

# Hindu Music In Bangkok: The Om Uma Devi Shiva Band

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## Abstract

This research focuses on the Om Uma Devi Shiva, a Hindu band in Bangkok, which was founded by a group of acquainted Hindu Indian musicians living in Thailand. The band of seven musicians earns a living by performing ritual music in Bangkok and other provinces. Ram Kumar acts as the band's manager, instructor and song composer. The instruments utilized in the band are the dholak drum, tabla drum, harmonium and cymbals. The members of Om Uma Devi Shiva band learned their musical knowledge from their ancestors along with music gurus in India. In order to pass on this knowledge to future generations they have set up music courses for both Indian and Thai youths. The Om Uma Devi Shiva band is an example of how to maintain and present one's original cultural identity in a new social context.

**Keywords:** *Hindu Music, Om Uma Devi Shiva Band, Hindu Indian, Bangkok Music*

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## Introduction

Bangkok is a metropolitan area in which people of different ethnic groups live together, weaving together their diverse ways of life. Hindu Indians, considered an important ethnic minority in Bangkok, came to settle in Bangkok during the late 18 century A.D. to early 19 century A.D. At the time, India had become a British colony, which resulted in Indian people migrating to other countries. One of their destinations was Southeast Asia, especially countries like Malaya, Singapore and Burma which were also British colonies, making the migration easier. According to Pande, A. (2014:138), during colonialism when plantations of tea, coffee and rubber sprang up in Malaya, the government sponsored the migration of Indian labors into the region along with subordinate officers and traders, artisans and money lenders. Additionally, with the founding of the Indian National Army as an independence movement in Southeast Asia, Indian men poured into the region.

However, Indians migrated into Thailand for different reasons. Mani (1993, as cited in Agarwal, 2018:133) said that the most important factor that contributed to the migration of Indians into Thailand was economic. Since in the 20th century, droughts, crop failures, poverty and unemployment in India drove people to take the risk of migrating into Thailand to seek jobs and a better life. Moreover, the political problem of the partition of Indian and Pakistan also led to the migration of Indian people to Thailand. Seeing the success of Indian migrants, others followed. Most of them settled in Bangkok where there were already Indian settlements and given that Bangkok was the major urban center and the capital of the country; clearly, there were better chances of making a living in Bangkok than elsewhere.

Hindu Indians did not come in large numbers to settle in Thailand; as a consequence, they were considered a minority group with little political power compared to much larger migrant Indian groups in Malaysia or Singapore. Generally, Hindu Indians in Thailand earn their living as traders. They often reside in Bangkok's central business districts such as Sukhumvit, Silom and Sathorn. Preecharaj, D. (2008:64-65) categorizes the origin of Hindu migrants in Thailand into five groups, as follows:

1. Hindu Indians from Uttar Pradesh
2. Hindu Indians from Sindh and Punjab
3. Hindu Indians from Gujarat and Rajasthan
4. Hindu Indians from Tamil Nadu in the South of India and the north of Sri Lanka in the area of Jaffna peninsula
5. Hindu Indians from Bengal, especially from Dhaka and Chittagong

Hindu communities in Bangkok have expanded continuously since the founding of Thai-India diplomatic relations on July 30, 1947. At present, they are found in Silom, Sathorn, Yannawa, Phahurat, Ban Khaek and Sukhumvit. (Ibid:65) These Indian migrants brought with them a musical culture which plays a major role in religious rituals. This research aims to study the Bangkok Hindu immigrants' musical culture, particularly as it relates to the Om Uma Devi Shiva band, as it is one of the famous Hindu Indian bands in Bangkok.

### Background of the Om Uma Devi Shiva Band

The Om Uma Devi Shiva band was founded in 1993 A.D. by Shiva Kumar Kor and his friends in Bangkok to sing and perform rituals devoted to Hindu deities. The rituals and music are performed in various Hindu temples in Bangkok, including the residences of mediums (Shiva Kumar Kor, interview, 2019). Most of the musicians in the band were born in India and educated in Delhi. For cultural exchange and to enhance the performances, musicians from India are regularly invited to join the band. The importance of Om Uma Devi Shiva band in terms of maintaining an Indian identity contribute to its importance as a cultural presence in Bangkok.

The Om Uma Devi Shiva band, with its office located on Tripetch Road, Wang Burapha Phirom subdistrict, Phra Nakhon district, Bangkok. The leader of the group is Shiva Kumar Kor, now 51, migrated from India to Thailand when he was 13 years old. Shiva Kumar Kor owns a restaurant and a store selling candles and incense sticks. He married Suwanna Chinpraditsuk, daughter of an immigrant Chinese man, who owns a graven image store. At present, Suwanna helps her husband in all aspects of the band's work: contacting customers and musicians, setting up rituals and offerings, and advising musicians invited from India on Thai conduct and behavior in the workplace (Shiva Kumar Kor, interviewed April 9, 2019).

Ram Kumar, the manager of the Om Uma Devi Shiva band, explained that he was born in New Delhi, India and is now 58 years old. He has lived in Thailand for more than 20 years at Lam Lookka Klong 2, Pathum Thani Province. At first, Ram Kumar came to take a job as a singer at the Bangkok Holiday Inn hotel, Silom, where he worked for ten years. His roles in the Om Uma Devi Shiva include being a manager, an instructor, a composer and a singer (Ram Kumar, interview, 2019).



Figure 1. The Om Uma Devi Shiva Band. Source: Author, taken on April 9, 2019.

The Om Uma Devi Shiva band (see Figure 1) consists of seven musicians, with Shiva Kumar Kor as the band leader. Every Tuesday the band performs a musical ritual for 1-2.5 hours at its regular stage in the Phahurat area in Bangkok while rehearsals take place at the store of Shiva Kumar Kor. The band can be hired to perform at weddings, ceremonies, festivals or funerals, and the number of musicians in each performance varies according to the job. The rate of a performance

starts at 15,000 baht (\$482) and increases for performances staged in provincial areas, according to the distance travelled; for example, a performance at Chiang Mai costs 40,000 baht (\$1300). The rate includes the ritual performance, offerings, and Panchmeva or five kinds of dry fruits used in the puja ritual: almonds, cashew nuts, raisins, dates, and sugar. A Brahmin ritual is also performed, and the host of the event may give expenses directly to the Brahmin in the same way that Buddhists offer expenses to monks in Buddhist prayer services (Suwanna Chinpraditsuk, interview, 2019). As for earnings, the musicians get approximately 1,000-1,500 baht each per job. One of the most remarkable members of the band is a dancer who comes directly from India. Songs in the band's performances are composed by Ram Kumar (Ram Kumar, interview, 2019). Members of the Om Uma Devi Shiva band all believe that Indian music will remain in existence in Thailand for some time to come since the band is still popular and is often hired to perform on special occasions such as wedding ceremonies, newborn ceremonies, etc.

Concerning the role of the Brahmin, Agarwal, R. (2018:135) explained that in a society of diasporic Hindus, an informal network of Indian Brahmins has developed; they provide a service to the laity for rituals such as marriages, festival ceremonies etc., including delivering religious teachings. Since Brahmins act as mediators between humans and gods, it is impossible to conduct any religious ceremony without a Brahmin's assistance. Hindu communities in Thailand usually invite Brahmins from India to stay in the country for a period of time, and as the need for Brahmins is growing, Brahmin friends and relatives of the preceding groups follow. Hence, it was found that most Brahmins who stay and work in Thailand have come from the same area in India.

### **Music Knowledge Transmission**

Indian classical music can be transmitted from ancestors to descendants and from teacher (Guru) to disciples (Sishya). Vedabala S. (2017:168) said that an old and important tradition in music transferal is the teacher-disciple of guru-shishya system in which a guru orally and individually taught his disciples who stayed at the guru's residence called gurukul and did the house chores in return. A guru's responsibility was not only to instruct music to the disciples, but also to shape their personality and to teach them life philosophies. Presently, the way people live their lives has changed, and, as a result, the teacher-disciple system has also changed and declined accordingly, although some of these teacher-disciple relationships still remain in practice. Deshpande (1987) also mentioned that learning and practicing in the teacher's residence is an important characteristic of Indian classical music knowledge transferal. The system emphasizes individual learning from the guru using strict and intense ways of coaching, resulting in perfectly skilled disciples. Members of the Om Uma Devi Shiva band learnt music from various music gurus in New Delhi, India, such as guru Hari Shangar Roy (Ram Kumar, interview, 2019). The band's Brahmin also studied in the academy for Brahmins in India. As for transmitting musical knowledge, the band has set up a course in Indian music for youths at Suwanna Chinpraditsuk's store, 95/44 Phahurat rd., Wang Burapapirom Subdistrict, Phra Nakhon District, Bangkok, which both Indian and Thai students attend (Shiva Kumar Kor, interview, 2019).

### The Musical Performances

The musical performance of the Om Uma Devi Shiva band begins with prayers to gods and goddesses. It is important for Hindus to worship the God Ganesha before performing any ritual. Narintharaporn, K. (1975:18) explained that Hindus consider Ganesha the god of obstacle removal who can provide success for any business. Therefore, he is named Viganeshavara, meaning lord who overcomes obstacles, and Sitthithada, meaning provider of success. Those who worship Ganesha will prosper and meet with auspiciousness.

After the Ganesha worship ritual, the Brahmin says a Sanskrit prayer to invite the gods and to present offerings to them. However, if the performance is unrelated to any religious ritual, the Brahmin can be excluded. Subsequently, the band begins its devotional songs praising Ganesha, Shiva, Uma, Narayana, Kali, Vishnu, Brahma and Saraswati, respectively. Songs with content such as love, joy and nature are also played, but the finale must be the Arati song. (Shiva Kumar Kor, interview, 2019). The 11 songs of the Om Uma Devi Shiva demonstrated for this research are as follows:

1. Ganesha song; a four-verse song about the sacrifice of offerings: honey, sugar, milk and desserts, to God Ganesha asking for his blessings;
2. Shiva song; a devotional song that begins with the phrase “Om Nama Shiva” to pay homage to Shiva and to sacrifice offerings and ask for his blessings;
3. Laksmi Narayana song; a devotional song asking for blessings from God Narayana and Goddess Laksmi. The song that presents the incarnations of Narayana as Krishana, Rama and Laksman;
4. Uma Devi song; a devotional song asking Goddess Uma for blessings and for her to grant a wish to have a baby;
5. Phool Tumhe Bheja Hai Khat Mein (A letter with a flower for her); a love song about a letter enclosed with flowers which a man gave to his lover to let her know his heart had love for her as great as the sea;
6. Neele Gagan Ke Tale (Under the blue sky); a song about love that blossoms under a blue sky and a beautiful landscape;
7. Yeh Dosti hum Nahin Todenge (Friendship is not to harm friends); a song about friendship in which friends do not harm friends;
8. An Indian classical style song about Krishna praising and appreciating nature. This song features a dance from the dancer;
9. Ta-ka-te; a song about friends looking at each other;
10. The Saraswati song; a song praising Goddess Saraswati; and
11. The Arati song; a finale song accompanied with Sankha blowing to praise Goddess Uma. At the beginning of the song, musicians pay respect to the goddess by wai (Shiva Kumar Kor, interviewed April 9, 2019).

One doctrine that strongly influences Hindu religious songs is the Bhakti, which originated in South India in the 6th century A.D. Beck, G.L. (2019:5) explained that the Bhakti emphasized love and devotion to deities and favored an approach that utilized songs composed in vernacular such as Tamil and Telugu in South India and Hindi and Braj in North India. Tanaka, T. (2008:87) said that the Bhakti Hindu devotional songs have developed in many styles, languages and repertoires such as Bhajans, Kirtans, Aratis, and Vishnu. Concerning the importance of Hindu devotional songs, Karthick, R.K.S. (2006:35) said that Indian scholars believe that music,

considered to be a form of Tapasya (penance), is the easiest way to reach the gods or to attain salvation. Similarly, Beck, G.L. (2019:8) said that Hindu devotional songs and lyrics which portray gods or goddesses vividly in what may be called “verbal icon” enabled the aspirants to effectively focus their minds on their deity.

### The Musical Instruments

The instruments used in the Om Uma Devi Shiva band are the dholak drum, the tabla drum, harmonium and manjira, all of which will be further discussed in detail below.

#### *Dholak Drum*



Figure 2. Dholak Drum. Source: Author, taken on April 9, 2019.

Drums are musical instruments heard in most cultures everywhere (Buathong and Binson, 2020:114). The drums provide significant energizing support to the ensemble. Miner, A. (2000:346) explained that the dholak is a medium-size barrel drum widespread throughout the northern region of India. Its two heads are single skin fastened to leather hoops that are laced across the body with cotton cord. The player places the dholak on the lap or floor when sitting down, or suspends it from the neck or ties it around the waist when standing. The dholak accompanied professional vocal and instrumental music and dance into the 19th century, but was gradually replaced by the tabla. Nowadays, it accompanies devotional and regional music including domestic songs celebrating births and weddings. Kesava, a musician in the Om Uma Devi Shiva band, noted that the double heads of the dholak are made of goat skin, while the inner rims are made of bamboo and along the drum barrel are stretched ropes for sound tuning.

#### *Tabla Drum*



Figure 3. Tabla. Source: Author, taken on April 9, 2019.

Tabla (see Figure 3) is a kind of twin drum of Hindustani or Northern India music, which first appeared around 11-12 century A.D. when Islam dominated Northern India. Pikulsri, C. (1987:26-27) explained that since Muslim culture spread throughout Northern India, musical instruments affected by the culture were mostly Northern Indian instruments and the new instruments in Northern India emerged from Muslim were the sitar and tabla. Pikulsri, C. described further that the tabla consists of two drums. The one on the left of the player, called Baanya, is a kettle drum with bass tones whose barrel is made of copper. The baanya's head is 24 cm. in diameter and 27 cm. in height (excluding its pedestal). The drum on the right of the player, called Dhaanya, gives higher tones than baanya at the fifth interval. Its head is 18 cm. in diameter and 26 cm. in height (excluding its pedestal). To play the tabla, the player sits on the floor with the drums on their ring-shaped pedestals in front of him. The tabla is played to accompany instrumental songs, vocal songs and dances.

The most important characteristic of the tabla is its clear echoing pitch, similar to the sound of metal being tapped. This particular sound is created using black tuning paste (Gab or Syahi in Hindi) made of plant resin, ashes and various metal powders such as iron and manganese, all ground together and applied on the center of each drum's head. The precise mixture is responsible for the drum's unique bell-like sound that distinguishes the tabla from other Hindustani drums and enables clear accurate pitch tuning as required.

### *Harmonium*



Figure 4. Harmonium. Source: Author, taken on April 9, 2019.

The harmonium (see Figure 4) is a free reed instrument of the aerophone kind. It was invented by a Frenchman, Alexandre Debain, in 1842 A.D. The original one, similar to an organ, was a large instrument equipped with keyboards and two pedal pumps for its bellows. At the end of the 19th century, Europeans introduced

harmoniums into India. However, their large size and the way that a player needed to sit on a chair to play did not correspond to Indian culture in which people normally sat on the floor. According to Brockschmidt, S.K. (2003:14-19), in 1875 A.D. a Calcutta man named Dwarkanath Ghose (or Ghosh) invented an Indian-style harmonium based on Debain's instrument. Ghosh's harmonium was a portable box instrument with its bellows at the back of the instrument and a keyboard on the top. Its structure and mechanism were simplified, so as to be less expensive and easy to repair. Ghosh also added drone reeds to make a distinctly Indian drone sound which was not present in the European harmonium. Abels, B. (2010:26-33) explained that the most significant difference between an Indian harmonium and its European counterpart is that the bellows are attached to the back of the instrument where it is operated with the player's left hand. The Indian harmonium has no legs nor any supporting structure as it was intended to be played while sitting on the floor. In Abels' opinion, the Indian harmonium that Ghosh invented was based on the harmonium flute, a small accordion with a bellows at the back, and the table organ, a small portable box organ, rather than Debain's version.

In the Om Uma Devi Shiva band, Kesava is an Harmonium player. He gave a demonstration of harmonium playing using his right hand to press the keyboard and play the melodies, and using his left hand to push and pull the bellows to vibrate the air and thereby create the sounds. The harmonium has seven notes; sa (do), ri (re), ka (mi), ma (fa), pa (sol), dha (la), ni (ti) and can be played to accompany any song. He mentioned that the harmonium comes in various sizes depending on one's preference and its prices vary from several thousand baht up to 40,000 baht (\$1300) (Kesava, interview, 2019).

### *Manjira*



Figure 5. Manjira. Source: <https://in.pinterest.com/pin/724375921306352270/> (Accessed June 4, 2021).

Sashital (2017:75-76) explained that the manjira cymbals are a percussion instrument of great antiquity since they were found in the excavations of the Indus Valley, a civilization which existed about 2,500 B.C. Cymbals consist of two brass or bronze concave plates that produce a sharp ringing sound when struck together. The metal plates can also be used singly with a beater, or a mallet made of wood or metal. Cymbals are known by different names in India; the small ones used in devotionals are called manjira, the large ones are called kafi, and other names found are jhanj, tala, khanjani etc. Cymbals, like drums, have an important role in



temple worship in Hinduism and Buddhism. Small cymbals are used for rhythm by performers of Kirtans (musical narration); and the large ones, called Zariga, are used in Arati rituals.

### Conclusion

The Om Uma Devi Shiva is a small Hindu band with seven musicians and a Brahmin. Four kinds of Indian traditional instruments are used in the band, namely, dholak drum, tabla drum, harmonium and cymbals. Since in Hinduism, music is considered a way to approach the gods, most parts of the performances include prayers, offerings and songs that are related to rituals devoted to deities. The band is popular among Hindus who live in communities in the business districts in Bangkok and who still maintain their religious rituals accompanied with music as a way of maintaining their identity and roots. The process of performing rituals and music is to create confidence in their original culture and to present their identity in a new political context, in this case Thailand; according to Brah (1996), this is an important process for immigrants settling in a new country. Waghorne (2004:14, as cited in Agarwal, R. 2018:134) saw that religion, history and language gave a sense of belongingness which is a major component of community formation.

Agarwal, R. (2018:137) noted that diasporic Indian communities have settled in Thailand for generations. Even if they still maintain links with their motherland, they acculturate with Thai culture. These Indians have learned the Thai language, they have taken part in some Buddhist activities and Thai royal ceremonies, representing their respect for the country and their inclination to be part of Thai society. Moreover, in the research, a marriage between a Hindu Indian man, Shiva Kumar Kor, and a Thai woman, Suwanna Chinpraditsuk, was observed, showing how a Hindu has become part of Thai society.

Realising the importance of the guru-sishaya system, the Om Uma Devi Shiva band occasionally invites music gurus from India to teach their original styles and they themselves set up Indian music courses in singing and drum playing for those who are interested, including Thai people, enabling an easier approach to Indian music in Thailand. These kinds of interactions between people of different cultures are considered acculturation which, according to David D.S. and Berry, J.W. (2006:11), covers all the changes that arise following contact between individuals and groups of different cultural backgrounds. There are four strategies in approaching acculturation: assimilation, integration, separation and marginalization. The practices of the members of Om Uma Devi Shiva conform to integration, which is when one tries to maintain one's original culture while having interactions and participating in larger society (Ibid:34-35).

The important instruments used by the Om Uma Devi Shiva band are the dholak and tabla drums and the harmonium. A distinguishing feature of note and rhythm pattern repetitions was also found in the Ganesha song. The instruments used and the pattern repetitions contribute to inducing the faith of followers and their approach to the essence of the lyrics. According to Qureshi (1986), the use of

harmonium together with dholak drum can create a sacred ambience to stimulate faith in ritual followers, while the repetition of certain rhythms can intensify the spirituality of the song. As only a few Indian music bands work in Thailand, the Om Uma Devi Shiva is popular and is often hired to perform at Hindu events where the Hindus like to express the strong bonds of their traditions. Accordingly, the Om Uma Devi Shiva band can survive and continue its musical art while earning a sufficient income to make a living.

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