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Evoking sounds of South Asia

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Unfamiliar to western ears, the natural, trembling tone of the bamboo flute evokes pastoral scenes of India's distant past. But bamboo flutist Shashank Subramanyam will sing through the instrument at the Yale Center for British Art tonight to give Yalies a taste of India today.

Subramanyam, who was invited by the Yale Raga Society, an undergraduate organization whose mission is to foster Indian classical arts on campus, will be seen and heard as part of Yale's India Initiative, launched in November. A collaboration between the South Asian Studies Council, the Music Department and the Office of International Affairs, the concert is just one example of a multi-organizational effort to introduce Indian culture to campus. The venture began in the fall with the initiative's announcement.

Aimed at increasing student engagement with the developing region through additional academic courses, recruiting efforts and research endeavors, the \$75 million effort to expand ties with the emerging global economic power of India has begun to promote awareness outside the classroom through Indian culture and arts.

"We do want to have a greater presence for South Asia, and India specifically, on the Yale campus," said George Joseph, the assistant secretary of the University in charge of relations with South Asia. "Activities like the concert that's happening are an important vehicle for that."

And through the arts, the India initiative is reaching a broader audience than ever before.

While only faculty and students with a specialized academic background typically attend lectures and panels held in conjunction with the initiative, cultural events appeal to different viewers and are more accessible to the Yale and New Haven community, Joseph said.

And since culture varies by region, especially in a country with the second largest population in the world, Sudhir Rao '11, co-president of the Yale Raga Society, said the organization tries to introduce region-specific art to the Yale community. Tonight's performance of the bamboo flute in a Carnatic style is unique to the southern region of India; the sitarist performer last spring was more in tune with northern India. Shashank's wife, Shirisha Subramanyam, will also be leading a demonstration of Bharatnatyam-style dance — a classic dance form that originates from Southern India — this afternoon.

Rao said he has noticed a hike in interest in his organization's concerts and events over the past couple years, especially since the India initiative was launched this fall. The Shashank concert tickets — which are

free and available by registration on the organization's site — are nearly all claimed, and the venue is expected to be close to full capacity during this evening's performance, Rao said.

Other South Asian groups on campus have received University funding for their arts efforts through the initiative, Joseph said.

The South Asian Studies Council, for one, listed a number of campuswide events over the past year that were aligned with the initiative's interests, including a dinner and keynote address by film director and producer Mira Nair and an inauguration of the Yale School of Art's new international art exhibit space featuring Indian art.

The South Asian Studies Council has also commissioned a professor at Delhi University, Priya Kanungo, to teach a course on Indian music in the spring semester next year, said the council's chair, anthropology professor Kalyanakrishnan Sivaramakrishnan.

“The India Initiative is committed to bringing Indian art, music and film into the mainstream of Yale College experience and will continue to work actively with all groups at Yale with similar commitments,” said Sivaramakrishnan, who also directs the initiative.

In fact, Joseph said one of the most distinctive features of the initiative is its concerted effort to be University-wide and inclusive of all different academic concentrations.

“The numbers I've seen have suggested that more people attend the cultural events” compared to academic presentations, Joseph said. But rather than focus on the popularity of such performances and galleries, he said, the initiative will continue to pursue what he called a “broad set of events” that define the country's heritage and identity.