

**Roots of Carnatic Music in Sri Lanka  
- Artistic interrelations between Sri Lanka and South India**

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**Abstract**

Each ethnic group living in a world of cultural design shapes their musical traditions according to their own heritage values. Music occupies a prominent place in the cultural fabric of every community.

The Tamil speaking community in Sri Lanka is an organized society intertwined with art. The religious beliefs and worships of this community formed the artistic foundation. From this, many arts such as music, dance, koothu, drama, painting and sculpture began to appear and grow.

As far as Sri Lanka is concerned, Batticaloa, Trincomalee and Jaffna are the areas where the Tamil people live, but Jaffna, the northern part of Sri Lanka, is mostly populated by Tamils.

Due to its geographical proximity to South India and the interaction between the two countries, the cultural heritage of South India was likely to spread to Jaffna and later to many parts of Sri Lanka.

Key words: Cultural transmission, Musical Drama, cultural customs, rituals, social art

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**Traditional elements of music in Sri Lankan Tamil culture**

All the arts and temples of the Sri Lankan Tamil community have their origins in the style of worship that takes place there itself. In the early days, the arts developed in Sri Lanka based on temples and its traditions.

The following lines from *Vaiyaa Pādal* refers the above,

‘ஊர் மூத்த நயினாரைக் கோவில்தனி லுறையவைத்தங் குண்மையாகச்

சீர்பூத்த சந்திரசே கரன்புசை செய்யவெனச் செப்பி நாளும்

ஏர் பூத்த பொற்பணங்க ளறுபத்தொன் றீந்துதிருப் பூசைக்கென்று

வார் பூத்த முலைமடவார் தங்களோடு பரராச மன்னன் வாழ்ந்தான் (97)

தன்கோட்டைக் கருகாக வன்னியநா தரனயங்கட் சார வைத்துப்  
பின்கூட்ட முடன்வாழும் பரிசைகத்திக் காரரையும் பெலமதாக  
மன்கூட்ட வரசுகா வலன்கணக்கன் முதலோரை மருங்கில் வைத்துப்  
பன்கூட்டச் சாதியெல்லா மோரிடமாய் வடபாகம் பயிலச் செய்து (98)<sup>1</sup>

A few lines from *Kaṇṇagi Purānam* also emphasises for the above,

‘சித்திரமறையோர் வீதி சிறந்திடும் வண்ணையூர்க்குக்  
கத்தனாம் வைத்தீசர்க்குக் கனத்ததோர் நடனஞ்செய்யும்,  
குத்திர மனத்தாளகுங், கொடியிடை, கனகி நூற்குப்  
பித்தனாயுலா மராலிப் பிள்ளையான் காப்பதாமே’<sup>2</sup>

The artists who lived near the temple are the best historical sources for the fact that their contributions have been important to the development of art traditions in the temples. The *Īlattu Chidambaram Purānam* is a fitting testimony to the fact that dance and vocal artists lived near the temple.<sup>3</sup> They were not only involved in singing music and playing musical instruments, but also in making garlands for the rituals at temples along with street Bajanaas.

Even the names of some of the towns in Jaffna are often used as causal names for the group of society living there. Especially today, a large number of musicians live in the town of ‘Panippulam’ in Jaffna.<sup>4</sup>

Professor V. Sivasamy in his article - ‘Music in the Government of Jaffna’ (*Yarlpāna Arasil Isai*) comments that ‘Panilam’ refers to a social group that mainly plays conch (*saṅgu*) musical instruments and is transformed as *Panipulam* nowadays.<sup>5</sup>

Thus the musical traditions provided by the temple began to participate in Tamil cultural events later. It is customary to use nāgaswaram, Tavil as Maṅgala music for all the festivities that usually take place in homes and residences.

In this way, the musical traditions that have emerged and developed in the Sri Lankan Tamil cultural practice are intended to be based on certain cultural elements followed by the Tamil community.

<sup>1</sup> Vaiyaapuri Aiyar, *Vaiyaa Pādal*, Publisher . Dr. K. S. Nadarajah , Colombo Tamil Sangam 1980, pg 56 - 57

<sup>2</sup> Nattuva Suppaiyanar, *Kannaki Purānam*, Publisher . Vaddukooddai M. Ramalingam, Suthanthiran Printers, 1961, pg 4

<sup>3</sup> Bhramashri Somaskanda Sarma, *Aalayankalil Vaaththiya Karuvikal*, Research book- Submitted to Music Department , University of Jaffna, 1994, pg 59

<sup>4</sup> Prof. Sivasami, *Yarlpāna Arasil Isai*, *Sinthanai Journal*, Vol 111: Faculty of Arts, University of Jaffna, pg 25

<sup>5</sup> Prof. Sivasami, *Yarlpāna Arasil Isai*, *Sinthanai Journal*, Vol 111: Faculty of Arts, University of Jaffna, pg 35

Furthermore, the carnatic music tradition groomed via the origin and development of the Devadasi tradition, the Music tradition in Koothu, the Oduvar tradition, the musical instruments tradition (*Isai Vellalar*), the mythology (*Purāna Padanam*), the storytelling (*Kathāprasāṅgam*), the origin and development of the songs by the Siddhars and the Arulalars in Sri Lanka.<sup>6</sup>

### **Fundamentals of Carnatic Music Development in Sri Lanka**

Musical theatre (*Isai Nādagam*) and the musical tradition (*IsaiVelalaMarabu*) have played a main role in the development of Carnatic music in Sri Lanka. Following 3 stages were developed in Sri Lanka with the contribution of the above.

- 1) Artists from Tamil Nadu came to Sri Lanka to proceed with art work with the support of *Nattukottai Chettiars* during the 18th century.
- 2) Some of the Sri Lankan artists who were interested in Carnatic music joined and went to Tamil Nadu with them and followed as *Gurukula Vāsam* and returned to Sri Lanka.
- 3) Self-formation of musical groups.

Social acceptance was high in the community, even though these arts were mostly associated with religious worship, evidenced by many articles of Professor Sivathambi.<sup>7</sup> Musical drama entered into the Sri Lankan Tamil community, same as the proliferation of *Isai Vellalar*. Arrival of great artists such as Thiyagarajah Bahavathar, Kiddappa and K.P Suntharambal created opportunities for Musical theatre to appear and grow in Sri Lankan Tamil society as well. It was considered essential for artists to excel in musical knowledge in musical theatre.

But over the period of time, artists have been forced to sing songs in their respective melodies, even when they have no genius in the art of music. The audience too were expecting the same. The songs are the most important in musical theatre as mentioned by Prof. Sivathambi and he used the term 'song as an arena' (*'Pādale Arangāka'*) when referring to this art form shows the importance of songs in this field.<sup>8</sup>

So the artists tried to sing songs on the same steps even though they did not know the musical techniques deeply. (Rāga-s such as Ānandabhairavi, Bhairavi, Sāma, which are often used in musicals. In later times musical artists had to sing the same for the success of the art,

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<sup>6</sup> Sivathambi. K. Prof. Yarlpaanam- Samookam-Panpaadu – Karuththunilai , Kumaran Printers: 1998, pg 56

<sup>7</sup> Sivathambi. K. Prof. Yarlpaanam- Samookam-Panpaadu – Karuththunilai , Kumaran Printers: 1998, pg 56

<sup>8</sup> Sivathambi. K. Prof. Yarlpaanam- Samookam-Panpaadu – Karuththunilai , Kumaran Printers: 1998, pg 35

even though they did not know the techniques of singing these ragas.) Music became a social art form at this point. Prof. Sivathambi referred to the same as 'Carnatic music entered the Jaffna community without knowing its character' in his book titled 'Jaffna-Society-Culture-Concept'.<sup>9</sup>

### **Puraana Padana Marapu**

Tamil and shaivism depended on mythology to protect it from western rulers in Sri Lanka during the 18th and 19<sup>th</sup> century. *Kandapurānam* played an important role in Jaffna tamil society and the same was supported by the statement made by Srilankan tamil Scholar Pandithamani K. Kanapathippillai. There is a definition of what is the best style for reading and exploring mythology in *Purāna Padanam*.

Before the reading *Purāna* begins, the book is anointed and placed on the pedestal and the traditional temple priest reads the archetype and begins the mythology. It is a special rule for the mythological rituals that take place in temples. In the case of houses and monasteries, the above rules are followed without the presence of a temple priest. It is essential to read the backup for any myth.

When reading the *Kāppu*, start with ragas like Tōdi, Kāmbōji and Bhairavi. Starting with the Tōdi rāga was made as a special rule. It was customary to study in the temple and in the holy places in the morning and evening. It is best to start with the Tōdi raga in the morning and read in ragas like Bilahari and Bhūpālam. In the evening, it is best to start with the Tōdi raga and read in the ragas like Purvikalyani, Kalyani, Pantuvarāli etc. It is welcome to read songs like Adana, Cārukēsi, Mōhanam, according to the rasas like fear, heroism, imprisonment and mercy that come in the songs. However, it is common practice to recite the *Purānas* in the ragas of Saṅkarābaranam, Bhairavi, Anandabhairavi, Sāma, Ārabhi and so on. It is common practice to read the *Purāna* in the Kāmbōji, Bhairavi ragas as not all ragas are available to everyone. No one wants the change in styles of reading *Purānas* traditionally.<sup>10</sup>

### **Story telling (*Kathaprasangam*)**

It is considered as an ideology driven from Christian religious events held in Sri Lanka.<sup>11</sup> Although it resembled the Sermon on the Mount, its content and purpose were different. The main purpose of this art was to save the crossing riders.

<sup>9</sup> Sivathambi. K. Prof, Yarlpaanam- Samookam-Panpaadu – Karuththunilai , Kumaran Printers: 1998, pg 56

<sup>10</sup> Shanmugasuntharam. N, Kalaiyum Marapum,; Kalai Peru Mandram, Thellipalai: Jaffna: 1974: pg: 45

<sup>11</sup> Sivalingarasa. S. Prof, Eelaththu Tamil Ilakkiya Sinthanaikal, Kumaran Printers: Colombo: 2003, pg 54

Even though it is a very valuable social art form found in many parts of India, its character and purpose in the Sri Lankan Tamil community were different from the most natural form of storytelling. This art form came into use during the novelist period when talking about the storytelling tradition of Sri Lanka. Especially C.C.S. Mani Iyer is the one to be remembered here. He is considered as an important person who enriched the Sri Lankan storytelling tradition. His musical and Tamil skills gave him the opportunity to become a great orator and to guide many.<sup>12</sup>

### **Carnatic Music Tradition**

Carnatic music became a field of learning in the 19th century AD. So far it has not only become an art for particular communities but is beginning to change into something more. The arrival of Swami Vipulananda's book – *Yarl Nool* gave a different perspective on Carnatic music in Sri Lanka.

The art form of the music field which had hitherto been played only for pleasure became learning during this period. Those who were affluent after the 1940s, who were interested in Carnatic music, went to Annamalai University in Tamil Nadu to study and returned to Sri Lanka as *Saṅgīta Bhūṣaṇam*'.

Following this, Carnatic music was introduced as a main subject in the Government of Sri Lanka School Curriculum and was taught in schools.

As a result, the Carnatic music industry in Sri Lanka is seen as a University Based Research field nowadays. It is no exaggeration to say that the Carnatic music community in Sri Lanka has grown in importance as a subject taught in schools today, as a field of study in universities and as a field of job creation in the community.

### **Conclusion**

It is a fact of history that Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka are similar on many platforms from time to time. Thus it is inevitable that all the changes taking place in Tamil Nadu, the birthplace of the Tamil arts, will be followed in Sri Lanka, where the same culture, language and customs are followed by the community. In this context, the artistic relations between Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka have a long history. Although Carnatic music is native to Tamil Nadu, it is true that it is deeply rooted in the Tamil culture of Sri Lanka.

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<sup>12</sup>Shanmugasuntharam. N, *Kaaiyum Marapum*, Kalai Peru Mandram, Thellipalai: Jaffna: 1974, pg: 32

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