CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSIONS

The Nagaswaram is one of the earliest music instruments to have nurtured the style of Karnataka classical music as its medium of expression. Although its antiquity in South Indian music is seldom debated, a lot of historical evidence from the Vedic period till the 12th century have been lost. The Nagaswaram has been part of the Dravidian identity for a long time, even before the Aryan influx. The Nagaswaram is an instrument which has a lot of variants that feature in Folk music traditions too. However its chosen music language was always classical yet with a strong local identity. (It did not have use for Sahitya in its repertoire and if it did, it was always in the spoken language of the multitudes such as Tamil). In my observation the Nagaswaram has been ignored by many research works if not gone unnoticed during the study of Karnataka classical music. The root words which was used to denote an instrument in ancient Sanskrit treatise was often “veena” or “venu”. The term “veena” was a widely used term which need not signify a stringed instrument. Even wind instruments, closely related to the Nagaswaram were given the same terminology such as the ‘Mukhaveena’. The term “venu” was often a generic term used to denote a wind instrument. However the terms such as “utthala venu” denoted an ancestor of the Nagaswaram. Thus is quite possible that many ancient terminologies that were used to denote the Nagaswaram (or its ancestor) have gone unnoticed or attributed to some other instrument. Similarly in Dravidian works such as the Sillapadikaram (2nd CE) the term ‘Kuzhal’ is used in a generic way to denote a wind instrument, while the term “Nedun-kuzhal” specified the Nagaswaram. Written by the royal prince Illangoathikal this work is one of the most prominent of Tamil classics which gives us valuable information on classical music in the early Dravidian society. Here again I would like to clarify that the term ‘Dravidian’ does not exclusively signify the ancient Tamil speaking population. the Sanskrit word "Dravida" is used to denote geographical regions of South India and is devoid of any ethnic or linguistic identity according to noted historian Prof RC Majumdar 207 (The largest-Dravidian ethnic groups comprise of Kannada people from Karnataka, the Tamil speaking people from Tamil Nadu, Puducherry and Sri Lanka, the Telugu people from Andhra Pradesh and

207 Professor of History – University of Calcutta, Vice President – International Commission-UNESCO
Telangana, and the Malayalam people from Kerala). The commentators which were later additions provide valuable explanations on the Silappadikaram even while quoting from other ancient Tamil treatises on music and dance. By its time (i.e. 2nd CE) cultural fusion between the North and South was complete. There is clear evidence that the ancient Dravidians practised a high form of classical music even while or before the Sanskrit terminologies came into existence and that “Kuzhal” or wind instruments played a huge role in the ancient Karnataka classical music. Thus the Dravidian music was very much classical in nature and it had started accepting its Sanskrit counterpart which was based on the same music thought. For example the lines (Tamil) in Silappadikaram:

“caatavam autavam chaturtam vatamozhi peyaraanum vazhakum”

Meaning the “vatamozhi” or Sanskrit terms shadavam, audavam and chaturtam are currently used in practise (Ramanathan, 1979)\(^{208}\). My research has lead me to believe that the “Kuzhal” described in the Sillappadikaram might refer to an ancestor of the Nagaswaram. It played an important role in the ancient music society and is said to have lead the music ensemble for dance (just as the Mukhaveena did for centuries till it was replaced by the flute by K Kandappa Pillai). All other instruments such as the ancient Yazh followed its lead. The parts of the Kuzhal have been described in the third chapter of the Sillapadikaram which mention terms such as ‘anaicu’ which are still terms used to denote parts of the present day Nagaswaram. Moreover the fingering technique of the ancient Kuzhal corresponds with that of the present day Nagaswaram. Common terminology such as ‘Vankiyam’ are telling evidences that some kind of ancestor of the Nagaswaram played an important role in the ancient Karnataka classical music scene. I have reached a conclusion that the antiquity of the Nagaswaram and its role in the formation of the Karnataka classical expression cannot be questioned without concrete documentation that proves otherwise.

One of the reasons for the emergence of the Nagaswaram as a lead instrument could have been its powerful volume due to which it could be heard over long distances which was essential for an era before the emergence of the mike. Ancient vocalists were trained to play the Yazh (predecessor of the Veena) and sing along. Later on the Veena was used as an essential accompaniment for vocal and vice versa.

\(^{208}\) Music in Silappatikaram – Dr. S Ramanathan – Pg. 149
Till the era of royal patronage there was very little scope for the artists to specialise (solely) in the art of singing Karnataka classical music. All families of traditional artisans ensured proficiency in both instruments and vocal. From the ancient fictional courtesan Madhavi to Veena Dhannamal and Brunda Muktha, all Vainikas were proficient vocalists. However this could not be the case with the Nagaswaram. It cannot be used as an accompaniment to Vocal music since it would easily overpower the human voice. It had to develop an identity of its own.

It is quite unfortunate that even though the Nagaswaram artists and the Isai Vellala community was held in great regards by the entire Karnataka classical music fraternity, very few efforts were made to document their music by historians and musicologists. The lack of proper understanding of the music, repertoire and their lower birth could have been a hindrance. There seems to be ample documentation on the grammar of Karnataka classical music rather than the actual practice and its practitioners. Biographies of musicians exist without adequate accounts of their concerts, style and content of the music rendered. Only records of concerts that took place in royal courts have been described to a certain detail and the Nagaswaram being outside the royal patronage suffered from the lack of proper records. The position of the Nagaswaram is an unfortunate one. Practised by the Isai Vellalas, a section of musician of lower status, it never found complete acceptance during the emergence of Sabhas due to various reasons. The Sabhas came at a crucial time when royal and temple patronage was waning and played a vital role in the continuation of Karnataka classical music. the Sabhas which were run mostly by the upper class members of society, wanted to patronise a new sanitised (almost sanskritised) version of Indian classical music and dance which would find wide acceptance from the world and would pass international scrutiny (this came at a time when the British colonisation had left a deep dent on the cultural pride of ethnic India and yet the need to conform to the new western standards of scrutiny was highest). Artistic communities such as the Isai Vellalas (the Nagaswaram) and the Devadasis were often looked down upon and came under tremendous pressure to conform. The classicism of Nagaswaram music was often questioned. The paradox is that it was found to be catering to classical Karnataka music by the Tamil Isai Sangam which became more of a political movement than an artistic and cultural one. By now Karnataka classical music came to be recognised as the sole property of the upper
class musicians and the Tamil Isai Sangam did not recognise that the Nagaswaram was both a classical Karnataka instrument as well as an integral part of the classical Tamil identity. The Sangam instead chose to concentrate only on the encouragement of the Oduvars. These artists who specialised in the Tevaram and the ancient Panns were thought to be the sole guardians of Tamil music or ancient Dravidian music. It suffered the biggest blow during its efforts to translocate from the Temple space to the Sabhas in the latter half of 1920’s when premier organisations such as the Music Academy which did not provide adequate patronage for Nagaswaram music as discussed in Chapter Three. The Nagaswaram was only used as a ‘Mangala Vadyam’ to be played outside the music hall premises on the first day of the annual music conferences as an inauguration. 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” (Sriram, ‘The December Music Season of 1934’, 2009) 209. Today the academy does accommodate a small percentage of Nagaswaram music in its annual concert line up.

There are many instances when the Nagaswaram seems to have been completely forgotten during scholarly discussions between musicians during seminars. TR Subramanyam once made a broad analysis of the music trends that were changing in his Keynote address at The Fine Arts Society, Chembur, Mumbai. The seminar was held in March 1998 and later published in May 1998 in the magazine Sruti. He talks about how formerly, listening to music (Karnatak classical) was in a “non–standardised form not intended for big audiences”. He spoke of the emergence of Sabha’s as the most important event in the 20th century and their contribution towards making music available to the public. He spoke of how the duration of concerts have come down and how the Krithi has gained more prominence in the concert than the RTP. Most of his observations hold true except that he forgot about the Nagaswaram as an instrument which rendered Karnataka classical music to very large audiences. The Nagaswaram played an important role in serving Karnataka classical music for a large audience in the ancient South Indian cultural societies. It was a very popular instrument among the rustic folk and during temple festivals attracted very large crowds from many neighbouring villages too. Perhaps saying that

209. ‘The December Music Season of 1934’ – V Sriram, SRUTI December 2009, ISSUE 303, ISSN 0970-7816, Pg. 43
the number of audience has gone up due to the emergence of concert halls may not be entirely true. The truth is that the audience for the consumption of Vocal music has gone up, which was otherwise a niche affair while the more popular instrumental forms have diminished in demand. The Sabhas got the Karnataka classical vocal and Veena closer to the public while Karnataka classical music was already available to the public in the form of Nagaswaram, Harikatha, Drama and later films (for a short while). My research has showed me that Karnataka classical music has perhaps become more niche, limiting itself to the Sabha-going audience whereas the other sections of audience have now moved on to other forms of music. Even film music at one point of time used classical music for their sound scores. This has now completely changed. Karnataka classical music is no longer the dominant music among the masses. It is no longer part of the majority sound scape in today’s society. While film music is now a separate genre, others such as Pop, Rock have come to become the dominant form of entertainment. Is our classical space now shrinking? Where will classical musicians be without the patronage of Sabhas and government organisations? The dip in popularity of Nagaswaram music has run parallel with the downwards slide in the popularity of Karnataka classical music as a whole. The regular Karnataka classical music audience is a discerning one and cannot be called as general public.

I have not undertaken a state wise study of the interconnection between vocalists and Nagaswaram. I have chosen to look into the Karnataka classical music system as a whole for study and analyses of the movement of style and music concepts between instrumentalists and vocalists. However my research has led me to interview and observe the music and life of many Nagaswaram artists and vocalists, mostly who hail from the present state of Tamil Nadu. The influence of the Nagaswaram has been most perceivable on vocalists who have had close proximity to them, particularly those vocalists who have hailed from the Tanjore belt. The very definition of ‘Classical music’ is that it is ‘art music’. It is practised over a wider geographic area and is not subjected to regionalisation. The birth of classical music took place before the birth of linguistic barriers and existed side by side at a time when Aryan and Dravidian cultures intermingled to create a unique cultural identity that we are part of today. The Karnataka classical music identity was established much earlier than the formation of states on the basis of language. (In fact Karnataka
classical music precedes the very genesis of the idea of India as one country, India only consisted of fragmented princely states till the British colonisation). It is futile to point out one particular state as the sole custodian of Karnataka classical music. TN Rajarathinam often referred to the south Indian classical music style as “Karnataka Isai Bani”, which included Vocal, instrumental and even Film music during his life and time! He did not recognise political states but only princely states which patronised and propagated music namely, Ettyapuram, ramanathapuram, Trivandrum, Tanjore, Mysore etc. Many of the vocalists who have been analysed in this research are from the present state of Tamil Nadu simply because there was a higher number of Nagaswaram artists residing there. The institution of Temple and its influence on culture was the thriving around the Tanjore belt and this is where many a Nagaswaram Vidwan thrived. Thus it was natural that the number of vocalists who were influenced by the Nagaswaram is highest around this region. Many of these vocalists (who were influenced by the Nagaswaram) rose to great heights in the Karnataka classical music field and went on to inspire and influence the thought process and content of the entire Karnataka classical vocal field. One has to acknowledge that the temples and royal courts in and around the Tanjore belt were the one of the biggest patrons of Nagaswaram music. Rich merchant clans such as the Chettiar clans followed suit. Patronage for Karnataka classical music from Industries such as TVS motors, RMKV Silks, Nalli Silks, Shriram Group, TS Mahalingam and Sons etc. is much larger in Tamil Nadu. Karnataka classical music has also found great support from the government of Tamil Nadu. Chief Minister MG Radhakrishnan took great interest in the music of Mandolin U Srinivas (who also belonged to the Isai Vellala community) as a child prodigy. Similarly chief minister M Karunanidhi hails from an Isai Vellala family itself and is father is said to have been a Nagaswaram player. The present Chief Minister Jayalalitha is said to be trained trained in Karnataka classical music and has great admiration for Karnataka classical music. Thus it is only natural that a much larger number of musicians, particularly Nagaswaram artists thrived in Tamil Nadu. Vidwan RK Srikantan of the illustrious Rudrapatnam School of music has been a prominent and respected representative of classical music from the state of Karnataka. During our interview he went on to say that there are very few vocalists from the present state of Karnataka who have been influenced by the Nagaswaram so as to sing in the ‘Nagaswaram Bani’, certainly none from the Rudrapatnam School of musicians. Nonetheless the Nagaswaram’s
contribution in the formation of the Karnataka classical music idiom, especially in Raga alapana is immense according to him.

During the course of my research I have come to realise that the term “Bani” or style was of utmost importance in the music world up until the Radio, Television and Internet became popular. Today’s Karnataka classical musicians are exposed to a various styles and finding distinctive “Banis” has become more of an individual phenomenon than something that is passed on throughout a line of disciples. In the earlier days, the style of the performer was closely related to that of his birth place and guru. Most often it would remain unaffected by other performance styles. Gurus’ often forbade their disciples from listening to musicians from another school of thought for the fear of one’s own trademark style being diluted. The Guru’s style was the Shishya’s lineage. However with the decline in the traditional gurukul system and a democratised dissemination of music though various music teachers and Universities has resulted in a music student being exposed to more than one style. There is a school of thought that believes that there are no perceivable styles left. As I have mentioned earlier the Veena Bani of singing has almost become extinct and even the Nagaswaram Bani in Vocal has started to fade away. This goes hand in hand with the Nagaswaram losing its ecosystem. There is a definite change in the acceptance of styles. Traditional artistic communities are fading into oblivion as practising Karnataka classical music, especially the Nagaswaram alone as a profession may not be economically feasible. The classical status of parallel streams such as Harikatha and Gamaka Vachana have come into question and are often considered light – classical. In the ancient music society till the nineteenth centuries the Isai vellalas, along with the Bhagavathars and theatre artists comprised the majority of performers. The concept of ‘mainstream classical’ was not very well defined (in spite of the court musicians being a minority). Today the ‘majority stream’ is the ‘main stream’ comprising of Karnataka classical vocalists and instrumentalists (except the Nagaswaram). The Nagaswaram presented an alternative format of presenting Karnataka classical music (though the Mallari, Rakthi and Pallavi). Today it has changed its repertoire and content to suit the changing times. The Krithi has become the most preferred form of taking Manodharma forward. Even though every Karnataka classical artist has a distinct style of performance, the general norms of a Karnataka classical ‘Kutcheri’ have a certain predictability of format.
During the course of my research, I have constantly come to review the gamut and significance of the term Nagaswaram Bani. The term “Bani” signifies style. The style of a musicians goes deeper than his or her presentation or performance. It goes on to govern their entire thought process, interpretation and vision of Karnataka classical music. In this context the term “Nagaswaram Bani” suggests that the musician who is said to be following it, interprets, internalises and renders his music through the eyes of a Nagaswaram Vidwan. The influence of the Nagaswaram and its role in creation of a Bani in vocal music is one of the most complex phenomenon in Karnataka classical music. The “Nagaswaram Bani” cannot be defined or put into specific compartments since it can encompass a wide variety of approaches within itself. The Veena Bani for example is a very specific style which one could find in most vocalists who were also Vainika’s. Where as many upper-class musicians such as Konerirajapuram Vaidyanatha Iyer, GNB, Semmangudi etc. who had no playing expertise of the Nagaswaram were deeply influenced by its music and were able to successfully imbibe the style into their own. There are certain common features such as Birukka, Jaru, Long breath phrases, repetitive circular phrases, bold gamakas, long intense sarvalaghu swaralpana, force in rendition etc. which make up important components of a Nagaswaram inspired vocal style. The Nagaswaram Bani is a very distinct style yet can differ and occur in varying degrees within the personality of each musician. While GNB’s was a stylised polished style, Semmangudi’s was raw and intense like an uncut diamond. Madurai Somasundaram’s style was completely different form both the artists mentioned above with a heavy influence of Nagaswaram music on style. At the same time the Nagaswaram influence need not always translate into a Bani. This holds particularly true for the present day musicians who can draw from many sources of inspiration and exposed to a lot many more influences. The influence of Nagaswaram can be seen in many aspects of the artist but need not govern his entire outlook to music. I believe that Sanjay Subrahmanyan’s music has a very strong influence of Nagaswaram music which is a part of his style. However as he believes, his style need not correspond to the idea of a “Nagaswaram Bani”. Every concert can bring out a different shade and today’s artists can draw from multiple sources of inspiration. Today, the concept of a (modern day) vocalist’s style based exclusively or predominantly on Nagaswaram Bani cannot be substantially validated. A great amount of regulation and carefully crafted listening will be required to channel ones style into a particular Bani (unless it is inherited as being part of a
musical lineage). On the other hand the inspiration and ideas that have been borrowed by vocalists from the Nagaswaram over a period of time cannot be negated as I have tried to point out throughout my research. With respect to the influence of Nagaswaram on the individual vocalists I have studied in Chapter 5, I would agree with the great flautist, TR Mahalingam’s ‘theory of subjectivity’. In matters of art especially Karnataka classical music a tremendous amount of subjectivity is involved. According to TR Mahalingam there is no good, bad or absolute Bani in Karnataka classical music. Even the theory of ‘classicism’ or ‘classic’ is subjective and answers to ‘acceptability’. It is difficult to say whether GNB’s is the absolute benchmark for a Nagaswaram Bani however it is widely accepted by both connoisseurs and lay audience that there is a strong flavour of Nagaswaram music in his own style. Similarly the artists who I have chosen to analyse in Chapter 5 are those who have been widely accepted to have a distinguishable Nagaswaram influence on their music. An identification of the Nagaswaram influence on a vocalist, involves understanding the vocalists interpretation, expression of Nagaswaram music (which is different from one vocalist to another), the translation of this style and the effect it has on the audience. Essentially the “Nagaswaram Bani” is a part within the larger picture which is the style of the artist. It is a part or element existing within the style of the Vocalist. Only Madurai Somasundaram may stand an exception whose style I feel is almost a vocal translation of Nagaswaram music.

My research led me to interview and interact with many senior vocalists in today’s Karnataka classical music field. During the course of my interview, one of the most frequently touched upon subject was regarding the extent to which a vocalist could adopt the “Nagaswaram Bani” or the style and presentation of Nagaswaram music into their singing. It is my opinion that the adoption of an instrumental style into vocal music can be a natural process especially in cases where the vocalist is also an instrumentalist and vice versa. The human vocal chords are one of the most complex, delicate yet flexible instrument. It can produce any nuance of any genre of music, it can negotiate difficult phraseology, extremely speedy Sangatis and birukkas, sustain a note for a long breath, increase and decrease the volume seamlessly etc. however each human being is born with a different kind of voice and one has to understand one’s advantages and limitations. The Nagaswaram Bani is one of the toughest styles to incorporate. One has to have an extraordinary voice which can be
trained into becoming even more flexible. This kind of training has to start quite early in the singer’s learning period. Good lung capacity is of great importance to be able to sustain the long music phrases in one breath. Most musicians who followed the Nagaswaram Bani were known to have a “Birukka Shareera” or a voice quality that could effectively reproduce the speedy Nagaswaram phrases. However it is my opinion, the music of most musicians such as Semmangudi and Tanjore S Kalyanaraman who were inspired by the Nagaswaram underwent a lot of stylistic changes according to age. Based on the recordings I have analysed Tanjore S Kalyanaraman reduced the amount of Birukkas considerably as he advanced in age. His music incorporated a lot more gamakas than GN Balasubramanians and he chose to concentrate rare ragas especially Vivadi during the later part of his career. It has been observed that musicians such as GNB (who was heavily influenced by the Nagaswaram), who was known for his silken voice had pitching problems during the latter half of his career. Many leading musicians who followed the Nagaswaram Bani have had a lot of voice problems. The Nagaswaram Bani is a very assertive style which can take a toll on the human voice, especially in today’s times where the number of concerts for leading vocalists have gone up. It is best left to the individual musician to decide whether the style of Nagaswaram suits his or her voice and performance style. From the 1950’s to the 70’s a lot of vocalists emerged who had a beautiful blend of the Nagaswaram influence into their own style. Nagaswaram artists TN Rajarathinam Pillai and Karaikurichi P Arunachalam made a huge impact on the generation of musicians which came next. The blind imitation of the racy birukkas and long breath phrases cannot make up for a successful internalisation of the Nagaswaram style. A vocalist has to share a similar musical vision to that of a Nagaswaram player’s. It is very difficult to define what this musical vision or soul of Nagaswaram music. It can be experienced after one has had a prolonged exposure to Nagaswaram music. Pattabhi Raman, the founding editor of Sruti magazine, wrote extensively on the Nagaswaram. In one such article he writes a cautionary note against the blind imitation of the Nagaswaram music. He states that a vocalists has to retain the core attributes and nature of vocal music at any cost when he applies his inspiration from the music of the Nagaswaram to the contours of his own raga alapana. It goes well as a guide to raga elaboration and opens one’s mind to great manodharma. However mere imitation of the music of the maestros such as TNR by reproducing the same musical passages and blind usage of birukkas don’t go well for
one’s own growth. He even writes how many musicians have fallen prey to the imitation of the Nagaswaram’s music and even punctuate their singing with the gasping for breath which is generally attributed to the Nagaswaram players.

I have come to believe that Nagaswaram music is very unique. The Nagaswaram is perhaps one of the only instruments that can render classical music, yet in a colloquial manner. It is not a confined idea of Karnataka classical music but a very open space within which a lot of experimentation can happen, especially in the performance and formation of Manodharma Sangeeta. It is classical music for the not-so-privileged and connoisseurs, classical music that defies segmentation for a particular class. Its music has a very earthy feel. As I have discussed earlier, the term “Nagaswaram Bani” is open to a lot of possibilities. Each Nagaswaram player has a different style, so when we talk about a vocalist following the “Nagaswaram Bani”, whose style is he following? The Semmbonarkoil style of Nagaswaram music is very different from that of the Chillakurippettai style. TN Rajarathinam’s vision was very different from Karaikurichi Arunachalam’s. GNB’s music was very close to TN Rajarathinam Pillai’s Manodharma, he modelled it around the Nagaswaram maestro’s style out of their mutual friendship and admiration. However in the case of most other vocalists, we tend to call their style as having elements of the Nagaswaram Bani because their music captures the soul of Nagaswaram music. There is a similarity in vision and development of Manodharma Sangeeta, a close proximity of styles to Nagaswaram music as a whole. The “feel” or “sensation” is often subjective but takes utmost importance in the Fine arts especially Karnataka classical music. If the overall effect created by the vocalist gives flavours of the Nagaswaram and a discerning majority audience gets this flavour then there is a proximity in style between that of the vocalist and Nagaswaram. The style of the vocalist has to be deeply intertwined, matched with the Nagaswaram’s earthy feel and exist as one homogenous amalgam.

Vidwan RK Srikantan has spoken about his deep admiration for the Nagaswaram style of alapana, the depth and its construction. However he also went on to add that his voice though supple was not suitable for the effective rendering of the Nagaswaram style. He goes on to say that while he has observed many elements of the Nagaswaram music, it never affected his style.

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210 Sruti, May 1998 “Nagaswaram Bani” – N Pattabhi Raman, Pg. 28, Issue 164
Apart from the various artist whose style I have analysed in Chapter 5, there are many vocalists who have been influenced by the Nagaswaram and have shown traces of it in their own rendition. It is very unfortunate that there are very few music recordings, if not none available of these artists due to which I was unable to form my own conclusions about the presence of the “Nagaswaram Bani” in their style. However some common names kept popping up in my interviews with various other senior vocalists who often mentioned these past masters. One such Vidwan who came up frequently during my discussions on the Nagaswaram influence is Manakkal Rangarajan. Similarly there were many other Isai Vellalas who were very popular as vocalists and have contributed immensely to Karnataka classical vocal music. While Chittoor Subramania Pillai’s style could not be termed as close to the Nagaswaram Bani, others such as Kanchipuram Naina Pillai, TA Namashivayam, TM Tyagarajan, Kulikkarai Vishwalingam (son of Nagaswaram Vidwan Kullikkarai Pitchiappa), Tiruvarur Sethuraman, Seerkazhi Govindarajan, Madurai Somasundaram who sang in the Nagaswaram Bani and made a huge impact on the Karnataka classical music scenario. My research has led me share Vidwan PS Narayanaswamy’s views there has been an outstanding contribution from the Nagaswaram Vidwans and Isai Vellala vocalists towards the genesis of a distinct style in Karnataka classical vocal music. PS Narayanaswamy believes that there have been many outstanding vocalists and musicians (non Nagaswaram) from their own community like Flute T Swaminatha pillai and his disciple Sangita Kalanidhi T Vishwanathan (brother of balasaraswathi and Guru of Aruna Sairam). PSN goes on to add that the Isai Vellala clan itself has done a great service to Karnataka music. My research has led me to believe that until the 20th century a lot of sacrifices were made by the Nagaswaram musicians and their community, it was due to their continuous perseverance that Karnataka music didn’t diminish into a few elite circles. They continued and spread Karnataka classical music and its values among the masses till a crucial period of time. Another vocalist who featured in many discussions was the late Bharat Ratna MS Subbalakshmi. Although she came to be associated more with devotional hymns and Bhajans during the later part of her life, many musicians such as Kalavathy Avadhoot who have heard her early music reminisced about the assertive style of singing she had and the possible Nagaswaram Bani in her early music. She definitely had the tonal quality in her voice to have been able to sing in the Nagaswaram Bani. Hers was a birukka-shareera, a voice capable of rendering any fast passage with crystal clarity. Her rendition had a
force and a very assertive gamaka rendition. As Vidushi R Vedavalli has described, the music of MS Subbalakshmi had the quality of “mellinam” or gentle graces but also “Vallinam” or deep accents. Her style of rendition has often been described as being speedy in her early years after which she switched to the Madhya-laya or medium tempo. She was a great admirer of GNB’s music and it is said that was known to have been deeply influenced by his style. She was one of the lady musicians of his time who could sing equally sparkling birukkas with great ease. I have personally found instances which seem to suggest the possibility of the Nagaswaram influence on her music. The Kriti “Raghuvamsa sudha” is very popular and has been taken to great heights by instrumentalists, so much so that many vocalists find it suitable to leave it to instrumentalists. However MS Subbalakshmi has rendered in this composition in the most compelling manner. Her singing is forceful and the vigor does not diminish in the faster sections, which she easily navigates. At times the rendering of this composition felt quite close to the Nagaswaram style of rendition which is a powerful concoction of speed and cleverly incorporated gamakas. However there are very few recordings of her earlier concerts available and those with extensive Manodharma are even rarer. Most of the available recordings are those of her singing the lighter compositions of Karnataka classical music. Due to this, it has been difficult to find the Nagaswaram influence on her music for certain.

There was a time when the Nagaswaram players were very popular, perhaps even more than the vocalists as was told to me by Vidwan TN Sheshagopalan. They held great sway especially whenever Karnataka classical music was associated with temples. A lot of upper class vocalists came to listen to their music and participated in the temple processions for the sole purpose of observing their raga alapana. I was told by PS Narayanaswamy (who personally attended many Nagaswaram concerts) that even stalwarts who had nothing to do with the Nagaswaram Bani like Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar and Madurai Mani Iyer came to attend. Madurai Mani Iyer often spoke to PSN about preparing his own raga alapana by referring to Nagaswaram alapana since he considered their Manodharma of the highest order. Mani Iyer often referred to the Nagaswaram during interviews for the A.I.R (during the 1960s) and that he would participate in night processions during temple festivals, walking right behind the Nagaswaram artists. He was the disciple of Vidwan Rajam Bhagavathar, who was also greatly exposed to Nagaswaram music. Rajam Bhagvathar trained along
with Madurai Pushpavanam and Nagaswaram Ponnuswami Pillai from Ettayapuram Ramachandra Bhagavathar. According to PSN, Musiri Subramania Iyer would be the first to arrive at the Kapaleeshwar temple (in Mylapore, Chennai) during the annual ratholsavam solely to catch the Nagaswaram procession which would last from 10pm to 3am. It was often stated to me that all the above artists were inspired by the Nagaswaram in one way or another. Some were greatly influenced so much so that the influence came to define their style and ideology, so as to suggest the “Nagaswaram Bani” in their style. The Nagaswaram influence became a huge phenomenon with the arrival of its genius master-player TN Rajarathinam Pillai. He cast a spell on all those who heard him just like the Pied-piper. Even artists such as DK Jayaraman were great admirers of TN Rajarathinam and he often referred to the Nagaswaram maestro as one of the greatest torch bearers of Manodharma.

Today the Nagaswaram is not heard as often as one would like to. Its stand is precarious and its relevance in today’s classical music scenario has come to be questioned. There are many factors that have contributed to the Nagaswaram losing ground in the Karnataka classical music scenario. One was the bad hand that was dealt to the Nagaswaram during the important phase when Karnatak classical music was making its transition from the traditional patrons like the Royal courts and temples to the Sabhas in the 1920’s. There has also been a perception that the Nagaswaram music and its players did not follow the grammar of Karnataka classical music as dictated by the various Lakshana granthas or musicological treatises. Unlike the rest of Karnataka classical music, the Nagaswaram musicians depended entirely on Oral traditions especially the Guru-shishya parampara for the transmission of musical knowledge. Since music was practiced as a family tradition the knowledge of ragas and their dimensions was passed orally from father (who was the guru in most cases) to son. Most Nagaswaram Vidwans were barely literate (since they came from a lower caste which was at a disadvantage for education before and during the British colonization). Thus there was no written word to validate their traditions and musical practices. There were many Nagaswaram Vidwans who had very little knowledge of the Lakshana of music, propagated by the Sanskrit treatises. There have been many instances when they would not have even heard of the term Shuddha, Chathushruthi or Eka shruthi according to Dr BM Sundaram. However they would be very adept at handling any rare or Vivadi raga. Most of the time while training the guru would only
ask his disciple to play a swara in terms such as “Thalli Vaaschu” or “Koraachu Oodhu” (play it a little higher or play it a little lower). The students would then remember the amount of air he blew into the Nagaswaram for that particular Raga. However the Nagaswaram artists specialised in Ragas such as Gaulipantu etc. without knowing what kind of Rishabha is used. Another important aspect was that the Nagaswaram vidwans did not follow the Sanskrit term in describing their music. They had terms in their own regional spoken language such as Tamil and Kannada for many music terminologies and this was perhaps not understood by the rest of the Karnataka classical music fraternity. Perhaps this lack of technical terms and grammar made them shy away from the new age in Karnataka music when there was a huge movement to add a scientific analysis to its practise. Especially during the last few years of colonial occupation when the need for a sense of pride in one’s tradition and a nationalist identity made musicians scramble to suit their music to the western standards of scrutiny. At a time when the Madras Music Academy conducted many seminars and debates to create a uniform grammar and music practise for Karnataka classical music, the Nagaswaram vidwans’ were at a genuine loss for words.

Another factor which has affected the Nagaswaram severely is the lack of promising students to continue the art. This instrument has always been associated with the lower caste sections of society and this bias led many upper class students to stay away from the social stigma attached to it. Once the temple patronage diminished there weren’t many patrons and venue for the Nagaswaram music. This lack of opportunity led to further alienation of even youngsters from the Isai Vellala community. Many have shifted to the Saxophone, which is easier to learn is comes on a neutral ground (there are no caste related stigma’s attached to it).

I also found that another aspect of the Nagaswaram, its advantage of volume, has become a disadvantage to its cause today. There are very few Sabhas who have a hall which is big enough to sustain a Nagaswaram ensemble. In Bangalore for instance, perhaps only Gayana Samaj and Chowdiah Memorial hall are large enough to handle the powerful sound of the Nagaswaram. Many smaller venues (funded by smaller Sabhas) cropped up during post-independence but the sheer volume of the Nagaswaram music is so loud that (it is one of the loudest acoustical double-reed wind instruments in the world) the audience would have to sit at a distance or face considerable discomfort in a small hall. The Nagaswaram is most ideally suitable for
open air concerts but there are very few well managed open air theatres available today.

During the course of my research I have come to believe that Manodharma especially Alapana in ragas such as Keeravani, Charukeshi, Shanmukhapriya, Kamboji, Hemavathy, Simehndramadhyama and Dharmavathy were taken up quite early and extensively by the Nagaswaram Vidwans. According to the Guru-sampradaya of PS Narayanaswamy, the raga Kamboji was adopted by upper class vocalists after listening to the Nagaswaram exposition of this raga. For some time in the history of Karnataka classical music, Kamboji was considered a folk raga. However the classical Nagaswaram players expanded the boundaries of this raga and the vocalists picked it up from them. Similarly not many vocalists would take up the raga Dharmavathy for elaborate Manodharma. PS Narayanaswamy believes that it was Kullikkarai Pitchiappa who popularised the raga Dharmavathy with his extraordinary rendition of alapana in Dharmavathy raga followed by a Pallavi. It is my belief that all the vocalists who have been influenced by the Nagaswaram at expert performers. From Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, GNB to TN Sheshagopalan and Sanjay Subrahmanyan, vocalists influenced by the Nagaswaram have also observed the Nagaswaram technique of gauging the audience mood and keeping in tune to their pulse.

My research has led me to the conclusion that the Nagaswaram has not just influenced the individual vocalist but the Karnataka classical vocal system, considerably. Today this influence seems highly improbable and unbelievable. Today Karnataka classical music as a pure-art is only practised in the Sabha as a concert format or the “kutcheri”. Temples which arrange classical music as part of festivals also put a stage and organise Karnataka classical music according to the modern Kutcheri-paddhathi (concert – pattern). The decline of the popularity of the classical Nagaswaram in the realm of pure art has made its music quite rare, especially its Manodharma. The influence of the Nagaswaram on Vocal music seems a very far off possibility today since there are very few spaces of interaction between vocalists and Nagaswaram artists today. Temples do not employ or commission Nagaswaram music and neither is it heard much in the Sabha concert scenario. However, as I have tried to prove throughout my research, there was a time when there was a close interaction between vocalists and the Nagaswaram Vidwans. Nagaswaram Vidwan Veeruswamy
Pillai was among the most respected musicians of his time and his contribution to Karnataka classical music was recognised by the Madras Music Academy in 1949. During his speech he sought to bring out the relationship that was shared by the vocalists or “main-stream” Karnataka classical music and Nagaswaram musicians. He went on to point out that earlier vocalists, Nagaswaram and Fiddle Vidwans were all considered as one society. He also spoke about the divide between different sections of Karnataka classical music that he had come to observe during his time. However before his time all musicians were part of the same ecosystem. Violin Tirukodikaval Krishnaier was a great friend and admirer of Tirumarugal Natesa Pillai. Similarly Konerirajapuram Vaidyanatha Iyer and Mannargudi Chinna Pakiri were great friends and mutual admirers. Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer had the greatest regards for Pandanallur Veeruswamy Pillai. Korainadu Natesa Pillai was an expert in Sangita Sastra and Chidambara Vaidyanatha Bhagavathar was an expert vocalist and Nagaswaram Vidwan who also gave solo Vocal concerts. There was a great give and take relationship between the two fields according to Veeruswamy Pillai. Madurai Ponnuswamy was a great Veena Player and a Nagaswaram exponent, he also wrote a book on musicology. The musicians of the yester years seemed to have belonged to one society comprising different performing communities.

The discovery that Sesha Pillai (an ancestor of Flautist T Swaminatha Pillai) played the Saranda came to me as a revelation. It is amazing that an Isai Vellala, native of Tanjore District in the southernmost tip of India came in contact with an instrument that has been largely played only in the northern regions of Asia from Sindh to Kandahar. When there has been such an exchange of ideas between such far flung regions at a time when the world was not wired, it could not have been too impossible for an exchange of ideas between the various musician communities of Karnataka classical music. Too much history has been lost for want of proper documentation, especially related to the exchange in musical ideas between musicians of different communities. Repetition of music theory, its grammar and mathematics has resulted in the lack of proper documentation and emphasis of the actual practise of it. We are today left with little scraps of information in the form of oral history to pick on for formation of a consistent narrative.

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Apart from the influence of Nagaswaram on Vocal music there has been tremendous influence vice versa. During the emergence of the Krithi as a mode of presentation most instruments strived to emulate the vocal like clarity of sahitya rendition and the Nagaswaram is no exception. Many other instruments such as the Flute and violin strove to bring out the finesse of Karnataka classical vocal rendition especially in the reproduction of gamakas. The 1900’s saw a whole new level of advancement of Karnataka classical instrumental music, especially in the hands of instrumentalists such as Mali, Lalgudi Jayaraman-MSG-TNK and Veena Dr S Balachander. There was a huge advancement in instrumental playing techniques and finesse in the presentation of Karnataka classical music. One could find a huge difference in playing techniques within immediate succeeding generations. A good example of this was the playing style of Palladam Sanjeva Rao and Mali. One of the reasons for such advancements in instrumental techniques was the higher exposure to vocal music. For the longest period of time Vocal music was always conducted in private circle. The availability of Vocal music for public reference (after the emergence of Sabha) gave the instrumentalists ample opportunity to carefully learn and observe the salient features of Karnataka vocal rendition. This availability of vocal music is perhaps why instrumentalists such as U Srinivas were able to achieve perfection on his Mandolin within his lifetime, which otherwise took the Violin a few generations. To enumerate the importance of singing or vocalizing Karnataka classical music I would like to quote Flute Shashank who went to say that "Instrumentalists should never learn music through notations; they must be vocalists first and instrumentalists later. Most teachers in this century have committed the grave mistake of teaching students without knowledge of good vocal music, as South Indian classical music is almost meant to be a vocal form of music. When a flute player has learnt a good style of vocal music without the help of notations, a lot of fine finger movements and sound modulations develop in him. These fine and miniature forms cannot really be described or taught to students since these techniques almost map the heart and soul of an artiste.” His point is that one has to be able to play as naturally and seamlessly as one’s own singing and the instrument should come as an extension of his or her own self. Thus I would like to conclude my research stressing the need for vocalists to learn or at least listen to Instrumental music very carefully and vice versa. The understanding of Karnataka classical music can only be completed with a holistic approach towards learning and one of the most important aspect in the
learning of our music is “Kelvi-jnanam”. It would serve music students well to cultivate the habit of listening. In this context, the senior musicians I have analysed found great merit in listening and inculcating the music of the Nagaswaram into the formation of their musical ideology. It is of great significance to the Karnataka classical music field and has served its role of spreading the message of classical music among the general public at many historically crucial points.