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Research Note:
Musical Traditions in India

Salil Sachdev

In summer 2004 I will be traveling to New Delhi, India, for a period of three months after having received a Rotary Grant for University Professors. My intent in traveling to India is based on a two-fold purpose. First, I want to share my experience and skills in an area of my expertise, music theory, at the Delhi School of Music, and second, I am eager to continue working on my long-term project of documenting the traditional folk music of India on video and audio recordings.

The Delhi School of Music is one of the only 2 institutions in India dedicated to teaching Western classical music, the other one being in Mumbai. Based on a highly credible and strong reputation, it is the only place in North India where young people can study Western classical music in a formal setting. However, the emphasis of study has always been on instrumental performance. There has always been a strong need for teaching in music theory, a need that remains largely unfulfilled due to the lack of teachers specializing in this area. Perhaps the most appropriate example of this dire need would best be illustrated by my own experience as a student of music composition in New Delhi. At the time that I was pursuing my studies in music in India, there were only two people in New Delhi who had the necessary background and training to adequately prepare students in advanced Western music theory. I was fortunate to be able to study privately with one of them (the Conductor of the Delhi Symphony Orchestra) for a period of four years, after which I was prepared and able to pursue my graduate studies in music composition in the United States. By having the ability to contribute in this area now, I would be able to help students studying western music in India, to solidify an area of their background so necessary to having a well-rounded foundation in music.

My second reason for going to India is to further investigate, and as well to continue documenting, the traditional folk music of India on video and audio recordings, a project that I started two years ago. India is one of the most diverse nations in the world—a “museum of peoples.” Comprised of 26 states organized on a linguistic basis, the country consists of people with a multitude of different ethnic identities and backgrounds as well as philosophical and religious beliefs. Hence, there is a profusion of distinctly different kinds of folk, religious and ceremonial music vibrantly alive in all parts of the country. While the universal emphasis on studying the classical music of India has proved to be highly fruitful on its own accord, it has in the process overshadowed the abundance of folk music resonant with everyday life in the country. Long in its history and beautiful in its melodic form and expression, Indian classical music is one of the oldest unbroken musical traditions in the world. Many scholars and researchers from around the world have found themselves drawn deeply into the classical music tradition of India. While this continues to be a highly worthwhile
effort, overlooked in this emphasis is the rich cultural heritage of the abundance of folk music existent in India in different parts of the country. These profound musical artistic traditions have co-existed with Indian classical music for centuries. However, being the music of the “average” people and rural areas, their place in research, study and documentation has not been given as much stress as their classical counterpart. Thus, the significance of this project lies in discovering and documenting artistic traditions which have proven to hold their dignity and integrity in the face of continual change, and constant demands for modernization, transformation and threats of extinction.

Among the many possibilities of research in folk music are work songs in south India. These include harvest songs, hunting songs, boat songs and weavers’ songs, all meant to alleviate the the monotony of everyday chores and labor. As well in south India is one of the most mesmerizing drum ensembles, consisting of Chenda drums, accompanied by a bell and cymbal. The Chenda drum is a hollow cylindrical drum made out of soft wood with the ends covered with cowhide. It is one of the most important percussion instruments played in temple festivals. The Thyambaka, a renowned drum ensemble in the state of Kerala, features several Chenda players playing some of the most exciting and vibrant music that can be heard anywhere.

Commonly found in parts of North India is the one-string fiddle player, walking around in different neighborhoods with a bunch of fiddles delicately balanced on a basket placed on his head, while playing the fiddle at the same time. This fiddle, made out of a piece of wood, small gourd and one string, comes alive in the hands of this street vendor, trying to sell his instruments with his exquisite “walking performance.”

Brass bands, with their blaring and vibrant sounds, are commonly found in all parts of India and are an important part of many wedding celebrations. Composed of trombones, trumpets and various other instruments, they reflect the English influence on India from the colonial period. The music they play, however, is mostly popular Indian film music. It is certainly one of the most interesting and fun filled sights to see this very common phenomenon in the country.

I plan to travel to various parts of India, particularly rural areas, and record the folk music of various regions on audio and video. The video documentary will include street performances and interviews with practicing musicians, as well as the cultural and geographical history of the regions. Additionally, I plan to document certain festivals where folk music is an integral part of the event.

The outcome of this effort will contribute to not only the visual and aural documentation of traditional folk musical practices in India, but will also serve to stimulate and encourage further research and study in this enormous area. Since there is such an astounding variety of folk, religious and ceremonial music in the many culturally diverse regions across India, it will require an effort of a lifetime to document them thoroughly. Ultimately, it is my intention to document all of the major streams of folk music existent in the country (and the associated festivals) in a multi-volume video and audio anthology. This continually growing anthology would serve as a valuable resource to music schools, libraries, researchers and scholars, and students of arts and humanities all around the world.

—Salil Sachdev is Assistant Professor of Music