

[Mesmerizing Mauritius](#)

Category : [April 1998](#)

Published by Anonymous on Apr. 02, 1998

CULTURE

Mesmerizing Mauritius

India's best music and dance artistes pilgrimage to paradise island

With reports by Anand Mulloo, Mauritius

Air Mauritius' weekly Mumbai flight #749 touches down at sunny Plaisance Airport on the east coast of this Hindu-majority island/nation 400 miles east of Africa. An excited crowd is waiting. Pop singer Baba Sehgal struts into view, welcomed by a herd of female fans and flashing cameras. Just behind him appears famous classical singer Shruti Sadolikar followed by five more of India's greatest living cultural artists. A Saiva Siddhanta Church of Mauritius welcome group greets and garlands the classicists. TV cameras turn and capture their arrival, too, for evening news. This portrait of musical culture clash is unforgettable--India's hottest "pop" prince landing on the same flight as six of Bharat's greatest classical superstars.

Three months earlier, September, 1997. "This idea is not good. Guaranteed, it will fail," helpful-minded friends respectfully warned Saiva Siddhanta Church--locally known as the Saiva Dharmasala--when they first heard of the plot to bring classical artists from India for a fund-raising gala. "To be honest,

nobody really likes this music anymore. You should bring some popular "playback" singers if you really want to make any money--not to mention losing an awful lot!" With doomsday fears in their ears, a small group of members nevertheless decided to proceed, and began a stomach-churning--at times downright harrowing--three-month ascent.

Thursday night, December 4--showtime. Overcoming an unending series of financial crevasses and logistical avalanches, the organizing team reaches the summit. Triumph. On opening night, at the grandiose national public arts theater of Mahatma Gandhi Institute, a capacity crowd of 650 enters--women donning a rainbow of elegant gold-threaded saris and churidhars and men in dinner dress or embroidered kurtas. Six of India's finest talents--with three superb Mauritian percussionist accompanists--command the stage. For four and one-half hours, they stun an unsuspecting audience with the greatest of India's musical/dance magic.

"I loved them all, but I think Shruti Sadolikar was my favorite," said well-known media personality Sunil Gopal. "Her voice was so amazing, so clear. I don't know how she can sing like that." Young music enthusiast Soopaya gushed, "For me, I adored the bamboo flutist, Mala Chandrashekar. I could hardly believe it. She seemed so relaxed, but played such fast, complex rhythms."

"I liked Jayanti the best," said Oomavadee Pallanee conclusively. "We never hear the veena performed in concert here, only the sitar. It was just so beautiful. I will never forget it." Shweta Beeharee, 19, swooned, "Definitely, it was the

dancer I loved the most. I myself am studying dance, and when I heard Paolomi was coming, I just couldn't miss this chance. She totally thrilled me and inspired me to practice harder." Others were especially impressed by the drum accompanists. On stage were the best of Mauritius--Manik Munde playing the pakawaj, the North Indian drum, Veylan Armoogum, the India-trained super talent on mridangam and accomplished artist Naden Veerapen on tabla. A first-time experience for all was the ethereal sounds of the sarangi, a North Indian string instrument that looks like an oversize violin, played by Santosh Mishra of Banaras. The sarangi's graceful sliding notes offered a welcome contrast to the South Indian fast staccato patterns.

The show was a fund-raising project for a spiritual park on the Church's Dharmasala grounds. The seven-acre site features huge ten-foot granite statues of the Gods--a five-faced Lord Ganesha, six-faced Lord Murugan and an exquisite Lord Siva as Dakshinamurthi, the Silent Sage beneath a banyan tree. Key organizer S.K. Moorghen recounted: "Over a three-month period, we made probably 2,000 phone calls, faxes and e-mails solving so many problems." Just finding and getting six great artists--none personally known to the other beforehand--from different cities (Chennai, Mumbai and Banaras), representing six different art forms, on the same flight to Mauritius was in itself a near miracle. Moorghen especially credited Sunil Gopal and Satish Ruehe of Mauritius Broadcasting Company for providing invaluable pre-concert publicity and filming the event for broadcasting on national television, the five-star mega-resort, Sofitel, where the artists stayed in style, Air Mauritius and dance teacher Anandhi Ramachandran who selected the three artists from Chennai.

Nothing they did managed to get the interest of the youth, who were noticeably missing in the audience. "Most of our friends feel this kind of music is boring," teens bluntly told disappointed ticket sellers. But the few dozen who did sacrifice their weekend snack money for a ticket confessed afterwards that their friends definitely missed an "awesome happening."

The concert profited ^{US}\$7,200--a sizeable Maur. Rs. 150,000--which is now funding completion of a Ganesha pavilion at the Dharmasala. This architecturally rare, jewel-like, wooden Kerala-style shrine is the first increment of a grander park vision seriously unfolding on a seven-acre seaside property on the island's northeast coast.

Opening the show, the senior Minister of Education, Hon. Kadress R. Chedumbarum Pillay, praised the Dharmasala not only for the concert but for its youth programs and its blossoming spiritual park. "I wish to ensure that the government is always ready to support religious organizations whose aims are to promote peace and harmony." Many of the nation's major companies--including Pepsi Cola, the State Bank and Shell Oil--purchased advertisements in the concert's souvenir magazine.

The artists are classic examples of perfection, dedication and long training--fifteen years or more in every case, beginning at ages five or six. Genes help too. Shruti Sadolikar is the daughter of Marathi classical singer Pandit Wamanrao Sadolikar. Sarangi maestro Santosh Mishra and Jayanti Kirin's musical families go back seven generations each. He teaches at Banaras Hindu University. She, at just 27, is considered one of the finest veena players in India. "The veena sings," she told Hinduism Today, "it calms people with its sweet, tranquilizing effect, whereas pop music just excites people."

The concert helped stem a waning respect for Hindu classical music. Local artists felt personally revitalized, and a doubting Hindu public proudly witnessed some of their oldest cultural traditions spectacularly and youthfully represented, as well as supported by the government and private sector.

Were there lessons learned that others might benefit by? "Yes," organizer Moorghen states. "Firstly, everyone should know that good classical

music is sellable, despite all one might hear to the contrary. Select the best artists you can find. Then promote the event well. Most people don't do this, just to save money. But this is demoralizing to the artists and gives events like this a "poor attendance" reputation. Regarding selling tickets, there is no easy shortcut. You have sell tickets the old fashioned way--person to person. Of our 1,100 tickets to the two concerts, 95% were sold by friends and Hindu church members. But there is hardly a greater joy than seeing the cultural refinement these events bring to a community."