

Towards Fusion: New Trends in Hindustani *Sitar* Music in Malaysia

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Abstract

While a classical *Sitar* recital in Malaysia still retains many of its original forms and practices, local sitarists are experimenting with new musical ideas to promote the *Sitar* and its music to a wider audience of mixed ethnicity. Musicians combine Hindustani musical elements such as *Raag* (melody) and *Taal* (rhythmic cycle) with different musical elements such as the Chinese pentatonic scale and Arabian Maqam as well as new genres to produce a musical blend broadly dubbed as ‘fusion music’. This article explores how the characteristics of the Hindustani elements of *Raag* and *Taal* are adopted to complement the structure and style of the new compositions. Different *Sitar* playing styles and techniques are employed in the performance of fusion compositions that use Blues or Bossa Nova genres.

Keywords: *Raag, Taal, fusion, Sitar music.*

Introduction

Malaysia is a multiracial and multicultural society that has a rich and diverse cultural and musical heritage. Indians represent the third largest population in the country. The classical music practiced by Malaysian Indians is based on the ancient traditional system that originated in India.

Indian classical music refers to both the South Indian Carnatic and North Indian Hindustani systems. Hindustani and Carnatic music share a common ancient musical heritage, as both systems are built upon highly complex and elaborate melodic structures called *Raag*, and both employ a system of rhythm and meter that falls under the rubric of *Taal* (rhythmic cycle).

Hindustani music in this paper should not be confused with the Bollywood music that accompanies Indian films. The term 'Hindustani music' refers to the classical form of North Indian music built upon the structures of *Raag* and *Taal*.

Hindustani music was popularised in Malaysia through the *Sitar*, a lute with six to seven strings. This instrument played an important role in introducing Hindustani music to many Malaysians. Over the years, the music performed on the *Sitar* has stayed true to its classical form thanks to the *Guru Shisya Parampara* (teacher disciple tradition), where this art is passed down orally from teacher to disciple.

At the turn of the millennium, the *Sitar* is becoming an increasingly popular instrument, especially in the world of fusion music, because of the versatility of the instrument and the rapid commercialisation of this new genre of music. A number of local musicians, namely, sitarists, are experimenting with the idea of fusion music that involves the synthesis and cross-cultural musical exchange between Hindustani *Sitar* music and musical elements, genres and styles from different cultures within Malaysia and around the world.

This article traces the development of *Sitar* fusion music in Malaysia, focusing on the changes in the Hindustani classical elements of *Raag* and *Taal* as incorporated into fusion music. It also analyses the different playing styles adapted by sitarists playing non-classical fusion compositions.

The Development of Hindustani Music in Malaysia

Indian music (Carnatic and Hindustani) was brought into Malaysia by the early Indian and Sri Lankan settlers in this country (Orme 10 July 2005). The development of Carnatic music, however, superseded the development of Hindustani music in this country as a result of the migration of many south Indians to this country. Orme Maheswaran, who is one of the pioneer sitarists in Malaysia, says that Carnatic music gained popularity in Malaysia during the 1930s. This music was easily accepted by the Malaysian Indians because Carnatic music was mainly taught using the Tamil language, and Tamil is a language spoken by most Indians in Malaysia.

The development of Hindustani music in Malaysia was not as widespread as that of Carnatic music. Unlike Carnatic music, many Malaysians were only introduced to the classical form of Hindustani music in the mid 1970s. This is attributed to a number of reasons, one of them being the difference in language between the two types. Hindustani music is a north Indian system and has very strong Arabian and Persian (now Iranian) musical influences resulting from the Muslim invasion in the late 13th century (Bhattacharya 1978). Therefore, the terminology of Hindustani music is generally in Hindi or Urdu (a language of North India with Persian influences). Given the language used, this system was ‘alien’ to the Malaysian Indians who spoke Tamil (Orme 10 July 2005). The difference in language was one of the main reasons why the development of Hindustani music in Malaysia took longer as compared to that of Carnatic music.

Due to the difficulty presented by the terminologies and the language, it was easier to learn Hindustani *Raags* through an instrument such as the *Sitar* (Orme 10 July 2005). Hindustani music in Malaysia was thus popularised through instrumental music. As Penang-based sitarist Hamid Khan asserts, ‘The *Sitar* became the most famous of all the instruments which introduced Hindustani Music in Malaysia’ (11 September 2006).

The Development of the *Sitar* in Malaysia

The *Sitar* is one of the most famous stringed instruments outside India. It is a long-necked lute, made entirely of wood except for its resonator. The instrument has six to seven main strings running across the fingerboard. In addition to the main strings, eleven to thirteen sympathetic strings run parallel to the main strings under the frets. The instrument is held at a forty-five degree angle while one is playing. The *Sitar* is a versatile instrument and has developed and evolved in many different countries around the world, including Malaysia.

It is believed that the first *Sitar* was brought into Malaysia in the early 1950s. According to veteran sitarist Orme, a group of Indian musicians brought the *Sitar* to this country during one of their trips. There is, however, no recorded history of the instrument being performed or taught by any teachers or music education institutions until the mid-1960s.

In the mid-1960s, there is evidence of the *Sitar*’s having been played in the *Gurdwaras* (Sikh Temples). The *Sitar* offered an accompaniment to religious songs in these temples (Hamid Khan 11 September 2006). Women in the Sikh temples played the *Sitar* to accompany *Bhajans*, *Shapads* and *Kirtans*, which are light classical north Indian vocal genres. The instrument, however, was not recognised as a classical solo instrument that one might use to play purely classical compositions.

In the early 1970s, the popularity of the *Sitar* began to escalate rapidly. This was a result of the famous collaboration of Ravi Shankar and George Harrison of the Beatles in the mid-1960s (Hamid Khan 11 September 2006). During the late 1960s and early 1970s, prominent sitarists from India, like Ravi Shankar, Nikil Banerji and Ustad Usman Khan came to Malaysia to perform purely classical *Sitar* concerts (Orme 10 July 2005). Through various performances like these, the *Sitar* gradually began to gain prominence and popularity among many Malaysians. Many musicians in Malaysia began to develop an interest in the *Sitar*, and they slowly learnt the basics of the instrument.

During the early and mid-1970s, the *Sitar* was promoted by a number of local musicians in Malaysia, namely, Orme Maheswaran, Jabamalai Dass and Hamid Khan. Over the years, the *Sitar* was gradually recognised as a classical solo instrument in this country.

From Classical to Fusion Music: The Transition

The strength of Hindustani classical music lies in its rich and sustained tradition, which was passed down for generations through the traditional practice of *Guru-Sishya Parampara*. In the early years, many *Gurus* were careful to pass the art of Hindustani music to only worthwhile and deserving students, as music was considered sacred and divine. A musician who studied under a *Guru* through this traditional system understood his/her role and responsibilities as a student and a disciple.

In the past, when a person chose to be a student of music, he consequently made music his livelihood. He trained and practiced under the watchful eye of his *Guru* to fulfil his aspirations of becoming a professional musician. The complexity and intricacies of the Hindustani system made it a very difficult and demanding field of study. A disciple had to surrender himself completely to the music. The disciple made music his life, and inevitably his life became music.

Presently, with the emergence of industrialisation and mainstream popular styles of music, it has become difficult, almost impossible, for classical musicians to practice and perform solely classical Hindustani music. In a world where pop music, R&B, hip hop and rap predominate, classical Hindustani music is no longer the preferred choice among many youths. Classical musicians are faced with the uphill battle of competing with the catchy rhythms and lyrics of mainstream popular music. The intricacy of the Hindustani system and the deep understanding required of the *Raag* and *Taal* make classical Hindustani music less appealing to the younger generation. Consequently, there is a growing gap between the older people who form the majority of classical music lovers and the younger generation.

Fusion Music

To revive and sustain this musical heritage, classical musicians in this country have opted to fuse elements and instruments of this classical Hindustani form with elements and forms from different musical systems. In the last four to five years, local sitarists like Samuel J. Dass, Kumar Karthigesu of the Temple of Fine Arts and Hamid Khan have experimented with the idea of fusion music. This syncretism in music is an inevitable process, especially if classical musicians want to keep abreast of the mainstream popular styles of music. The efforts of such musicians have contributed immensely to the development and popularity of the *Sitar* and the growth of Hindustani *Sitar* music in Malaysia.

In an effort to promote and localise Hindustani music in Malaysia, Samuel J. Dass created the fusion ensemble *Varna* in 2004. *Varna* is solely an instrumental ensemble, with the *Sitar* as its main instrument, and it is the first instrumental *Sitar* fusion ensemble in the country that has produced an album and performs in public concerts. The band is composed of five highly acclaimed musicians. The leader of the ensemble is Samuel J. Dass, who plays the *Sitar*. Jamie Wilson plays the acoustic steel guitar, while Fauzi Samin (Aji) plays the acoustic nylon guitar. The percussionists in the ensemble are Prakash Kandasamy on the *tabla* (a north Indian

percussion instrument) and Sivabalan Shanmuga Sundram on the *mirdhangam* and *ganjeera* (south Indian percussion instruments).

In an interview with Samuel J. Dass, he mentioned that ‘music should be for the masses and not only for the elite classes’ (26 October 006). It has always been his aim to promote Hindustani music to a wider audience in Malaysia. He strongly believes that fusion music provides a greater avenue for promoting Hindustani music and the *Sitar* because ‘fusion music appeals best to the younger generation and an audience of mixed ethnicity’.

Fusion music has not been well received by many purists who argue that the traditions and ‘authenticity’ of the music are lost when the classical form of the music is fused with others. Many purists have dismissed the idea of fusion, claiming that this genre of music is not ‘pure’ and that the original characteristics of the music are lost. The same dissatisfaction is shown by purists regarding Indian music. There is always a fear of the ‘*Raags* losing their original characteristics when they are incorporated in a fusion composition’ (Orme 10 July 2005).

On the contrary, fusion musicians argue that ‘evolution in music is not necessarily a bad thing. However, respect and knowledge of traditional styles and forms must be kept (adhered to), because one cannot progress without a history’ (*New Straits Times* 16 October 2005). Dass asserts that in fusion music, a certain amount of compromise needs to be made between all the different musical elements and forms that are being fused: ‘No one instrument or musical element can shine throughout the performance as the role of each instrumentalist in the ensemble is to support the other’ (Dass 12 July 2006).

The Changes in Classical Elements When Incorporated in Fusion Music

Raag

All the fusion pieces discussed in this paper are from the compositions for the fusion ensemble *Varna* by Samuel. J. Dass. *Varna* has a total of nine compositions composed in different genres and styles. The analysis of the pieces shows that there are changes in the Hindustani musical elements of *Raag* and *Taal* when they are incorporated into fusion compositions. The characteristics of these elements are altered and adapted to conform to the style and mood of the fusion compositions. In fusion compositions, the development of the *Raag*'s melodic potential is restricted due to the presence of harmony.

A *Raag* is a precise melodic form with a set number of *swaras* (notes) in its *arohanam* (ascending motion) and *avarohanam* (descending motion). Most importantly, it must possess its own individual aesthetic appeal. It is a 'discernible melodic form that underlines all classical Indian music' (Bagchee 1998). A *Raag* is regarded as important because of its melodic potential. For this reason, the *Raag*'s *swaras* (notes) are expected to be elaborated further according to set techniques and methods.

Hindustani music is linear in motion, and the melody is always monophonic—while in Western classical music, in contrast, importance is given to harmony, chord progression and modulations. Besides the basic twelve tones of the scale, Hindustani music has an extra ten *shrutis* (microtones) that are not present in the harmonies and chord progressions of the Western classical musical system. These ten extra *shrutis* are the distinguishing features of many *Raags*. Certain *Raags* are recognised through the careful use of these *shrutis* within the performance.

The presence of the twenty-two *shrutis* of the Hindustani scale makes it almost impossible for all of the *shrutis* to fall under the Western classical chord system, which is built upon the twelve semitones of the Western musical scale. These chords will not sound very pleasant if paired against microtonal variations, as harmony usually sounds best when notes have a natural harmonic relationship according to the Western equal temperament tuning system.

An example of the changes in the characteristics of the *Raag* can be seen in the fusion composition *Life Breath* by Samuel Dass. This composition is based on three different *Raags*, namely, *Bhairavi*, *Malkauns* and *Nandkauns*. Each *Raag* has a different feature, and the notes of the *Raag* have to be performed according to set rules and techniques in order to highlight its characteristics. *Life Breath* is also set in the key of G Minor of the Western Classical scale. An analysis of this piece shows that the melody line of *Life Breath* does not adhere strictly to any one particular *Raag*. The scales of these three *Raags* have been used interchangeably to form a melody line for *Life Breath* that is governed by the rules of harmony.



Figure 1 Scale for *Raag Bhairavi*.



Figure 2 Scale for *Raag Malkauns*.



Figure 3 Scale for *Raag Nandkauns*.

From the perspective of Western classical music, the omission of the submediant (E^b note) in the scale of G Minor can often be overlooked simply because E^b does not play an important role in the spelling of the three chords used in Figure 4. Therefore, G Minor will not lose its tonal quality with the omission of this note.

Life Breath is an example of how the characteristics of the *Raag* change as the *swaras* are tailored to suit the melodic and harmonic structures of the piece. In many of the fusion compositions for *Varna*, the presence of harmony and chord structures hampers the *Raag*'s development. The *Raag*'s characteristics are unclear, as the melodic lines of the pieces are forced to resolve with the chords in the bars.

Another example of changes in the characteristics of *Raags* can be seen in the fusion piece *Vibrations* by Samuel Dass. According to Dass, the excerpt in Figure 6 is based on *Raag Bageshri*. An important characteristic of *Bageshri*'s scale is that during the descent of this *Raag*, the *swaras* are performed in a *vakra* (twisted) form.



Figure 5 Scale for *Raag Bageshri*.

The musical score for Sitar is presented in three staves. The first staff, labeled 'Sitar', covers measures 1 to 3. It begins with a treble clef and a 4/4 time signature. The tempo is marked 'Andante'. The first measure has a G chord and a melodic line starting on G4, with a 'M' marking above the first note. The second measure has an F/G chord and a melodic line starting on F4, also with a 'M' marking. The third measure has a C chord and a melodic line starting on C4, with 'M' markings above the first and second notes. The second staff, also labeled 'Sitar', covers measures 4 to 6. Measure 4 has a G chord and a melodic line starting on G4, with a 'M' marking. Measure 5 has a C chord and a melodic line starting on C4, with a 'M' marking. Measure 6 has a G chord, an F chord, and a G chord, with melodic lines starting on G4, F4, and G4 respectively, and 'VM' markings above the first and last notes. The third staff, labeled 'Sitar', covers measures 7 to 8. Measure 7 has a Dm chord and a melodic line starting on D4, with a 'M' marking. Measure 8 has a G chord and a melodic line starting on G4, with a 'M' marking.

Figure 6 Excerpt from fusion piece *Vibrations* by Samuel Dass.

This piece is in the key of G Major, and the chords in this excerpt alternate between F Major, C Major and D Minor. An analysis of this piece shows that the *swaras* of the *Raags* have been interwoven and tailored to conform to the chords in the bars.

The *swaras* in the first two bars do not suggest *Raag Bageshri* because of the presence of the *swara Pa* (A natural) as employed in the ascending scale. Based on the scale for this *Raag*, *Pa* is usually only present in the descending scale. This excerpt is also not entirely in *Raag Pahadi*, given the presence of *swara Ma* (G natural) and *sudha Ga* (F natural) in bars 1 and 2. The sequence of *swaras* in the first two bars of this excerpt therefore does not belong to either *Bageshri* or *Pahadi*. The ascent from *Ga* (F natural) to *Pa* (A natural) in bar 7 and then to the high *Sa* (D natural) in the following bar is not characteristic of *Bageshri*. The use of *swara Pa* in the ascending scale is uncharacteristic of this *Raag's* scale.

From a Western classical music standpoint, however, the notes F and A in bar 7 are crucial notes, as they form the mediant and dominant of the D Minor scale, which are important in the spelling of this chord. In bar 8, the notes D and G form the G Major chord. Therefore, although the notes in bars 7 and 8 do not conform to the scale for *Raag Bageshri*, they conform to the dominant and tonic chords of the key.

While the *swara* combinations in the entire 8 bars in Figure 6 suggest *Raag Bageshri*, it is clear that certain *swaras* have been employed in ways that are uncommon to this *Raag's* progression. An important feature of *Bageshri* is the rendition of the *swaras Ga* and *Dha*. In the performance of this *Raag*, these *swaras* have to be played with a slight *gamak* (oscillation between two pitches), as shown in the scale of this *Raag* in Figure 5. The use of *gamaks* on these notes produces slight *shruti* (microtone) variations that often highlight the characteristics of this *Raag*.

According to Dass (2005), for the music to reach a wider audience of mixed ethnicity, 'there needs to be less emphasis on intricate classical details and more emphasis on catchy and appealing melodic lines'. Dass asserts that 'the aim of fusion is to attract the listener with beautiful melodic lines and not to follow the rules of a classical performance which may bore audiences who have come to enjoy a fusion performance and not a classical *Sitar* performance'. He states that in most fusion compositions, the *Raag* is only used as the framework of the composition and therefore there is inadequate room for the sitarist to explore all the different *swara* combinations of the *Raag*.

Taal

‘Just as *Raags* organize melody, *Taals* organize rhythm’ (Massey & Massey 1976: 110). The essential characteristic of a *Taal* is its cyclic or repetitive nature. Unlike in Western classical music, the melodic phrasing of Hindustani music does not end on the last beat of the bar but rather closes on the first beat or *sam* (pronounced as sum) of the next cycle.

The term *Taal* is often translated as ‘rhythm’ (White 1971: 32), as a ‘time measure’ (Massey & Massey 1976: 110), or as ‘a measure to assess a proper time within one round of a piece of composition’ (Sharma 1993: 2). Each *Taal* has a set structure and specific *bol* pattern (rhythm mnemonics on the *tabla*). These patterns are commonly known as *thekas*. A *theka* is a universally accepted set of *bols* used to represent a *Taal* (Kandasamy 12 July 2006). *Taals* are often identified by their *theka* patterns. Percussionists improvise on the *theka* to add variety to their playing styles and to highlight the different timbres of the instrument. Figure 7 is an example of a *theka* pattern for *Keherwa Taal*, an eight-beat rhythmic cycle.

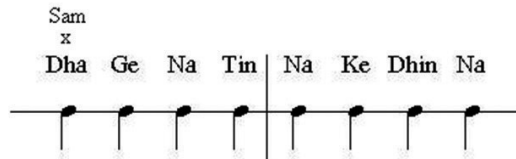


Figure 7 Basic *theka* of *Keherwa Taal*.

The most important beat in the Hindustani *Taal* system is the *sam*. It is the first and last beat of a rhythmic cycle. The *sam* functions both as the resolution point for one musical phrase and as the beginning of a new phrase: ‘The *sam* is (also) a point of culmination which completes a rhythmic structure’ (Massey & Massey 1976: 111).

In many of the fusion pieces by *Varna*, the intricacy and complexity of the *Taal* system has been altered to suit the melodic and rhythmic structure of the pieces. Many of the *Taal*’s defining characteristics have been omitted or kept to a minimum to ensure balance between all the different musical elements and forms that are fused.

Prana Express is a fusion piece composed to the eight-beat rhythmic cycle of *Keherwa Taal*. In this piece, the fast-paced melodic lines and intricate guitar and *Sitar* techniques have overshadowed the rhythmic section of *Prana Express*. The different *bol* combinations (rhythm mnemonics on the *tabla*) and stroke patterns on the *tabla* and *mirdhagam* cannot be heard due to the speed of the piece. The *Taal* pattern sounds like a succession of eight beats per bar with no definite stress patterns for each bar. While the basic rhythm is based on a *Taal*, the tempo adopted does not bring to the foreground any *Keherwa Taal* pattern. The key characteristics of the Hindustani *Taal* are only highlighted when the rhythm and melodic sections both make a clear arrival on the *sam* (first beat of the rhythmic cycle).

In fusion music, percussionists are often required to fuse their playing styles with the style and mood of the fusion piece. In fusion pieces like *Bombay Bossa Nova* and *Damascus*, the *tabla* player fuses his playing style with the rhythmic structure and melodic phrasing of these pieces. In *Bombay Bossa Nova*, the *tabla* player adapts his playing style to suit the Bossa Nova rhythmic pattern. The characteristics of the Hindustani *Taal* are portrayed through the verbalisation of *bols* (rhythm mnemonics on the *tabla*) by the *tabla* player at the beginning of the piece. In this piece, a fusion of the Bossa Nova rhythms and the *tabla bol* patterns is achieved. In *Damascus*, piece both the *tabla* and *mirdhagam* players try to fuse the different rhythmic patterns of their instruments with the different strokes and rhythmic patterns played on the *doumbek*.

In most of the fusion pieces, the characteristics of the classical *Raag* and *Taal* have been altered to conform to the style and mood of the piece. In an attempt to localise Hindustani *Sitar* music, fusion musician Samuel Dass has compromised on many of the defining characteristics for the *Raag* and *Taal*. The intricate details of the *Raag* and *Taal*, as present in a classical performance, have been omitted in the fusion pieces as he asserts that there needs to be a balance between all the musical elements and forms that are being fused.

Changes in the Playing Style of the Sitarist

In a fusion performance, instrumentalists often try to fuse their playing style with the style or genre of the new composition. In fusion compositions that are not based on *Raags*, Dass tries to minimise the use of *Sitar alankaras* (ornaments) and classical playing techniques, as he feels that an overemphasis on these classical *alankaras* can disturb the feel of the fusion piece. In these pieces, Dass merely fuses his playing style with the mood and style of the piece. In *Damascus*, for example, the use of *Sitar alankaras* is kept to a minimum. Dass only employs a short *meend* (lateral deflection of the main string).

In *Brickfields Blues*, Dass fuses his playing style with the mood and feel of a Blues-inspired composition. Blues is a genre that is not found in Hindustani classical music. Hence, a Blues-influenced melody played on the *Sitar* is an example of an attempt by Dass to fuse his playing style with this musical genre. The main melody of the composition is first played on the steel guitar, after which the exact melody is then imitated by the sitarist to show the versatility of the instrument when it is used to play a Blues melody.

In *Chinese Song*, long tremolos that involve quickly striking the *baj* string (the main string of the *Sitar*) are played with more exaggeration. Long tremolos are uncommon in classical *Sitar* performances. In the performance of *Chinese Song*, this ornament is played loudly and deliberately to give the piece a Chinese feel, as tremolos are common in Chinese instrumental

music (Dass 12 October 2005). The tuning of the main string of the *Sitar* is also altered in this piece to make the *Sitar*'s timbre close to the *Pipa*'s (Dass 12 October 2005). The *baj* string, which is the main string on the *Sitar*, is tuned to a *shruti* (microtonal variation) slightly higher than the original D (one tone above Middle C according to the Western tempered scale). The rest of the six main strings of the *Sitar* are tuned in relation to this new *Sa*. This tuning method is only used for this particular composition.

Conclusion

Musical exchange between cultures in Malaysia has broadened the horizons of many classical musicians. They experiment by combining Hindustani musical elements and forms with those of other cultures. Although Hindustani classical music still remains the forte of many classically trained musicians, they are also experimenting with different musical ideas and forms to create a blend of music popularly known as 'fusion music'. This new trend in music has proved more acceptable to younger audiences who prefer their music to be lively with catchy rhythms.

Purists constantly stress the importance of upholding the traditional practices of Hindustani classical music, as they fear that the music is losing its classical identity. Fusion musicians, however, argue that Hindustani music is an age-old tradition that is based on a rich musical heritage and that purists therefore need not fear the growing trend of fusion music. Fusion music is not a threat to classical Hindustani music. This new genre cannot replace a musical system built upon these highly complex and elaborate systems of *Raag* and *Taal*. Fusion is merely a form of experimentation with the concept of combining something that is current with something from the past. Many years from now, current fusion music will be replaced by the emergence of new musical styles and genres. Hindustani classical music, however, will always remain in its classical form. Fusion musicians are trying to bridge the gap between diverse musical systems.

Finally, fusion music will continue to exist, especially in a multicultural society like Malaysia that has rich and diverse cultures. As long as the different musical systems of the world are available to a musician, fusion music will remain. Musicians will continue to experiment with different musical ideas, but at the end of the day, they will always fall back on their forte—which is classical music (Dass 12 December 2005).

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Photo 1 Samuel J. Dass demonstrating how to hold the *Sitar*
(photograph by M. Pravina).



Photo 2 Orme Maheswaran on the *Sitar*. The *Sitar* has an extra thumba (resonating chamber) near the neck (photograph courtesy of Mr. Orme Maheswaran).



Photo 3 *Prana* (fusion ensemble) performing at the Petaling Jaya Civic Centre on 12 July 2006. S. Sivabalan – far right on Mirdhagam, Jamie Wilson – acoustic steel guitar, Samuel J. Dass – *Sitar*; Fauzi Samin – acoustic nylon guitar, K. Prakash – *tabla* (photograph by M. Pravina).