

The Future of the Past's Music: How the Traditional Music in India (TMI) project came into being

Most people in this country are aware that there is more to Indian culture than Shilpa Shetty. Even the popular Bollywood film and music world has much more to offer than Shilpa. There is also the well-known north Indian Hindustani tradition of music and indeed there is the lesser known, but equally important south Indian music system, Karnatic music.

Before my first visit to India I equipped my ears with Ravi Shankar and Hariprasad Chaurasia. By visiting south India first I discovered Balamurali Krishna and L. Subramaniam instead. Furthermore the constant stream of radio and cassette players at virtually every teashop, temple, and private house providing 'film music bore not much resemblance to Hindustani and Karnatic music.

Ten years later and after extended stays and travels - especially in rural India - I came across a nearly bewildering variety of elaborate music styles in every nook and corner of India; their sheer numbers seem to outdo the well-known Bollywood, Hindustani and Karnatik music genres. Listening for hours to the bhajans performed in a tiny temple in Tamil Nadu, the extended length of a panchavadyam performance in Kerala, the intoxicating songs of the Baul minstrels in West-Bengal, or the echo-songs of the Sora Adivasi [\[1\]](#) in the Eastern Ghats got me completely hooked and put me on a quest of the less known regional and rural music genres.

Good things start in Kerala

At the beginning of the 90ties I had a chance to listen to a panchavadyam (Kerala percussion orchestra) performance at the Guruvayur temple. While watching it I was so amazed that I promised myself: One day I will come back and study this wonderful music – and I came back in 1996, where I stayed for more than one year, studying, recording, and documenting, and later analysing the kshetram vadyam. Kshetram vadyam is the traditional percussion dominated temple music of central Kerala performed by professional musician communities. With my assistant, Jutta Winkler, and the help of the British Library Sound Archive in London we have recorded and documented about one hundred hours of traditional music on digital audio and visual media.

The objectives and results of Traditional Music in India

The official birth of Traditional Music in India (TMI) was in 2000, when Janet Topp Fargion, the curator of the World and Traditional Music Section within the British Library Sound Archive, and I, set up a research project “to record, document and research folk, devotional and ritual musics of India” (project concept 2000).

The project secured assistance from the Archives and Research Centre for Ethnomusicology (ARCE) in Delhi – especially in the person of its director, Shubha Chaudhari – and Indian researchers and musicians based in the project areas. The recordist's have left copies of all recordings in the ARCE institute in Delhi.

Part of the project became the collection and documentation of more than 100 musical instruments for the Horniman Museum in London. The recordists and the keeper of the Horniman's musical instruments collection, Margaret Birley, developed the idea to commission musical instruments to be made in the areas, where music and dance was recorded.

In November we started on the first 17 months tour to selected rural and mostly remote areas in India. Until February 2007 five more tours followed comprising a total research time of 3 ½ years.

The project concept from the year 2000 stated:

“Although Indian classical music styles, Hindustani and Karnatic, are well-documented and appreciated in India and all over the world, many of India's traditional music styles have never been recorded, documented or analysed. The project...will concentrate on these important non-classical music styles.

Indian traditional music cultures are rich and diverse, and many can be traced back 3000 years. Nearly all world religions and numerous local cults and sects are prevalent in India, and are still dominant in the everyday lives of millions of people, especially in rural areas. Furthermore, about one third of the world's aboriginal people, being of Dravidian, Indo-Aryan, Tibetan, Austro-Asiatic or Mongolid descent, live in India. The aboriginal people in India are called Adivasi. Due to rapid change within these communities on the Indian subcontinent, however, it is feared that within the near future many folk, devotional and ritual art forms will disappear.

The primary objective is to document and make accessible information in the form of recordings on musical traditions in India. Thus, the main aims of the project are:

- 1) to make high quality digital audio and visual recordings including vocal, instrumental, and dance-music styles,
- 2) to provide detailed documentation of the performers and cultural contexts within which musical activities take place, and
- 3) to make “special recordings” to be used for broader public dissemination and publication. Recordings will be deposited at the NSA (the British Library Sound Archive, RK) and the ARCE (Archive and Research where they will be preserved in perpetuity and made available for consultation. Documentation will be done on the NSA's database which is due to become available on the Internet in January 2001.” (project concept 2000).

During the project it became apparent that the sheer wealth of musical styles and musicians in India, sometimes hardly known outside their villages, makes it very difficult to do a comprehensive project. Very few areas in India, like parts the Western states of Punjab, Rajasthan, and Karnataka, are well-documented and researched. Little work has been done on the remote rural areas or the habitats of the Adivasi, the latter comprising around 7 % of the total population [2]. In many areas music and dance cultures could be regarded as 'endangered'. The main reasons being the extremely fast changing socio-cultural structure and the traditionally high stratification in Indian society.

Therefore the TMI project has been concentrating on the oral culture of distinct communities living in some of the more remote rural areas, where music and dance still play an important part in everyday life.

Until date the TMI covers music and dance from communities of the areas as follows;

- The kshetram (bigger temple) and kavu (smaller temple) art forms of Kerala
- The musical genres on Majuli in upper Assam
- Adivasi music in Bastar (Chattisgarh, central India)
- The music of the Buddhist Monpa in the eastern Himalayas (Arunanchal Pradesh)
- Musical genres of the Sora Adivasi in eastern India (Orissa, Andhra Pradesh)
- Desert music from Banni in Kutch (Gujarat)
- Baul minstrels from West Bengal
- Devotional music in Orissa
- Music of the Chakma people in eastern Mizoram (north east India)
- Village minstrels of Andhra Pradesh

Many music styles are closely related to the popular and the well-known Hindustani and Karnatik systems; they even form their base and those styles are still getting influenced from the rural musics.

Within the TMI project we have recorded around 500 hours of documented digital media (audio and video) and collected over 100 musical instruments (commissioned by the Horniman Museum to the instruments' makers). Though the result in itself is impressive, it is a beginning, but as the German say 'steter Tropfen holt den Stein' (steady drops hollow the stone). Until today a few materials have been published in book-form or website, issued on CD or DVD, or shown in exhibitions (see references).

At the beginning of 2008 the London Horniman Museum plans to "hold a major exhibition showcasing a new collection of musical instruments from rural areas of India, and associated musical traditions." (exhibition concept Horniman Museum)

The Future of Traditional Music in India

The TMI is more than just music and dance. It is about the people, who play, sing, and listen and dance. Music and dance is one important part of their 'identity', what links them to their tradition and helps them to cope with reality. Much more, it is not so much about 'keeping up traditions' but rather about fun, a way to enjoy life.

Interestingly there is a new awareness in 'world music' in the northern parts of the world, but also in India. Especially as the urban developing middle class' interest in traditional handicrafts slowly shifts to other traditional arts, like music and dance.

The benefits of the world wide web enable more and more rural musicians and cultural activists to connect themselves with musicians and aficionados in other parts of the world, creating new possibilities to continue and revive their age-old trade.

More and more museums (like the Horniman's musical instruments exhibition) and exhibition halls (in and outside India) 'discover' not only the traditional fine arts, but also the music and dance from rural India.

The Smithsonian Global Sound Project [\[3\]](#) has started to set up a website, where it makes traditional Indian music accessible.

The aim of the Traditional Music in India project is not just about recording and documenting, but about to exchange with and understanding of rural musicians, to create awareness of the situation of these artists, provide a way to link Indian musicians with each other and the outside world.

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...and the Goddess loves music

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[1] The term 'Adivasi' is commonly used for aboriginal people in India.

[2] See for instance Singh, 1972 p. xiii

[3] See <http://www.smithsonianglobalsound.org/>