadcast media like Vasantham television and OLI 96.8 Tamil FM radio station. Increasingly, the

internet, with all the varied forms of communication it enables, has also been playing a big role in promoting Indian arts and artistes. In this section, we provide a survey of some important media developments and efforts, over the years, with a particular emphasis on their support for Indian performing arts.

## BROADCAST MEDIA

The development of broadcast media channels into two popular Indian stations, Oli 96.8 on FM radio and Vasantham on television are described in this section.

### Radio

Radio broadcast was pioneered in Singapore during the pre-war years and commenced in 1936. Anecdotal evidence points to only 3 to 4 hours of radio broadcast in the early pre-war years which increased to over 15 hours in the 1970s. Early Tamil coverage consisted primarily of news and film songs. Classical music had very little coverage except for the occasional playing of 78 rpm gramophone records. However, the film songs of the 1930s and 1940s were essentially based on Carnatic music with the voices of Thyagaraja Bagavathar, P.U.Chinnapa, T.R.Mahalingam (the singer-actor), M.S.Subbulakshmi and S.G.Kittappa dominating. There was hardly any input from local artistes until the 50s when classical singing was broadcast live from the station located at the Cathay Cinema building.

The metamorphosis from Radio Malaya through Radio Singapore, Radio Malaysia (Singapore Division), Radio and Television Singapore, Singapore Broadcasting Corporation to Mediacorp radio describes Singapore radio's travel from the year 1936 to the present day. The Tamil station was given a name Olikkalanjiyam by the then Head M.K.Narayanan, and was subsequently shortened to Oli. Since August 2001, Oli has been broadcasting 24 hours a day primarily in the Tamil language and has listenership even in Malaysia and India.

S.P. Panneerselvam, recently retired Senior Producer of Oli says, "In the early days, all announcers (as they were called rather than the current term deejays) were into classical music. I remember poet N. Palanivelu and producer K. Ramaiah as the pio-

neers in the field. There were regular radio recordings of local classical artistes in the Ulloor Kalaingar (local artistes) slot. Later on, Nagaratnam Suppiyah and R.Ramani produced programmes such as 'Rare Kritis and Rare Ragas' using the voice of (late) musical wizard Maharajapuram Santhanam to sing and demonstrate. Ramani and former radio Head A. Murugaian compiled over 200 Tamil songs that were set to music and taught to school students. Ramani gave a series of some 50 lectures on Indian classical music at the Bukit Timah campus of the University of Singapore. When top musicians came to town, all of us used to run to them and at least record their interviews."

P.S. Raman, then the Director of Broadcasting, hosted concerts of Dr. M. Balamuralikrishna, M.L. Vasanthakumari, M.S. Subbulakshmi, Maharajapuram Santhanam and K.B. Sundarambal in the radio auditorium. These concerts were subsequently aired over Radio Singapore. He even personally compered Vasanthakumari's concert. Subbulakshmi's and Maharajapuram Viswanathaiyer's birthdays were celebrated with pomp over the radio. Such was the enthusiasm for classical arts. Other radio producers like P. Krishnan, Francis Dheepan and Bamah Balakrishnan also share this view.

M. Ramalingam ran a series of radio slots called "Raga Vilakkam" (exposition of ragas) very successfully over several months. Tamil radio used to broadcast Kathakalakshebam and discourses by the famous Embar Vijayaraghavachariar and Kripananda Variyar. There was an intense listenership as radio was the only medium of entertainment in the 1950s and early 1960s.

"My personal pride is when I produced an Indian music compilation with Carnatic and Hindustani music content. It was selected and sent to China for an international contest and reached the finals," Panneerselvam recalls, with great joy.

In recent years, Shankar Rajan produced a daily programme called "Thirai Isaiyil Raagaragam" (ragas in film music) which ran for two seasons. This show succeeded in generating some interest even among the youth.

With the fierce competition for an audience across

many different media, Oli these days pays limited attention to classical music. Young veena player Maathavan laments "The current classical music slot is at an ungodly time of 5 am to 6 am. I hope there is a change in direction."

### Television

Television broadcasting was introduced in Singapore in February 1963, with the name changing from Television Singapore to Television Malaysia (Singapore) and then following the same path as radio to the present Mediacorp television. The Indian broadcast was initially together with Chinese programmes in Channel 8, but moved on

his life as a teacher in YMCA. With script writing and acting in his blood since his school days, Chandran was recommended to join radio as Broadcaster Grade 3, which paid a princely sum of \$260 per month. Chandran was sent by the then Director of Broadcasting P.S. Raman, on a Colombo Plan scholarship in 1959 to the United Kingdom to be trained by British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). When television broadcast was in the offing in Singapore, Chandran was selected again for training in NHK in Japan in 1963 and came back to be placed in both radio and TV programming.

With poet K. Perumal, he produced and acted in a TV drama on the renaissance poet of India Subramanya Bharathiyar when a funny incident happened. Chandran shares, "Dressed as Bharathiyar, Perumal tied a tight turban on my head with a sharp pin. Unfortunately the pin pierced my

“  
When top musicians came to town,  
we all used to run to them and  
at least record their interviews.  
P.S.Raman, then the Director of  
Broadcasting, aired one-hour  
concerts of Dr. M. Balamuralikrishna,  
M.L Vasanthakumari,  
M.S.Subbulakshmi, Maharajapuram  
Santhanam and K.B.Sundarambal  
in the radio auditorium – all  
free concerts sung before a live  
audience.”

to be launched as Vasantham in September 1995. It was for a period known as Vasantham Central, and then became Vasantham as a stand-alone name in October 2008.

One of the most outstanding TV broadcasters was E.S.J. Chandran, who currently runs a music school in Chennai. An octogenarian, Chandran has a very creative mind with vivid memories of his years in broadcasting. Following his B.Com degree from India, he had a stint with Rediffusion, Malaysia after which he settled in Singapore in 1955, beginning



E.S.J. Chandran upon completing his training in Japan, 1963



Dressed as Bharathiyar, Perumal tied a tight turban on my head with a sharp pin. Unfortunately the pin pierced my head but there was no time to react as it was a live broadcast. I bled all the way and Perumal only realised it when he took the turban away after the show. But the pain was nothing – I had acted in the first Tamil TV drama and was the first compere. Those accolades were enough!



head, but there was no time to react as it was a live broadcast. I bled all the way and Perumal only realised it when he took the turban away after the show. But the pain was nothing – I had acted in the first Tamil TV drama and was the first compere. Those accolades were enough!” Chandran continued to write radio plays like Detective D’Cruz as well as science fiction like “Macedona” and “Minsara Manithan” (Electric-Man). Chandran was given the highest television accolade when he was presented the Veteran’s Award during the airing of Pradhana Vizha in 2003.

From the 1970s to the early 2000s, there were programmes like Raga Banthangal, Aaniver, Kalaimanigal, Pena Munai, Kala Sagaram and Sahitya Karthakkal whose rich content was based on classical music and dance; they were very well researched shows. Sahitya Karthakkal covered composers like the Trinity, Arunachala Kavirayar, and their life-history with local musicians singing their compositions.

Bharatanatyam dancer V. Balakrishnan, whose life story is captured in the Outside the ‘Big 4’ chapter in this book, spent most of his working life with television broadcasting and he produced many cultural programmes. A programme that he specially remembers is “An Appreciation of Bharatanatyam”

– a series produced by Singapore Broadcasting Corporation.

Like with the radio station, Balakrishnan has an issue with time slots for the classical arts on television too. “Quite often cultural programmes are aired at the wrong time. 6 pm on a Wednesday evening is never the time to get serious viewership. I wish Mediacorp could broadcast cultural programmes at prime time.”

The ex-editor of Tamil Murasu and current Head of the Indian Broadcasting Division of Mediacorp, Dr. Chitra Rajaram, accepted that current programming is primarily aimed at the younger audience, “Shows like ‘Vasantham Star’ and ‘Who is the Star’ give opportunities for training and development of music and dance among the youth.”

Another stalwart in the Indian political, business and media community, Chandra Das, described earlier in this chapter, has a suggestion, “Vasantham is doing very well in news coverage, magazine / documentary shows and dramas. But it could do better with cultural programming. Too many films are screened during festive periods. Cultural organisations should be given a weekly short slot of about 10 to 15 minutes to educate the viewers on Indian culture. This can be achieved if SIFAS or other groups took some initiative to work with Vasantham.”

That said, Vasantham continues to feature interviews, excerpts of music and dance programmes presented locally, as well as events and festival previews on their weekly “Thaalam: The Indian Beat” programme. Periodically, they also air specially commissioned programmes on Indian music and dance. There is also “Art Bites”, on the Okto channel which has featured several snippets about various Indian performing arts genres in English in well-presented bite-sized segments, often aired as fillers between programmes.

**PRINT MEDIA**

The Straits Times is an English-language newspaper owned by Singapore Press Holdings (SPH) and it was established 170 years ago in 1845.

For more than 100 years, Indian content was very

low until after the close of the WW2. In the 1970s and 1980s when the cultural ballast in Singapore was exponentially increased, The Straits Times began devoting space to Indian culture.

One important feature was the bilingual page introduced every Friday and the most promising editor of that page was local writer, Sumathi Vaidyanathan. Articles on Indian classical music and dance and concert reviews by local musicians were carried regularly and forthcoming concerts were listed. This page was, however, stopped following a restructuring of the contents. Subsequently, references to Indian arts and culture appeared only sporadically and that situation is existent even today.

A review of the NewspaperSG resource at the NLB website, reveals a fascinating range of items related to the Indian arts in the 1950s through the 1980s.

Here are some snippets of the treasure trove at that site:

- A letter writer responding to another letter writer, sarcastically, for wanting more film music rather than classical music on Radio Malaya (1954)
- Performance notices and previews of concerts by sitar players Jaya Bose (1959), Kalyani Roy (1969) Ravi Shankar (1972), “blind violinist” M. Chandrasekharan (1977), Sikkil Sisters (1983), Kalakshetra dancers Krishnaveni Lakshmanan (1982) and (Malaysia based) Krishnakumari (1987) and many others
- Preview of a fundraising dance concert featuring Roshni Pillay, Mageswari Govindasamy and Nandana Chellappa to raise money for the Dr. V. S Rajan Memorial Scholarship, with guest of honour, Professor S. Jayakumar (1984)
- Coverage of arangetrams, with a big story on the Kesavan sisters’ debut in 1984
- Snippets about election results and arrival of new teachers at SIFAS
- A story about a Malay dancer, renamed Nirmal Kumar by his Guru M. Nithianandam, dancing at the Sri Veeramakaliamman Temple (1983)
- A Bharatanatyam and Odissi recital by Stella So Wai Yee, a Hong Kong based dancer (1985),
- A Kuchipudi recital presented by Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society’s Rajyasri Muralidhar (1988)
- A feature about the “the sitar man”, a Chinese technician, Kenny Tan (1989)

A large number of reviews, previews and features about Indian classical music and dance by writers like Radhika Srinivasan, Pauline Walker, Shobha Sekhar (a distinguished musician herself), Rhama Sankaran, Minu Tharoor, Chitra Varaprasad and



The Straits Times preview of a fusion choir and orchestra, conducted by Radha Vijayan of Nriyalaya Aesthetics Society, 1994

Shobha Tsering Bhalla (who went on to become the editor of India Se) were featured on The Straits Times too.

P.N. Balji, a senior journalist in Singapore, recognises the business challenges for an English newspaper in Singapore devoting space to a niche classical art form. “Eyeballs are moving to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and God knows what else will appear on the scene to confuse our already complex world. As the journalists focus on the stories that will capture eyeballs, the victims are those who will see their events not being covered. This is somewhat



P.N. Balji, veteran journalist

unfortunate because the Indian arts and cultural scene is riding on the wave of a liberal immigration policy, which has swelled the Indian population from 7 to 9 per cent.” He suggests that those who seek coverage should think like a journalist and pitch their event stories in ways that journalists would consider them newsworthy for the paying public.

Tamil Murasu is today the only Singapore-based Tamil newspaper. It was founded in Singapore by the well-known community leader Thamizhavel G.Sarangapani in 1935 who played a key role in developing interest and talent in performing and visual Indian arts amongst the local Tamil community by organising competitions, performances and cultural activities during Thamizhar Thirunal (Tamilians Festival). It was bought over by Singapore

Press Holdings, the main print media business in Singapore in 1995.

Tamil Murasu is the main source of news for the Tamil-speaking community with its coverage of wide-ranging matters from current affairs and foreign news, especially South Asian matters as well as sports, entertainment and the Indian film industry. This newspaper has established itself as the voice of the Tamil-speaking community in Singapore. Senior journalists like V.Palanisamy and Kanagalatha have for a long time been covering cultural affairs in Tamil Murasu with a passion that is well appreciated by readers.

Kanagalatha says with pride, “From Sarangapani’s days, Tamil Murasu has dedicated a page for the



Cultural coverage in the Tamil Murasu, 2001

arts. When the newspaper was revamped in 1999, the page was renamed Kalai Murasu (Arts Drum) which ultimately led to the creation of the Lifestyle Section of the paper. This section publishes articles that encourage and motivate young artistes as well as veterans through curtain raisers, reviews, comments, interviews and the listing of arts events. Tamil Murasu is the print medium that has been the forerunner in creating awareness about the Indian arts scene in Singapore.”

Chandra Das, who is also Chairman of Tamil Murasu, started “Tabla” to reach out to the non-Tamil and expatriate Indian community in Singapore. Launched in October 2008 (in a happy coincidence, the front page of the initial issue featured a preview of an upcoming event featuring tabla wizard Zakir Hussain), the free weekly newspaper Tabla has been a boon to Indian event organisers. Tabla features a weekly listing of event information, and periodic previews of Indian classical music and dance programmes. Special features on Indian classical music and dance institutions have

also been published, and the paper has quickly found widespread distribution among the Indian community in Singapore.

**THE INTERNET**

As various internet platforms continue to absorb audiences from the traditional media, Singapore Indian artistes and institutions have also become very active on the internet. Almost every Indian institution in Singapore has a well maintained and updated web site, a Facebook page, and several Youtube videos with excerpts from programmes.

“Tamil Murasu is the print medium that has been the forerunner in creating awareness about the Indian arts scene in Singapore.”

Email, SMS and WhatsApp messaging formats have become a dominant mode of spreading news quickly about upcoming events. For a brief period in the mid-2000s, a website [kanakasabha.com](http://kanakasabha.com) voluntarily and freely listed event information for all classical music and dance programmes and also provided a directory of all classical music and dance schools. Its editor, Dr. Seshan Ramaswami, says "In the earlier days of the internet, and in the pre-Facebook era, there was very little information available online, or even offline about upcoming classical music and dance programmes. I would often just wander around the streets of Little India, looking for posters, and visit institutions just to copy information from notice boards to post information about upcoming events. Many independent teachers were very grateful for new student enrolments facilitated by the website's teacher database. The site is being renovated currently and we hope to start offering this free service again to the Indian

arts community. On average, we used to list over 500 programmes a year as we tried to cover every event, from a small free Navarathiri temple concert to the big-ticketed Esplanade events. Today, I would imagine that number must be over a 1000."

Another interesting Singaporean online initiative, and one with a global reach, is CarnaticRadio.com, a 'not for profit' organisation, started by a group of Carnatic music fans. The online radio was launched on the Vijayadasami day of 2010. The site is devoted to Carnatic music and makes available music from this great tradition to rasikas (fans) worldwide on a 24x7 basis. It is also designed to be a good entertainment medium for musicians and fans of the younger generation who can improve their "kelvi gnanam" (knowledge by listening) by tuning into the performances by various renowned artistes. Its founder, Niranjan Nanthagopan says "We also intend to provide a platform for artistes

**Past Indian Performing Arts Events in Singapore**  
LAST UPDATED: January 30, 2005 10:40 p.m.  
Past Events: 2002 2003

[Forthcoming Events](#) \* [Performing Artistes](#) \* [Schools](#) \* [Past Events](#) \* [Links](#) \* [Message board](#) \* [Index](#) \* [Kanakasabha home](#)

Date	Time	Program	Artistes	Venue	Organizer	Ticket and Contact Information
<b>2004</b>						
Thu, Jan 8	8:00 p.m.	Bharata Natyam duo	Madhuri Raj Sethuraman and Shilpa Raj Sethuraman	SIFAS, 2A Starlight Road	SIFAS	Free admission. Contact 6299-3925
Sun, Jan 18	8:00 p.m.	Hindustani vocal recital	Mahesh Desai	Four Seasons Hotel, Windows East, 20th Floor	Shambhala Yoga Centre	Tickets: \$50 + GST. Contact Zarina Ann Mohammad at 67388773, or email <a href="mailto:zarina@shb21.com.sg">zarina@shb21.com.sg</a> Program Hotline 6733-2183
Wed, Jan 21	7:00 p.m.	Parasurama Aradhana celebration	Various artistes and communal singing	Vedagathas Kaliaraman Temple, 355, Serangoon Road	Kannada Sangha, Singapore	All are welcome. Pk. Bhagya Murthy at 6718-8280
Sat, Jan 24	6:30 p.m.	"Nectar that lasts forever": Tyagaraja Aradhana celebration	Students and staff of alapana arts	Glass Hall, Singapore Art Museum	alapana arts	For more information, call 6396-3296
Sun, Jan 25	8:30 p.m.	Kalambari 'a gallery of dances from Classical to folk'	Artists of the Temple of Fine Arts	Orchid Room, 4th level, Excelsior Hotel, 5 Coleman street	Temple of Fine Arts	The performance will be followed at 8:30 p.m. by a vegetarian buffet at Annalakshmi restaurant. Ph: 6339-9991 and 6339-0492. Email: <a href="mailto:tf_a@templeoffinearts.org">tf_a@templeoffinearts.org</a> Pick up invitations at TFA office at the Excelsior hotel.
Fri, Jan 30	7:30 p.m.	Hindustani vocal recital	Sucheta Bhattacharya accompanied by Chandranath Bhattacharya (harmonium), Sarfaraz Ahmed (tabla)	SIFAS, 2A Starlight Road	SIFAS	Free admission. Contact 6299-3925
Sat, Jan 31	7:15 p.m.	Bharata Natyam srangam	Atoradha Parasuraman and Divya Parasuraman, disciples of Usha Ravi Menon	Juliver Hall, Raffles Hotel	Usha Ravi Menon Dance School	By invitation. Contact 6441-7788
Sat, Jan 31	7:30 p.m.	Carnatic vocal recital	Sangeetha Swaminathan, disciple of Sothia Ranganathan, accompanied by N N Ganesh Kumar (violin), T. E. Sundaresan (mridangam)	SIFAS, 2A Starlight Road	SIFAS	Tickets: \$10. Contact 6299-3925
Sri Sri Perstraps at 7:00						

A screen shot of the website [Kanakasabha.com](http://Kanakasabha.com), which had an extensive, updated listing of Indian fine arts events and schools, 2005

from the new generation through this radio. In addition to playing recorded music we plan to web cast live concerts. We have an average of 150 to 200 listeners at any point of time. However our App has already been downloaded 400 times from Apple and Google Play Store."

## THE HIGH COMMISSION OF INDIA, SINGAPORE (HCIS)

The HCIS has been a great source of support to many event organisers in Singapore by liaising with the Indian government's Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR). The ICCR was founded in 1950 by independent India's first Education Minister, Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad. The ICCR has an empanelled list of artistes, whose travels abroad are funded by the Indian government. Local hosts for these artistes only need to fund local hospitality, venue and publicity costs. Artiste fees are paid by the Indian Government.

A. Sachithanathan, long-time Vice President of SIFAS remembers that among the first artistes to visit Singapore through ICCR was the Bharatanatyam danseuse Yamini Krishnamurthy who danced here in 1953, with a live orchestra. He remembers, "In the early years, the HCIS would arrange with the Oberoi Hotel to get us 2 to 4 rooms free of cost for these programmes, so it was a very fruitful partnership. Every year some 5 to 6 artistes would come to Singapore. The HCIS was very helpful as were the Indian banks. Some of the bank managers would help to host the visiting artistes, thus reducing our hospitality expenses. The banks would also help get advertisements from their clients for the programme brochure. Singaporean Cabinet ministers, prominent industrialists, and Ambassadors and High Commissioners from many different countries would be invited by the Indian High Commissioner, making these concerts very high profile events. Consequently, Indian companies like Air India were keen to get involved as supporters. At one point, we had an arrangement that Air India would purchase 12 tickets every year for these events."

Over the years, Singapore has benefited tremendously from the HCIS's active promotion of the Indian classical arts through the ICCR scheme. Major artistes such as Ravi Shankar, Birju

Maharaj, T. N. Krishnan, Padma Subrahmanyam, and Chitra Visveswaran have all visited Singapore under this scheme.

The period 1976-1980 is particularly noteworthy, when Ratnakar Rao served as First Secretary at the HCIS. He remembers, "We worked closely with SIFAS to get well known artistes from India, either sponsored by ICCR, or jointly with SIFAS. Sachithanathan, the live-wire Vice President of SIFAS and I worked as a team to get advertisements for colourful and informative brochures for the



Singaporean Cabinet ministers, prominent industrialists, and Ambassadors and High Commissioners from many different countries would be invited by the Indian High Commissioner, making these concerts very high profile events. Consequently, Indian companies like Air India were keen to get involved as supporters. At one point, we had an arrangement that Air India would purchase 12 tickets every year for these events.



events." On his part, A. Sachithanathan recalls "Ratnakar was an extraordinarily supportive partner. I remember how he would just take away ticket bundles from SIFAS, and then almost miraculously soon return with cash, having sold all the tickets to the large number of Indian music patrons and friends he had cultivated through his passion for the arts during his stay in Singapore. That sort of support from the HCIS those days was just fantastic!"

In particular, Ratnakar remembers dance recitals by Kathak artiste Shovana Narayan, a Kuchipudi



(from left in foreground) G.J.R. Krishnan, Ratnakar Rao, Padmavathy Ananthagopalan and Lalgudi G. Jayaraman, late 1970s



Newspaper article about an ICCR concert by Shanthi Rao, 1977

recital by Raja and Radha Reddy, a violin recital by Lalgudi Jayaraman, and a veena recital by Shanthi Rao.

In recent years, even with the burgeoning of so many institutions conducting professionally run festivals of music and dance in Singapore, the HCIS continues to play a prominent role in arranging visits by ICCR artistes. It also continues to be a facilitator for many Singaporean Indian arts institutions in developing relationships with Indian institutions. It also invites many local artistes to perform at official High Commission events.

**DONORS AND SUPPORTERS**

Philanthropic organisations, community groups, corporations and individuals have also come forward to support the arts. There is also a very strong network of banks that have provided valuable financial support.

Aravinth Kumarasamy of Apsaras Arts says, "Government support meets only a small percentage of our financial needs. We have a very difficult time finding the balance of the needed funds from corporates as supporting the arts is not a high priority for the corporates in Singapore."

**CORPORATE FOUNDATIONS**

Two corporate foundations stand out in their consistent support for the arts in general, and for the Indian arts in particular, the Lee Foundation and the Shaw Foundation.

Lee Foundation is Singapore's largest private charitable foundation created to "aid the advancement of education, medicine and cultural activities". Founded in 1952 by the philanthropist and businessman Lee Kong Chian, it is a family-run foundation. Since its creation, Lee Foundation has donated over \$1 billion, principally for educational causes, regardless of race, language, religion, nationality and geographic location. The foundation has given generously for Indian cultural activities and organisations like SIFAS, Bhaskar's Arts Academy and Apsaras Arts have been the beneficiaries, as have several independent artistes of all genres.

Tan Sri Run Run Shaw and Runme Shaw, the famed Shaw Brothers, started the Shaw Foundation in 1957. This charitable organisation has donated millions of dollars to many charitable causes, principally towards education. Their over-riding principle is that wealth contributed by society should be returned to society in generous measures. The Shaw Foundation has supported

various institutions which have been teaching and performing the various art forms and over the years, has supported many Indian performing arts events of SIFAS and others.

The Tote Board Arts Grant was introduced in 1995 to promote arts appreciation among students in schools, junior colleges and ITEs. Its subsidies to the NAC-AEP have been described earlier in this chapter.

**INDIVIDUAL DONORS**

One of the most regular and dependable supporters of the Indian arts is prominent lawyer and businessman, Sat Pal Khattar. He says, "I have been associated with SIFAS since the days when the late Mr. Karthigesu was the President. Ours is a small but not insignificant community and very much a part of the fabric of modern Singapore. It is important that cultural values that we live by and which are part of our heritage are preserved and are passed on to future generations. This is essential if our community's values are not to fade away. SIFAS is an important player in that context. I am very happy to be a Patron of SIFAS. It gives me great satisfaction to see so many activities being carried out and also to note that our community's values in the performing arts are nurtured and



M. Bala Subramaniam being felicitated by Shaw Vee Meng of the Shaw Foundation at SIFAS Academy Day, World Trade Centre, 1999



(From left) Sat Pal Khattar, P.S. Somasekharan, Murli Chanrai, P. Selvadurai and Dr. S. Kasinathan at the SIFAS Festival 2009

carried to greater levels for both current needs and prosperity.”

Another prominent supporter, R. Jayachandran, who was awarded the Kala Ratna by SIFAS in 2014 for his consistent contributions to the Indian arts, says, “I have been observing the progress of the Indian music and dance scene in Singapore since 1978. Doubtless there had been cultural exchanges with India in the post-war era. These were random and infrequent, catering mainly to a small group of enthusiasts. The last three decades, however, have seen dramatic improvements in the cultural scene of Singapore. Several music and dance institutions have sprung up to teach classical music and dance of different traditions of India. The cultural calendar seems to get quickly filled up with classical and semi classical concerts through the year. The Indian cultural environment in Singapore is now vibrant. These programmes keep the cultural traditions alive while providing lively entertainment to our multi-cultural, multi-ethnic audience in Singapore.”

### PROMINENT INDIVIDUAL SUPPORTERS

K.Kesavapany, Singapore's non-resident Ambassador to Jordan and Governor of the Singapore International Foundation shares his thoughts on the Singapore Indian Community's Cultural Profile, “As an observer



Ours is a small but not insignificant community and very much a part of the fabric of modern Singapore. It is important that cultural values that we live by and which are part of our heritage are preserved and are passed on to future generations.



R. Jayachandran, being honoured with the Kala Ratna award, by J.Y. Pillay, as P.S. Somasekharan applauds, SIFAS Academy Day, 2014

of the evolution of Singapore's cultural mosaic over the past five decades, I am extremely proud of the contribution made by the Indian community to the making of our multicultural society.”

Spearheaded by pioneer organisations like the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society (SIFAS), Bhaskar's Arts Academy and Apsaras Arts, the arts and crafts of the Indian community are well entrenched. Apart from facilitating the transfer of music and dance from the ancestral land, a distinct Singaporean flavour has been imbued into the unique productions by these arts groups.

These organisations have also helped to train hundreds, if not thousands, of young aspiring musicians and dancers, some of whom have gone on to become tutors and to start their own organisations.

With the arrival of new talent from India and in the wake of the economic transformation of Singapore, new groups such as Soorya and Shruti Laya have emerged to enrich the cultural scene.

In what I would call a reverse transfer of cultural exchanges, many talented Singaporean Indian artistes are now performing regularly in Indian cities such as New Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai and Bangalore. Some have ventured even further

to the US, UK, France and Malaysia. With the support given by the National Arts Council and the Singapore International Foundation (SIF), they serve as Ambassadors to promote the many facets of Singapore's multi-cultural society.



K. Kesavapany, ex-Director of Institute of South East Asian Studies (NUS), diplomat and current board member of several community and Indian organisations

The establishment of the Indian Heritage Centre (IHC), which was declared open by PM Lee Hsien Loong on 7 May 2015, serves to showcase what has been achieved so far and motivate coming generations of Singapore Indians to aspire to greater heights.”

Ambassador Gopinath Pillai, a prominent member of the Indian community in Singapore shares his thoughts as follows, “SIFAS is to be congratulated for its initiative to bring out a book on Indian classical music and dance in the fifty years of independent Singapore. The subject is significant because it is one that has had a significant influence on the performing art forms of South East Asia over hundreds of years. The fifty year period is also significant because it is the formative years of our country that has just become independent. In the midst of nation building Indian classical music and dance flourished. Organisations like SIFAS, Bhaskar’s Academy, Apsaras Arts, Temple of the Temple of Fine Arts and several more are to be given credit for this. Even today these organisations

work assiduously to keep the cultural flame burning. Many dedicated individuals devote a great deal of their time to ensure the continued existence of these organisations for more than fifty years. The community’s continuing support has also helped a great deal.”

The challenge for the future for classical music and dance is posed not by some alien art form but popular music and dance from the film world which has a great deal of appeal for the young people of today. In fact even for the older generation it provides light entertainment. Success of popular music and dance should not dissuade the proponents of classical music and dance from carrying on their good work. The media has a role to play. They can devote a significant number of slots to publish or give enough air time to classical music and dance. Western classical music has flourished in spite of a variety of popular music being available. It has shown that both classical music and new popular music can exist side by side. Indian classical arts should be able to do the same.



Gopinath Pillai, Director of Institute of South Asian Studies (NUS), diplomat and member of boards of several business and Indian organisations, presenting SIFAS Bharatanatyam Diploma to Haritha Ramesh at SIFAS Academy Day , 2011

## EVENT MANAGERS

The frenetic pace of new Indian arts institutions, the large numbers of new Indian immigrants from across the subcontinent, and the rapid pace of growth in the number of Indian events staged in Singapore have all given rise to a new kind of organisation – the event management company that focuses on the Indian arts. Three of these post-millennial entrants into this burgeoning field have a wide canvas in terms of services provided and the kinds of events staged and promoted. Teamwork Productions, Jade and Arte Compass organise and support events across the entire scope of the Indian arts as well as English and Indian language theatre, Indian film music events, fusion or Indian semi-classical and pop/contemporary music events, poetry readings, stand-up comedy and others. Praapthi on the other hand, the latest entrant focuses on providing event management services to Indian classical music and dance events.

Teamwork Productions is an “entertainment company”, with roots in the performing arts, social action, and the corporate world. Their expertise includes producing television programmes,

documentary and feature films, event management, social communication, creation and development of contemporary performing and visual arts festivals across the world, and in nurturing new talent across art forms. Teamwork started in Singapore in 2001 with ‘Celebrating India– Singapore 2001’ a 7 day festival and business conference which was attended by the President and Prime Minister of Singapore. Teamwork Productions has worked closely with the Kalaa Utsavam team in Esplanade and helped produce the festival since its inception (see the 2000s chapter for a description of this regular entry on the Indian arts calendar). Other than the Utsavam, over the years, Teamwork has presented programmes by Hariprasad Chaurasia, Shubha Mudgal, Daksha Sheth , Aditi Mangaldas, Nrityagram dancers, Dr. L. Subramaniam, Vikku Vinayakram, Amjad Ali Khan and most recently, Hariharatmakam, a dance performance by renowned Kuchipudi dancers Dr. Raja and Radha Reddy and their group of young dancers. Shweta Asnani, founder of Teamwork Productions Singapore says, “I founded Teamwork Productions in partnership with its Indian headquarters, in 2001 and the last 14 years have been a wonderful



A Teamwork production staged in Victoria Theatre, Hariharatmakam by Natya Tarangini troupe of Dr. Raja Reddy and Radha Reddy, 2015

satisfying journey of bringing some of the best names in the Indian classical music and dance field. The audiences have changed and matured over the years, and that is heartening to see as Teamwork was a part of this change and growth.”

Arte Compass was established in 2003. The primary focus of Akila Iyengar, founder of Arte Compass was to take performing arts across cultures, motivated by the desire to promote local and International talent.

Arte Compass premiered with *Shraddha: An evening of melodies* in April 2003, by the legendary mandolin maestro, U. Shrinivas, singer and composer Shankar Mahadevan, percussionist Sivamani and the pianist Loy Mendonsa. Other notable classical events hosted by Arte Compass include *Mandolin Classic* by maestros, U. Shrinivas and U. Rajesh, and *Kaleidoscope of Rhythms: World Fusion Music* by Zakir Hussain, U. Shrinivas,

Fazal Qureshi, Kala Ramnath, Vijay Chauhan and other western artistes. More recently, the company managed a recital by the SIOC labelled “Mystique 7 in Sapthapadi” and “Lotus: A musical blossom”, the first ever ‘Indian and Chinese Classical Music concert by world renowned artistes U. Shrinivas, Prof. Liu Yuening, V. Selvaganesh, Vijay Ghate, Zhu Lin and Wang Yi Jen. Akila currently also serves as a Board member of the Shrinivas Institute of World Musique founded by the late maestro U. Shrinivas.

Jade Group International Pte Ltd is a full service event management firm with offices in Hong Kong and Singapore. The Singapore office was set up in 2007. Since then, Jade Group has worked behind the scenes on many quality classical dance and music events. With the advantage of having offices in Singapore and Hong Kong, Jade Group is able to promote Asia tours of well-known artistes and work on cross-border events such as the



An Arte Compass production, Mandolin U. Shrinivas playing with Prof Liu Yuening (yangqin) and V. Selvaganesh (ganjira) at the Esplanade Theatre, 2011

Singapore-Hong Kong-Bangkok concerts of Zakir Hussain with the Masters of Percussion tour. A key focus of Jade Group in Singapore has been festivals. As event manager and festival director of Samarpana-the Asian Festival of Classical Dance since its inception, Jade Group has worked closely with the producer of the festival to expand into an India chapter, the Ananya Samarpana Festival of Classical Dance which is now in its third successful annual edition. Having managed ventures that showcase Singapore-based artistes abroad, managing partner of Jade Group, Singapore, Jyoti Ramesh says, “As a company that started off 13 years ago in Hong Kong, bringing South Asian arts to the region, we are delighted that Jade Group is now in the fulfilling position of presenting talented Singapore-based artistes and local productions on the international platform.”

The large number of Indian music and dance events, festivals and arangetrams organised on a regular basis in Singapore has led in some ways to the launch of a unique company, Praapthi in January 2014. Spearheaded by a team of veteran arts volunteers V. Devarajan, Vidhya Venkat and Akila Krishnan, Praapthi provides integrated event management services with a focus on

Indian fine art events. “We offer end-to-end event management services, bringing in a concept of total outsourcing, so that our clients can focus on their performance and enjoy the event,” says Devarajan. Praapthi’s services span from sponsorship drives, print and social media publicity, to planning and managing all aspects of events. Organisers of one-time events, like parents who organise dance and music arangetrams for their children are often flustered by all the project management skills and contacts with sound, light, brochure design, stage and reception decoration that are required to make the programme a success. The arrival of Praapthi, whose banners are now already regularly seen at many local events, is a boon for such organisers, as well as for more seasoned event organisers, who can now focus on the creative aspects of the productions with the administrative, technical and logistics aspects outsourced.

In this chapter, we briefly described the roles of many of the most important enablers of the Indian performing arts in Singapore – various departments of the Government, the media, the High Commission of India, donors and event managers. There are other enablers such as venue providers and managers, ticketing agencies, independent



Zakir Hussain and Khete Khan (Khartaal) at Masters of Percussion Tour at the Esplanade, a Jade Group presentation, 2008



Anjasa, an event managed by Praapthi and staged by Apsaras Arts, at the Victoria Theatre, 2015

lighting and sound technicians, make-up artistes, instrument suppliers and repairers, and costume makers and renters who are also enablers of the Indian arts worthy of mention.

Together, this rapidly growing and professional support system bodes well for the future of the

Indian performing arts institutions and artistes in Singapore. This continued support will free up the resources of these institutions and artistes to focus on the creative aspects of their art, a little more secure in the knowledge that there is a system that will provide much needed assistance in various aspects of the production and marketing of events.



## CHAPTER 10

# CONCLUSION

DR. SESHAN RAMASWAMI

**T**his book has taken us through the fascinating history of the Indian performing arts in Singapore. The development and spectacular growth of the Indian arts in Singapore have mirrored the economic developments in Singapore.

From very slow beginnings of the hardworking pioneering artistes, some institutions have grown dramatically and have become landmark cultural institutions, well known to Singaporeans and arts connoisseurs in India, especially the cognoscenti in the cultural capital of Chennai in the South. In the early days prior to independence, both local and new Indian immigrants were starved for opportunities to learn Indian classical music and dance, and to witness performances. Fifty years later, not only is Singapore a successful, gleaming economic pearl, but alongside, it has also developed a thriving ecological system of Indian artistes, teachers, institutions, temples and other enablers.

These efforts and activities have mutually reinforced each other, and made it easy today for a fan of the Indian fine arts to find a highly qualified teacher in almost every neighbourhood in Singapore, and to witness some quality performances by both local and visiting artistes in venues across the country and around the year. No longer do artistes have to wait for Navarathiri for that chance to practise their art in front of an interested audience in a temple. They can write for grants, they can collaborate with other artistes from their own institutions and others, they can learn other art forms and attempt contemporary experiments, they can attend regular workshops from visiting masters, and they can enjoy and participate in inspiring feasts of music and dance in splendid, modern venues with the best acoustics and lighting systems in the world, all around the year. With air travel becoming more accessible and travel grant offered by the NAC, artistes can take their around the world. An invitation to perform,

choreograph, compose or to conduct a workshop in Singapore has become a highly sought after one for artistes in India, not just for the glamour of a foreign performance, but for the high quality of discerning rasikas and experienced Gurus and performers in the Singaporean audience. Artistes from India too have “upped their game”, presenting new formats of music and dance, enabled by sophisticated venues in Singapore and professional event managers, which rival the best in the world. The development of Indian arts in Singapore has had a salutary effect not just on its votaries among local Indians, but on the larger arts scene in Singapore, and perhaps even on the modernisation of the arts scene in India, especially in Chennai.

Each chapter in this book has already provided a short summary of its contents. In this concluding chapter, we describe the emergence of some dominant themes across the book, a glimpse into the potential of the future and some recommendations for all those interested in the continued growth of the Indian performing arts scene.

### DOMINANT THEMES

The guiding motto of the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society (SIFAS), Singapore’s oldest surviving Indian cultural institution, 66 years of age today, has been “Kala Samskriithi Lakshanam”, a Sanskrit saying that roughly translates as “Art characterises civilisation”. That has been a dominant theme throughout the book. From the early immigrants to more recent ones, generations have struggled with the integration into a global metropolis, while holding on to the cultural roots that give them a fundamental sense of self and being. The arts of Indian classical music and dance are deeply intertwined into our daily life, not just in religious activities, but also social and cultural ones like harvest festivals, weddings, celebrations and launches of anniversary celebrations. When an immigrant Indian parent wants her son or daughter to remain rooted in Indian culture, the easiest way of accomplishing that is to enrol them in a music or dance class. From ways of dressing, to ways of treating elders and teachers with respect, to learning about Indian epics and literature, to celebrating special events like Guru Purnima, Saraswati Puja, and Vijayadasami with music and dance, to being exposed to a wide variety of languages and sub-cultures across the

subcontinent, training in the Indian arts can provide that holistic cultural education to complement the academic learning of the theory and practice of the art forms themselves.

Dr. Liu Thai Ker, the second Chairman of the NAC, and a keen observer of the arts scene in Singapore, pointed out how Indians in Singapore seamlessly wove the arts into their daily lives, and how that could be an example for everyone in Singapore - to treat the arts as something to be lived in everything that we do in our professional and personal lives.

Throughout the historical chapters, and stories of some of the struggles of artistes, that has been a dominant theme - the Indian arts have given a sense of identity and rootedness to Indians here. They continue, even while competing with all the distractions of the modern world.

Another theme has been the roles of the institutions, in particular the temples and Government institutions in sustaining and indeed breathing life into the fledgling arts scene in early Singapore, both before and after independence. Where the temples sustained the culture with their resident nadaswaram and thavil player, and the Navarathiri and Kumbhabhishegam festivals which were the forerunners of today’s curated and ticketed festivals, the Government stepped in bountifully in later years. The Arts Housing Scheme, performance grants, the Tote Board grants, the conduct of music and dance competitions, subsidies for workshops by masters and many other programmes have been a huge boon to Indian arts students, performers and institutions.

A third theme has been the overwhelming influence of the ‘Big 4’ institutions of SIFAS, Nrityalaya/Bhaskar’s Arts Academy, Apsaras Arts and the Temple of Fine Arts in providing the basic infrastructure – of regular courses of music and dance, of full time employed teachers, and of regular performance opportunities locally and abroad. These four institutions have proved to be a springboard for the rest of Singapore. The artistic lives of many independent artistes and institutions outside the ‘Big 4’ have been deeply influenced and enhanced because of their associations with the ‘Big 4’ as ex-students, teachers and collaborators.

A fourth theme is that despite the emerging popularity of Hindustani music and relatively rarer (for Singapore) forms of dance such as Odissi, and Kathak, Carnatic vocal music and Bharatanatyam continue to be the default choice of art form for most young students. Most of the multi-disciplinary institutions continue to experience the greatest numbers in these two forms of the arts, which emanate primarily from Tamil Nadu, the state that provided Singapore and South East Asia with its largest number of immigrants from India.

A fifth theme that emerged, though more subtly, is that, like with the arts everywhere in the world, but perhaps more so in Singapore, contemplating a full time career in the Indian arts as a performer is fraught with difficulty. An interview with the late K.P. Bhaskar, who founded the highly successful Bhaskar’s Arts Academy way back in 1952, on the tributeSG website was telling. He said that every performance lost money, and this was something he had learnt to live with. The teaching activities of the arts institutions underwrite all performance activities. Unless there are generous sponsors and patrons of the arts, both of which happily have been a vital life-giving force for many Singaporean Indian institutions’ performance activities, the arts cannot survive.

The arts are not learnt in a vacuum, simply to achieve some certification in annual exams. The artiste needs to perform before a live audience, to fully develop her own art form. The idea of “rasa” or connecting to the audience emotionally is an important defining, aesthetic principle of the Indian performing arts. But organising performances for a ticket buying audience is a highly risky proposition for a promoter, especially when the arts are the “complex” forms of Indian classical music and dance which require a trained ear and eye to enjoy in its entirety at multiple levels of expression.

For the Indian arts, there is also the very challenging competition from popular music and dance based on films. Ever since their inception, popular Indian films have been carried on the backbone of song and dance sequences. While the music and dance in movies of the older generations used to be heavily influenced by their classical forms, these arts in today’s movies hardly bear a resemblance

to those traditions. Thus, the Indian classical arts performances need to compete with the mass and easy appeal of these other art forms of film-based music and dance which are fuelled by million dollar budgets. A music fan who may think nothing of paying \$100 to attend the live performance of a movie “playback” singer, often balks at attending even a free performance by a highly accomplished classical musician.

A final theme is a latent one, one that did not find direct expression in any of the interviews. The Indian arts have played a huge, continuing role in integrating new Indian immigrants into life in Singapore – new immigrants and native Singaporeans regularly learn side by side, perform together, and collaborate and partner with each other in a variety of artistic endeavours. This is a welcome side effect of the development of these great arts institutions in Singapore, that they have enabled an easy, almost seamless way of integrating new arrivals, in a way that has proved more difficult perhaps in other areas of daily life in Singapore. There are local and international schools, heartland and city areas, local and foreign companies, but with the Indian arts activities, there is never a separation of local and foreign or a reckoning of the number of generations that someone has been a Singaporean. The arts are about the best way there is to effect integration of all the varied components of Singaporean society and the Indian arts have been especially instrumental in achieving that for the Indian community.

The story of the Indian arts in Singapore has been a huge success on the teaching side. There are full time teachers of all the arts forms, making a decent living on fees alone. On the performance side, there has been tremendous progress in both the quality and quantity of performances, but they continue to be subsidised by government grants, and generous corporate endowments. The development of a paying audience for the Indian arts continues to be a challenge, even fifty years later. This phenomenon of course, is not unique to the Indian arts scene in Singapore. It remains a global challenge for practitioners of the “fine art” forms in every culture.

## THE FUTURE

Our interviews and our experiences in putting together Kala Manjari also revealed some emerging trends which look to be long lasting.

First, there is the rapidly growing emergence of the North Indian forms of music and dance. While the early Indian residents and immigrants in Singapore tended to be primarily Tamil speakers, the last two decades have seen waves of immigration from around the subcontinent. Interest is growing in Hindustani music, in Kathak and in other non-South Indian art forms like Odissi. Interestingly though, it is not just North Indians who are learning these art forms; a large number of South Indians too are enrolled in these classes, in addition to, or substituting the traditional South Indian forms.

Teaching is becoming more specialised. In earlier years, the focus of teaching institutions was on hiring multi-disciplinary artistes who could teach more than one art form among vocal, instrumental, percussion and even dance. The future seems to be with more specialised teachers. The keyboard, with its versatility and ever increasing technological sophistication, has seen a lot of interest among aspiring music students. Sadly, the same cannot be said for the harmonium - a vital accompanying instrument of Hindustani music and the acoustic fore-runner of the keyboard. There are a couple of teachers, but no full time harmonium players in Singapore, and visiting artistes often make do with serious amateurs, or multi-disciplinary instrumentalists and vocalists. Interest in the veena also seems to be on the wane, as is the case in India too. The difficulties of maintaining this beautiful instrument, and transporting it even locally, not to mention the intricacies of mastering this instrument capable of expressing minute subtleties of Carnatic music, no doubt also contribute to the decline in its popularity.

The future for the dance field looks to be very promising with so many interesting developments. Today, there is a plethora of talented dance accompanists, so putting together a qualified orchestra is relatively easy. The difficulty is in finding common rehearsal times for many accompanists, for whom the arts are not a full time career. Increasingly, dancers are resorting to dancing to recorded music,

especially as recording and artiste costs are a lot lower in India and most dancers continue to make regular trips to the subcontinent to perform, to learn, to teach, to make costumes and to attend and participate in conferences and festivals.

There are plenty of opportunities for dancers to collaborate with artistes of other genres and cultures, such as theatre, music, and dance from Malay, Chinese, and other Asian and Western cultures. As an audio-visual medium, Indian dance with its versatility in providing a basic body language that can express just about any story or theme, looks to continue to expand its reach into the other ethnic communities of Singapore. Today, the Indian performing arts companies in Singapore seem to focus on dance performances, both traditional and contemporary rather than on music recitals.

Hopefully the future will see the 'Big 4' continue to stabilise and become self-sustaining institutions maintaining high standards of teaching and performance. Some institutions are going through a phase of transition in management from the pioneering generation to the next, while others are still dominated by the pioneers. As the institutions grow in numbers, it may be difficult to maintain these institutions just on the backs of passionate volunteers. To have these institutions managed by professionals will be a big challenge but they seem well equipped to handle that challenge. There are courses on arts management now available locally, and the internet has made some aspects of management easier. Today, there are inexpensive software systems and solutions that drastically reduce the necessity of manpower for basic duties of collecting fees, payments for tickets, and publicising events. The hope is that the 'Big 4' will become the 'Big 8' in the near future. Already, some of the newer institutions are seeing student numbers in the hundreds, something that took a few decades for the pioneering institutions to achieve.

Two final trends, are those of the increasing growth of group performances, both orchestras as well as large dance productions and the emergence of home grown artistes and teachers. The Indian performing arts are uniquely solo arts in their training and exposition. The traditional concert revolves around a solo musician or dancer who

performs with accompanists, and the artiste's role is to convey her take on the bhava or emotional content of a raga or a dance piece to the audience, supported by the accompanists. In an institution that teaches hundreds of students, it is impossible to arrange solo opportunities for more than just a few of the most talented and gifted students. The growth in orchestra renditions and group dance performances seems set to grow, also giving rise to thematic recitals touching on innovative themes, in both traditional and contemporary genres, rather than classic concert patterns and traditional margam repertoires of solo musicians and dancers. This trend may make for newer ways of teaching from the basic exercises of sarali varisais, alankars and adavus (for Carnatic and Hindustani music, and Bharatanatyam), the students are taught to pay attention to others in the class. One constantly align oneself in timing, in rhythm, in movement to those one is learning with, so that it is that much easier to co-ordinate voices and movements in the eventual group performances.

With decades long histories, some of the institutions in Singapore have now produced completely "home grown" talent in both teaching and performing. This is a welcoming trend, as Singaporeans may no longer need to be dependent on accompanying artistes, or teachers from India, who, while being of the same ethnicity, may not share the same perspectives and world views of those who grew up in Singapore. This is just a small emerging trend, and it would be wonderful if it could be sustained, because that is the desired lasting impact of all the activities and efforts of these institutions – not just to graduate students with a diploma but to convert them into full-fledged artistes and teachers.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

It is difficult to make recommendations that would work for everyone, for the large and small institutions, established and emerging artistes, government and private enablers. In line with global developments in other parts of the economy, a few important pointers emerge with significance across the spectrum:

1. Greater use of technology for learning and for performance, including the use of the internet and mobile technology to enhance learning

through tanpura apps, recorded lessons, Skype sessions, and publicity through social media. These new technological developments can greatly reduce the costs and enhance the effectiveness and reach of the Indian arts.

2. Greater collaboration with local non-Indian arts institutions and with institutions in India, many of which are eager to increase their cultural and global reach. Increasingly, there are festivals that feature collaborations between artistes of different genres and countries, or curated festivals and events that move from city to city across the world.
3. Collaboration of all local institutions in a festival or mega productions, featuring local talent in all genres of music and dance, including Carnatic and Hindustani music and all dance forms, including folk. While the different institutions have indeed come together formally for special events in the past, such as the staging of Ritu Mahatmiyam in the early 1990s, and a celebration of the tenth anniversary of the Esplanade, an annual or at least biennial festival with the support of the NAC, the Esplanade and corporate sponsors would be a welcome addition to the festival calendar. The celebration of Singapore's National Day on and around August 9, suggests itself as a natural occasion for this festival to avoid a clash with other Indian festivals during the year.
4. Developing an audience. Every artiste and institution needs to work on this mutually supportive endeavour. Far too often, we see in a festival of local artistes, that each artiste brings with him or her, a small band of devoted fans made up of friends and family. And when the concert ends, the audience leaves too, to make way for a new band of fans for the next artiste. Music and dance appreciation programmes and incorporating learning by listening (kelvi gnanam, as they call it in Tamil) and viewing need to be important components of the activities of teaching institutions and independent teachers. They should constantly exhort and incentivise students to patronise the arts events of all Singaporean institutions, not just the ones they belong to. Today's performances of the Indian traditional arts already have a few non-Indians, local residents as well as tourists in the audience, sometimes out of keen interest in Indian culture,

and sometimes out of curiosity. This is a potentially large “market” that remains untapped.

5. Singapore does have world class performance venue infrastructure. But do we have world class productions, and performances by local artistes and institutions? Indian productions from Singapore have enhanced in their production values over the years, and as documented in this book, have travelled the globe especially in the last couple of decades. There needs to be a bigger push towards becoming cultural ambassadors for Singapore, and building and strengthening cultural ties with both neighbouring countries, and with global economic and trading partners of Singapore across the world. All artistes today should aspire to appeal to reach a global audience.

6. Continued Government support. This will continue to be key, especially in the areas of housing and performance grants. The Indian arts are at that critical stage of development where a little more sustained support may see them break through to the next level to becoming robust production companies and self-supporting teaching institutions. The danger of course is in these institutions becoming over reliant on easy financial support from the NAC. Perhaps an emphasis on showing that an institution or artiste is developing an audience, not just for themselves, but for all of Singapore, could be made a requisite component of arts grant proposals. Making efforts at multi-lingual subtitling, at reaching out to new segments of audiences, of developing informative brochures and websites, or conducting appreciation workshops and seminars, could be some of the ways in which institutions could justify their audience building credentials.

7. Mass media support. Barring an exception or two, the mass media sadly are not as major supporters of the arts today as they were in the past. Luckily, the inexpensive, even free newer internet-based media have lessened the impact of that loss of support. Artistes and institutions also need to realise of course that media companies are not charities; they are business entities that need to offer content relevant to their audiences. So that remains the challenge of the traditional performers of the Indian arts in Singapore, like their traditional counterparts across the world – to convince the media, the audience, and sponsors, that the arts they purvey are timeless and universal in their appeal. It is not a particularly difficult persuasion task, given the richness, beauty and timelessness of their forms, but it requires some new thinking about how to present the classics in ways that continue to touch the hearts, minds and souls of today's audiences.

These are happy times for the Indian arts in Singapore. The Indian Heritage Centre has just opened, providing a new source of energy to the Little India hub of much Indian cultural activity. Festivals of music and dance abound. There continues to be a constant influx of new talent from the subcontinent, even as there is a reverse journey of Singaporean artistes settling into the music and dance scene in India. Government and support from foundations and individual donors remains as strong as ever.

Singapore looks set for another long period of dramatic growth – in quality and quantity – of Indian arts, artistes and institutions. Majulah, Singapore Indian arts!



## APPENDIX A

## A CHRONOLOGY OF SIGNIFICANT EVENTS IN SINGAPORE'S INDIAN PERFORMING ARTS HISTORY

1949	Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society is founded.	1998	Inaugural NAC National Indian Music Competition is held.
1952	Bhaskar's Arts Academy is founded.	1999	Aravinth Kumarasamy awarded Young Artist Award for music; Alapana Arts is founded; Prenavam Sangeetha is founded; SIFAS celebrates 50 years of existence.
1958	Santha Bhaskar conducts the first Bharatanatyam arangetram in Singapore.	2000	Mirra Fine Arts is founded; Shruti Laya is founded.
1963	K.P. Bhaskar is awarded Pingat Jasa Gemilang after leading the first Singaporean cultural delegation to India in 1962.	2002	Esplanade Theatres on the Bay opens; Inaugural “Kalaa Utsavam” festival is organised.
1966	M. S. Subbulakshmi performs for three consecutive days at the PGP hall at the Sri Srinivasa Perumal temple.	2000	SIFAS Performing Arts Company is founded.
1968	Indian Arts Centre is founded.	2002	Global Indian Cultural Centre is founded. The Singapore chapter of Kala Peetham is established.
1977	Apsaras Arts is founded.	2003	Inaugural “SIFAS Festival of Indian Music and Dance” is held.
1979	Madhavi Krishnan is awarded Cultural Medallion for dance.	2004	SYAMA is registered as a Society.
1982	Temple of Fine Arts is founded.	2005	First “Soorya Global Festival” is staged.
1984	Bharathaa Arts is founded.	2006	Maya Dance Theatre is founded.
1989	Neila Sathyalingam awarded Cultural Medallion for dance; K.P. Bhaskar and Santha Bhaskar set up Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society.	2007	Music Circle is founded; Bharathanjali is formally registered.
1990	Santha Bhaskar is awarded Cultural Medallion for dance.	2009	SIFAS celebrates 60 years of contribution to the Indian fine arts with a year long festival.
1991	The National Arts Council is formed from the amalgamation of the Singapore Cultural Foundation, Cultural Division of Ministry of Commerce	2010	Inaugural Madhuradhwani festival held by Music Circle; Chowk is founded.
1993	NAC arts housing project is officially launched; Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society moves into its Starlight Road premises.	2011	Nawaz Mirajkar is honoured with the Young Artist Award for music; S. Sathyalingam, co-founder of Apsaras Arts, passes away.
1995	Nirmala Seshadri is honoured with the Young Artist Award for dance; Ghanavenothan Retnam is honoured with the Young Artist Award for music; Ravi Shankar performs his concerto for sitar and orchestra with the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra.	2012	Inaugural “Dance India Asia Pacific” is hosted by Apsaras Arts; the inaugural “Samarpana: The Asian Festival of Classical Dance” is hosted by Shruti Laya.
1996	Meenakshy Bhaskar is honoured with the Young Artist Award for dance.	2013	Dance pioneer K.P. Bhaskar passes away.
1998	Thamizhvanan Narayanasamy Veshnu is honoured with the Young Artist Award for dance.		

## APPENDIX B

# NATIONAL ARTS COUNCIL INDIAN MUSIC COMPETITION LIST OF WINNERS

Genre	#	Artiste(s)	Genre	#	Artiste(s)
<b>1998</b>					
<b>INTERMEDIATE</b>					
Carnatic Music	1	Aravind Ratnam Ganesh	Violin	1	Gangadharan Anirudhan
	2	Raghuraman Lavanya		3	Janani Ganesh
	3	Puvanan s/o Supermenian		Veena	1
				2	Saranya Seetharaman
				3	Saraswathi
			Vocal	1	Janani Ganesh
				2	Sushma Somasekharan
				3	Ganesh Venkataraman
<b>2002</b>					
<b>INTERMEDIATE</b>					
<b>2000</b>					
<b>INTERMEDIATE</b>					
Violin	1	Sneha Ramesh Mani	Violin	1	Nandakumar Narasimhan
	2	Gangadharan Anirudhan		2	Kartik Balachandran
	3	Sahana S Murthy		3	Sneha Ramesh Mani
Veena	1	Neela Sitaram	Veena	2	Ramkumar Vasudevan
	2	Rajendran Gowri		3	Anparasi Thirugnanam
<b>OPEN</b>					
Violin	1	Bharati Sampath	Sitar	1	Krsna Dasa Tan Guo
	2	Kartik Balachandran		2	Gayatri d/o T.P.Subramaniam
Veena	1	Aravind Ratnam Ganesh		3	Vanitha d/o Buthmanaban
	2	Lakshmi d/o Swarnam	Ensemble	1	SIFAS Octet
	3	Thavamalar d/o Balakrishnan		2	Swara - Yatra
Sitar	1	Sailesh Venkatraman		3	Swara- Chakram
	2	Ong Ban Yong	Carnatic Vocal	1	Aravind Ratnam Ganesh
	3	Vithiagarun Gunalan		2	Padmanabhan Bindu
Ensemble	1	SIFAS Octet		3	Lavanya Balachandran
	2	Swara - Yatra			
	3	Swara- Chakram			

Note that in some years, no first prizes were awarded in some categories. Source: NAC website

Genre	#	Artiste(s)	Genre	#	Artiste(s)
<b>2004</b>					
<b>INTERMEDIATE</b>					
Sitar	2	Rhea Chatterjea	Carnatic Vocal	1	Radhakrishnan Srikanth
	3	Keerthigar Perumal		2	Rashmi Balasubramanian
Veena	1	Shenbagavalli Raman		3	Kadayam Suresh Kaushik
	1	Neela Sitaram	Mridangam	1	Sanjay Vanen
Violin	1	Sandeep Ramachandran		2	Ganesh Jayabal
	2	Aishwarya Ramesh		3	Jayagowtham
	3	Praphulla Chandra			s/o K. Annadurai
Mridangam	1	Sudarshan Narasimhan	Sitar	3	Rhea Chatterjea
	2	Jayagowtham	Tabla	1	Tan Guo Jun
	3	s/o K. Annadurai		2	Radha Govinda Dasa
		Ganesh Jayabal		2	Jayanth Ganapathy
Tabla	1	Kumaran s/o Sinniah	Veena	1	Gautham
	2	Veluri Shouri		2	Viswanadam Abhirami
	3	Jayanth G.		2	Aishwarya Mahadevan
Vocal	1	Trishala Raj Shankar	Violin	1	Radhakrishnan Srikanth
	2	Kadayam Suresh Kaushik		2	Sriram Sami
	3	S. Avanthika		3	Shreya Gopi
<b>2006</b>					
<b>INTERMEDIATE</b>					
<b>OPEN</b>					
Sitar	2	Sri Vijaykumar Naidu	Carnatic Vocal	1	Padmanabhan
	3	s/o Govinda Rajoo		2	Bindu Madhavan
Violin	1	Sneha Ramesh Mani		3	Sindhu Sundar
	1	Raghuraman Lavanya	Flute	3	Deepthi Prabhakar
Mridangam	1	Viknash s/o Balakrishnan	Mridangam	1	Sista Satish Chandra
	2	Pathmanathan		2	Sudarshan Narasimhan
		s/o Jaganathan	Sitar	1	Periya d/o Sundaram
Tabla	1	Kamal s/o Sarwan Singh	Tabla	2	Shouri Veluri
	2	N.Sathis Kumar		3	Sivanathan Jheevanesh
	3	Hari Sivakumar		3	Varun Ramesh Mani
Carnatic Vocal	1	Janani Ganesh	Veena	1	Ramaswamy Sandhya
	2	Sushma Somasekharan	Violin	3	Nanditha Krishnaswamy
	3	Radhika Ramakrishnan		*	Murali Bharatram
	3	Padmanabhan Bindu	Ensemble	1	SIOC, People's Association
		Madhavan		2	SIFAS
Ensemble	1	SIOC, People's Association		3	Swathi (Nrityalaya
	2	SIFAS Octet			Aesthetics Society)
	3	SYAMA			

\* Honourable Mention

Genre	#	Artiste(s)
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2008

## INTERMEDIATE

Tabla	1 2	Pradeep Adhokshaja Thinagar s/o Nanoo Siva Das
Mridangam	2	Akshay Alauddin Lenin
Flute	2	Vibhu Bulusu
Violin	1 2	Sriram Sami K. Sowndarya
Vocal	1 2 * *	G.S.Divya R.Shwethambari Nandhitha Gurunath Hari Poonguzhali Purushothaman

## OPEN

Tabla	1 2 *	Tan Guo Jun Radha Govinda Dasa K. Jegatheessh G.Nityanandan
Veena	1	Aparna Mahadevan
Violin	1	Srikanth Radhakrishnan
Carnatic Vocal	1 2 3 *	Rashmi Balasubramanian Sandhya Ramaswamy Kavitha Jayaraman Darshini d/o Yoganathan

2011

## OPEN

Carnatic Vocal	1 2 3	Meenakshy Jyothish Gayathri Krishnakumar Sandhya R
Violin	2 3	Surup Sowmithri Thathachar Vimalapugazhan Purushothaman
Veena	2 3	Anjana Giridhar Swathi Nachiar Manivannan
Flute	2	Saikrishna
Mridangam	2 3	Prasanna Venkateshwar Thilak Pandian
Tabla	1 2	Vignesh Sankar Iyer Vaishnav Muralidharan

\* Honourable Mention

Genre	#	Artiste(s)
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2011

## INTERMEDIATE

Carnatic Vocal	1 2 3 3	Nishanth Thiagarajan Ganesh Balasubramanian Sriram Balasubramanian Aarthi Devarajan
Violin	1 2 3 *	Sharanya Ramesh Priyadarshini Jyothilakshmy Kavitha Ashwin Venkatram
Veena	1 2	G. Visveswari Nishtha Anand
Flute	1 2 3	Prajwal Srikanth Vibhu Bulusu P.Niranjan
Mridangam	1 2 3	Sriram Sivakumar Shyama Pushpa Sadashiv Jaiganesh Charan
Sitar	1 2	Anantya Bhatnagar Sarathak Bhatnagar
Tabla	1 2 3 *	Thinagar s/o Nanoo Siva Das Sivakumar Balakrishnan Hemanth Hariharan Abhishek Srivastava

## OPEN

Flute	1 2 3	Raghavendran s/o Rajasekaran Prabu s/o Ramachandran Xu Kai Xiang Rit
Tabla	1	Lalit Kumar Ganesh

Genre	#	Artiste(s)
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2014

## JUNIOR

Tabla	1 2 3	Sanjeevam Selvam Bellakka Krishnamurthy Tejas Sooriyan Selvam
Sitar	2 3	G.Solai Valli Sarvagya Bhatnagar
Carnatic Vocal	1 2 3	Amritha Devaraj Aditya Sudharshan Pranav Shreedhar
Mridangam	1 2 3	Pranav Swaminathan Aravindan Siddharth Chandramouli Aravind
Flute	2 3	Shanthosh S Krithikh Gopalakrishnan
Hindustani Vocal	2 3	Jagannath Philkana Jisnu Praharaj
Violin	1 2 3	Swathi Kumar Uppalapati Shreyas Jaiganesh Shre Vidhya

## INTERMEDIATE

Veena	1 2 3	Archana Kumaraswamy Anjana Giridhar Nishtha Anand
Mridangam	1 2 3	Pavethran s/o Kanagarethinam H. Venkateshwar Pradeep Abheeshta
Flute	1 2	Sabapathy Tirupathi Ramana Rohini Subramanian
Hindustani Vocal	1 2 3	Meghnaa Hebbar Bhupali Aithal Triana Banerjee
Carnatic Vocal	1 2 3	Sharadh Rajaraman Chaitanyasre Lenin Aarthi Ravichandran
Violin	1 2 3	Surup Sowmithri Thathachar Jyothilakshmy Kavitha Sharadh Rajaraman
Tabla	1 2 3	Sivakumar Balakrishnan Vaishnav Muralidharan G. Lakshmanan

Genre	#	Artiste(s)
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## OPEN

Mridangam	1 2 3	M. Nareindharan Soma Sundram Shivanesh Akshay A Lenin
Carnatic Vocal	1 * *	Nishanth Thiagarajan Aarthi Devarajan Meenakshy Jyothish
Flute	2	Tan Qing Lun
Violin	1 2 3	Sharanya K. Sowndarya Ramesh Priyadarshini

\* Honourable Mention



## APPENDIX C

# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<b>CC</b>	Community Centre
<b>HCIS</b>	High Commission of India, Singapore
<b>HDB</b>	Housing and Development Board
<b>HEB</b>	Hindu Endowments Board
<b>ICCR</b>	Indian Council for Cultural Relations
<b>MMA</b>	Madras Music Academy
<b>MOE</b>	Ministry of Education
<b>NAC</b>	National Arts Council
<b>NAFA</b>	Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts
<b>NLB</b>	National Library Board
<b>NTU</b>	Nanyang Technological University
<b>NUS</b>	National University of Singapore
<b>PA</b>	People's Association
<b>SIFAS</b>	Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society
<b>SIOC</b>	Singapore Indian Orchestra and Choir
<b>SYF</b>	Singapore Youth Festival
<b>TFA</b>	Temple of Fine Arts
<b>WW2</b>	World War Two

## APPENDIX D

# PHOTO CREDITS

#	Photo	Source / photographer
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## PREFACE

1	Meeting at SIFAS	Dr. Seshan Ramaswami
2	Meeting at Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society	Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society
3	Photo selection session	Dr. Seshan Ramaswami
4	Book team	Shruthi Prakash

## THE PRE-INDEPENDENCE YEARS: PIONEERING ARTISTES AND INSTITUTIONS

1	Samuel Dhoraingham	Shankar Rajan
2	Ambaligay playing the violin	Dr. R.D.Gangatharan
3	Ambaligay playing the veena	Dr. R.D.Gangatharan
4	Vallathol Kathakali leader Namboodri	Narayana Narayana
5	M. Ramalingam	Shankar Rajan
6	Photos of K.P. Bhaskar	Bhaskar's Arts Academy
7	Photos of Santha Bhaskar	Bhaskar's Arts Academy
8	M. V. Gurusamy	Shankar Rajan
9	Mridangam notation	Shankar Rajan
10	Sharada Shankar	SIFAS
11	Photos of Uma Rajan	Uma Rajan
12	Rathi Karthigesu	Rathi Karthigesu
13	V. Ramachandran collage	Family of V. Ramachandran
14	Ghatam	Shankar Rajan
15	Vijeya Lakshmi Rajah	C. R. Rajah
16	Poster	S. S. Sarma
17	Certificate	Shankar Rajan

#	Photo	Source / photographer
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### THE POST-INDEPENDENCE YEARS: AWAKENING AND MATURING OF THE INDIAN PERFORMING ARTS

1	Bhaskars at National Day Parade	Bhaskar's Arts Academy
2	Meenakshy Bhaskars	Bhaskar's Arts Academy
3	Ghanavenothan Retnam	Ghanavenothan Retnam
4	Madhavi Krishnan with A. Sachithananthan	A. Sachithananthan
5	Hema Dorai	SIFAS
6	SIFAS Tutors	SIFAS
7	George Yeo and S. Dhanabalan at SIFAS	SIFAS
8	S. Sathyalingam and Nehru family	Apsaras Arts
9	Neila Sathyalingam and S. Sathyalingam	Apsaras Arts
10	Neila Sathyalingam - Women's Hall of Fame	Apsaras Arts
11	Neila Sathyalingam, 1959	Apsaras Arts
12	Aravinth Kumarasamy	Aravinth Kumarasamy
13	Apsaras Production	Apsaras Arts
14	TFA in Hong Lim Park and Jurong Bird Park	TFA
15	SIOC	SIOC
16	Manuneethivathi Muthusamy	SIFAS
17	Vicknesvari Vadivalagan	Vicknesvari Vadivalagan
18	Naidu Sisters and Shankar Rajan	Shankar Rajan
19	Priyalatha Naidu	Priyalatha Naidu
20	Saradha Shankar	Rajan family
21	Nirmala Seshadri	Nirmala Seshadri
22	C.N. Thyagaraju and G. Manikantan	Manikantan
23	Lazar Thurakkal Sebastine	Lazar Thurakkal Sebastine

### THE 2000s: NEW VENUES, NEW FESTIVALS AND NEW ARRIVALS

1	Indian Heritage Centre	Indian Heritage Centre
2	Benson Puah	Esplanade
3	Kalaa Utsavam	Esplanade
4	Aruna Sairam	SIFAS
5	Rising Stars at SIFAS Festival	Dr. Seshan Ramaswami
6	Mummoorthigal Vizha	Dr. Seshan Ramaswami
7	Meera Das	Soorya, Singapore
8	T.N. Seshagopalan	Music Circle
9	Percussion Marathon	Nawaz Mirajkar
10	Fifth Lotus	Dr. Seshan Ramaswami

#	Photo	Source / photographer
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11	Box with Mridangam Marathon	Dr. Seshan Ramaswami
12	V. Shankar Narayanan	Dr. Seshan Ramaswami
13	Srividya Sriram	Srividya Sriram
14	Chitra Poornima Sathish	Chitra Poornima Sathish
15	Sushma Somasekharan	Sushma Somasekharan
16	Sai Akileshwar	Sai Akileshwar
17	Srikanth Radhakrishnan	Srikanth Radhakrishnan
18	Abdul Kalam with SIFAS students	SIFAS
19	A.K.C Natarajan	Dr. Seshan Ramaswami
20	Cheritha Singapura in Mexico	Bhaskar's Arts Academy
21	International Bharatanatyam Conference	Nirmala Seshadri
22	Angkor	Apsaras Arts
23	Nirmanika	Apsaras Arts
24	Ramayana	TFA
25	Three Stalwarts	Dr. Seshan Ramaswami

### OUTSIDE THE 'BIG 4': INCEPTION AND GROWTH OF INDEPENDENT ARTISTES AND INSTITUTIONS

1	The Lenins	Prenavam Sangeetha
2	Shruthi Anand and Pratima Bellave	SYAMA
3	GICC students	GICC
4	Radha Vijayan	Radha Vijayan
5	Dr. Bhagya Murthy	Dr. Bhagya Murthy/Lijesh Karunanakaran
6	Vasanth Kasinath	Vasanth Kasinath
7	Usharani Maniam	Usharani Maniam
8	Shanta Ratii	Shanta Ratii
9	Dr. Siri Rama	Dr. Seshan Ramaswami
10	V. Balakrishnan	V. Balakrishnan
11	Sitaravamma Sandrasegaren	Lavanya Ramesh
12	Suganthi Kumaraguru	The Kesavan Sisters
13	Jeyanthi Balasubramaniam	The Kesavan Sisters
14	Gayatri Sriram	Gayatri Sriram
15	Chitra Shankar	Chitra Shankar
16	Raka Maitra	Chowk /Tan Ngiap Heng
17	Maya Dance Theatre	Maya Dance Theatre/Horng Yih
18	Maalika Girish Panicker	Maalika Girish Panicker

#	Photo	Source / photographer
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### EVOLUTION OF NORTH INDIAN ART FORMS IN SINGAPORE

1	Dr. Mangal Chotta Singh	SIFAS
2	Dilip Kumar	SIFAS
3	Gurcharan Singh	Gurcharan Singh
4	Irene Manual	Irene Manual
5	Kalyani Puranik	Kalyani Puranik
6	Sharafat Khan	Sharafat Khan
7	Usman Khan	TFA
8	TFA Production	TFA
9	Charan Girdhar Chand's Production Trinetra	Ramni Kashyap
10	Charan Girdhar Chand	Charan Girdhar Chand
11	Nawaz Mirajkar	Nawaz Mirajkar
12	Damaru	Nawaz Mirajkar
13	Sonali Sinha Biswas	Dr. Seshan Ramaswami
14	Ravindra Parchure	K.S. Venkatraman
15	Arshad Ali	Shashi Lal Kashyap
16	Engage	Rajan Raju

### BRIDGING CULTURES: IMPACT OF THE INDIAN ARTS ON MULTI-RACIAL SINGAPORE

1	Richard Tan	Sonny Lim
2	Dr. Chua Soo Pong	Dr Chua Soo Pong
3	Madam Som Said	Madam Som Said
4	Sonny Lim	Sonny Lim
5	Osman Abdul Hamid	Osman Abdul Hamid
6	Yam Boon Fong	Yam Boon Fong
7	Krsna Dasa Tan Guo Ming	Krsna Dasa Tan Guo Ming
8	Radha Govinda Dasa Tan Guo Jun	Radha Govinda Dasa Tan Guo Jun
9	Low Kok Leon	Low Kok Leon
10	Low Kok Wai	Low Kok Wai
11	Tony Makarome	Tony Makarome
12	Tan Swie Hian	Tan Swie Hian

#	Photo	Source / photographer
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### RHYTHM OF THE ARTS IN HINDU TEMPLES

1	Sri Mariamman Temple	HEB
2	Vijayalakshmi Balakrishnan	Vijayalakshmi Balakrishnan
3	Navarathiri celebrations at Vairavimada Kaliamman Temple	Dr. Seshan Ramaswami
4	Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple	HEB
5	Stamp of Philanthropist P G Pillai	PGP family
6	Embar Vijayaraghavachariar	Shankar Rajan
7	Sri Mariamman Temple nadaswaram players	Dr. Seshan Ramaswami
8	Nadaswaram and Thavil at Veeramakaliamman Temple	Dr. Seshan Ramaswami
9	Dance group at Sri Sivan Temple Mandalabhishegam	Sri Sivan Temple
10	TFA Hindustani choir	Sri Sivan Temple
11	Odhuvars at Sri Senpaga Vinayagar Temple	Senpaga Vinayagar Temple
12	Kathak dancers	HEB

### THE INDIA CONNECTION

1	Dhananjayans	Soorya Singapore/ Lijesh Karunakaran
2	Dr. L. Subramaniam	Esplanade
3	Mohan Vaidhya	SIFAS
4	Rajhesh Vaidhya	Soorya Singapore
5	Rajkumar Bharathi	Rajkumar Bharathi
6	Padmavathy Ananthagopalan	Padmavathy Ananthagopalan
7	Leela Samson	Apsaras Arts
8	Karaikudi Krishnamurthy	SIFAS
9	Karaikudi S. Subramaniam	Dr. Seshan Ramaswami
10	Madurai G.S. Mani	Madurai G.S. Mani
11	Premeela Gurumurthy	Premeela Gurumurthy
12	Thanathevy Mithradeva	Shashi Lal Kashyap
13	A. Janardhanan	SIFAS
14	Rama Verma	Bhaskar's Arts Academy

#	Photo	Source / photographer
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**THE ENABLERS OF THE INDIAN PERFORMING ARTS: GOVERNMENT, MEDIA,  
THE INDIAN HIGH COMMISSION, DONORS AND EVENT MANAGERS**

1	Bhaskar's Arts Academy	Dr. Seshan Ramaswami
2	Nishanth Thiagarajan	SIFAS
3	Professor Tommy Koh	Professor Tommy Koh
4	Dr. Liu Thai Ker	Dr. Liu Thai Ker
5	S. Chandra Das	SIFAS
6	Kokila Rajan	Dr. Seshan Ramaswami
7	SYF Competitors	Sreedevy Viju-Pany
8	SYF judges	Neila Sathyalingam
9	Neila Sathyalingam	Neila Sathyalingam
10	E.S.J. Chandran	E.S.J. Chandran
11	P.N.Balji	P.N.Balji
12	Kanakasabha.com screen shot	Dr. Seshan Ramaswami
13	Lalgudi Jayaraman	Ratnakar Rao
14	Shaw Vee Meng	SIFAS
15	Sat Pal Khattar	Dr. Seshan Ramaswami
16	R. Jayachandran	SIFAS
17	K. Kesavapany	K. Kesavapany
18	Gopinath Pillai	SIFAS
19	Hariharatmakam	Teamwork Productions
20	Mandolin U. Shrinivas	Arte Compass
21	Zakir Hussain	Jade group
22	Anjasa	Praapthi



APPENDIX E  
**LIST OF  
INTERVIEWEES**  
(IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER)

Sai Akileshwar	Kamakshi Jayaraman
Padmavathi Ananthagopalan	Rathi Karthigesu
Wilfred Douglas Anthony	Ramni Kashyap
V. Balakrishnan	Shashilal Kashyap
Vijayalakshmi Balakrishnan	Vasantha Kasinath
Jatinder Singh Bedi	Dr. S.T. Kasinathan
Raj Kumar Bharathi	Jeyanthi Kesavan
Santha Bhaskar	Kedar Khan
Santhosh Bhaskar	Sharafat Khan
Mohan Bhaskar	Usman Khan
Sonali Sinha Biswas	Professor Tommy Koh
Charan Girdhar Chand	Chitra Krishnakumar
S. Chandra Das	Karaikudi Krishnamurthy
E.S.J. Chandran	Kavitha Krishnan
Dr. Chua Soo Pong	Aravinth Kumarasamy
Dr. Eugene Dairianathan	M.R. Lenin
V.P. Dhananjayan	Rahana Lenin
Samuel Dhoraisingam	Sonny Lim
Dr. Premeela Gurumurthy	Dr. Liu Thai Ker
Kannan Gurusamy	Low Kok Leon
Osman Abdul Hamid	Low Kok Wai
Professor A. Janardhanan	Arun Mahizhnan

Raka Maitra	Srikanth Radhakrishnan
Tony Makarome	V. Raghuraman
Madurai G.S. Mani	Dr.Rajesh Rai
M.S. Maniam	Dr.R.Rajagopalan
Usharani Maniam	Dr.Uma Rajan
Irene Manual	Kokila Rajan
Vijayalakshmi Menon	Sarada Rajan
Nawaz Mirajkar	Shankar Rajan
Thanathevy Mithradeva	Anu Raju
Dr. Bhagya Murthy	Dr. Siri Rama
Manuneethivathi Muthusamy	Chandrakantha Ramachandran
Praemalatha Naidu	Maheswari Ramachandran
Priyalatha Naidu	Rajeswari Ramachandran
Pushpalatha Naidu	Yogeswari Ramalingam
Niranjan Nanthagopan	A.P. Raman
Narayana Narayana	Lavanya Ramesh
D. Natarajan	V. Ramkumar
J.P.Nathan	Hema Ranganathan
Maalika Girish Panicker	Ratnakar Rao
M. Param	Shanta Ratii
Ravindra Parchure	Ghanavenothan Retnam
Latha Pradeep	A. Sachithananthan
Benson Puah	Som Said
Kalyani Puranik	Leela Samson
S.R. Radhakrishnan	Sitaravamma Sandrasegaren

Neila Sathyalingam	M.Bala Subramanion
Rajalakshmi Sekar	E. Sukumar
P. Selvadurai	Krsna Das Tan Guo Ming
Nirmala Seshadri	Radha Govinda Dasa Tan Guo Jun
Bala Shankar	Tan Swie Hian
Chitra Shankar	Nishanth Thiagarajan
Vanitha Shankar	C. N. Thyagaraju
Brij Mohan Singh	Vicknesvari Vadivalagan
Gayatri Sriram	Lalitha Vaidyanathan
R.Srivathsan	Anuja Varaprasad
Dr.Padma Subrahmanyam	Rajiv Vasudeva
Dr. Karaikudi Subramaniam	Radha Vijayan
Dr. L. Subramaniam	Yam Boon Fong
N.Subramaniam	



## APPENDIX F

LIST OF  
REFERENCES

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## APPENDIX G

## BIOGRAPHIES OF AUTHORS

(IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER)

**SARITA ALURKAR-SRIRAM**

Sarita Alurkar-Sriram wears many hats: she is a marketing professional, an active member of the performing arts community and a freelance writer of non-fiction, music and travel. Sarita serves on the management committee of SIFAS, and is also a part of the team that organises the annual SIFAS Festival of Indian Classical Music and Dance in Singapore, now in its 13th year. She champions Hindustani classical music in Singapore through various forums, including her own banner, Engage Arts, through festivals, chamber concerts and lec-dems. Sarita regularly writes for local and regional publications. She also has a deep rooted passion for Asian hand-woven textiles and gives illustrated talks on Asia's textile heritage and the Indian hand-woven sari, at various venues in Singapore, including the Asian Civilisations Museum and the National Library.

**SHANKAR RAJAN**

Shankar is a traditionally trained Carnatic vocalist and mridangist and had his mridangam arangetram at the age of eleven. He was Deputy General Manager of the Centre for The Arts, National University of Singapore (NUS) from May 2002 to April 2005. He is leader of the Singapore Indian Orchestra and Choir and also serves the National Arts Council and National Youth Council, Singapore in various capacities. Shankar served as Academy Registrar of SIFAS from 2006 to 2008, and then as Principal until 2012. Together with his wife Saradha Shankar, he was awarded the Singai-Gamma Award for semi-classical singing in 1992 and the Veteran Musicians Award in 2004. In June 2010, Shankar was honoured by Global Arts and Talents as a pioneer musician who has contributed greatly to the development of the Singapore Indian Arts Scene.

In December 2012, a Tamil magazine in India called "Sudesi" honoured Shankar with the Visishta Award for his contributions to the music fraternity in Singapore. Shankar is a graduate of the University of Singapore and a qualified financial adviser.

**DR. UMA RAJAN**

Born into a family of doctors and artistes, Uma Rajan grew up to combine triple careers in healthcare, arts and community service which has cemented her a place nation-wide in Singapore, as a health care professional, an accomplished dancer, arts administrator, and a promoter of arts education and appreciation. In 1991, she became one of the first 15 charter members of the newly-inaugurated National Arts Council, and went on to lead all three of its Festivals of Asian Performing Arts. More recently, she turned her skills to writing, penning *A Life For Others*, a biography of the Buddhist nun, Venerable Ho Yuen Hoe in 2006. In 2012, her celebrity cookbook *Spice Potpourri* won for Singapore, the World Gourmand Award for the Best Indian Cuisine Book and Best Fund Raising, Charity and Community Cookbook in Asia. She continues to advise on health care, arts and community services, holding various posts in Ministries, the National Arts Council, IDA, Peoples' Association, voluntary and community organisations.

**DR. SIRI RAMA**

Dr. Siri Rama is a Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi dancer, choreographer and teacher. She has performed solos, presented group performances, conducted workshops and given talks in many cities across the world. She is currently serving her second consecutive term as the President of the Singapore chapter of

the World Dance Alliance Asia Pacific. She has taught courses at various institutions including Singapore Management University, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts and IIIT (Hyderabad, India). Siri has collaborated with artistes of various genres, including Hindustani and computer musicians, Chinese, Malay and contemporary dancers, and storytellers. Siri is the founder-director of the Kanaka Sabha Performing Arts Centre in Mumbai, India, and the founder-editor of [www.kanakasabha.com](http://www.kanakasabha.com), a worldwide website devoted to the appreciation of the Indian classical dance forms. Siri holds a PhD in Fine Arts, awarded by the University of Hong Kong for her thesis on the dance sculptures in Belur and Halebid temples in Karnataka, India.

### DR. SESHAN RAMASWAMI



Dr. Seshan Ramaswami is Associate Professor of Marketing Education at the Singapore Management University. He has previously taught at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, University of

Pennsylvania, and Indian School of Business. He has been a keen enthusiast of the Indian performing arts since his teens, with many years of training in Carnatic veena, and Carnatic and Hindustani vocal music. He served as Vice-President of SIFAS from 2007-2009. Ramaswami is currently serving his second consecutive term on the Arts Research and Development advisory panel of the NAC. He has organised several concerts of Indian classical music and dance in India, USA, Hong Kong and Singapore, and contributed several concert reviews and articles on music to publications of Gananjali, Hong Kong and SIFAS, Singapore. Ramaswami holds a PGDM from the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, India, and a PhD in Marketing from the University of Florida, USA.

### SUSHMA SOMASEKHARAN



Sushma Somasekharan is a Chartered Accountant and a Carnatic vocalist. One of the leading Carnatic vocalists in Singapore, Sushma is an alumna of SIFAS. After completing

her B.Accountancy in Nanyang Technological University, Sushma moved to India to pursue Carnatic Vocal professionally. During her stay in Chennai, she developed an interest in writing and now runs a column titled 'Young Voices' in India's premier Arts magazine, Sruti. She has also contributed articles to the bi-monthly Arts magazine, Aalaap. Apart from writing, Sushma was also invited to be a guest lecturer at National Institute of Education, Singapore educating young music students on Carnatic music. She has toured Europe, USA and Sri Lanka for concerts and has collaborated with many leading artistes including Mythili Prakash and Bernhard Schimplesberger.

### E. SUKUMAR



E. Sukumar graduated from University of Singapore (NUS) in 1971. He began his administrative career in the Ministry of Finance before moving on to NUS in 1980. He held senior management positions in the university's administration including that of Principal Assistant to the Vice-Chancellor, Director of University Liaison and Director in the Office of NUS President, until his retirement in 2011. He has also been active in community service since the 1980s. He has held senior appointments in several organisations such as SINDA, Hindu Endowments Board, Hindu Advisory Board, temple committees and the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society. He continues to devote much of his time to community-related activities.

### DR. CHITRA VARAPRASAD



Dr. Chitra Varaprasad is a Senior Lecturer at the National University of Singapore. Apart from her teaching and research, she also has a keen interest in Art, Culture and History, and is a guide at four local museums.

She has always been interested in the performing arts, especially Bharatanatyam. She has enjoyed writing on these various aspects in the Straits Times Bilingual page, when it was active.