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South Indian Indigenous Artists, Researchers To Visit Oberlin

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This semester, Shansi will host their inaugural visiting artists through their Visiting Artist and Practitioner Program, along with Shansi's partner institution for the program, Keystone Foundation, an organization that focuses on Indigenous communities and ecological development in the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve in South India, selected two Indigenous Adivasi artists and one Adivasi community-based researcher from the Irula tribe in Tamil Nadu to visit Oberlin for this 16-day program.

Shansi has a history of working with artists from Asia and the Asian diaspora, specifically through the Visiting Scholars Program, the Jacobson-Cocco Distinguished Lecture Series, and other sponsored events and performances.

"Oberlin Shansi has had a visiting scholars program since the 1920s," Shansi Senior Director Ted Samuel said. "We believe in mutual exchange. We don't just want to send Obies abroad, we also want to provide opportunities for members of our partner institutions to come here, do research, engage with academic life here, and also to observe pedagogies at a small liberal arts institution in Ohio."

While this framework has allowed many scholars to visit Oberlin through Shansi over the years, the organization has begun evolving their mission to expand the breadth of people who can engage with research and experiences at Oberlin.

"Over time, we started to develop partnerships with different types of organizations, nonprofit organizations," Samuel said. "We also work with a U.N. agency, and the visiting scholar model just doesn't necessarily work for that. Furthermore, the Irula arts residency is unique to us as we work with musicians who are not 'professional' in a traditional sense, even though their talent, knowledge, and expertise runs deep. They are currently engaged in the process of translating intimate, sometimes ritualistic music and dance practices to staged contexts."

The Irula artist residency will have many components, including performances, workshops, and presentations across various local venues.

"Ultimately, what we landed on is a program that marries the College and the community in a two-week residency," Shansi Grants and Fellowships Coordinator Phoebe von Conta, OC '22, said. "The first week that visitors will be here, the program will orient towards community events, because students will be on spring break, and then the second week will be oriented towards more campus involvement."

There will also be two artist jams at Hanson Records and the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland. This program's engagement with community venues and resources helps Shansi take a step toward achieving its community goals.

"It's easy for Shansi to be insular, you know, and to just really focus on our relationship with Oberlin College and our partners in Asia," Samuel said. "I think that this program is forcing us to go past the college bubble, if you will. I've been talking to folks at the public library for over a year to start doing things with them, but now we're actually doing something. So it's kind of breaking down those barriers to better engage in the community. And to engage in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, that's a dream come true — and now that we know that we have contacts at these places, there's precedent, so the next time, it won't be as hard to get into the community, because we've already done it once before."

Shansi also hopes that these two weeks of programming will serve as a solid representation of the kind of diverse work that the organization does and can do.

"This program is also an effort to spread the word about the expansiveness of Shansi," von Conta said. "I think sometimes on campus there can be a misunderstanding or an assumption that Shansi is for one type of student or one type of group or one type of campus organization, but that's not the case at all, and Shansi has a really dynamic array of programming and kinds of people who participate in the fellowship and grants."



Photo courtesy of Sneha G. Gupta

Indigenous Adivasi artists from the Irula tribe will visit Oberlin for Shansi's Visiting Artist and Practitioner Program.