

## Conclusion

*Modernizing Composition* has sought to demonstrate how Sinhalese songwriters and poets modernized song and poetry in response to colonial and postcolonial formations. In this conclusion I wish to consider what their responses can articulate about common frameworks and theories one encounters in scholarship in the disciplines of South Asian studies and ethnomusicology. I also attempt to identify shortcomings of this monograph and describe three academic projects to which I hope to have contributed.

The onset of postcolonial studies impacted an entire generation of scholars in South Asian studies and ethnomusicology to devote research to the impact of colonialism and power relations between social actors from South Asia and the West. The history of Sinhala song and poetry in twentieth-century Sri Lanka offers food for thought to this academic movement, but it also directs attention onto overlooked links within South Asia. I focused this monograph on one intra–South Asia relationship hitherto not taken into serious consideration by ethnomusicologists or South Asian studies scholars: connections between Sri Lankans and North Indians.

Readers of *Modernizing Composition* may contend that the monograph's attempt to draw attention to intra–South Asian connections is problematic because it obfuscates how these connections have deep roots in colonialism and orientalism. The persuasiveness of this argument, in my judgment, is weakest when one focuses on Sinhala song and poetry created in the mid-twentieth century. The strength of this argument, however, grows stronger when one focuses on the song and poetry produced in the early decades of the twentieth century.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, one finds ties between John De Silva's (chapter 1) Sinhala-language theater song, Hindustani music, and orientalism.

In 1903 De Silva employed the Indian musician Visvanath Lawjee to compose Hindustani music for the Parsi theater. To my knowledge, when De Silva employed Lawjee, De Silva had not heard of reformers like Sir Sourindro Mohun Tagore (1840–1914), who was striving to create a national system of Indian notation to put Hindustani music on par with European classical music.<sup>1</sup> At this time Lucknow's Marris College of Music—an institution that played a key role in the classicization of Hindustani music—had not yet been established. Given these circumstances, we can assume that the reason De Silva developed interest in Hindustani music was not because he was impressed with its emerging classical status.

Why, then, did De Silva hire Lawjee and also hypothesize that Sinhala poetic meters originated in the tradition of North Indian classical music? In my interpretation, De Silva justified his use of North Indian classical music because he believed it articulated the ethos of the Arya-Sinhala identity. It is well known among scholars of Sri Lanka that Sinhalese reformers fashioned the Arya-Sinhala identity in dialogue with Henry Steel Olcott's brand of Buddhist orientalism. One therefore must concede that De Silva's interest in North India was intimately tied to his embrace of orientalist thought.

If I can convincingly trace the formation of De Silva's and Lawjee's intra-South Asian connection to orientalism, why does *Modernizing Composition* emphasize the importance of intra-South Asian relations? The reason is that the majority of Sinhala songs and poems in the twentieth century were direct responses to North Indian influences. Sinhalese songwriters and poets often did not directly encounter post-Enlightenment ideas and European cultural forms. Rather, Sinhalese songwriters and poets often came into contact with such ideas and forms through North Indian elites who reinterpreted and popularized them in South Asia.

Chapter 1, for example, examines how Sinhalese playwrights fashioned a new form of theater (nurthi) based on North Indian Parsi theater, and Sinhalese gramophone songwriters imitated melodies and short and long syllabic instants from North Indian film songs. Chapter 2 documents how the Heḷa Havula movement of the 1940s came into being to oppose North Indian cultural influence. Chapter 3 centers attention on the manner in which Rabindranath Tagore impacted Sinhalese songwriters and poets to fashion compositions with Victorian-tinged notions of romance. Chapter 4 turns to the 1950s, when Sinhala songwriters channeled Sanskrit literature and North Indian classical music into the radio opera. Chapter 5 investigates how one songwriter championed the musical nationalism that Professor S. N. Ratanjankar brought to Sri Lanka from North India.

If scholarship in South Asian studies and ethnomusicology has remained somewhat blind to the historical salience of modern intra-South Asian relations, so too have scholars in these disciplines tended to overlook the role played by commercialization in the social and national reform of music and literature.<sup>2</sup> The history of Sinhala song and poetry brings to light that at some moments *reform* drove commercialization, but

at other moments *commercialization* motivated reformist projects. Consider, for example, the *alut sindu* genre of gramophone songs (chapter 1). *Alut sindu* songwriters drew on the sentiments of the Buddhist revival to sell records. The reverse was true in the case of Sunil Santha (chapter 2): linguistic nationalism inspired Santha to engage in a commercial project that would accomplish the goals of the Heḷa Havula to elevate the Sinhala language, standardize its modern grammar, and encourage the Sinhalese English-speaking elite to speak in their mother tongue.

The radio station needs mention here: it was the institution that fostered conditions of possibility to utilize song for the dual purpose of reform and commodification. Social actors in Sri Lanka held various opinions about how radio song could be used to accomplish national and commercial goals. The case of Sunil Santha is again noteworthy because his reformist aspirations conflicted with the commercial goals of the radio station's administration. As a result, Santha boycotted the 1952 auditions and later quit his post as an A-grade musician. Scholars of radio in South Asia will need to explore further how and why did the institution with the power to produce and disseminate the sonic aspects of music and language become a crucial site for the coming together of national and commercial interests.<sup>3</sup>

*Modernizing Composition* also bears on the way aesthetic and affective modes of communication might function as crucial forces, in what Jürgen Habermas has termed the "public sphere." Texts of songs and poems surely contribute to democratic communication in ways that differ from rational discourse. Modes such as didacticism (chapters 1–2), romanticism (chapter 3), and neoclassicism, modernism, and social realism (chapters 4–6) perhaps opened up for the Sri Lankan reading and listening public new spaces for debate in Sri Lanka's democracy. A kind of "affective public sphere" is most evident in chapters 1 and 2, which document how colonial-era Sinhalese songwriters and poets reworked song and poetry into forms of quasi-rational discourse, platforms to empower the colonized community by advocating for the importance of Sinhalese Buddhism and the Sinhala language. The songwriters and poets discussed in chapters 1 and 2 played leading roles in Sri Lankan movements that aimed to politicize religion and language as markers of personal identity in relation to the West and North India.

Other moments in the history of Sinhala song and poetry seem distant from the public sphere: consider the wartime romance of World War II (chapter 3). In this case, it might be best to ask how wartime romance created contemporary spaces for the reading and listening public in which they could relate anew not only to themselves, their ethnic group, and their nation-state, but also to their allies in World War II. In chapter 3 I contended that wartime songwriters and poets drew specifically on ideas about romance that had become popular in three countries allied with Sri Lanka during the war: England, France, and India.

Readers of part 2, "The Postcolonial Era," may feel inclined to ask where scholars should draw the line between individual expression and historical event.

Questions remain, for instance, regarding the relationship between the production of Sinhala song and poetry and the politics of Sinhala-ization after 1956. While it is certainly important to study the production of song and poetry to understand the rise of Sinhala linguistic and ethnic identity, I found myself unable to reduce my research findings to this framework because my particular primary sources in part 2 possess varying degrees of closeness to the politics of Sinhala-ization.

Consider, for instance, the radio opera (chapter 4). Chandrarathna Manawasinghe's and Wimal Abeyesundara's radio operas were state-sponsored creations disseminated on the nation's sole radio station at the moment when the state was attempting to redefine the country as a Sinhala Buddhist nation. But the radio operas were also fictional flights of fancy with strong North Indian influences. Does this suggest that political regimes have use not only for *overt* forms of nationalist art but also for *covert* forms that seem to champion art-for-art's-sake ideologies? Or might the phenomena of these radio operas suggest that there are cracks and slippages in the reach of state power? Maybe the new political regime did not care to control the radio opera for its benefit? When I sought to explain the divergent aesthetics in the radio opera and free verse, I felt it was more appropriate to emphasize biographical details over the political transformation of the country in 1956. I argued that the contrasting standard of excellence in the radio opera and free verse was intimately related to the creators' different education, institutional base, and shared endeavor to raise the standards of their respective art forms.

At the same time, one cannot completely exclude historical events from these instances of individual expression. Manawasinghe, Abeyesundara, and Siri Gunasinghe knew they were fashioning song and poetry for a country with a new complexion: sovereign and ruled by Sinhalese Buddhists. They did not adopt neoclassicism and modernism in an apolitical vacuum. They adopted these aesthetic modes in response to a necessity they perceived: the need to raise the standards of Sinhala song and poetry. Perhaps one could characterize the logic of such thinking like this: if the Sinhalese were now the dominant majority in the democratic country, Sinhala song and poetry would have to be powerful as well.<sup>4</sup>

One can identify a variety of limitations of this study. These limitations include the absence of studies of song and poetry in earlier periods, later decades in the twentieth century, and coeval moments within South Asia. Many questions thus remain: How did developments in the nineteenth century factor into the twentieth? How did simultaneous movements in song and poetry in South Asia parallel or diverge from the Sinhala examples? How did the history discussed in the pages of this book factor into the new constellation of Sinhalese songwriters and poets who radicalized Sinhala song and poetry in the 1970s?

In 1971 approximately ten thousand Sinhalese Buddhist youths revolted to overthrow the government and its ruling class of Colombo-based, English-speaking statesmen and stateswomen, who had received their higher education in England.

The insurgent youths were underemployed or unemployed. They were village-based, Sinhala-speaking, and educated in village high schools (*maha vidyalaya*), national technical colleges, or national universities. They tried to seize state power in one day without any outside assistance. The insurgency inspired radical forms of Sinhala song and poetry, which future studies will need to address.

The absence of women in this monograph raises further questions. To my knowledge, between 1900 and 1965 there were no visible female songwriters in Sri Lanka. During this time, however, women such as Rukmani Devi had achieved success as gramophone vocalists, and others were giving voice to the concerns of women in the realm of poetry. In the early twentieth century female poets authored verse for a publication titled *Kiviya* (The poetess), and during the 1950s they contributed to a monthly poetry magazine titled *Kiviñdiya* (The poetess). What does an absence of female songwriters but presence of female vocalists and poets articulate about gender norms in twentieth-century Sri Lanka? Why were women authors of poetry but not song?

I hope this book will ultimately contribute to three projects. The first project is to bring into dialogue the study of South Asian music and literature. The study of South Asian music falls under the purview of ethnomusicology. The examination of South Asian literature occurs in South Asian studies. This academic separation has consequences: scholars have rarely taken notice of connections between song and poetry. *Modernizing Composition* has sought to overcome disciplinary fragmentation, because it examines the shared history of Sinhala-language song and poetry in twentieth-century Sri Lanka.

The second project is the attempt to bring into conversation postcolonial studies with the philology of regional languages in South Asia.<sup>5</sup> Postcolonial studies tends to privilege English-language sources and overlook South Asian language and literature.<sup>6</sup> I do not claim that South Asian regional literatures are more authentic repositories of culture than English-language texts. But we bypass South Asian languages and literature at a price. Our puzzles are missing important pieces.

Last, I hope this book plays an instrumental part in the endeavor to expand the scope of South Asian studies onto overlooked regions and languages in South Asia. I am convinced that histories of song and poetry from regions such as the Maldives or Bhutan and underrepresented languages such as Dhivehi and Dzongkha would shift the focus of the historiography of cultural production in South Asia from the well-studied relationship between India and the West to more understudied connections. The success of *Modernizing Composition* will depend on whether it inspires scholars to write such histories of cultural production in South Asia from the perspective of such lesser-known regions and languages.