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Invites you to talk by

Prof. DAVESH SONEJI

on

Resounding Islam:

Occluded Muslim Histories of

Modern South Indian Rāga-Based Music

on

Wednesday, 18th December

Time: 5.30 PM

Venue: QIAMS, 82, Sterling Road,

Chennai

FOR REGISTRATION CALL:

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About the Talk:

This talk examines the inaudible yet polyphonic pasts of modern South Indian rāga-based music by exploring the long and complex history of Islamic musical production in Tamil-speaking South India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It follows three genres that populate the Tamil Islamic sonic landscape: the *kīrttaṇa*, the *patam*, and the Arabic-inflected *muṇḍāḷattu*, and analyzes these in relation to highly localized Tamil Sufi devotional cultures on the one hand, as well as formal, canonical traditions of Tamil Islamic literary production on the other. It also locates this music in the deeply intermedial world of cultural production that predates the “classicization” of popular rāga-based music in the 1920s: a world in which lyrics and paratextual materials stand out in sharp relief for their aesthetic and theological uniqueness; in which intermedial exchanges between arts like dance, music, and drama are wholly natural; and in which no sonic borrowing or repurposing is considered irreverent or uncreative. The modern Tamil theatre (known today as *icai natakam*), Islamic and Catholic musical forms, courtesan music, and the music of the wider para-Tamil Indian Ocean world all constituted the soundscapes of what I call “popular rāga-based music” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The focus on Tamil Islamic music in this paper also raises significant questions about the social organization of rāga-based music in South India, and also about its relationship to larger questions of religious and aesthetic pluralism in the cultural life of modern Tamil Nadu. Perhaps most significantly, it forces us to reconsider the basic premises of the supercultural force represented by “classical” music in modern South India, which was molded by the politics and aesthetics of upper-caste cultural nationalism, and certainly today, thrives as the very aesthetic heart of the politics of communal majoritarianism in this region.

Davesh Soneji

(University of Pennsylvania)

Davesh Soneji is Associate Professor in the Department of South Asia Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. His research interests lie at the intersections of social and cultural history, religion, and anthropology. For the past two decades, he has produced research that focuses primarily on religion and the performing arts in South India, but also includes work on gender, class, caste, and colonialism. He is best known for his work on the social history of professional female artists in Tamil and Telugu-speaking South India and is author of *Unfinished Gestures: Devadāsīs, Memory, and Modernity in South India* (University of Chicago Press, 2012), which was awarded the 2013 Bernard S. Cohn Book Prize from The Association for Asian Studies (AAS). He is also editor of *Bharatanāṭyam: A Reader* (Oxford University Press, 2010; 2012) and co-editor, with Indira Viswanathan Peterson, of *Performing Pasts: Reinventing the Arts in Modern South India* (Oxford University Press, 2008). He is presently co-editing another volume entitled *Dance and the Early South Indian Cinema* (forthcoming). Prof. Soneji has recently held positions as Visiting Professor at the Central University of Hyderabad in India, as well as Le Centre d’Études de l’Inde et de l’Asie du Sud (CEIAS) in Paris. Prior to coming to the University of Pennsylvania, Prof. Soneji taught at McGill University in Montreal, Canada for over twelve years. Prof. Soneji is also the co-founder and director of The Mangala Initiative, a non-profit organization centred on social justice issues for hereditary performing artists in South India. He is currently working a new book on the social history of “classical” (Karnāṭak) music and musical production in South India from the late eighteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries.

