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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Hindu Jazz

Pavle Radonic

We commenced at the library cafe and proceeded on a meandering path to our respective buses. A quick look at some tees in the Adventure apparel shop on Waterloo Street turned up nothing of interest. Amongst the fleecy apparel Ranie had recalled the coldest weather she had ever experienced in her life: five degrees somewhere in the north of India. Not surprisingly, Ranie had not forgotten the experience. The trekking shop had taken up residence in what had once been a school attached to the old, ornate Catholic chapel adjacent. It was a first time visit for Ranie; she had no plans for any trekking. A yoga and meditation teacher with a Masters in another field, Ranie was neither climber nor adventurer. Nor in fact was she a coffee kind of girl. But that didn't stop her taking up the suggestion of a cup across the way at Overdoughs.

The staff at Overdoughs, including the usual barista—Cultural Studies, UniMelb—were out at an early dinner. Despite being busy with the preparations for the evening, the lads who remained accommodated. On most visits the staff at Overdoughs seemed to be majority Malay. The manager who could tell you the last time you visited, the number at your table, where you sat and details of your order, was a middle-aged Chinese. The barista at Overdoughs was also Chinese, her parents now settled in Frankston, a bay-side suburb of Melbourne. As in many restaurants, the crew at Overdoughs looked to be without exception smokers, serious stranglers of the unholy weed. Naturally one could not help thinking of the possibility of other substances at an apparently chic eatery bearing such a risqué name, even in Singapore. On some view particularly in Singapore. Whether the name was another example of idiosyncratic Singlish was uncertain.

As usual afternoons at Overdoughs—even nearing 5pm—the seductive visuals presented a misleading picture. Planter boxes of greenery, generous awnings, the cool marble inserts of the former chapel one side and the fine old English church adjacent, with its steep corrugated roof that suggested earlier slate; cobbles under-foot, often the dripping watering-system active, altogether portrayed a pleasant and comfortable nook that the afternoon heat entirely overwhelmed.

It was particularly hot that afternoon. We had fetched April; the end of the first week. Cloud cover had been sparse and no afternoon shower.

One guessed the evening trade was substantial at Overdoughs and a hipster crowd. In recent years Waterloo Street had become an art precinct. Spitting distance away stood the Nanyang Academy of Fine Art. A couple of commercial galleries were close by and then Armenian Street and the State galleries. SOTArise a short stroll away, another School Of The Arts, purpose-built in this case with transparent tiered faculties over-hanging a central courtyard suggesting shared and compounding creativity—dancers feeding sculptors exciting dramaturges and so on.

The Preppy youth one saw elsewhere in the centre, at Starbucks, around the international hotels and the taxi stands, as well as the fashion malls like Iluma, were absent in this immediate area.

These young people would not number among the Overdoughs diners, one could tell. There did exist an alternative, non-conformist arty crowd in Sing'—one would never guess they could be missed from Melbourne—though it was as difficult to locate as the underground for the Fascist occupiers of WWII.

Overdoughs may possibly have drawn particular cells of the rebels. It was not out of the question that this very place, Overdoughs itself and the small courtyard of the old, long disused churches (carrying the new tag Sculpture Square), had become the central hot-bed of dissidents and free-thinkers in Singapore. Not much imagination was needed to circle the inner round with scented candles, guitar plucking in a corner, dart game in another with a highly illegal target pierced and tattered. Jeffrey Archer and Robert Harris novels, glosses on Christianity and Success Strategies would only provide cover for much more strident matter in the evenings here. There was no shortage of Che and Jimi tees in the street over the twenty and more months.

Entering the Overdoughs courtyard one had that sixth sense that can descend over a person in certain shaded rooms and houses. Certainly in the afternoons at O.D. outdoors among the greenery and at the tables an after-taste of this kind seemed to linger.

An average cafe was to be Ranie's fate at Overdoughs on this April day, mid-autumn back in Melbourne, delivered by the young stand-in Malay barista who made up some part of the short-fall with warmth and pleasantries.

Flat, watery, entirely lacking body. Caffeine addicts may have raised a stir. Nothing of any concern for a yoga and meditation-fortified girl like Ranie. That in fact was what she was used to for coffee in Singapore, Ranie declared. It would have been good to intro Ranie—Eranie properly—to something closer to the mark. Never mind; no need fret or dwell on the matter.

Even for a native, a local, the heat was oppressive out in the edible vegetable garden that is the feature and high-light of the setting at Overdoughs. Cherry tomatoes, chives, parsley, bullet chilli and much else in old-style timber crates in the courtyard like the green-grocers must have had for the tatters and cabbage here the same as down in the great Southern land. No doubt most of the fruit, vegetables and leafy greens got delivered to Overdoughs in plastic bags washed and pared like for any other eatery in Singapore. Nevertheless, cooks and other kitchen staff had been seen late afternoons passing between the mounted crates here in the courtyard with a pair of scissors taking cuttings. Elsewhere in Singapore one might have been dubious; at Overdoughs there was more than show.

Five or six fans were mounted on the wall of the building and two or three others free-standing on the paving. Since it had been discovered usually brief sits were taken afternoons at Overdoughs once or twice a week. At under five dollars a cup, the church and chapel laid on, a prospect of the National Library through the side-street with its aeroplane-like shade-wings, the HDB tower alongside showing everyone's laundry on the drying poles, one attained a certain equilibrium and calm in the midst of the city.

A yoga and meditation master might have been expected to find a similar ease in such an oasis. In fact on the contrary, Ranie showed signs of being unexpectedly trapped and confined. The

heat was to blame. All the fans, a dozen of them, sat motionless and mocking sheathed by their wire grills. Usually in the courtyard at O.D. one or two of the old-style aluminum pedestal fans cut the air even without customers. The staff-smokers when they came out usually forgot to switch off. On this particular afternoon Ranie had to make the request herself when the coffee was delivered. Earlier her plea when ordering at the counter indoors had been forgotten.

Ranie needed to go to the other side of Bugis for her Choa Chu Kang bus. We would part on Rochor Road. Like a number of other Singaporeans met over the term, Ranie travelled exclusively by bus on her native soil. The train, the MRT, would have deposited Ranie fifteen or twenty minutes sooner at Choa Chu Kang (almost a full hour Ranie would need bussing out to the far nor'west). Yet despite this fact, like the others willing to pay the price, Ranie travelled to and fro, anywhere she wanted to go in Singapore, solely on the rubber of the buses. In her case she had the luck of the old No. 67 on her line out to her far-flung corner.

Put simply, the business class, the moderately well-heeled and well-dressed, the shiny, bejeweled and perfumed, sought out the speed and stream-lined cleanliness of the tube that reflected their condos and better class of HDBs. By choosing the buses one avoided that portion of one's compatriots, the body-shirted technocrats, high-heeled administrators and earnest aspirants; one avoided the escalators and deep dungeons of the underground, the Ascot inflected announcements warning of the treacherous "platform gap", the mechanized cattle entries and exits, fluorescent lighting, the cavernous echoing hallways.

On the buses the CCTV cameras were less obtrusive. Army lads and armed Security looking for parcel-bombs rarely were found on the buses, especially the old hulking type like the 67. (There has never been seen a stream-lined vehicle of this number pushing on through Little India and beyond with its freight of dark-skinned foreign workers and uncles in shorts and vinyl sandals.) True enough, patrons hammered their pads on the buses like on the trains; jabberers rattled on their hand-phones the same. Perhaps it was delusory the sense of the lesser incidence. The aunties and uncles with their pushers and trolleys were more rarely sighted on the trains. Their instincts could always be trusted. The advertisements on the buses were only selling kindness, courtesy and non-violence to the drivers; a memorable young un-photogenic girl suggested it was kool to offer your seat to the lame, the elderly and pregnant. One could step from the bus into the open air, the shade of a shelter, refreshed from the journey, sometimes delighted and even unaccountably excited. The early opponents of steam and its nefarious machines may have been right after all.

Opposite O.D. on Middle Road stood Fortune Centre. Never entered before despite the enticement of its simple draw. The little eateries around the base did not at first blush offer any allure. That was because the staff remained hidden within. Around the corner in the Queen Street mall fortunes were told by a wide assortment of seers and visionaries. Special lottery tickets were chosen by birds on tree branches; a fat, gold-painted Laughing Buddha had his tummy rubbed by passing hopefuls (it was supposed to increase chances).

This neighbouring 10 - 12storey building could not have been irrelevantly named. Painted white with narrow, probably office windows, the name failed to redeem it unfortunately.

Ranie however had a particular place to introduce. It was her turn. Late last year Ranie had hosted a dinner at Aravind's Restaurant in Little India behind Amara Hotel; taken the responsibility of the menu and caused to have delivered to table spicy rasam soup, rich and spicy cauliflower dip, masala tea and a good deal more that has since slipped a poor gastronome's recall.

Finally a true Indian breakthrough without needing to catch a flight. It would not have been the same in company with a fellow outsider, an angmoh or Chinese, even one who had visited India a dozen times and could quote the vedas.

You needed to watch closely to catch the little dance between the waiter and Ranie at Aravind's. This kind of subtle, underlying warmth and understanding meeting one's own can sometimes be observed in the city: a relaxation of facial muscles as if a smile was imminent; deft nods as much as speech in the exchange; something like the subtle on-stage prompting of one actor to another that an audience in their seats rarely catch. Two play-mates on a see-saw would not be far-fetched.

At the Fortune place the man at the counter was one of those village lads over-flowing with feeling. Complete ease and relish was evident at the introduction. At the Fortune place Ranie may have been more regular too. Did whites perhaps not patronize this particular Tamil eatery? There were some indications. At any rate it was unlikely Ranie had brought a white there before.

The Tamil was a little above average height for his fellows; moustache thick and forming handle-bars that was not so common in the type. The diet of the Tamils gave them brilliant effulgence when they stretched their smile—at least the inherited, traditional diet. A long-lost brother could not have been greeted with greater warmth. One fully expected the man to advance a step and gather his guest into his arms in the time-honoured Slavic manner.

From close quarters the chap instantly heard correctly and understood the sudden greeting in his own language. Returned was the standard reply. Like a couple of home-boys to any observer on the side. The chap seemed to guess there might not be too many more arrows in the quiver and reverted to English for his appreciation of the gesture.

At that early hour we were not stopping for a meal. A brief introduction was sufficient to gladden all concerned. Thank you very much. Thank you very much back and forth. Briefly the menu. No nan. That was North Indian. But chapatti can. Dips the same as Aravind's. Rasam certainly: a pleasure to serve that up. Masala tea. From the description—cinnamon was included—it seemed to be pretty close to the hippy Byron Bay brew from back home.

God byes to all; fare-well and safe passage. A nice find, best of its kind. The food would no doubt be excellent, though that really was the lesser part. This was not the fulsome shop-keeper giving his schtick and laying it on thick. The man wasn't thinking: \$3 rasams, \$2 masalas, maybe we could get him onto the Briyani eventually....

Along the passage, through two heavy frosted-glass double doors, left around the corner the Hindu temple that had been passed three dozen times without entry. In company with Ranie this

was the day. Sandals without socks made it easy. (Did Tamils, real Tamils still with some meaningful connection with their homeland, shod their feet with shoes, socks and stockings at all?) In the middle of last year an invitation to join Ranie at a family occasion at another temple had been declined. Following the Aravind dinner a pass at the prominent temple on Serangoon Road was another opportunity that had gone begging.

We were arrived. Kick off the footwear beside the entry. The hour was about right for the service; or the prayers, Ranie said. In fact we were ten minutes late. There would not be more in the cycle until six o'clock. Never mind.

Casually Ranie had engaged one of the scantily-clad priests. "Priests" Ranie had called them. Their colleagues had been observed from a distance at Sri Manmatha Karuneshvarar on Kallang Road many months now, dressed in their white cotton saris, sometimes with a line of fabric draped over the shoulder, barefoot, hairy chests and shoulders naked. All the lads seemed to be on the fleshy side, a touch wasted looking.

One hesitates to say, but the lads had the appearance of reprobates of some kind, young chaps given to measureless pleasure and indulgence. De-flowered vestal virgins many years before. The Kamasutra wasn't all to do with sex as commonly thought; nevertheless the prohibitions did not apply in the same way in the Hindu religion either apparently. These lads were odd kind of priests to behold, certainly looking through the lense of Western conditioning. Some of the hidden behaviours that were being discovered for our priests struggling with their discipline seemed unabashedly irrelevant at Sri Manmatha.

Certainly no insult intended. It was a vague kind of impression; a good ultimately. Fitting with the looser, unfocused kind of assembly at these prayers, as observed from the doorway at Sri Manmatha. On the evening passes at Sri Manmatha worshippers could be seen seated facing away from the altar even as the coconut milk it looked like was poured out front; even as the music swelled. People sat on the inner steps in easy postures, some huddled in groups chatting. More serious parishioners stretched themselves in prostration, foreheads on the hard tiles. That seemed to be entirely their own affair. They might want it that way. Women and men all together mixed and undifferentiated.

No church one had ever seen or heard of could compare. The song-and-dance Charismatics were carefully structured by comparison. It was an enticing scene; a trifle daunting. If one took a step forward through the doorway at Sri Manmatha or some other Hindu temple during such a gathering, how was one supposed to behave within, a solitary white man?

— You might like the music, Ranie suggested hopefully before the bad news was obtained.

Introducing someone to one's own enthusiasm was always slightly awkward. This was well understood.

Ranie would turn out an excellent guide. A quick, introductory pass was best in such circumstances. The interior of the temple would not detain us long.

It was overwhelming of course with all the elaborate, fantastical statuary. No one alive could adequately explain it all; certainly not Ranie. Hers was not a textual worship and understanding. The Mahabharata, the Upanishads and Vedas—Ranie knew something of the lie of that land. Not a lot. None of that was perhaps intrinsic to true faith. What was the literacy rate in contemporary India even now? Probably no better than the first millennium and a half of Christianity.

Good and well. Chapter and verse had never in fact seemed the crux of belief or even wisdom: it was not a contradictory standpoint for a bibliophile. The living word, the life practice and example, would always be far more suggestive.

But what were all these Chinese doing here praying, not photographing?

A chap up front was addressing the altar somehow. An independent female in the back corner stood in the classic Buddhist pose with the burning joss sticks at her forehead, then switching in the air; eyes closed and face tight. This was no pretense.

Chinese without a doubt. It was difficult to credit and unexpected.

Before the woman a Hindu goddess, Saint or nymph in luscious womanly form, four armed possibly in a kind of seated dance as had been seen in Arabian Desert movies. The Chinese woman seemed to have adopted this deity specifically. There were many to choose from. For a first-timer in a Hindu temple the wrapped Chinese pair came as a surprise.

— Praying for a lottery win, Ranie answered with almost a total lack of irony.

The Chinese could often be found within the Hindu temples, Ranie said.

A large Toto and 4-D outlet sat just past the neighbouring Buddhist temple. In Ranie's mind more than likely the pair here had done their own temple first and after this would swing back to purchase their lottery tickets.

And there was no reason to blame the Chinese in Singapore in praying for lucre, even under the roof of a temple that didn't belong to them. One was in strife in Singapore, like a lot of other places, without a modicum of moola. In Singapore you were in deeper and without a paddle. India would have been no better, neither in Nehru's time nor the Mughals or any other. God forbid the Raj! Meritocracy on a tiny island without minerals or any other natural advantage equals selling your grandmother, your daughter, brother and wife in one big Promotion in order to survive. In slums, gutters and open sewers the punt was the hope of the poor.

Good luck to the pair, full blessing. The outdoors awaited.

In the steamy hot climes the outdoors of the places of worship, the perimeter walls of the temples and shrines, were an integral part. Indoors the temple was fast emptying, the priests beginning to clean and tidy. At Sri Manmatha on Kallang Road the nightly clean-ups had been witnessed a number of times; something rather captivating in itself. In their saris, bare-foot, wielding the long-handled brooms and pans, the ceremonially adorned priests strongly suggested drag. In the rest of Singapore slave-wage, sun-burnt foreign street-sweepers swept the gutters with their sharp brush-brooms right through the middle of the heat. The contrast of the young Hindu priests

was striking. When they caught your eye it recalled the five o'clock shadowed Trannies out of costume in KL when they came down for breakfast in the afternoons.

The priests came out from India, Ranie said, spoke no English and lived in quarters above the temples.

— See there, Ranie's finger pointing to upper storey windows behind the back altar.

During the service, the prayers at Sri Manmatha, the languid movements of the priests surprised. The chap with the thin, two metre long horn blew at his own discretion it seemed; when the drum and bell tickled him sufficiently. Place the fellow in the back of a dark, smoky room he might be backing a celebrated saxophonist out front under the spot-light. As an outsider looking on from the open doorway, from the footpath, you needed to stop bopping and toe-tapping on Kallang Road. The experimental free jazz/noise musicians back in Melbourne needed to know about this Hindu scene. Even Dave Brown, with all his listening to World Music and his extensive CD collection, might not be familiar with such simple, lazy but telling improvisation.

Whenever the chap at Sri Manmatha turned his wrist to pour the milk out front within the cloistered, inner altar, his loose, easy movements looked to be under the rule of the jive. That particular manner too reminded of some old buried visual memory. Roman toga movies during the hot bath scenes it might have been. The young attendants at the baths had been abused by the old men, one understood now; the Spartacus slave rebellion had come to nought; these attendants had been brought in chains to the imperial city, where they performed their function as required.

Somehow the heat seemed to have lessened a couple of hundred metres from Overdoughs. This was without fans too—there had been none apparent within doors here. At the left we exited and Ranie was followed as she slowly, lazily strolled as if in a gallery or museum. Down at Sri Manmatha that was how the congregation did it too, a seeming careless saunter within the temple. These gods did not require any stiff formality. Some might choose to prostrate themselves full length and hold the pose with forehead touching the tiles. Again, up to them.

Ranie was half-stopping at the various figures in their small niches both in the wall of the temple and on the perimeter high wall. Possibly she was afraid of too many questions. The niches were raised only a metre from the ground: an average 1.55m Tamil would not need to bend.

Over and above everything else, the first thing to remark was the jet-black statuary. It was a shock to the sight. Art and iconography had never come in such tones; features were difficult to make out here. No new, unique art-work in a gallery had ever produced such a striking effect.

There was no concession to the great white civilization here. A traveler who had left his ventures late in life struggled to gather his bearings. The location was important—Singapore after all, perhaps the highest per capita consumer of whitening creams in the world....

There may have been one fair skin deity around the back corner. Even the Tamil construction workers riding midnight in the rear of the lorries being deposited at their dorms were rarely as dark as this deepest jet. Could the British, one wondered, have condoned such iconography during their administration? Wouldn't it have been perceived as a threat?

One Mahatma-like sage seated within his little recess was showing some kind of sign. The man was aged, bald, clad in a kind of loin-cloth, all very much like the Mahatma of Independence. Most of our saints and prophets had been prettied and Hollywoodized the last half century at least; this figure would not win fans in the modern age. Here the right hand was raised, the two middle fingers bent back to produce horns. That gesture on the horizontal plane in our Montenegrin region offered an obscenity, a kind of Up yours pal!

There were many mysterious finger signs from the black gods and saints within the niches. The round made by thumb and forefinger signified something that had momentarily slipped Ranie's mind. (A few days later Zainuddin—a Rowther Tamil by ancestry—suggested that particular mudra—hands on knees knuckles down and the rounds made by thumb and forefinger—was said to help still the mind in meditation.) The two bent Mahatma fingers that produced a kind of horns Ranie did not know either.

Earlier on the walk up from the cafe Ranie had mentioned a large Yoga event that was upcoming at East Coast Park, down on the water from Lower Geylang. Next Saturday, or the one following, would draw a big crowd there, Ranie said, where one of the features would be a series of one hundred and eight postures, fifty four each side of the body. It was a strenuous work-out taking a couple of hours to perform. Ranie herself, an experienced yoga teacher, did not know all the movements.

Two or three Krishna figures stood in the niches without any apparent resemblance between them. Krishna took innumerable forms of course, like many gods before monotheism. There were a particular number of emanations of Krishna, Ranie said.

Such a deal of new information overwhelmed. Thankfully Ranie was careful in that regard; this relaxed, easy tour was just what one needed for introduction to Hinduism.

The various holy texts, the various interpretations of this and that matter, glosses and time-lines—there was so much calling for attention. Ranie was far from burdensome.

By far the most striking figure in the niches came near the end of the brief tour, on the northern wall of the temple near the doorway by which we would re-enter again before our departure.

Most of the niches were vertical hollows, a kind of Islamic cylindrical form. This particular niche was a long horizontal, stretching something like two metres in length.

Such breadth was needed in order to accommodate a fully out-stretched handsome young man taking an afternoon nap it appeared. As the figure was fully and regally clothed, with some kind of little cut-out shade stemming from the cap he wore to screen his eyes, the impression was of a short kip under the branches of a laurel perhaps, or some other tree holy to the Hindus. Something about the high fashion, matched so well by such glorious ease, created an impression in itself.

The massive cobra that stood over the Prince's head was clearly protective rather than threatening. Enemies needed to be wary of plots while this good Prince was at repose.

The young man could only have been a Prince, perhaps one figured prior to enlightenment. One could assume such a figure was destined, if not fully arrived. The deportment of limbs was arresting; perfect comfort and ease was perfectly evident. There was a positive glory in the circumstance. Picasso's *Dreaming Girl* was minor by comparison.

This Prince knew no evil; attendants and those who wished the young man well no doubt knew better—therefore the enlistment of the guardian sentry.

This Prince was chosen, a great future awaited him. The forthcoming reign promised fullest and most consummate justice for all.

The wondrous liberty and repose of the Prince was presented to the viewer by some trick of the artist—one needed to acknowledge this was indeed a high order of artistic accomplishment.

Some kind of calculated, imperceptible swivel had turned the Prince slightly outward toward the viewer in order to offer up the fullest sense of sumptuous repose.

Not since the fauns and dryads of Greece and Rome had gods in temples been depicted in anything like such manner; asleep by a brook, under the leaves of an over-hanging olive or umla tree, the hope of the future generations.

It was the last thing one could have expected stepping from the busy, dirty roadway, from the shadows of the concrete towers, the heat and the haze.

Before this delightful form the bells and trumpet were not required to transport the viewer to another place and time.