'Vedic metal': A discussion of global and local identity in the practice of extreme metal in the South-Indian community in Singapore

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Abstract

The recent Esplanade performance by an extreme metal quartet, Rudra, of their own material in a genre they call 'Vedic metal', disguises a number of issues: a lack of presence, the chequered fortunes of musics of popular culture in Singapore; accepting an invitation by an event company to perform and be paid for their performance as an underground group; and accepting the invitation to perform in an annual Indian arts festival, previously known and accessible only to Indian classical and folk arts practices. Since their formation in 1992, Rudra's presence and practice has posed a number of problems for local studies concerning the musicians who compose, perform and generate forms of extreme metal. Their continued existence also is indicative of the support they receive as well as sustainability of their endeavour. By focussing on the group Rudra and activities surrounding them, I will draw attention to the sound and textual material in their music, their sources and resources and speculate on the nature of their relationship from global and local perspectives.

Between the 10th and 12th November 2006, at the Outdoor Theatre overlooking the waterfront at Singapore's recent and most highly publicized concert space, the Esplanade, an extreme metal quartet Rudra performed their own compositions. They had been invited to play as part of an annual Indian Arts festival called *Kalaa Utsavam*. Their recent performance is evidence of sustainability of their endeavour and support received in the last fourteen years. George Lipsitz (1990, p. 99) suggests what a performative act reveals constitutes a dialogic process 'embedded in collective history…nurtured by the ingenuity of artists.'

On the other hand, this performative act reveals a lack of written narratives about the group. Rudra's emergence at the Esplanade recalls Michel Foucault's (1994, pp. 380-1) view of an event as a 'reversal of a relationship of forces…the entry of a masked other'. Moreover, Rudra's presence, or lack of presence, in written discussions of musical communities in Singapore, points to the complex processes and procedures in acknowledging authors and purveyors of their own material. The in/significance of Rudra is not only the consequence of self- or lived-expression but also that of political, legal, psychological, social, moral and aesthetic layers in operation. In Foucault's (1994, pp. 213-4) words these are 'traits we establish as pertinent, continuities we recognize or the exclusions that we practice'. For example, Rudra's recent Esplanade performance disguises the chequered fortunes of musics of popular culture in Singapore. Kong's (2006, p. 104) narrative account begins with a crackdown in the early 1970s on practitioners of rock/pop music because of its unfortunate association with drug abuse and immoral values.

A considerable shift in attitude is perceived through the 1990s where such music was associated with redefining Singapore's social heritage and identity and more recently seen to contribute towards the creation of a more vibrant and fashionable city atmosphere (Kong, 2006, p. 104). Therefore, Rudra's formation and emergence in rock/pop music in Singapore during the 1990s might be considered propitious timing. Yet 'Vedic metal' is not mentioned nor Rudra acknowledged as creators and performers of their own material as well as pioneers contributing to redefining local rock/pop music heritage in Singapore.

Rudra's lack of mention may have resided in their identity as one of several underground musical communities – an identity the group acknowledges:

> The music we play keeps us underground by titillating the palate of the small but faithful metalheads. Staying sane is the best advantage of being an underground artiste as we don't have to put a false front to the general public (Audioreload 2006).

Their Esplanade performance, however, resulted from an invitation by an event company to participate as paid performers, which might seem ironic for an underground group. To paraphrase Lipsitz (1990, p. 3), their performance epitomises a tension between identities, underground and mainstream, and music as commercial endeavour and an expression of lived experience.

Finally, Rudra's Esplanade performance is instructive at a cultural level. They were invited to perform in an annual Indian Arts Festival; previously accessible only to Indian classical and folk arts practices. Bassist/vocalist K. Kathirasan recalls that 'we were invited to play as part of an [annual] Indian Arts festival called *Kalaa Utsavam*. We were…nervous…a metal band being showcased in a traditional environment. But we managed to pack the venue for three consecutive nights with a few watching us all three nights' (Rudra, 2006).

Strangely, no mention is made of the presence of an extreme metal community comprising South-Indian youth in Lee's (2001, p. 421) work on music in Singapore:

> The majority of Indians in Singapore speak Tamil…temple music from the Carnatic tradition…is performed to announce daily prayer times and during festivals such as *Thaipusam* and *Thimithi*. Other genres include *bhajanas* (Sanskrit *bhajans*), film music and Hindustani and Carnatic classical music.

Rudra's in/significance compels historical enquiry and explanation which has been hampered by a lack of written narratives about their practice. In this paper, I draw from a variety of primary and secondary sources such as interviews and material drawn from websites to focus on the group Rudra and activities surrounding them. I will then draw attention to the sound and

textual material in their music, their sources and resources and speculate on the nature of their relationship from global and local perspectives.

Rudra: A brief chronology

Rudra is the name given to the God of Storm, and in later Hinduism, Shiva, God of Destruction. The aggressive character of its music and unique identity, f/using western and Indian musical instruments, resources, as well as combining English and Sanskrit lyrics, Vedic imagery and philosophical themes are combined in what they call 'Vedic metal':

> Our lyrics deal with the philosophy found in the Vedas called Vedanta. We are very much inspired by that school of thought and hence, we call our music 'Vedic metal' (Aging Youth, 2004).

They first met as a trio in 1991 comprising K. Kathirasan (bass, vocals), Shivanand Palanisamy (drums) and M. Balasubramaniam (guitar):

> All of us met [at a local polytechnic] where we were pursuing our studies in Engineering. We soon realized that we had another interest...Metal music (Rudra, 2002).

The group was first formed in 1992 and called themselves Rudhra (a mispelling of Rudra). They recorded their first song for a Singapore Rock compilation in 1993, three more for a second compilation in 1994, and a demo-release called *The Past* in 1995. The band broke up in 1996 and members got involved in several other bands but some members still wanted to pursue the idea of incorporating Vedic elements in extreme metal. Towards the end of 1996, they re-formed as Rudra and released their first album Rudra in 1998. A second album, *Aryan Crusade* in 2001 earned them a top 40 albums of the year placing in a now-discontinued local magazine *BIGO* (Before I Get Old) and frequent air-play on a local (now discontinued) radio-station. By this time, Rudra had become synonymous with the label 'Vedic metal'. *Kurukshetra* (the name of a battlefield in the Indian epic *Mahabharata*) was released in 2003 and was followed by *Brahmavidya: Primordial I* (Absolute Knowledge: Primordial Self) in 2005. International tour itineraries by now included Malaysia, India, Thailand and Indonesia with plans for the USA. Recent local public performances have included *Rock On, Singapore!* (June 2005) as well as the Esplanade performance (November 2006). Earlier this year, Rudra made a tour of three US cities (Pennsylvania, Minnesota and New York) – a tour which was partially sponsored by the local composers and performers association (COMPASS).

Contextualising extreme metal and Rudra

Rudra's music and performance is closely aligned with genres contained in extreme metal practice. According to Kahn-Harris (2006, p. 129), the extreme metal scene emerged in the 1980s 'out an interconnected musical and institutional rejection of heavy metal, more influenced by punk bands'. This brought about 'more radicalised forms of metal that eschewed melody and clear singing in favour of speed, down-tuned guitars and growled and screamed vocals.' An overriding consideration of this entire spectrum of sounds is distortion and amplification. Fast drumming with the frenetic pace and/or abrupt changes in rhythmic meter or time-signature become another dimension dominating the song. This dominant drumming is accentuated by tuned-down bass guitars but in a way that the rhythm guitar riffs are given an indistinct feel. Melodically, guitars deliver frenetically paced passages either in short bursts or what might sound like 'prolonged wails'. Vocal articulation of the lyrics generally takes the form of wails or screams, sometimes as short phrases spat or shouted out, and growls of varying textural density and depth of resonance. Occasionally, there are songs which resemble conventional songs in popular culture. Performance of lyrics suggests *ametrical* structures not dissimilar to forms of recitation of religious texts.

Lyrical content ranges from angst-filled and abusive to the deeply social, political and philosophical presented in a variety of forms, from poetic through to aphoristic 'blog-texts'. Since the lyrics are presented in non-conventional structures, they have considerable influence on musical materials, particularly musical form and content, which includes harmonies and accompanying textures and timbres. Songs in extreme metal practice therefore are perceived to employ unusual chord progressions or 'bewilderingly complex tonal structures' (Berger 1999a). The difficulty of matching form and coherence in comparison with established musical/poetic forms in popular culture render theses songs 'chaotic' or 'breaking down into near formlessness' (Reynolds & Press, 1995).

Rudra's exposure to and interest in extreme metal came in their later teems because it was a medium where 'serious subjects can be handled with ease and it has its aggressive moments to drive home facts which are difficult to accept by the masses' (Rudra, 2002). Over the years, they have concentrated more on lyrical content towards philosophical issues while retaining musical characteristics of extreme metal (Rudra, 2006). For instance, the title of their 2003 album *Kurukshetra* was more than a name of an ancient battlefield from the *Mahabharata*:

> We watch this battle [Truth & Falsehood] every time we are caught in a dilemma...I am my own worst enemy. I am my own best friend and so I am the very battlefield *Kurukshetra* (Audioreload, 2006).

For Kahn-Harris (2004, p. 110), the practice of extreme metal is interpreted as a 'transgressive experience' which is 'produced through practices that cross over or (more usually) straddle the principal boundaries that structure our social reality: death/life, good/evil and pure/impure'. Since there is a symbiotic relationship between transgression and art as well as ritual practice, DeNora (1997) suggests that 'Music motivates but also exceeds the body'.

Unfortunately, it is the excesses, *extra-musical* dimensions and negative connotations that most discussions of extreme metal tend to dwell on. Berger (1999b) suggests that 'the music provides a source of individual empowerment, responsibility and community among people who have suffered as a result of changes in the structure of capitalism'. This is all the more telling when Kong's (2006, p. 107) accounts focus on slam-dancing at heavy metal concerts more than the actual music or music-

making. Very little is known about local creators and performers of the various genres of rock/pop music, even less about the musical material.

Given its lack of appropriate exposure, only a few musicians can earn a living from their activities within the extreme metal scene. Nevertheless, Kahn-Harris' (2004, p. 113) study reveals that by earning a living away from the extreme metal scene, an overwhelming majority successfully manage economic security. Rudra members, for instance, possess tertiary qualifications and hold full-time jobs. Music is for them a pastime pursued professionally:

> We don't make money out of it but we wouldn't want to suffer from huge losses too. We do have complete artistic control of our music. And neither do we have to increase our sales to feel good as we do normally sell fairly enough to make any relatively small record label happy. We don't want to be full-time musicians. We want to pursue it as a passion. And to be realistic, it is impossible to make money out of writing original compositions in Singapore (Rudra, 2006).

'Vedic metal' as global and local identity

In an article on the Anglo-Indian community and western ballroom music in Lucknow, Shope (2004, p. 175) suggests ways in which people produce their own identities within the context of their relationships to contrasting groups between which they are considered situated. Shope emphasises production of identity marked simultaneously by continuity and change and the power of individual agency in its construction. 'This is what we do' that lays claim to 'this is what we are' crystallizes the notion of identity in performance. Shope's argument is instructive when applied to 'Vedic metal' and their sense of identity. Rudra members consider themselves third generation Indians in Singapore. They studied Tamil as a second language in the Singapore school system. They were also brought up with religious affiliation to Hinduism, which they claim as their 'innate cultural (not just religious) identity' (Rudra, 2002). As third generation Indians, however, 'we are more exposed to English and we speak English most of the time' (Metal-Rules 2004).

The greater exposure and affiliation to the use of English marks the significance of Rudra's identity and practice of extreme metal in at least two ways. First, Laing (1997, p. 123) identified one of the three 'later great waves' as generating own-language musics across the globe, citing the success of American rap in the 1990s. This own-language movement adaptation has equal relevance for the global and local practices of extreme metal:

> ...below the 'global' horizon, the 'local' co-exists more easily with the Anglophone in music than in most other cultural forms...Partly for these reasons, 'local' (read national) musical modes, forms and traditions are tenacious and provide a resource of themes, rhythms, tunes for young musicians (1997, p. 123).

The rise of local 'scenes' not only within but also outside of an Anglo-American 'base' is inextricably linked to a unique characteristic of the extreme metal scene, its decentralisation, which in turn has an impact on the global scene. For example, Kahn-Harris (2006, p. 129) identifies Malaysia as one of many 'local' scenes in the development of the global extreme metal scene. Through 'Vedic metal', Rudra have arguably contributed to the development of another local 'scene' on the global map. Following Laing (1997) and Kahn-Harris (2006), the emergence of local 'scenes' in the global scene is inextricably linked to a unique characteristic of the practice in the extreme metal scene – its decentralisation. It is this decentralisation that has enabled Rudra to forge their unique identity locally and globally. A good case in point is Rudra's invitation by an event organiser who had been impressed by their live performance in Bangalore, India in 2002 (Rudra, 2006).

Their global and local identities, however, are not unproblematic. While Rudra see parallels between 'Vedic metal' and Anglo-American groups who 'align themselves with European *pagan religions*' (Rudra, 2006), they reject similar alignments from extreme metal groups around the world – even groups who influenced them profoundly:

> Sepultura was one of the greatest extreme metal bands to us. Their early albums *Beneath the Remains* and *Arise* very much inspired us...we never grew to like their album *Roots*. It didn't mean much that they were cultural...Sepultura's incorporation of traditional roots in metal to me was a misfit. We are not conscious of any work after the *Chaos AD* album inspiring our musical direction (Rudra, 2006).

Secondly, Rudra's local identity epitomises situatedness and consequently fragmentation within the South Indian community in Singapore; for instance, South Indian youth and an older community who subscribe to music of South Indian film. Moreover, Rudra's lived experience in Singapore does not acknowledge a variety of musical and cultural influences among many communities of non-Indian abstraction as well as underground communities, for example, *Mat Rock*, practitioners of extreme metal in the Malay community who are more distinguishable by their use of the Malay language in their lyrics.

Thirdly, the unique identity of 'Vedic metal' resides in extreme metal that f/uses Sanskrit with English. However, is Rudra one of the many 'Vedic metal' or extreme metal practitioners in Singapore? Are all South Indians religiously affiliated to Hinduism? How effective is Sanskrit as a local signifier for a community who subscribe to Vedic metal as opposed to other forms of extreme metal? While their use of English renders their music more porous globally, how does it help 'Vedic metal' against a global outpouring of as many Anglophone-influenced practices rooted more by the use of English lyrics than localized signifiers?

Rudra's practice, therefore, raises an uncomfortable question of their identity in the local and global extreme metal scene as does their supporters who may not be all South Indian nor Hindu nor even understand Sanskrit. Yet such an inquiry articulates the importance of understanding Rudra's identity and lived experience as local and global practitioners of extreme metal. Rudra's presence, as composers and performers of 'Vedic metal', questions modes of organizing ideas and interpretations that have hitherto excluded them from written narratives about locally produced pop/rock music in Singapore.

But it is precisely their in/significance that challenges us towards the need for further and future scholarship *of* and *about* the musical practice of extreme metal in Singapore.

Acknowledgment

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