Bangalore has taken on the delicate task of making a museum about Indian Music

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Indian Music Experience, Bangalore, Music Museum

Facade of MoPOP in Seattle. (Indian Music Experience)

It’s a classic urban lament: Some guy has a hot date, his car won’t start, his cab doesn’t turn up, and he’s forced to pay one-and-a-half on the metre to the auto driver.

“This life is so unfair/Still got to pay the auto fare,” sings Bruce Lee Mani of Thermal And A Quarter, a popular Bangalore rock band.

At clubs, the comical song still draws raucous applause.

But now “Metre Mele One-and-A-Half” is travelling much further — all the way into a museum. It won’t be the dreary sort of place familiar to school children, with dusty objects trapped behind smudged glass. This new museum in Bangalore wants to rev up the action: Inviting visitors to clamber into yellow-and-black autorickshaws and listen to the Thermal And A Quarter song blasting...
Bangalore has taken on the delicate task of making a museum about Indian Music through headphones. Elsewhere, they can hum a swara from Carnatic music or explore the natural sounds of a “singing stone,” a hunk of black granite meant to be rubbed and tapped.

Both novelty and tradition define the upcoming Centre for Indian Music Experience (IME). Spanning a wide range of Indian music — including classical, contemporary, and regional forms — this long-germinating project in south Bangalore is finally scheduled to open sometime between March and June 2017. It joins other music museums proliferating around the globe, from Phoenix to Paris to Ouagadougou. But for India, this is something brand new.

Clearly, it’s a museum that wears emotion on its sleeve. “As a musician, I react very emotionally to music, and I want people to experience that magic,” says project director Manasi Prasad, a young Carnatic vocalist with a
Bangalore has taken on the delicate task of making a museum about Indian Music. Yet, IME also has cerebral ambitions. In presenting a streamlined version of India’s vast music history, and excavating some lesser-known nuggets, the museum also probes the impact of technology in musical evolution.

“It’s long overdue,” says Mani, the rocker in Bangalore. “A lot of great stuff gets shoved under the carpet and no one hears it or sees it.” Others emphasise IME’s potential in showcasing music as a shared experience, not just an individual pursuit with ear buds and YouTube. “It could help people from different groups in society to connect and respond,” suggests Sumana Chandrashekar, a ghatam player and programme officer at India Foundation for the Arts.

India’s hoary museum world could use a shake-up. A 2014 British Council survey of 150 museums across the country noted that “there are very few that even aim at being visitor-friendly and interactive”. One exception is the Virasat-e-Khalsa museum in Punjab, where multimedia exhibits and compelling storytelling have lured 75 lakh visitors over the past five years. As argued by German scholar Andreas Huyssen in his essay Escape from Amnesia: The Museum as Mass Medium, published in his book, Twilight Memories, “entertainment and spectacle can function in tandem with complex forms of enlightenment.”

In the case of this new Bangalore museum, one source of innovation was Gallagher & Associates, a prominent US-based design firm, whose projects include the Grammy Museum in Los Angeles and the Experience Music...
Project in Seattle (now called the Museum of Pop Culture or MoPOP).

Gallagher’s desi connection was crucial. Senior associate Sujit Tolat grew up in New Delhi in the 1970s, attended the National Institute of Design, and credits the cultural organisation SPIC MACAY for broadening his musical education beyond a teen preference for Jethro Tull. So, despite his overseas design commissions — including work on the blues-infused BB King museum in Mississippi — he was familiar with the thrills of India’s aural culture, including its transport maestros.

“The autorickshaws are like little mobile musical shrines, running around everywhere and reflecting the personalities of the drivers. It was natural for us to use those,” Tolat explains. Overall, he worked closely with a small content committee in India, comprised of experts in Carnatic, Hindustani, regional music and film music. In turn, that committee tapped other experts for written briefs on specific subjects.

Tolat describes himself as a bridge between East and West. The inception of the Bangalore project also straddled time zones. It all started when a private developer, Brigade Group, fulfilled a requirement to hand over a two-acre parcel of land for a “civic amenity” after conceiving the sprawling Brigade Millennium complex of apartments in JP Nagar. A local trust surveyed neighbourhood residents. Rather than a sports centre, the majority wanted a facility devoted to music.

Initially, the options looked pretty ordinary. Perhaps a music school, or a maze of performance venues. Then, in
2009, during a business trip to Seattle, Brigade chairman MR Jaishankar visited what was then called the Experience Music Project, the museum bankrolled by Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen. MoPOP’s undulating, multi-hued $100 million building, designed by Frank Gehry, had drawn scorn. An architecture critic for The New York Times wrote that the building looked like “something that crawled out of the sea, rolled over and died.” (Gehry said he was inspired by chopping up a few electric guitars and refitting the curved fragments into a whole new shape.)

The Bangalore museum’s building, which was eventually designed by Architecture Paradigm, follows the curves of the existing jamun and mango trees on the plot. The curved façade also symbolises the continuum of Indian music, like a flowing raga. The flooring, made of Kota stone from Rajasthan, is hard enough to withstand large
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footfalls.

Back then in Seattle, what intrigued Jaishankar about the museum was not so much the Hendrix and Nirvana mementoes, but the technology that encouraged young music fans to romp around. They could turn themselves into rock legends, playing guitar before a screaming crowd projected on a huge screen. They could record a song in the studio.

Touchscreens also revealed a wealth of information. Jaishankar wondered if Bangalore could harness some of its own famed tech wizardry this way. So he asked Manasi Prasad to plunge into online research, culminating in a museum-hopping trip to the US, together with the Bangalore architects who won a competition. After settling on Gallagher, the ball got rolling.

A view of the Sound Garden. (Indian Music Experience)
Over the years, though, the ball often seemed more like a boulder.

Here is what has been the hardest part. How, exactly, does one erect a shrine to the unfathomably rich legacy of Indian music? Obviously, it won’t all fit in a museum that spans three floors and 20,000 square feet of exhibition space.

The content committee was headed by Pappu Venugopala Rao, a secretary of the Madras Music Academy. (A previous committee bit the dust, following a pause for museum construction.) Periodic three-day meetings were held in Bangalore. To defuse any struggle between north and south, the committee agreed to give equal space to Hindustani and Carnatic. Regional forms were given just 60 slots, out of the lakhs of traditions that exist. Much of it is devotional, such as Sankirtana from Manipur and Gurmat sangeet of Punjab. Sufi and Qawwali will come alive, as will Rabindra Sangeet. Film music will be covered from Naushad to Amaal Mallik. And no one dreamed of leaving out the National Anthem.
The marathon discussions lurched from exhilarating to exhausting. The experts parsed which musicians could be labelled as “innovators,” and which made their mark due to sheer popularity. “Sometimes arguments got heated in a friendly way. We would make fun of each other at the lunch break,” recalls Rajiv Vijayakar, the designated expert on film music. Often they simply agreed to disagree. Tolat warned them against being encyclopaedic or elitist.

“The ‘dwell’ time is not more than a minute,” Tolat insists. “Too many choices are not too good for visitors. If at every computer terminal they have 15 songs to listen to, you really start to confine them.”

Says Rao: “We had to be very merciless. We had to be ruthless.” He adds: “We did not want to focus on living artists unless they are very popular. It will create unnecessary problems.” Given India’s depth of loyalty to
particular performers and gurus, the committee knew its mission was delicate.

At this stage, the IME team seems reluctant to provide a complete list of names to be celebrated in the museum. Rao offers a mere glimpse. In Carnatic music, living performers include Bombay Jayashri Ramnath, Chitravina Ravikiran, Aruna Sairam and Sanjay Subrahmanyan. (For instance, TM Krishna did not make the cut. According to Pappu Venugopala Rao, TM Krishna’s popularity “goes up and down.” “We can’t be going with “fluctuating” artists.” He contrasted that with artists whose careers are more “established.”

Rao said, “I’m sure there will be people who don’t like that TM Krishna is dropped. And others who will like that we do not represent TM Krishna.”) In the Hindustani category, look for Shivkumar Sharma, Jasraj, Hariprasad Chaurasia, and the Gundecha Brothers. In contemporary music, it appears that Indian Ocean and the Raghu Dixit Project will receive kudos for drawing on traditional sounds and poetry.
As for the legends now deceased, those choices remain to be seen. Committee members emphasise that they do not aim to erect a rigid canon of Indian music. “Suggestions and contributions from the public will only enrich it,” says Jayant Kastuar, the designated expert on regional forms. “This is not the last word on this music. It is not a stagnant pool of water, it is a running stream,” Rao maintains.

Indeed, some areas of the museum will strive to expose gaps in the canon. In one gallery, “the takeaway is the important role that women played in the growth and the evolution of the recording industry,” says contributor Vikram Sampath, author of Voice of The Veena and My Name is Gauhar Jaan. Many were courtesans. This exhibition will feature relatively obscure names, including Zohra Bai of Agra, Jankibai of Allahabad, and Salem Godavari.
Neither will IME shy away from a few modern winks. Will the song ‘Choli ke Peeche Kiya Hai’ be included? “Obviously,” says Vijayakar. “These kinds of double-meaning or directly erotic songs are part of our culture.”

Fund-raising has also been arduous. Brigade contributed Rs 15 crore from its CSR funds, but that still left a big hole in a modest Rs 42 crore budget (For context, according to the Bangalore Metro Rail Corporation Limited in January 2017, the cost of building just one above-ground Metro Station in Bangalore ranges from Rs 35 to 40 crores). Prasad and the outreach director, Suma Sudhindra — a veena player and former president of Chowdiah Memorial Hall — gave repeated presentations. Eventually, the central government agreed to provide Rs 5 crore, the state government gave Rs 2 crore and the State Bank of India contributed another 2 crore. Today, the team is still trying to raise Rs 8 to 10 crore from corporate donors and the public alike.
One fundraising approach involves “adopting” a musical instrument, thus underwriting its maintenance. Such instruments have come from various corners. “Some happened very early. Some have taken years of convincing,” says Prasad. Carnatic mridangam master Anoor Ananthakrishna Sharma handed over four instruments, including a Thavil (a barrel-shaped drum from Tamil Nadu, used in temple, folk and Carnatic music, often accompanying the Nagaswaram) from Tamil Nadu and a pung (an a cylindrical drum from Manipur, it often accompanies a highly energetic dance). Ravikiran offered a chitravina. The family of Bismillah Khan donated one of his most treasured shehnais (luckily, not one that his grandson allegedly swiped and melted down for metallic value.)

Another option: Buy a brick with a name engraved. For Rs 10,000, anyone can publicly lay claim to supporting the cause of Indian music. Yet, that idea has mostly flown under the radar: In a country packed with rasikas and Bollywood music junkies, just about 75 bricks have been sold so far and some of those were at the ‘early bird’ price of Rs 5,000. (One supplier did donate glass, in the memory of his music-loving mother.)

The museum’s organisers would like to attract a cross-generational mix. But they do seem particularly keen on appealing to younger visitors. For example, one animated film will show a mother gently introducing the concept of music to her daughter.

Perhaps one of the most surprising aspects of IME is that
it starts off with contemporary indie music, only then circling back to temple music and the gharanas. “Yeah, I love it,” says Gaurav Vaz, manager and bass player for the Raghu Dixit Project. “Typically, indie music is given the last priority.”

After all, the museum is rooted in Bangalore — a city praised for its open-minded music scene. The rapid influx of migrants has pumped up audiences for so many different genres of music. And if IME lives up to its ambitious blueprint — still a matter of suspense, given the scramble for funds — foreign tourists will surely turn up, too. They might be surprised to learn just how much sound can be found outside of Bollywood.

(In Arrangement with GRIST MEDIA)

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