CHAPTER THREE
PARALLEL DEVELOPMENTS IN THE HISTORY OF VOCAL KARNATAKA MUSIC

Karnataka music today is definitely not what it was a few centuries ago. The changes that have swept this genre with special reference to Vocal music are tidal in nature. Among all the performing arts of India, it was classical music that saw the most changes at a rapid pace. The field of Karnataka classical music has undergone fundamental changes in its patronage, content, presentation and reception (Subramanian, 2006). There were several developments in vocal Karnataka music which are of great significance while analysing the stand of Nagaswaram music today. This chapter is a study of the complex and intertwined relation shared between Nagaswaram and Karnataka vocalists. Careful observation of the ancient history of Karnataka music shows that instrumentalist and vocalists always had their own tiny ecosystems running parallel to the greater developments in society and culture. However with the slow shift of patronage, the space in which the Nagaswaram artists existed changed rapidly. Instruments for a long time in the history of Karnataka classical music did not enjoy individual concert status, except for the Veena and Nagaswaram. Most other instruments were almost always a part of an ensemble like the Vadya Vrundas (Kuthapa – ancient instrumental orchestras) or as accompaniment to Vocal music. However, by the turn of the 19th century, with the emergence of many talented musicians, instruments and instrumentalists gained importance as lead musicians. They were able to sustain an audience with solo concerts.

As instruments gained individual importance, vocal music found itself on the same playing field as all other instruments, which had gained importance as lead musicians. In this context, Vid Sanjay Subrahmanyam believes that the influence of the Nagaswaram was more on the musicians and their stylistic rendition than on the system. He believes that the emergence of powerful musicians during the instrumental renaissance ushered a new era of give and take between vocalists and instrumentalists’. According to him, the influence of Nagaswaram was seen and talked about most from the 1940’s to the 1970’s. It was the era of change where Vocal music found itself under the tremendous influence of many outstanding

49 From the Tanjore Court to the Madras Music Academy – Lakshmi Subramanian, pg. 1

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instrumentalists who could be described as trend setters and game changers in the
field of Karnataka classical Music. This chapter attempts to deeply analyse these
changes which swept Vocal music and changed its very stand. Most of the changes in
technique, content and presentation happened organically as an evolution along with
the changes in the musical scenario.

As believed by many scholars, Karnataka Vocal music found its birth in the
 cradle of the Vedas. In ancient society, the need for community life and bonding was
quint essential for its growth. This sense of cooperation found expression in music
and dance. The ancient Vedas, Upanishads and Epics, when set to music were great
tools of group activity. Initial monotonic recitation called Archika, gave way to the
Gathika and Samika. These swaras were called Udatta, Anudatta and Swarittha.
Slowly the seven swaras evolved. Musical sound or ‘Nada’ was considered as a
manifestation of God and man’s instinct towards melody led him to develop music as
a form of worship. Thus the spiritual status to Karnataka Classical music was given in
the very early stages of its development itself. In the spiritual significance of
Karnataka classical music, the Nagaswaram was given a special position as a
“Mangala Vadyam”, auspicious and affiliated to the temple.

PARALLEL HISTORY OF CLASSICAL DRAVIDIAN MUSIC TRADITION
& LOOKING THROUGH THE SANKRIT TREATISES

It is slightly unfortunate that the Nagaswaram does not find favour among the
Sanskrit treatises. This instrument was always practised by the lower caste
communities who had only limited access to the written musicological developments
and treatises, patronised by the Royal courts. As mentioned earlier, it was affiliated to
the temple and not the royal houses. The method in which the Temple and the Royal
houses functioned were very different from each other. It was essentially a part of the
Dravidian musical identity as opposed to the Aryan music developments. The
possibility of finding references and descriptions of the Nagaswaram would be higher
in the works of parallel running Tamil music history and Kannada treatises. Very few
of such treatises survive till today. It may not be possible to assert whether Tamil
music was based on the Sama Vedic traditions or not. However it is definite that this
musical entity or phenomenon existed with its grammar as early as the 6th BC. Except
the Sillappadikaram all other works written before the Christ era have become
extinct. However one cannot say that the Tamil works were independent and not based on similar lines of thought as the Sanskrit treatises. There is an accepted belief that the Vedic seer Agastya muni prepared the grammar of music, dance and drama in 80,000 Rig Vedic versus along with the grammar of the Tamil language in his book ‘Agathiyam’. He is believed by historians to have introduced the Vedic culture to those who lived south of the Vindhyas. There are references of him in the Ramayana. What is interesting is that along with Vedic culture he is also considered the father of the Tamil literature. Tolakappiar (Ancient Tamil grammarians) condensed Agasthya’s work from 80,000 verses to 8000 in their own work, the Tolakappiam. Of this work only 1612 verses are available however there are several indications to show that this work had many verses dedicated to Music grammar. Another work ‘Isai Numukkam’ (now extinct) was an exclusive treatise on the grammar of Tamil music. This was written by Sarakumara, the son of Sikandi, and had influences of the Sanskrit treatises on them. Sarakumara was a disciple of Agasthya muni. Thus one cannot rule out that Tamil music and culture definitely had many influences of the Sanskrit treatises on them. However in the case of music, lakshana was always written on the basis of the prevailing lakshya not the vice versa. Lakshana always follows Lakshya. Thus the Isai Vellalars and the Yazh Pannars of the Christian era could still have practised music based on the Sama Veda without any knowledge of Sanskrit language or the Sama Veda (VG Krishnamurthy, 1994)

In ancient Karnataka music, there was no dearth of Sahithya or literary passages for music. All the sacred scriptures were most available to be set to tune. However it was a period for the discovery of the science of sound and the principles of classical music. The Veena played a great role in the development of Gamakas which became the unique stamp of Indian classical music. Instruments too kept up their growth according to the number of swaras and musical scales that were being discovered with every century. The number of holes gradually increased in wind instruments and the number of strings went up in Tata vadyas. Frets were added and resonators were fixed. (Ayyangar, 1972)\(^\text{51}\) This happened at a rapid place and by the 10\(^\text{th}\) century AD the celebrated Yazh was already obsolete.

\(^{50}\) Sruti, Issue no 121, Pg. 39. VG Krishnamurthy and VS Gomathisankara Iyer.

\(^{51}\) History of South Indian (Carnatic) Music – R Rangaramanuja Ayyangar, Pg 32, ch6
The Natya Sātra (500 BC) is the earliest musical treatise that is available to us. By the time music reached this era from that of the *Sama Veda*, society had advanced and started developing the fine arts as refinement to its social structure. It is very evident from the Natya Sātra that there were many advances made in Dance and drama, and music had gained prominence as an aid to theatre and dance. This is very different from today’s scenario where music has gained a majestic throne as an independent art form. It is only very rarely that accomplished solo musicians provide accompaniment for Dance and Theatre and often it is more of a collaboration than an accompaniment.

However the period of the Natya Sātra was a giant leap from the period of the *Sama gana* where music was associated only with religious worship. In the case of the Nagaswaram, the ‘China-melam’ and ‘Peria-melam’ came to be two very different sets of Nagaswaram artists. Artists belonging to the Chinna-melam only accompanied Dance and theatre (probably also Kutapas) whereas the Peria-melam came to be reserved for temple rituals and offering only. The Chinna *melam*, which was a larger ensemble usually consisted of the Mukhaveena, (the high pitched cousin of the Nagaswaram family) whereas the Peria *Melam* consisted of the Timiri or the Bari Nayanam.

Musical scales such as Murchana and Grama had developed by the time of the Natyashastra. Aspects such as Tana, Jati, Varna, and Alankara were discussed in it. The concept of *Graha Bheda* had evolved during Bharatas time, through which the new musical scales were discovered. Compositional forms for Vocal music such as ‘Dhruvapadas’ had emerged. The Tamil Sangam literature period (from 2\(^{nd}\) AD Sillapadikaram to 5\(^{th}\) century AD Pattu pattu) saw the emergence of the ‘Pamm’ which were ancient ragas. Most of them directly corresponded to our modern day Ragas in their *swaroopa*. The Tamil Sangam period literature referred to *Graha Bheda* as ‘Kural thiripu’ and it very clearly states as to how the ancient Yazh was used to discover this phenomenon and how there were different Yazhs tuned to different *Pamns*. Thus one could see the important role instruments played during the discovery and evolution of many musical scales, an important milestone in the history of Karnataka music. Time and again the Veena was used to test musical theories, conduct experiments and demonstrate new elements in music. Thus it was also called as a ‘Pradarshini’ *Vadya* during the ancient days.
The *Silappadikaram* (written by Illango) talks about Madhavi’s (the Heroine, a Devadasi) music teacher. It goes on to state that he was proficient in Vocal, Yazh and Venu. Here I would like to point out that the term “Venu” is quite ambiguous as it was used to denote any *Sushira Vadhyra* during that period. As an example, the Nagaswaram itself was called as “Uttala Venu” in the Rig Veda according to Dr BM Sundaram. The term Venu till a long period in history, simply meant and denoted a wind-instrument. Once Mysore Vasudevacharya himself referred to TNR as a “Krishnavathara” and said that he was blessed to have heard his “magic flute”. The occasion was a special concert for the birthday celebrations of Rukmini Devi Arundale at the Kalakshetra auditorium. Mysore Vasudevacharya made this reference during his vote of thanks after being among the distinguished guests for the concert (Sankaran, Annecdotes that Affirm, 2013). Coming back to the *Silappadikaram*, Madhavi’s teacher used to play the *Sengottu Yazh* which had seven guts that gave birth to the seven ‘Palais’ (*murchanas*). They were *Semapalai, Padumamalaipalai* (by taking the second swara as *adhara sadja*), *Sevvazhipalai, Arumapalai, Kodippalai* the sixth being *Vilaippalai* and the seventh, *Merchempalai*. These correspond to the modern day Harikamboji, Kalyani, Todi, Kharaharapriya and Shankarabharanam as the first five and the seventh as Nata Bhairavi. The sixth being a Vivadi. Thus one gets a clue as to the existence of the ancient Raga system during 2nd AD. The *Silappadikaram* mentions “Kattalathi” and “Niravalathi” which seems to be close to *Manodharma* or improvised music. The practise of Raga *Alapana* in some format seems to present in the 2nd AD (Ayyangar, 1972).

Ancient Tamil *Sangam* literature (2nd AD – 5th AD) also gives many glimpses into the format of music present during that era. Veena was still a celebrated instrument of the royalty and kings like Samudra Gupta in the North Indian subcontinent too issued coins bearing his image with a Veena. The *Sangam* literature consisted of ten poems (the *Pattu pattu*). *Tirumurugatruppadai, Poranar Atruppadai, Sirupanatruppadai, Perumpannatruppadai, Mullaipattu, Maduraikkanchi, Nedunalvadai, Kurinjipattu, Pattinappalai and Malaipadu kadam*. These poems talk of many artist communities. One of them was the ‘Viraliars’. These were women

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52 T Sankaran for *Sruti Magazine*, October 2013, ISSUE 349, Pg. 32
53 This Niravalathi or Niraalathi seems to have been used for the Sanchari in classical Dance according to Dr S Ramanthan
54 Rangaramanuja Ayyangar, Ch. 16 Pg. 142
dancers who enjoyed great respect and royal patronage. They were also accompanied by the *Peruvangiam* and the *Muzhavu*, which are the ancient terms for the Nagaswaram and the Tavil respectively. The community of singers were called *‘Pannars’*. In the poem *Maduraikkanchari*, these *Pannars* have been described as having played an important role in the socio-religious activities of the ancient society.

This important period saw the artist communities receiving generous patronage from the *Pandyan* king Nedunchezhian, the earliest king to be found in epigraph (Pandiyan Nedunchezhian is the same king who put Kovalan to death earning Kannaki’s curse in *Sillapadikaram*). This is a point where history and fiction seem to be crossing paths and goes on to show us that myths and legends at some point of time could have been historical events whose narration changed over a period of time). The capital city of Madurai flourished and was a hub for all musical activities. It was a period when the Pannars woke up the neighbourhood by singing the ‘*Marudapann*’ accompanied by the *Tannumai* (Mrudangam), Sevvazhi pann was played during dusk. Thus vocalists followed *Gana Kala niyama* (time theory for Raga rendition). The other artist community present was *‘Porunars’*. These *Porunars* were poets who sang while playing the Yazh. (Ayyangar, 1972)\(^5\) To quote the *Tirumurugaattruppadai*, the Porunars had a “gentle, pleasing voice of one familiar with the faultless tone of the Yazh”. Thus there were many Vocal and instrumental communities that were existing side by side all deeply embedded in the activities of ancient community life. This also raises questions of the social hierarchy of these artist communities? Were they on par with the community of priests? Did the upper class perform art-music in public?

When did the practise and performance of Karnataka music gain popularity among the upper caste?

**THE AGE OF THE TEVARAM HYMNS (7\(^{th}\) century AD)**

Even though the Sangam literature was centred round Dance and Music, it only gave a theoretical explanation of the music practises during its period. However, the dawn of the era of *Tevaram* and *Divya Prabandhams* (7\(^{th}\) AD) saw the emergence of the earliest patterns of music practise on record. That is because these hymns were set to tune and the *Panns* that were used were ancient yet popular. Simple talas’ were used as time-measures. This was the period of revival of Hinduism. The Pallava kings emerged as great patrons of art during this period and built many temples. Mahendra

\(^5\) History of South Indian (Carnatic) Music – R Rangaramanuja Ayyangar, Pg. 36, ch7
Varma Pallava was the first South Indian ruler to build rock cut temples and some of the monoliths he commissioned are found in Kancheepuram and Mahabalipuram. The most famous inscription in music, the Kudumiamalai rock near Pudukottai has been credited to him. All the temples built by him and his successors’ maintained Tevaram singers, Dancers and orchestras.

The Tevaram are hymns in praise of Lord Shiva and are set to madhyama kala tempo (known as Varam or second tempo). The composers followed the stories of the Puranas’ and Adhwaitha philosophy. This was the period when both Nagaswaram and Vocalists rendered the same compositions close to the similar tunes in which they were composed. The Nagaswaram community still specialises in Tevaram hymns as they were studied with zeal and reverence and passed on to generations with very few alterations in its musical structure. One vocalist community who specialised in singing Tevarams in temples were called Oduvars or Oduvamurthis. Maintained by temple funds could it be said that these were some of the earliest communities of singers? It is very evident that the Nagaswaram Vidwans and the Oduvars shared the same space and musical content while presenting them for Alaya Vazhivadu. Could it be such singers maintained by the temple who brought the idea of Raga Alapana into the realm of vocal music as an inspiration from the Nagaswaram? After the Tevaram fell into disuse, one can say that the common repertoire between Vocalists and Nagaswaram artists came to a brief end. The only common factor that bound vocal music and Nagaswaram was the alapana and Pallavi. After the Silappadikaram Aalati, Raga alapana found mention only in the work of Sarangadeva as ‘Alapti’ during the 13th century and the idea seems to have taken a while to develop. After the 7th century AD Divya Prabandhams we find mention of melodic modes only in the 13th century Sangeetha Rathnakara. This is long gap in the history of Karnataka Classical music. Why there are no Sanskrit or Tamil works in between that describe the evolution of Raga alapana and when and how did Raga alapana become a form of improvisation sans sahithya or swaras is a puzzle. What could have inspired vocalists to develop and excel in the sort of improvisation where the advantage and ease of Sahithya is missing? These are answers that still elude many scholars.
The most important composers of Tevaram were

- Manikyavachakar – Tiruvachakam – originally set in the ancient pentatonic Mohana raga
- Tirugnana Sambandar (youngest)
- Tirunavukkarasar (Appar) - composed 40,000 verses of which 3110 survived.
- Sundaramurti

The *Tiruvachakam*, even though its name suggests that it was recited, had such a metrical structure that it readily lent itself for musical rendering later on and became the hand book for Shaiva Siddhantha.

Tirugnana Sambandar, Tirunavukkarasar and Sundaramurti were known as the *Moovar* (Tevaram Trinity). Gana Kala Niyama was followed during the recitation of the Tevaram and 21 Panns were popular. The Tevaram lost popularity in course of time and they fell into disuse by 10th century AD. It was revived by Rajaraja Chozha the second and Valli Ammai (a descendent of Tiruneelakantha, the yazh player who accompanied Sambandar). Sarangadeva analysed this version of the Tevaram and its Panns and wrote about it in his *Sangeeta Ratnakara* (Ayyangar, 1972). Thus one can see the exchange of ideas of classical music between scholars of regional languages and the Sanskrit scholars.

**THE DAWN OF RAGA DURING 8-9TH CENTURY AD**

The term Raga as we know it today was first used by Matanga Muni in his treatise on music the ‘*Brihaddesi’*. He explained the concept of 22 srutis with the *Dhruva Veena* and *Chala Veena*. The emergence of Raga as a complete musical structure marked a giant leap in the evolution of Indian classical music. Raga came to define the nature and pride of Indian music. The Nagaswaram internalised the Raga to such an extent that they became synonyms. To quote R Rangaramanuja Ayyangar “The development of the Raga concept is perhaps, the greatest achievement of Indian music. It established the independent role of Sangeeta apart from Sahitya. In due course, it also released the Venu and the Veena from the Kutapa and enlarged the domain of absolute music. In later times the pride of this place in this realm was the

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56 History of South Indian (Carnatic) Music – R Rangaramanuja Ayyangar, Pg. 47
prerogative of the marvel of musical creation, the incomparable Nagaswaram with its complement in the majestic Tavil”. When did raga release itself from Sahitya? Were the Nagaswaram the torch bearers of the practise? Rangaramanuja Ayyangar seems to suggest that the Nagaswaram picked up Raga elaboration and taken it to great heights in comparison to the rest of the Karnataka classical music world. I believe this could have been so, since that Nayanakaras didn’t have many compositions to fall back on. During the course of my research, most Nagaswaram Vidwans seemed to trace back their ancestors playing the Tevaram and Panns. None of the other ancient compositional forms such as Prabandhas, Virruttam, javali and Keerthana seemed to have been played on the Nagaswaram. During the course of my interviews with various Nagaswaram vidwans, most claim that the Nagaswaram never played any other form of composition apart from its own repertoire of the Mallari, Rakthi, Pallavi (all of which give predominance to Raga alapana) and the occasional Tevaram. The oral history passed down to them suggests that they mostly played swara kalpana and Raga since the very ancient time. Other ancient compositions such as Prabandhas and Dhruva padha were not mentioned by any treatise or musician as part of the Nagaswaram repertoire. Did the Nagaswaram develop its own compositions after the Tevaram period (7th AD)? While vocal music seemed to have many more compositional forms which gave importance to Sahithya, the Nagaswaram seems to have developed musical forms which gave more prominence to Raga alapana and swara kalpana.

MUSIC DURING THE 13TH CENTURY THROUGH THE EYES OF SARANGADEVA

Sarangadeva’s Sangeeta Ratnakara is an important musical treatise which gives us a lot of clues as to the developments in vocal and instrumental music in the times. Though Sarangadeva was a Kashmiri Brahmin of origin, he served as a minister in the secretariat of the King Immadi Devaraya of Devagiri. His work was the result of an exhaustive study of the Sanskrit treatises of Bharata (Natya Sastra), Narada (Sangeetha Makaranda), Matanga (Brihaddesi) and the Tamil Silappadikaram, Jeevakachintamani and Tevaram hymns. All the ancient treatises till now eschewed music as an aid to dance or drama. However, by Sarangadeva’s period things had clearly changed and he described music dedicated as an offering to god as the highest means of attaining the four Purusharthas. Regional (Desi) and classical (Margi) music had clearly emerged as independent streams. However the accuracy of
Sangeetha Rathnakara, as a reflection of the music actually performed outside the court during his time is debatable.

From the Sangeeta Ratnakara, R Rangaramanuja Ayyangar makes a very interesting study about the treatment of the ancient Tana and how its form evolved while changing hands from the Nagaswaram to Vocal music. (Ayyangar, 1972) Tana was a simple musical phrase which occurred in Jati (a scale derived from Murchanas). These simple musical phrases later developed into elaborate Sancharis used for raga delineation. The elaborate Sancharis could have been phrases that define the Raga bhava, or challan. He further goes on to say that this Tana changed in format over the years. “It took over the Rakthi from Nagaswaram and transformed it into Madhyamakala Raga Sanchara or Raga in quick tempo. It had an intricate voice technique and demanded absolute breath control. To invest the voice with the requisite tonal inflections for the exciting presentation meant arduous practise for a period of time…it created a scintillating atmosphere and sent attentive audience into a somnolent reverie. Unfortunately this interesting feature of south Indian music disappeared around the year 1920.” This could also have been the long Karve filled raga phrases that was characteristic of the Nagaswaram raga alapana (found extensively during the performance of Rakthi) and vocalists who were influenced by the Nagaswaram. This is clearly not the present day Tana which we refer to. One can see that Rangaramanuja Ayyangar traces very definitive link between Vocal and Nagaswaram with special focus on Raga alapana.

Sarangadeva also describes how each swara can be embellished in different ways, depending on the colours and contours of the adjoining swaras in the musical phrase. In this process each swara loses its individual demarcation and blends into one unit. He calls this phenomenon as “Swara Kaku”. Similarly there is “Kshetra kaku”, which defines the area from which the voice of a vocalist emerges i.e. Navel, lungs throat or head. Then there is the “Yantra Kaku”, which is the sound emanating from instruments. Although Kaku was generally described as modulation of the voice, proper intonation and impressiveness of musical sound one can see that there was a separate treatment of vocal and instrumental during the analysis of musical sound and grammar. Thus when Sarangadeva talks about Alapti one wonders whether it was a general way of raga elaboration for both instruments or was he attributing this only to

57 History of South Indian (Carnatic) Music – R Rangaramanuja Ayyangar, Pg. 65, Ch. 10
vocal? However according to Rangaramanuja Ayyangar, Saragadeva’s description of Roopaka Alapti is a derivation of the Pannalathi of Illango, which was one of the earliest attempts on elaboration of Sahithya in Krithis. Again many doubts arise here since the Panns were only melodic modes according to many scholars and did not have any Sahithya attached to it. It was the predecessor of the Ragas. These Panns were rendered as melodic modes on the Yazh and Venu. When they were applied to vocal music they appeared in the form of tunes on which the Sahithya of the Tevaram was set. Thus ancient melodic modes in their pure form were rendered effectively on the instruments ie. Alathi was played on the Yazh followed by the vocalising of lyrics.

Somewhere around 12th century, Someshwara Bhullokamal (1116-1127), a chieftain of the Deccan named South Indian music as “Karnataka Sangeeta”. Music received great patronage from this period till the 13th century, especially the Nagaswaram. Most practising musicians of the ancient times traced back their ancestry to the Isai Vellala community. This community gave rise to many sub-communities of Devadasis and Rudra Ganikayars. Many of the women of this Isai Vellala community were dedicated to the Temples as Devaradiyal or servants of god. The Sanskrit term (Devadasi) for this Tamil word, was a much later addition, during the 20th century and is also perhaps the result of the period of Sanskritization. According to the Agama Sastras Devadasi are mentioned as Nartakis, Ganikas, Rudra-ganikas, and Dasis. In Kerala Devadasi were called as Tevidicchi and Nangaimar. Daughters were trained as musicians and Dancers while the men took up the Nagaswaram (which was called the Peruvangiam) or Nattuvangam to accompany them in the Chinna melam (Sadir attam). This practise is believed to have emerged and attain prevalence during the Sangam age. This continued till the last few decades of the 19th century. The men took upon the name Pillai as their surname. A small section of the Isai Vellala community which did not want to associate themselves with music or dance broke away and took up the profession of weaving and textiles. They came to be known as the ‘Senguttuvars’ according to Dr BM Sundaram.

However by the turn of 13th century, the men of this community had taken the art of Nagaswaram to greater heights and had established the Peria Melam as an integral form of worship and musicianship. It came to be cherished as a Mangala Vadyam and this community came to establish an identity of its own and zealously continued it as their profession. The Chola dynasty, which was one of the longest
ruling dynasty in south India (from the Sangam period i.e. 3rd BC till the dawn of 13th century) gave generous patronage to temple and temple related fine arts of which the Nagaswaram and dance benefitted the most. The district of Tanjore was a bristling with music and dance in the air. Hundreds of temples throughout the Cauvery river delta maintained Nagaswaram players, dancers and other musicians. Chozha emperors immortalised the music and dance of the period through temple sculptures. One such example is the Kumbheshwara temple in Kumbhakonam which houses a one foot long Nagaswaram made of Granite. Located in Azhwartirunagari, this temple gives us ample proof of the status the Mangala Vadyam enjoyed during the period. However the Pannars, the only clear Vocal communities of the Sangam age were long gone by the 13th century and Vocal music underwent a huge change in dynamics. The questions that remains is when did Vocal music become a passion of the upper class? According to Dr BM Sundaram, public concerts by vocalists of the upper class were held only during the time of Coimbatore Raghavaier (1824-1878).

According to Dr BM Sundaram, the largest artist community in ancient society was the Isai Vellala community. Until the 19th century almost every musician was an Isai Vellala. He went on to say that “the community was like an ocean”. The 17th-18th century society of musicians comprised of the upper class court musicians, mostly Vocalists and Vainikas and then the Isai Vellala community comprising of the Peria Melam Nagaswaram, Chinna Melam Mukhaveena, Devadasis, mrudangists and the Natuvanars who could be accompanist and Gurus for the Devadasis or excellent composers of Karnataka Classical music. Thus the predominant performing community which could be heard by the public was by and large that of the Nagaswaram and its allies. Even the dance of the Devadasis was reserved within the closed precincts of the temple and private patrons, unlike the Nagaswaram whose music reached the houses of the lay man.

One of the many questions that are raised is that why are there not enough mention of the Nagaswaram in Sanskrit treatises? Even though the Isai Vellala community was one of the largest communities of musicians, why don’t we find enough mention of them in the Sanskrit lakshana grantha? This could have been due to the reason that most of the Sanskrit treatises were a result of court patronage. Kings took great pride in patronage of the Classical arts and looked upon this as a status symbol. They took great pride in showcasing their musical abilities. Most kings were
trained in Karnataka classical music either as Vocalists or *Vainikas*, (again none in the Nagaswaram). It was considered an essential part of a king’s education. They tried to excel as musicians. A fine taste in the refined arts was considered a matter of pride. Thus most Royal patrons also wanted to set a defining standard on the general musical practise by employing *lakshanakaras* to bring out musicological treatises. It was a display of prowess and patron ship by the king. From Sarangadeva to Subbarama Dixitar (1839-1906, He enjoyed the Patronage of Ettyapuram kings and AM Chinnaswamy Mudaliar) all received royal patronage. Were the musicologists like Sarangadeva performers themselves? The court musicians were to abide by strict laws of tradition and royal protocol. Whereas the Nagaswaram Vidwans, by birth a lower caste community were outside the musical boundaries of the royal house. They belonged to the temples and to the public imagination. Also the belief of the Nagaswaram being associated with a lower class instrument resulted in the shying away of upper class men from picking up its practise. Thus we don’t find much mention of the Nagaswaram in any of the Sanskrit treatises which had royal funding. Also the Sanskrit treatises had the tendency of using outdated names and most kept harping on either the Natya Shastra or the Sangita Rathnakara. How well they mirrored the present trends of the musical performances of their era or even for that matter the latest Raga names has been debated. Excessive Sanskritisation of the colloquial names of the instruments made it all the more difficult for one to be convinced of the lakshana granthas role as a reflection of musical practise during their times. For example, The Nagaswaram was called “Uthala Venu” or “Madhvari” or “Madhukari” in most musicological treatises including the Sangita Rathnakara, instead of its popular term ‘Mohori’ which was what used more often by its practitioners.

**DAWN OF THE KEERTHANA AND KRITHI**

15th century was of great importance to Karnataka vocal music. It saw the dawn of the Keerathana and Krithi which went on to become one of the most popular and powerful means of music presentation and came to be the very reason of the success of the modern day *Kutcheri* or music presentation. The pattern of lyrics set to a simple form of Pallavi, Anupallavi and charanam led to vocal music becoming more malleable in form. The founder of this type of composition is believed to be Tallapakam Annamacharya (1424-1503). His contribution was carried further by the
works of Purandaradasa (1484-1564). Purandaradasa, a 16th century Saint-bard came to be known as Karnataka Sangeeta Pitamah and he introduced many sweeping changes in the study and presentation of Karnataka Classical music. Introduction and codification of the preliminary exercises of Sarali, Janti, Alankara, Geeta, Sooladi in Raga Mayamalavagowla has been largely credited to him. This was a period which saw vocal music go through a revolution in outlook and purpose. Karnataka classical music which was to be used as a strict form of worship or profession began to gain a more emotional connect with a larger audience through the Bhakthi movement. Classical music came to be used as a form of social reform and bonding and in the process went through some sweeping changes within itself. To quote Rangaramanjan Ayyangar “the practical wing of Carnatic music would appear to have outgrown the framework of all previous writers and their theoretical concepts of Grama, Moorchana, Mela and Raga…..obviously, music had shed its outworn trappings and moved far ahead of book writers, theoriticians and grammarians limping behind. Verily, the stage was set for the great leap forward”.

Of all the compositional forms that had come into existence during 16th to 18th century, the Pada seems to be the most ambiguous. The term ‘Pada’ seem to denote a wide variety of compositional structure. However, used by most vocalists the Pada was a kind of composition that had Sahithya. Whether it was considered classical or lighter is unclear. Also, any composition set to lyrics seem to be called the Pada, be it the compositions of the Haridasas’ echoing a Bhakthi sentiment (Dasara Pada) or the Pada sung by the Natuvanars and Devadasis which had bhakthi in the form of Sringara Rasa. It is interesting to see that ancient compositions which were considered Art-music did not shy away from the use of Shringara rasa. Even the Varnams’ echoed the Shringara rasa in their Sahithya. For ex the Adi tala Saveri varnam “Sarasuda nine” or Pallavi Goplalaiyer “Vanajakshi” in Raga Kalyani set to Ata tala. The delineation of the Pada into Keerthana and lighter classical pieces on the basis of the rasa it carried (Shiringara or Bhakthi) was a later development during the time of Ghanam Krishnaiyer somewhere around 1816 according to Dr BM Sundaram. One must note that some of the Padams were far from light classical in their structure and rendition was quite heavily laden with gamaka and majesty. The Padas rendered by the family of Veena Dhanammal are a great example of this.
THE BHAKTHI MOVEMENT (NAMA SANKEERTHANA)

The immense rise of popularity of Vocal music can be attributed to the Bhakthi movement. It is this movement that channelized music as a powerful tool for social and religious reform. It also came at a time when orthodox Hinduism was challenged by the new crop of religions which gave their followers a new social status and lifestyle. This movement used melody as a means of prayer and attaining salvation instead of religious chants and an austere lifestyle. The Bhakti movement originated around 7th century South India and spread northwards from Karnataka and Maharashtra throughout India. By 15th century it had established itself even in Bengal. In the south, Prince Tulajaji, Oothukadu Venkatasubbaier, Narayana Theertha, Kshetragna, Sonti Venkataramayya, Arunagirinatha, the Haridasas of Karnataka, Upanishad Bramham, Pachimiriyium Adiappaier and all early exponents of this age and along with their music compositions gave vocal music a huge advantage among local audiences, even though their primary objective was something else.

Vocal music became a powerful tool for spiritual instruction and it made Hinduism a little more colourful after a period of austere rituals and the Bhakthi movement in turn made Karnataka classical Vocal music more endearing, popular and public when compared to the formidable Ragam and Pallavi. Many Saint- Composers like Sadashiva Bramhendra, Bodhendra Yati of Govindapuram and Sridhara Venkateswara established Bhajan Mutts on the banks of river Cauvery. Using the compositions like the Tarangini of Narayana Thirtha, they became powerful custodians of Nama Sankeetanam, vocal music and congregational worship. They were only second to the temples and slowly as their popularity grew they even rose above the temples in power. They invited musicians to perform and on special days like the Pancha-Parva the entire village could be seen in attendance. The practise of holding music concert series during festivals like Gokulashtami, Ramanavami, Vinayaka Chathurthi etc could be attributed to the trends set in motion by the Bhajan Sampradaya (Ayyangar, 1972)\textsuperscript{58}. One can say that this entire era was a huge advantage for Vocal music. The Nagaswaram was also held during processions in these Mutts, but by this time it had started being constricted to a Managala Vadyam. It was probably the period where Karnataka classical Vocal music or the Vocalisation of music and the song started gaining more eminence and popularity than instrumental

\textsuperscript{58} History of South Indian (Carnatic) Music – R Rangaramanuja Ayyangar, Pg. 186
music. Karnataka classical music became more expressive to the local population and the South Indian masses. According to Prof P Sambamoorthy, a fresh chapter in the history of the Bhajana Sampradaya began with the the arrival of the composer Tyagaraja. He has been credited with the bridging of the gap between the Bhagavathar and Sangitha vidwans by setting to the classical tune, songs steeped in devotion. Previous to Tyagaraja, the Bhagavathar who had been initiated into the Bhagavatha cult was rarely considered a music vidwan. From this we can clearly see that the music of the court Royals was solely about pure art music and the exhibition of their expertise. The marriage of religious sentiment to classicism can be found to have a direct link with Bhakthi movement, Tyagaraja and the growing popularity of Karnataka classical vocal music. Songs previously considered a lighter version became the new classical form (The RTP slowly became an adage to the classical idiom).

During this period Govinda Dixitar, a minister who served under Chevvappa, Achyutthappa and Raghunatha Naik (the Maratha kings of Tanjore) in succession, developed the Saraswathi Veena. He authored the important musical treatise, Sangeeta Sudha and modelled it on the Sangeeta Rathnakara in format. He described in great length about the practise of Raga Alapti of the period. His elaboration of Raga Alapti served the base for the future Lakshana Geetas, scientific classification of Janaka and Janya Ragas and the modern Tana technique. He elaborated Raga Alapti, Roopaka Alapti and Brinda Lakshana. He constructed the Raghunatha Mela Veena, more popularly known today as the Saraswati Veena. This was a giant leap taken in the structure of the instrument. Till now the frets had been fixed to the fret board with guts. Govinda Deekshitar used wax instead, which could be shifted when needed with ease and wax dis not absorb sound but was a good conductor. The new instrument had 24 frets and covered three and half octaves. All these evolutions in the structure and technique of the Veena and Nagaswaram served as very important developments which shaped the very nature of Karnataka music. According to Rangaramanuja Ayyangar, progress of music in the 18th and 19th centuries centred around the inherent potentialities of our music which was revealed by the evolution of elaborate instrumental techniques. He also goes on to say that the Veena and the Nagasawaram were one of the most efficient mediums for presenting the subtle nuances of our music. In spite of several lakhana granthas describing the structural and playing
technique evolution of the Veena, a clear description of the music which was rendered on it is lacking. How did they render Alapti, what were the special phrases? Was Alapti a predominant feature of Veena repertoire?

Somewhere during the history of Karnataka music, vocalist adopted the Tana, which was originally a speciality of the Veena into Vocal music. The Veena with its melodic and Tala strings was the creator and queen in the technique of Tana rendition which was originally call Madhyama kala raga prastara (raga in medium tempo). However Vocalists used the two syllables ‘Ta’ and ‘nam’ as the only steeping stones in building the music. Upon repeating theses syllables the usage “a nam ta” came into practise and since it had a pleasant meaning, the name came to stay. However in ancient musicological treatises the word Tanam originally meant a musical phrase. The new meaning was a work of successive generations of Vocalists. According to R Rangaramanuja Ayyangar, Madhyamakala is an adaptation of the Nagaswaram’s Rakthi. The Nagaswaram was an instrument which specialised in Ragam and Pallavi. “Rakthi was a device to present snatches of Ragam in quick tempo and set the stage ready for the Pallavi…..the veena took over it and adapted it to suit its own genius” (Ayyangar, 1972)\textsuperscript{59}. However according to my research the Rakthi is a very a particular kind of composition with a fixed tala. I do not see how it could correspond to the modern day Tana.

The Nagaswaram tradition of Pallavi elaboration has never had a provision for Tana. It was not a forte of the Nagaswara artists. However in recent concerts many have started performing the Thanam which has been predominantly an influence of the rest of the Music world. However the pattern of Thana phrases was present in Nagaswaram. As part of their Abhyasa they used to compose ‘Chittai Thana’ or patterns of swara in three or fours’ to practise the art of Swarakalpana and Raga Alapana. These were composed sets. “Thana chittai maadodhu” or setting a Thana. These were only meant for the purpose of practise. Its patterns were incorporated into the Raga alapana during the last phases itself. It was not considered as a separate musical entity. Similarly the Thana Varnas seem to have been very popular a format among the Natuvanars and many specialised as composers. Thus the patterns of the Thana were very much present in the Nagaswaram music, just not as a separate form of rendition. Whether the Varnas were rendered in Nagaswaram concerts of the yester

\textsuperscript{59} History of South Indian (Carnatic) Music – R Rangaramanuja Ayyangar, pg. 243, ch23
years is unclear however there are many composers of Varnas among Nagaswaram artists.

**MUSIC DURING THE PERIOD OF THE TRINITY AND TANJORE COURT**

The 17\(^{th}\) and the 18\(^{th}\) century were a period of great musical activity. The dual authorities of the temple and Tanjore court, along with the surrounding princely states such as Mysore, Travancore, Ramanathapuram and Ettyapuram provided ample patronage for the performing arts, especially Dance and Music. This was also a period where the Bhakthi movement gave a great fillip to the Bhajana sampradaya and Namasankeerthana. It was a time when many festivals were observed throughout the year with special Uthsavams in all the surrounding temples such as Chidambaram, Kanchipuram (Varadaraja Perumal), Walajapet, Tirupati, Sholinghur, Madras (Parthasarathi temple), Tiruvottriyur, Kovur etc (Sambamoorthy, Great Composers - Tyagaraja, 1954). All these temple festivals were led by the indispensable Peria Melam. Nagaswaram music is said to have reached a formidable place in the South Indian soundscape during the 18\(^{th}\) century. It featured not only during temple festivals and special occasions but also during daily rituals such as Deeparadhana, Ucchikalapuja etc. which is very different from today’s soundscape. Today we are surrounded by very different kind of sounds such as the blaring horns of Traffic, construction, the call of mosques or the occasional temple bell. Even the sounds of birds are no longer part of our daily aural experiences. However during the eighteenth century the aural atmosphere was filled with the constant activity of the Temple and its mascot, the Nagaswaram. Ramaswamy Dixitar, who was a disciple of Muddy Venkatamakhi (grandson of Venkatamakhi of Chathurdandi Prakashika) and the father of the celebrated composer Mutthuswamy Dixitar himself organised Nagaswaram and Dance as a part of the daily worship in the temple at Tiruvarur according to Dr BM Sundaram and Rangaramanuja Ayyangar (Ayyangar, 1972). In fact the Dixitar family was said to have close ties with many Nagaswaram Vidwans and their music.

Most importantly this was the period that saw the emergence of the music trinity or the three great composers of Karnataka classical music i.e. Shyama Sastri, Tyagaraja and Mutthuswamy Dixitar. While Tyagaraja had a close bond with the

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60 Great Composers – Book III – P Sambamoorthy, Pg. 95 - 99
61 History of South Indian (Carnatic) Music – R Rangaramanuja Ayyangar, Pg. 186
Temple festivals and the Bhajana Samprdaya, Mutthuswamy Dixitar had many Nayanakaras among his disciples. By this time, the Isai Vellala community had swelled in numbers and it was not unusual for an exchange of musical ideas across communities and families of musicians. According to Dr BM Sundaram, there was a Devadasi called “Kamalam” who had gained great respect as a musician and had close ties with the family of Ramaswamy Dixitar. She is said to have been a teacher, friend and guide to Mutthuswamy Dixitar. Her house was located diagonally opposite Mutthuswamy Dixitar’s house and the two exchanged many musical ideas. The Isai Vellala families consisting of Devadasis’ and Nagaswaram vidwans’ had music running in the family not only as the family profession but as a heritage (inheritance) and tradition. Similarly Rangaramanuja Ayyangar talks about the possible influence of the music of the Nagaswaram on Tyagaraja in his book History of South Indian (Carnatic) Music in page 194. Similarly Balasaraswathi’s ancestor, a Devadasi called Thanjavur Kamakshi Ammal (born in 1810) was also a well sought after teacher who taught many court musicians in the Royal houses of both Tanjore and Trivandrum and court records stand testimony to the fact that she was one of the teachers of the Vadivelu (the youngest of the Tanjore Quartet) in the Trivandrum royal court and was part of his ensemble in the 1840s (Jr, 2010).

The Golden period of Karnataka music (1767-1900) saw the birth of Harikatha as a popular music format. The harikatha which emerged during the post Tyagaraja period was heralded by Tanjore Krishna Bhagavatar (1841-1903). This period also saw the emergence of the first lady among the Brahmin community to take up Harikatha, C Saraswati Bai (1894). The last of the great exponents of Harikatha during this golden period was Harikeshanallur Muthia Bhagavathar (1877-1945). Not only was he a great performer but succeeded as a composer too. His composition gained great popularity and were propagated by his disciples. He was the first principle of the music college in Trivandrum. It must be said that by this time the Krithi gained immense popularity and compositions of the trinity and those of the post Tyagaraja period could be heard in every concert.

While the rest of the Karnataka classical music world was affected by the Bhakthi movement and the Bhakthi music, Nagaswaram remained unaffected. The Bhakthi movement resulted in sweeping changes in the popularity, practise and

62 BALASARASWATI- Her Art & Life by Douglas M Knight JR. Pg. 13
content of Karnataka classical music. The Nagaswaram however remained unchanged during the Bhakti movement in its content and performance. Somehow entwined and content within the context of the temple and its proceedings, the Nagaswaram had its own playing space within which it fulfilled its artistic expressions’ without changing its stronghold, which was improvisation. It remained a Mangala Vadyam which diabolically practised pure art music.

POST TYAGARAJA PERIOD

By this period musical compositions had gained a lot of significance. There were many varieties that catered to different modes of cultural consumption too. Krithi, Varnam, Devarnama, Javali and Padam etc are some of the modes of music that found great popularity among the practitioners. There was music that now catered to the needs of the temple rituals, court performances and Devotional expression. This period saw the emergence of clear segments in the music world. There were professional singers, attached to the court, comprising of vocalists belonging to the upper castes who were trained in musical grammar and conventional Sanskrit texts (Ragam Tanam Pallavi). Then there were the ritual temple specialists (Devadasis, Oduvars and Nagaswaram) and the singer-composers engrossed in devotional and poetic compositions (Krithi and Keerthana) (Subramanian, 2006)63. The social and moral landscape of the period and the musical culture was shared by these groups. During the Post Tyagaraja period many changes started to creep into the Nagaswaram repertoire. Sambamoorthy already mentions a Nagaswaram player called Dasari who played Tyagaraja’s Darini Telusu Konti in front of the Saint himself. This indicates that the Krithi had started its entry into the Nagaswaram repertoire during the Tyagaraja period. The Tiruvizhimizhalai brothers – Subramania Pillai and Natarajasundara Pillai (1893-1984) are credited to have first started playing Krithis extensively in their concerts according to Dr BM Sundaram. This marked the most important milestone in the history of Nagaswaram music. It ushered an age where there would be a scramble for the assimilation of the now popular vehicle of Karnataka classical music, the Krithi. Traditional families of Nagaswaram Vidwans such as the Semmponarkoil, Keeranur, Mannargudi and Tiruvizhimizhalai still specialised as Mallari, Rakthi and Pallavi Vidwans. However they were musicians

63 From the Tanjore Court to the Madras Music Academy – Lakshmi Subramanian, pg. 9
who were strictly attached to the Temple service. Only few of these artists from each family made the successful transition to the Sabha concert scenario. However independent artists who emerged later on during the post Tyagaraja period such as Veeruswamy Pillai (1828-1892), Tiruvengadu Subramania Pillai (1906-1986), TN Rajarathnam Pillai (1898-1956), Namagiripete and Karaikurichi P Arunachalam (1907-1964) became crucial players that made a successful transition to the Sabha-kutcheri. The most successful of them was TN Rajarathinam Pillai. Another important milestone during the post Tyagaraja period was the emergence of sound recording (gramophone). Here again, the Nagaswaram Vidwans and Devadasis were one of the earliest artists whose music was recorded. This was a time when many upper class musicians looked upon the practise of recording and photography with suspicion. The first Nagaswaram artists to be recorded was Semmponarkoil Ramaswamy Pillai (1880-1923), the great grandfather of Semmponarkoil Vaidhyanathan and Rajanna. However today very few recordings of the original Temple repertoire such as the Rakthi and Mallari remain. Recordings available today are of the live concerts by later artists. The Odam, Nadupatti & Vattam are extinct.

THE EMERGENCE OF KRITHI AS A VEHICLE OF MUSIC AND SHIFTING PATRONAGE

The emergence of the Krithi as a powerful and popular means of music expression could be called as one of the biggest changes that affected the fields of Vocal and Nagaswaram music. Vocal music benefitted immensely, especially with the advantage in Sahithya bhava and themes which Tyagarajas Krithis gave way for. Suddenly there was a song for every kind of emotion which was blended with sentiments of prayer and devotion. The simple language made it easy for the most innocent and tone deaf of Rasika to follow the music. The latter half of the 19th century also saw the emergence of Harikatha or Kathakalakshepam which used Tyagaraja’s keerthanas extensively. These performances were a blend of music, theatre, religious discourse (1860) captured the hearts of the audiences and accelerated the circulation of Krithis. It created an awareness among other performers about the advantages and potential of having a vast repertoire of krithis.

The chain of events that occurred in the history of Karnataka classical music that also affected the Nagaswaram were very subtle in their arrival. However they
etched themselves so deeply into the south Indian audience and its sensibilities that they could not imagine an alternative classical narrative in the history of Karnataka Classical music before these changes. The Nagaswaram and its unique repertoire remained popular and in demand even during the Bhakti movement however slowly its traditional repertoire of Manodharma lost ground. Its ecosystem which existed within the Temple precincts was unique and this ecosystem provided huge freedom for individual artistic expression. A divine ordain ensured that. This changed with the dizzy rise of the Krithi as a means of music expression and the emergence and shifting of patronage to the Sabha’s with its “Kutcheri” format. The anxiety of being left out and the loss of context with the fall of temple institution left the Nagaswaram with a huge task of reinventing itself. This reinvention happened with the Nagaswaram picking up Krithis like all other instruments. The duration of concerts at Sabhas was far lesser than the leisure the Temple festivals offered which resulted in a dip of the expansive Manodharma.

THE ERA OF SANSKITIZATION IN KARNATAK MUSIC

During the course of the research, it is very clear that there were separate communities of artists who were born into art. However it raises a very important question as to when and how did the upper caste community take up the fine arts? Were they performers too or was their role limited to being intellectual analysers of the art? Historical accounts show that even communities that practised music during the 19th century has a layered structure. The music scholars of the yester years were always men of higher caste and affiliated to the royal court. They compiled, commented and authored musical treatises. Similarly the court musicians were higher caste musicians who had access to formal training and who closely guarded the tradition (Sampradaya) and practise of classical music (Subramanian, 2006)64. The Tanjore court record shows that there were around 360 vidwans affiliated to the Royal court during Tyagaraja’s time. Each Vidwan had the opportunity to sing in the Sangita Mahal (royal concert hall) for only one day in a year and this was the most important day to display and establish rank (Sambamoorthy, Great Composers - Tyagaraja, 1954)65. Below these scholars were the ritual singers (like the oduvars), Devadasis

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64 From the Tanjore Court to the Madras Music Academy – Lakshmi Subramanian, pg. 35
65 Great Composers – Book II – Tyagaraja by Prof P Sambamoorthy Pg. 20
and Peria Melam who worked for the temple and also negotiated with the royal court. Together these communities formed a cultural economy.

Vid DK Pattamal has been hailed to be the first lady to perform the Raga Tana Pallavi on stage. However she was the first Brahmin lady to perform the RTP to be more specific. Who were the lady performers before her, and did they perform the RTP? Which community did they belong too? The women of the Devadasi community had been performing the RTP much earlier. (Krishna, 2013)\footnote{A Southern Music: The Karnatik Story – Vid TM Krishna, An Excerpt, The Hindu, Dec 13, 2013} Famous musicians belonging to the Devadasi community like Bangalore Nagarathnammal (1878 – 1952) and Coimbarore Thayi regularly included the RTP in their concerts. It is to be noted that only women of the Devadasi community enjoyed great freedom for the practise of art and its expression. The upper class women were forbidden to even step outside the house in the absence of a husband, let alone perform. This could have been due to the fact that performances were still done for a private audience and the democratic freedom of a public performance was yet to emerge. However the emergence of the Brahmin women in the public performance arena was also a much later development. The process of art shifting hands from one community to other is an important milestone in the history of Karnataka music and this went hand in hand with the phenomenon of Sanskritization. (Bhargav, 2013)\footnote{Aranyani Bhargav – The Hindu Friday Review, Nov 8 2013} Sanskritization is a process by which lower castes seek upward mobility by emulating the rituals and practices of upper or dominant castes. MN Srinivas defined it as a process by which “a low or middle Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual ideology, and way of life in the direction of a high and frequently twice-born caste.” This process was most pronounced in South Indian classical dance but also took place in the world of Karnataka music, both vocal and instrumental. Somewhere around this period the Nagaswaram community started feeling side-lined. The term ‘Nadaswaram’ might have emerged as this effort to sanskritize the name of the instrument. It is almost like a want of approval or a need for upward mobility in the world of Karnataka music which is now predominantly Brahmin. At the music academy there have been lecture demonstrations where the artists themselves have wished to continue calling their instrument the Nadaswaram because “it sounds better”. There have been no other explanations to the coining of this new term. This
new change in the nature of our cultural aspirations happened during the period of colonisation and subsequent freedom movement. Reknowned sociologist MN Srinivas has written about the process of Sanskritization during the colonial period of our Indian history. (Bhargav, 2013) The history of Dance and music is the history of our culture, it is different from national political history but very deeply embedded in our cultural sensibilities.

Vocal music underwent the process of Sanskritization too. On one hand we had a Bangalore Nagarathnammal who fought against the abolition of the Devadasi system along with the great T Balasaraswathi as opposed to Rukmini Devi Arundale who went about “cleansing” or purifying the dance form of Bharathnatyam removing many elements of eroticism and making it worthy being performed by the upper class. Similarly one of the greatest musicians’ of the yester years Vid MS Subbalakshmi, who born into a Devadasi family adopted the Brahmin identity. She wore the traditional Brahmin attire of the nine-yards sari, her chaste rendition of Sanskrit songs and relentless effort of her husband Sadashivam (a Brahmin) to popularise her as an idol of upper-class bhakti music and devotion all resulted her being part of this process. (Bhargav, 2013) TJS George – the author of her biography has said “…Sanskritization was at work in the case of Subbulakshmi, helping to convert prestige to rank”. This was an important period of social change. Thus when popular vocalists themselves felt the need to change the image of their social standing, it is only natural that other artistic communities like the Nagaswaram felt the pressures to catch up with the winds of change sweeping the field of Karnataka music.

The biggest change the Nagaswaram had to bear witness was the challenge and questioning of its music, heritage and authenticity. The last decade of the 19th century saw a sea of changes in the interpretation and preservation of Karnataka vocal music. It was almost a remodelling and reinvention of traditional classical music. The very definition of “traditional” and “authentic” came to be centred on a repertoire barely a hundred years old (period of the trinity). The latter half of 19th and 20th centuries was effectively the modernisation of classical music. However this process inevitably undermined the position and status of the traditional communities of performers like the Devadasis and the Nagaswaram artist. Among the devadasis,

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68 Aranyani Bhargav – The Hindu Friday Review, Nov 8 2013
69 Aranyani Bhargav – The Hindu Friday Review, Nov 8 2013
Bangalore Nagarathnammal and T Balasaraswati fought against this Sanskritization. Unfortunately the Nagaswaram community did not have the wherewithal to stake claim in the new transformed music scenario. Subsequently the very notion of Karnataka classical music, tradition and its exclusive custodianship changed (Subramanian, 2006). The Madras Music Academy was one of the biggest architects of modern Karnataka music. To quote famous art historian V Sriram (who is now on the management board of the Madras Music Academy) “the Nagaswaram in particular had been a strict no-no on the Academy stage”.

Nagaswaram maestro Madurai Ponnuswamy Pillai was the first Nagaswaram artist to be made a member of the experts chair committee of the Music Academy in 1929 after which the instrument fell into disfavour with the Academy. The Academy did great injustice to the Nagaswaram by engaging in an unnecessary debate comparing the Nagaswaram and Veena, as to which was more superior in 1932. It was decided that the Veena was more superior and that the Nagaswaram was an outdoor instrument which could never produce the nuances of the Veena. AK Ramachandra Iyer, the founder of Rasika Ranjini Sabha took great offence to this conference debate and in 1933 organised an exclusive concert festival of Nagaswaram music at his theatre premises (He was the owner of Midland theatre and a generous patron of Karnataka classical music). The Music Academy got the message and to make amends held a Nagaswaram concert of Vidwan Angappa Pillai in 1934. Vidwan TN Rajarathinam Pillai has been regarded as the first and the most successful Nagaswaram player to have made an effective transmission from the Temple to the Sabhas. However even today there are very few opportunities for Nagaswaram artists not just at the Music Academy but in other Sabhas too.

The developments of the 19th and 20th century music world were very closely related to the large scale national reconstruction of the period. The effects of western sensibilities left by the British colonization and educated had gone beyond skin deep. There was a sudden need for invoking the glory of the past Indian heritage for public moral upliftment. Tracing classicism and antiquity within the musical context became easy tools for this. However this national reconstruction of Karnataka music still had to be done within a modern context, which would pass the western scrutiny and fit

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70 Lakshmi Subramanian – From the Tanjore Court to the Madras Music Academy, Pg. 2
71 ‘The December Music Season of 1934’ – V Sriram, SRUTI December 2009, ISSUE 303, ISSN 0970-7816, Pg. 43
into the modern context. Artistic hierarchies around lineages of the three great composers arose. Music and musicians had to prove their classicism and credentials by quoting textual locations, even though the music of the 20th century was of recent origin and barely a hundred years old. The Indian notation system arose out of this critical period where the biggest need of the hour was of standardization. Chinnaswamy Mudaliar in his Oriental Music in European Notation (1893) declared that the notation system was the only viable means to standardise and preserve Indian music. The society of Theosophists were also greatly involved in shaping the identity of Karnataka music. They were great patrons of the Brahmin way of life and viewed Karnataka music as a great means for religious expression. Margaret cousins, a Theosophist and a member of the Madras University senate along with V Bhashyam Iyengar sought for a systematic programme of music education. She wrote “The culture of Nationalism......has developed a need for national culture. Any analysis of the national value of music will bring.........its inclusion in the curricula of schools and colleges so that young India may grow up in the image of young Krishna with his beloved flute and that of Saraswati radiant with the Veena”. Sadly the Nagaswaram was left to fight a lonely battle for attention. It did not receive any new patrons neither did its music conform to any ideas of standardisation. This crucial period also saw the complete change in the physical spaces of performance to suit the new audience. There was a revaluation of the traditional performing communities and ritual performers. Differences in presentation were no longer accepted since Karnataka classical music had completely been redefined. Part of the repertoire which the ritualism performers specialised in was marginalised and classified as non-classical or semi-classical and notions of pure music became more dominant than applied music. The Madras Music academy accommodated theses genres in the concert repertoire as light classical pieces to be sung in the end. Classicism now no longer lay in the compositions but outside in a network of connotations and significance imposed by successive cultural engineers (Allen, 1998)72.

Today’s classical music scenario is heavily based on the social changes that occurred during the later 19th and 20th century. “The consolidation of the eighteenth century inheritance and its dissemination in the post Tyagaraja generation in the second half on the 19th century was a critical stage in the making of the modern

72 Mathew Harp Allen, “Tales Tune Tell”.

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classical music idiom in southern India”, according Historian Lakshmi Subramanian. This project was a result of the new middle-class elite who had emerged as a result of colonial education and want of traditional identity and pride. It was a self-conscious cultural project. Sadly somewhere during this process the traditional Nagaswaram community did not swim with the tide fast enough. By not taking to and understanding the changing trends fast enough they did not have a strong enough voice to take part in the new culture of seminars, national conferences and discussion pertaining to classical music. These Seminars and conferences gained huge importance and later shaped the modern concert format. Institutions such as Gayana Samaja and Madras Music Academy played very important roles in this process. The first Gayan Samaj was established in Poona in the year 1874 by Balwant Rao Trimbak. Its branch was established in Madras by 1885. He clearly describes it as an initiative to revive a “taste for our musical science amongst the brethren of the upper class and to raise it up in their estimation and to promote a sense of nationality in the sense of our possessing an indigenous art of singing” (Subramanian, 2006). This sudden spurt in musical discourse, passionate oration and purposeful deliberation played a huge role in the reconstitution of the musical culture. However it here that other communities such as the Nagaswaram complete got left behind. These discourses lent a certain urgency to the process of self-reflection among the elite Karnataka Classical musicians. The ideas of modernisation (such as notation) were mixed with the notions of tradition and authentic culture. Somewhere in the 1900 the presentation of Classical music completely changed. The first element which suffered in Vocal rendition was the Pallavi. Public performances in vocal music meant that the musician had to cater to the larger audiences comprising of all sections. Rangaramanuja Ayyangar shared these views that the decline in standards of music began with the generation that appeared around 1920. “The mass mind is always impatient with what it cannot understand. Having paid the piper, it calls the tune that will tickle and titillate, rather than inspire and elevate” (Iyengar R. R., 1977). The early 20th century saw the emergence of women performers among the upper classes. However stylistic renditions of many other communities such as that of the Devadasis had slowly started to wane. The efforts to redefine Karnataka classical music resulted

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73 Lakshmi Subramanian – From the Tanjore Court to the Madras Music Academy. Hindu Music and the Gayan Samaj. Published in Aid of the Funds of the Madras Jubilee Gayan Samaj. Bombay, 1887, pg.3
74 R Rangaramanuja Ayyangar, Musings of a Musician, Wilco, Bombay, 1977
in the detachment of traditional communities of performers from their context. For example Veena Dhanammal (she inherited her music tradition from Subbaraya Sastry and had a rich repertoire of kritis, Javalis and Padams) was known for her distinct style. She trained under Satanur Panchanada Iyer, a disciple of Dixitar. The Kalapramanam was slow, deliberate and controlled. Her style laid more stress on melody and played down excessive use of swara prastara in stark contrast to the dominant style popularized by male musicians. However by 1938 her style and tradition had been lost. In a tribute to her by S Y Krishnaswamy mentioned that in her a demise a type of music had become extinct which ‘apart from individual excellence, mirrored a civilization that was fast receding into memory’. Here there is a definite reference to the effects of modern musical reform, which had ironed out diversity and difference and the word “civilization” denotes the rich community of the Isai Vellalas (Subramanian, 2006)\(^75\). This was the period of construction of the classical non classical dyad. When the popularity of the RTP dipped along with the fall of temple patronage it had a direct impact on the Nagaswaram, which specialised in Raga alapana, Pallavi and Swarakalpana. While Vocalists made a successful transition form the RTP to the song according to popular demand, the Nagaswaram faced many obstacles in the process, one also being the dependence on Vocalists to popularise the Kriti.

Today vidwan TM Krishna talk about the concert or “Kutcheri” (presentation pattern) being a successful product of Classical music and that which need not necessarily enshrine a holistic approach to Karnataka Sangeetha.

**THE GAP BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTISE**

Many great composers like Annamacharya (1408-1503), Sripadaraya, Vyasaraya, Vijayendra and Raghavendra worked in tandem to the courts sponsorship of music and music theory. The courts sponsorship lead to the authoring of many works on musical theory like Swaramelakalanidhi (1550) by Ram Amatya (minister of Krishna Deva Raya), Raga Vibodha (1609) by Somanatha Kavi and the Sangeetha Sudhanidhi (1614) by Govindha Dixitar. However these texts did not necessarily reflect the changes that the practise of music had undergone. To top it all was their tendency to adhere to the conventional practise of referring to the Sarangadeva’s

\(^75\) Lakshmi Subramanian – From the Tanjore Court to the Madras Music Academy. Pg. 134
Sangeetha Ratnakara (AD 1230) as their normative model which only served to widen the gap between stagnant theory and a living practise according to leading art historian, Lakshmi Subramnaian. The court’s objective to portray what was pure and unalloyed was one of the reasons of this. There was a change in music scholarship and by 15th century there was virtually no one who understood the old classical theory and square it with contemporary practise. According Kallinatha, the nature of music had changed, the grama-murchana-jati system had disappeared and been replaced by the universal tonic Sa. Yet Swaramelakalanidhi referred endlessly to the Sangeetha Rathnakara and referred to Hejjuji as a grama raga. There was a constant movement towards spontaneity and free expression held in balance and control by a complex adaptation of textual traditions. This adaptation of Textual tradition was complex, because it practical music had moved far ahead from what theory advocated and the assimilation of music theory was as said earlier, an adaptation. This gap was acknowledged by the Music Academy in the 1930’s and which is why it took it up as its personal mission to bridge the gap between theory and practise. This is did through a series of seminars and discussions. For example the changing of Anandabhairavi from the 20th Natabhatavi janya in the 1929 Music Academy annual conference to being the Janya of 22nd Kharaharapriya and fixing its characteristic sancharas in 1930 according to the practise and rendition of it (Bhagavathar, 1930). Thus when ancient musicological treatises barely portrayed the music of its own upper class royal court house, it cannot possibly be expected to have done any justice to the Nagaswaram performers which fell outside its Jurisdiction (under the temple administration). As a result the music of the Nagaswaram went mostly undocumented.

After a series of Muslim invasions, the changes they brought along in the structure and nature of classical music led to the branching off of Hindustani Music from its ancient format. This marks an important milestone, not just as the birth of another music system, but as the birth of an Indian classical music with a nature which no longer carried the burden of religious expression. This does not mean that Hindustani music does not contain the element of Bhakti in its Sahithya. It does have devotion yet it grew as an art form with more stress on artistic expression. Royal patronage was welcomed, Ghāranas were formed on the basis of artistic style and

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76 Lakshmi Subramanian – From the Tanjore Court to the Madras Music Academy. Pg. 33
77 Lewis Rowell, *Music and Musical Thought in Ancient India.*
78 Music Academy Journal published in 1931 (Quaterly) Vol II – Pg. 174
religion became quite secondary. Hindustani music grew as a spiritual form. Spiritualism can exist independent from religious sentiments. The Bhakti movement and Saint Tyagaraja (who made a great impact on the classical music scenario of the 18th century) changed the recurring theme of Karnataka classical music to Bhakti. It was no longer pure art-music but served the purpose of religious sentiments and devotion.

Till about 1912 Nagaswaram players specialised only in Ragam and pallavi and kept up high standards. It was only somewhere after this period that they started picking up the Krithi. Tiruveezhimizhalai Brothers (1893-1984) were the first to extensively render Krithis in their Nagaswaram concerts. This is probably the period where Vocal music and the Krithi made the maximum influence on the music of the Nagaswaram. I believe that it is during this phase that compositions such as the Rakthi and Mallari, (which carried no Sahithya bhava and no singular emotion) started waning in popularity.

After the decline of the Temple patronage and Royal courts, Sabhas became a chief source of patronage for music. However not many Nagaswaram vidwans could get equal opportunities in the Sabha circuit. Other venues of patronage such as marriages and naming ceremonies only served as a source of bread and butter and not as a platform for the demonstration of musical excellence. The emergence of the AIR served as a great boon to many Nagaswaram players. The institution of radio broadcasting provided employment to many Nagaswaram artist and opportunities for their music to be heard nationwide. Many Nagaswaram and Tavil Vidwans were assured of a steady income as staff artists of the AIR. However all this came at a price. Broadcasting demanded that the music suit the tastes of audiences across all classes and regions. There was also a very short time limit. The time allotted for the performance of a single piece inclusive of Raga Alapana, Krithi, Neraval and Swarakalapana together rarely exceeded 25-30 minutes. This was a big difference in the time they used to have to explore the Raga and render their music. The whole performance pattern had to be remodelled. They had to change their repertoire and condense their music to effectively suit the All India Radio. The institution of AIR has always been a prestigious venue for artists to exhibit their music however I doubt whether the traditional repertoire of the Nagaswaram such as *Odam, Udaikuru, Rakthi* and Mallari were accommodated into the AIR curriculum. Thus even though the AIR
has played a great role in the sustenance of Nagaswaram vidwans, it has played an equally crucial role in the change and perhaps loss of their traditional repertoire.

The beginning of the 20th century saw the last of the generations of musicians that passed out of the Gurukul system according to Rangaramanuja Ayyangar. The decline in the Gurukul system also saw the end of stylistic schools or Bani’s. No longer could one identify any one signature style passed on from generations as the strict rules of listening and adherence to channelized kelvi – jnanam were relaxed. Probably an age when no more Veena bani in vocal rendition and no clear Nagaswaram bani was left. This was the period when “culture turned into craft” according to Rangaramanuja Ayyangar. By 1970, very few individual vocalists such as Madurai Shri TN Sheshagopalan adopted stylistic elements from the Nagaswaram into their vocal style. His style was a powerful and attractive combination of several hallmark features of the Nagaswaram such as the Karve laden alapana phrases, speedy brugas etc according to Vid Sanjay Subrahmanyam. The influence of the Nagaswaram during the late 19th century and 20th century had become more evident on the individual performer than on the system itself.

Our present concert format could be called a result of many seminars and discussions held by the Madras Music Academy, the All India Radio which went in hand with the new institutions which presided over the developments in Karnataka Music and the general public discourse which also saw the active involvement of paper such as Ananda Vikatan (Tamil monthly), The Indian Express, The Hindu etc. The 20th century saw the articulation of a new kind of aesthetic conception related to performance. (1920s-1930s). This period saw the unchallenged emergence of the violin as an accompanying instrument to the voice, facilitated by the changing of performance space to the concert hall. This period also saw the maximum references to the ‘Nagaswaram bani’ in vocal music as being the perfect and most lucid style of rendition (Subramanian, 2006). According to Vid Sanjay Subrahmanyam, it was vidwan Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer who can be solely credited to these reffernces.

The chief architect of the modern concert format was Vid Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar. He quickly noted that expansive and relaxed recitals were a thing of the past and there was an urgent need to adapt. The concert tempo was quickened,

79 Lakshmi Subramanian – From the Tanjore Court to the Madras Music Academy.
there was a stipulated format, repertoire and balance in the number and kinds of compositions presented. He very clearly stated that the practise of singing miscellaneous pieces in a variety of languages was not a traditional practise but a modern innovation, to keep up to the temper of his times (Iyengar A. T., 1990). Semmangudi Srinivsa Iyer spoke in favour of this shorter duration too. The Madras Music Academy, by the end of 1930’s had established itself, succeeded in its classical project of the remodelling of Karnataka Classical music to suit the new nationalist ideals and exclusive aesthetic sensibilities. It had

- Successfully enlisted the cooperation of musicians
- Defined standards of performance
- Printed primers
- Retrieved old and rare manuscripts
- Initiated discussions and guidelines on teaching methodology
- Established a concert format
- Defined the lakshanas of many ragas.

PARALLEL MOVEMENTS SUCH AS THE TAMIL ISAI SANGHAM

The period of Sanskritization in Karnataka music was not uncontested and there were many voices which were raised against the move of nationalisation. One such movement which gained some considerable momentum was the Tamil Isai Iyakkam (Tamil Music Movement). This movement was as much about music as it was about language policies. Most of the traditional artist communities like the Vellalars, Devadasis and Oduvars had been denied a voice during the period of restructuring Karnataka music. Many of the traditional and ritualistic communities had their music and dance deeply rooted within Tamil. This movement was characterised even to the extant of a Tamil separatist movement. However this movement failed to create adequate space for the traditional artistic communities (or relocation) or an identity of an alternative classical tradition. This movement was part of an ongoing psychological drive to invoke a collective memory and a unique inheritance. There were serious issues of cultural custodianship between the upper

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class Madras elite performers and the other communities. Issues of prioritization of a particular version of music practise as ‘classical’, repositioning of performers etc. saw interesting debates between the Madras Academy and the Tamil Isai Sangham. Many efforts were conducted to revive the music of the Oduvars who were vocalists specializing in the recitation of the Tevaram and its Panns. Theses Oduvars were closely connected with the communities of Natuvanars and the peria melam (Nagaswaram). Even though the Oduvars music was largely a recital, many did follow the ‘viruttam’ style, which was entirely improvisational piece of literature within the gamut of the traditional ragas assigned. Tamil Isai Sangham did make efforts to restructure the music of the Oduvars with the help of musicians such as Musiri subramanya Iyer, MK Tyagaraja Bhagavathar, GN Balasubramanium etc. however by doing so it only brought the Oduvars under the aesthetic and musicological sensibilities of the elite musicians. Needless to say, the project did not take off. The Tamil Isai Iyakkam made very little effort into the propagation of the Peria melam artists. The Madras Music Academy made an exception in this with the emergence of TN Rajaratnam Pillai (1898-1956). He could almost be solely credited for making the Academy acknowledge the Nagaswaram and include it in their concerts. The Music Academy also granted the title of Sangita Kalanidhi award to Nagaswaram Vidwan Tiruvizhimizhalai Subramanya Pillai in 1956 and to Nagaswaram Vidwan Thiruvidamarudur Veerusami Pillai in 1961.

Classical music was also being used in theatre and also in the Cinema. The interactions between artists such as SG Kitappa (stage and cinema singers), TN Rajaratnam Pillai, Govindaswamy Pillai and Gopalakrishna Iyer resulted in the immense popularity of the Tamil song. However instead of the creation of an alternate and exclusive space for its traditional communities, the emergence of this repertoire served the purpose of stage and film music. Instead of attaining the identity of a parallel classical stream, Tamil music started being included into the repertoire of mainstream Karnataka vocalist, as lighter pieces and the Traditional communities lost out again. Now these lighter pieces form a predominant part the Karnataka classical concerts especially during the December (margazhi) music festival, which there is still no sign of the Senguttar or Isai Vellala communities. The Devadasis are now nonexistent having parted with their inheritance, the Padam. EV Ramaswamy Naiker or more popularly known as Periyar was one of the biggest and most respected names of
the Tamil Isai Iyakam. He called for the movement to go beyond language and
venture into the realms of race (original Dravidian identity versus Aryan influence)
and cultural custodianship. Attention was brought to the antiquity of the Tamil music.
Periyar also wrote a series of scholarly articles on the issue of music and traditional
performers in the ‘Kudi Arasu’, a Tamil Daily that he edited. He drew attention to the
Senguttar community. The Senguttars were musicians and ritual performers who
specialised in wind instruments and were attached to Alaya vazhivadu. The skill of
Peria Melam, wind instrumentalists were generally considered polluting by the upper
class according to Periyar. Their skills, Talent and musical heritage remained
unacknowledged and they were not openly appreciated. Periyar strongly condemned
this (Periyar, 1944)\textsuperscript{81}. However there were not many suggestions of their relocation
from him. What characterized the music during the 19\textsuperscript{th} and 20\textsuperscript{th}
centuries was the separation of the world of music into classical, semi or light classical and non-
classical. It saw a relocation of Karnataka classical music and its performance into the
new urban social setup. This era also saw the emergence of the ‘music critic’ as a key
participant in the reconstituted world of music, with Kalki Krishnamurthi (1899-1954)
as one of the earliest influential critics.

One realises that our inheritance of our music lies entirely from the works of
the Trinity and our perception and practise of music tradition does not pre date the
trinity. The Nagaswaram community which used to play the Rakthi, Mallari went
much further behind in their antiquity. So then how far do we trace the tradition of our
present practises in Karnataka classical music? what is our present perception of
tradition based on.

According to Vid Dr Jayanthi Kumaresh there is no fixed thing as a traditional
or conventional concert pattern today. In the yester years, before the period of the
Trinity there was an absence of a “bank” of compositions and it was always the
Pallavi, Shatkoti (singing of a raga for 6 hours), and Ashtavadhana (doing two talas in
two hands and a lime on the singers head) which was prevalent. The emphasis was on
the expertise or Vidwath of the performer and not on the sentiment of religion
(Kumaresh, 2014)\textsuperscript{82}. The stress on originality prevailed even during the time of the

\textsuperscript{81} Tamil Isai Natippu Kalaigal, by Periyar, Kudi Arasu, Erode, 1944
\textsuperscript{82} “Patterns followed in a Karnatak concert”- a conversation with Dr Jayanthi Kumaresh. Ananya
magazine, August 2014, Pg. 13
Trinity, as even they rendered their own compositions and not each other’s. The perception of a template in today’s concert is the result of some popular artists following the performance pattern which came into being during the late part of the 19th and 20th centuries. However artists such as Jayanthi Kumaresh, Ganesh Kumaresh, Vid TM Krishna, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam have now been changing the template and their performances are very varied in content and structure.

**State of the Nagaswaram today**

Today we see a huge decline in the popularity of the Nagaswaram, not just as a Sabha concert but even as a Mangala Vadyam. In Karnataka the Nagaswaram has almost gone silent except in few pockets such as Srirangapatnam etc. in 1999 K Raghavendra Rao wrote about the dismal state of the instrument. A few decades ago all Ramanavami and Ganesha festivals commenced with a Nagaswaram recital. Today this is no longer the case. This is because of the non-availability of good artists and the general apathy towards its music. Today the Nagaswaram has been replaced by the Saxophone too in many festivals (Rao, 1999). Nagaswaram has always been a part of auspicious occasions. However in the yester years these celebration would go on for days and so did the music. People had the time to listen to the music in leisure. Today even the duration of such functions has come down. The Nagaswaram is only a small part of the ritual for the sake of traditional formality. Sometimes it is even replace by a cassette which is a cheaper solution. Sometimes the artists are forced to stop their improvisation upon the signal of the priest. The audience is not interested in the music. Everybody is in a hurry to leave. Thus there is no inspiration for the players to add to their repertoire.

Once the royal court was abolished from power, its patronage of music came to an end too. The patronage shifted to Sabhas and academics. The 1990 list of the Karnataka Sangeeta Nrutya Academy had a list of 13 Nagaswaram artists, 8 of whom were past their prime of 65yrs of age and one was no more. Neither did it have any mention of scholarships award to any Nagaswaram Vidwan.

There are very few temples that maintains Nagaswaram vidwans anymore and a few schools or institutions that teaches Nagaswaram music. There are such schools

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and colleges to teach Nagaswaram in Tirupati, Vijayawada and Hyderabad. Tamil Nadu has such schools in Madurai, Tiruchi, Tiruvaiyaru, Srirangam and Chennai.

Another reason for the Nagaswaram losing its popularity is again the emergence of the Sabha, in a different context. The Nagaswaram was always meant to be an outdoor instrument. The huge volume (it is one of the world’s loudest acoustic wind instruments) gave it a great advantage over other instruments during the temple processions and other open air music festivals. It could be heard over the noise of the multitude of people for miles. However with the emergence of the closed indoor proscenium stage concert halls, the very advantage of being a loud and powerful instrument became a huge disadvantage. It is suddenly too loud to be played within a closed room. The nature of today’s Karnataka music scenario is such that there are a lot of tiny Sabhas’ and halls that conduct Karnataka classical music concerts, however only a few handful of them are large enough to sustain a Nagaswaram ensemble. There are many Sabhas and mini concert halls in cities such as Chennai, Bangalore, Bombay etc. however they can barely sustain a National or international artists and his or her audience, let alone handle the volume generated by a Nagaswaram troupe. The shrinking of open spaces for concerts led to further decline in the engagement of Nagaswaram artists.

Add to this that it is no longer a parallel stream of music with its own ecosystem. It is now competing for the same performance space shared by Karnataka classical vocalists along with other instrumentalists such as the Violin, Veena, flute etc. the number of Nagaswaram vidwans are far outnumbered by Vocalists. There is quite an increase in the number of performers while the market and consumption of Karnataka classical music has not grown in equal proportion.