

ICGC SOUTH ASIA SEMINAR SERIES



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University of Washington

The Past in the Present: Alternative Musical Imaginaries of Nation and Identity in India from the mid-1980s

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Wednesday, April 3 | 3:30 - 5:30 pm CT

537 Heller Hall (ICGC) | Live stream @ icgc.umn.edu

Abstract: The period from the mid-1980s or thereabouts inaugurated an era that was to throw up important cultural questions that have particularly marked the last three decades in Indian history. From the late 1980s, the rise of majoritarian Hindutva on the one hand and the anti-caste movements on the other, along with the waves of communal conflagrations and violence against Dalits over the decades from then on, saw interesting trends in literature and music. A large corpus of music came to be created, interpreted and performed around questions of communalism and caste, challenging and at the same time shaping popular sensibilities in different languages and in different parts of the country. Musicians such as Shubha Mudgal, Dhruv Sangari, Madangopal Singh, the Kabir Project, T M Krishna, Sambhaji Bhagat, the Kabir Kala Manch, to name a few amongst many, began studying and performing repertoires that were excavated from the past, often from centuries before. A vast corpus of such music, of which a large part is largely from Sufi and Bhakti traditions from the 12th century onwards, and the Dalit movement in different parts of the country, has come to address and re-constellate questions of nation, identity and politics in a refreshing manner, challenging right-wing cultural assertions frontally, and also shaping popular music listening cultures in the country through providing contemporary interpretations.

The talk will address some questions that are addressed by the repertoires that have been created that have informed my research into performance and performativity. Based on interviews with some of the musicians and a preliminary analysis of the music that they perform, I hope to demonstrate that the questions that are addressed by this musical corpus are distinct, in performative as well as idiomatic terms. I will also address how understanding performance in the present, combined with the experience of the performers and audiences, can be an important route to traveling back into and interpreting the past.

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