CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION TO THE NAGASWARAM

The Nagaswaram is one of the most ancient instruments of India. One of the world’s loudest acoustic wind instruments it was always given the special status of ‘Mangala Vadyam’ or an auspicious instrument, without which no celebration could be complete.

From marriages to naming ceremonies or from war music to Sabha concerts or temple procession, Nagaswaram held a high position in the society and was a joyous element of the social fabric in South India. Having flourished away from the influence of the Veena and the set Katcheri Padhathi (the present concert format) which influenced all other instruments and vocal music of the past century, its music evolved in a very unique and brilliant manner carrying a flavour common to none other. Said to be the pioneer in the technique of improvisation and the king of Raga Alapana, it was a source of inspiration to many stalwarts in the field of Karnataka music. The Nagaswaram artists are a unique community of musicians which has been practising Karnataka music across religious boundaries. Karnataka classical music has always been associated with Hinduism and its practise. However within the Nagaswaram community exists a very special community of Muslim Nagaswaram artists whose most famous exponent was Sheik Chinna Moula.

This instrument is as ancient as the very culture of the South Indian Subcontinent. To trace back its origin is as tricky as tracing the birth of Karnataka music as a genre. In the case of Karnataka music and its instruments, the creation of history is often a part of oral tradition. Many a times history is composed is by picking up narrative fragments and stringing them together resulting in a long story with little episodes coming in from here and there. Unlike the Veena, an instrument which was favoured among the literati, the Nagaswaram was limited to one community of performers, the Isai Vellalas’, who mostly did not pursue academic education and were barely literate. The Isai Vellala was a traditional community of artists (considered lower in birth and social status) who specialised in the art of music and dance. While the women became temple Dancers or Devadasis, the men often became Natuvanars and Nagaswaram artists. Many of them depended entirely on the Nagaswaram for their livelihood. The term ‘Isai’ denotes music while ‘Vellala’ means cultivators. They were literally the
cultivators of art in the ancient cultural societies. The Nagaswaram is a Raja Vadyam which needs Asura Sadhana. Formal education was difficult when all their time and energy was spent on music training. Many Nagaswaram Vidwans were barely literate and did not care for historical documentation of their tradition and music practices. Perhaps, this is why one does not come across many musicological treatises which provide documentation on the Nagaswaram music and its musicians in detail unlike the other ancient instruments. Since the oral tradition forms the base of our Nagaswaram heritage, historians and research scholars have to rely on contemporary studies of oral history which is reconstructed from traditions. Its historical journey can be spilt into three segments:

- As an instrument, born from and for Alaya vazhivadu (Temple rituals).
- An instrument which gained immense popularity as a Mangala Vadyam (instrument used for auspicious occasions) outside the temple i.e. For Marriages and naming ceremonies etc.
- As an instrument that slowly enters the Sabha-concert scenario

Having flourished for a long time, away from the influence of the set Katcheri Padhathi (concert format) which influenced all other instruments and vocal music of the past century, its music evolved in a very unique and brilliant manner carrying a flavour common to none other. Said to be the pioneer in the technique of improvisation and the king of Raga Alapana, it was a source of inspiration to many stalwarts in the field of Karnataka music. Great vidwans such as Coimbatore Raghavair, Vid GN Balasubramanium, Vid Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, Madurai Somasundaram, Violin Vid Dr M Chandrashekar, Vid Madurai TN Sheshagopalan and Veena Dr S Balachander have derived inspiration from the music of the Nagaswaram. Some of the most illustrious Nagaswaram Vidwans of the yester years were Thiruveezhimizhalai brothers, Keeranur brothers, Semponnarkoil brothers, T.N. Rajaratnam Pillai, Thiruvidaimaruthur P.S. Veerusami Pillai, Thiruvenkadu Subramania Pillai, Sheik Chinna Moula, Karaikurichi P Arunachalam, Kulikarai Pitcchiappa and Namagiripete Krishnan etc.
Fig 1: Thiruvenkadu Subramania Pillai

Fig 2: T.N. Rajaratnam Pillai

Fig 3: Namagiripete Krishnan

Fig 4: Karaikurichi P Arunachalam
The Nagaswaram is a wind instrument and comes under the classification of Susheera Vadhya. Musical instruments are generally classified into:

- Tanti Vadya or Stringed instruments, also called as Chordophones. For instance the Veena and Violin

- Avanadha vadya or instruments where sound is produced by the vibration of a stretched membrane or skin across a piece of metal or wood. They are called Membranophones. For Ex the Mrudangam Tabla etc

- Ghana Vadya are those of the cymbal and castanet class. They are also called Autophones. For Example the Ghatam

- Susheera vadya or wind instruments. They are also called as Aerophones. For example the Nagaswaram and the Flute.
Susheera Vadyas are instruments where a vibrating column of air is used to produce the musical sound. (Sambamoorthy, South Indian Music, 2001)\(^1\). Susheera Vadyas are either of the wood-wind type like the Nagaswaram and the Flute or brass-wind type like the *Tiruchinam* and *Kombu*. The Nagaswaram is a double-reed instrument. (Sambamoorthy, South Indian Music, 2001)\(^2\). The two reeds vibrate against each other to produce a sound unlike single reed instruments where the reeds vibrate against the mouth piece. The pair of reeds which act as valves are fixed to a metal tube which is inserted into the funnel shaped hollow body of the instrument. The length of the body of the main pipe may be from 25 cm (of the Timiri) to nearly 90 cm as in the Bari Nagaswaram. The Nagaswaram has twelve holes, seven playing and five auxiliary which are on the sides of the instrument. There are no keys for playing which enables the free movement of fingers and smooth production of any kind of *Gamakas*. Nobody knows how the earliest wind instrument looked like or how it was played. It is believed that man must have stumbled upon certain sweet sounds emanating from bamboos when the wind blew through them. The winds must have passed through the holes in the Bamboos which were left by the insects boring through them. This discovery might have led to the invention of the primitive wind instruments which later on became an important part of man’s religious and cultural life. Holes were also bored into the hollow long bones of animals to make primitive wind instruments. The earliest instruments were those which were played for ceremonies both religious and political like a marriage, birth ceremony, to ward off evil spirits or even the coronation of a king. One does not know exactly when art started being propagated for art’s sake but we can assume that the trends ran parallel to the changing periods of history. There is a relief of the Nagaswaram of the Gandharan period (3\(^{rd}\) century AD). The Veerabhadra temple in Asandi, Karnataka (early 13\(^{th}\) century) and a temple chariot in South India (18\(^{th}\) century) that show specimens of the Nagaswaram (Deva, 2000)\(^3\). There is a Nagaswaram made of stone, about the length of a Mukhaveena, in the temple of Lord Adhinathaperumal at Azhwartirunagari (9\(^{th}\) century AD), Thuthukudi District, Tamil Nadu which still gives a fine note (Sambamoorthy, South Indian Music, 2001)\(^4\).

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\(^1\) Prof P Sambamurthy – South Indian Music, Book III, Pg 259
\(^2\) Prof P Sambamurthy – South Indian Music, Book III, Pg 254
\(^3\) BC Deva – Musical Instruments of India, their history and development, Pg. 104
\(^4\) Prof P Sambamurthy – South Indian Music, Book III, Pg. 254
Vedic literature has ample reference to wind instruments. Like the *Venu* and *Nadi* (a kind of reed flute). Their music was offered as a sacrifice in the *Mahavrata* ceremony (Deva, 2000). The term *Venu* was very generic and was used to denote many kinds of wind instruments. Musicologist BC Deva himself says that there is enormous confounding in the names of susheera vadyas. He goes on to say that “Terms of very general connotation are used to flutes of different types. For instance Indo-Aryan words *venu, vamshi* and *bansuri* may indicate many kind: horizontal, vertical, beaked with or without a fipple hole”. The modern day side blown flute itself has many names such as *venu, vamshi, bansuri, bansi, pava, murali, kolalu, kolavi, kuzhal, pullankuzhal, pillangrovi* etc. However the Rig Veda mentions “*Uthhaala Venu*”, which meant a flute that is positioned facing up or vertical to the ground and not

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5 BC Deva – Musical Instruments of India, their history and development, Pg. 89
sideways or horizontal. This Utthaala Venu is the ancestor of the Nagaswaram according to Dr BM Sundaram. It is interesting to note that BC Deva refers to the names found in ancient literature (which was generally in Sanskrit) as “Indo-Aryan” and goes on to mention that they were generic in nature (Deva, 2000)⁶. This also points out to the importance of looking into the Dravidian and colloquial names of the Nagaswaram that might passed down through decades of oral traditions. The names such as Mohori, Mori, Volaga, Nayanam, Peruvangiyam and Nagasara seem to be closer to being synonyms, varieties and the predecessors of the Nagaswaram.

Most instruments were associated with some form of ritualistic practise. It is interesting that in the present times all other instruments have disassociated themselves with this aspect but the Nagaswaram still continues to hold the title of ‘Mangala Vadyam’ and is a must for all traditional celebrations in most of the South Indian homes. Indian classical music during its long history was always closely associated with religion. Margaret Cousins, the famous Irish-Indian educationist who composed the tune for our national anthem closely studied the Indian music scenario. In 1935 she wrote that religion is a part of life in India and that life in itself is religion. She goes on to observe that until the evolution of Hindustani music there was hardly any kind of secular music in India. A classical music concert is more like a prayer congregation than like an evening of entertainment, especially in south India. However the ancient cultural society of India, before the time of Margaret Cousins was very different from what she had thought of it. Karnataka classical music, before and during the time of the Trinity composers till about 18th century was very complex. It was a curious mix of art-music and religious music. The context of Karnataka classical music was religious but the execution and presentation of it was very art-house, with the Nagaswaram and the court musicians at the crux of it all. Today we have many thematic concerts based on compositions of Rama or Devi. However in ancient music society, classical music was invariably identified only with the Court musicians, Devadasis and the Nagaswaram community, who rendered music which was completely based on the principles of Manodharma or improvisation, centred around Raga alapana (improvisation sans words) and Pallavi (A basic melodic line which is elaborated through improvisation). Though the Nagaswaram existed within the temple precincts, its music content consisted of a majority of Raga alapana and

⁶ BC Deva – Musical Instruments of India, their history and development, Pg. 90
swara kalpana. Music scales were prescribed as religious offerings within the temple and the boundaries of religion were blurred by the concepts of artistic freedom. The Ragam, Tana, Pallavi was the most dominant form of Classical rendition. Thus the Nagaswaram was a unique instrument where there was a confluence between art for the sake of Art and art as a religious offering.

The *Naradiya Siksha* (1st century AD) however points out the significance of the ancient Nagaswaram and Veena. This work goes on to state that along with the ancient Veena, the Venu (the generic term for susheera vadyas) was one of the earliest instruments to define the music scale. This work gives us perhaps the earliest reference for the role these instruments played in the discovery and formation of the Vedic melodic scale in the following lines,

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"Ya samaganam Prathamah sa benormadhyamah swarah
Yo dvithiya: sagandharasthritheeyasthrushabhaah||
Chathurthah shadja ithyahu panchamo dhaivatho bhavetha|
Shatonishaadho visheyah sapthamah panchamam smruthah||"
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This shloka says in its first line that the note which is the first in singing of the Samaveda is the Madhyama of the Venu, second is the Gandhara, third the Rishabha, forth is Sadja, fifth is Dhaivatha, sixth (*atisvara*) is Nishadha and seventh (*krustha*) is Panchama (Deva, 2000).7

The Nagaswaram, regarded as the Oboe of South India, was found all over India in many other forms (Sambamurthy, South Indian Music, 1999).8

**Etymology**

While tracing the history one comes across many ancient names with which this instrument was known. It is important to notice the regional variations of the name as well as the periodic names with which the present day Nagaswaram was known. Some of the ancient names of this instrument were (Deva, 2000)9“pungi, beena, nagasara, mahudi, mohari, mori, mahuri, mukhaveena and madhukari”. Irrespective of the difference in names the construction and structure of the

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7 BC Deva- Musical Instruments of India. Pg. 92
8 Prof P Sambamurthy – South Indian Music, Book V, Pg. 238
9 BC Deva- Musical Instruments of India. Pg. 102-104
Nagaswaram has generally remained same throughout the country. The term *Mukhaveena* has been mentioned by Somanatha in his *Panditharadhy Charitha* (12th AD) and by King Mummadi Chikka Bhupala in his work *Abhinava Sangeethasara* (17th AD).

It is believed that the Nagaswaram attained its present term around the 14th AD. Sreenatha’s *Kreedabhiramam* (Telugu 14th AD) and Singaraja’s *Singiraja Puranam* (Kannada 15th AD) both have references to the term *Nagasara & Nagaswara*.

Of all the different names, *Mohori* seems to be the most ancient. It was a tribal or folk oboe. This word later attained many forms which could have been the colloquial versions of the former. For ex *Mori, Mahudi and Magudi* were all different usages of the same word. The name “*Madhukari*” and “*Madhukali*” seem to be the Sankritized versions of the *Mohori* (Ayyangar, 1972)\(^{10}\). Another ancient form of the instrument mentioned by Nagaswaram Vid Vyasarpadi G Kothandaraman was the “*Peruvangiyam*”. This name has been mentioned in ancient Sangam literature. It has also been mentioned in the same name in the commentary on *Sillapadikaaram* by *Illango Adigal* according to renowned musicologist Dr BM Sundaram who is an expert on the subject. The term ‘*Peru*’ means large and ‘*Vangiyam*’ means that which has holes. The Nagaswaram was also called as the ‘*Nagachinnam*’. The Skanda Purana’s mention several types of wind instrument as ‘Chinna’ in verses 17 and 18 in twenty second chapter of Shivarahasya Khanda- shankara Samhitha. The instrument is mention as ‘*Nagachinnam*’. The Sanskrit play ‘*Shrirangaraja Charitha Bana*’ of Srinivasa Kavi also refers to the Nagaswaram in its primitive form\(^{11}\). Some of the ancient treatises that mention the earliest names of the Nagaswaram are;

- Sillapadikaram – *Illango Adigal* (2nd-3rd CE) - *Peruvangiyam*
- Matanga’s Brihaddesi (6-9th AD) – *Mavari, Madvari*
- Nanya (11th Ad)
- Mangarasana Mangabhidhana- (1158, 12th AD) – contains a description too
- Sarangadeva (13th AD) - *Madhukari*

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\(^{10}\) History of South Indian (Carnatic) music – R Rangaramanuja Ayyangar, Pg. 41

\(^{11}\) Vid Lalitha Nandini – ‘Musical Instruments in Divinity- Nagaswaram’ at arky convention, Mylapore, Chennai, 21\(^{11}\) November 2014, Under the Ministry of Culture production grant.
- Raghavanka’s Harishchandra Kavya (Kannada 13th AD) - Mouri
- Vema (14th AD)
- Sreenatha’s Kreedabhiramam (telugu 14th cen) - Nagasara
- Singiraja’s Singiraja Puranam(Kannada 15th AD) - Mouri
- Mummadi Chikkaboopala’s Abhinava Sangeethasara (17th AD) - Mukhaveena.
- Govinda Vaidya’s Kanteerava Narasaraja Vijaya (Kannada 17th Ad) - Mouri
- Purandaradasa’s Suladis – Mourya
- Brihannandikeshiyam – Nagaswaram (Sanskrit treatise)
- Ahoballa’s Sangitha Parijatha – Sannadi
- Vachanakavyas’ – (15th century – Kannada treatise)

Brihannandikeshiyam is the only Sanskrit work which mentions the term and instrument as ‘Nagaswaram’ according to Dr BM Sundaram. The Sangeeta Ratnakara (13th AD) mentions the term Madhukari. However after the Chapter on Veena, it also has a Chapter dedicated to the Flute. Calling it “Vamsa”, Sarangadeva names some of the varieties as Umapati, Tripurusa, Chatrmukha, Panchavaktra, Shannmukha, Muni, Vasu, Nathendra, Mahananda, Rudra, Aditya and Kalanidhi. These names seemed to indicate the number of holes and the lie of the notes on the scale, which further determined the fingering. These names served as aids of numbering and as tools for easy memorization in the ancient music system. These traditions passed on into the naming of the twelve chakras of the 72 Melakarthas’. This seems to indicate that the flute variety called Aditya had 12 holes to facilitate 12 swaras’. Till this date, among all wind instruments, it is only the Nagaswaram that has twelve holes. Thus Sarangadeva might have been describing the Nagaswaram as one of the wind instruments. This was the period when all wind instruments were called by the common names of Venu. Also there was also a tendency to use Sanskritised terms as mentioned before. Further evidence for this belief is also obtained from his description of its playing techniques. (Ayyangar, 1972)

12 History of South Indian (Carnatic) music – R Rangaramanuja Ayyangar, Pg. 100, ch12
to the *keezh-anaisu* (the flared metallic bell at the farther end which can also be made of wood) of the Nagaswaram. Many of the Sanskrit treatises seem to have mentioned some form of the Nagaswaram. However researchers might tend to miss these references since these Sanskrit works did not use the colloquial and popular names with which the Nagaswaram was called.

The other commonly used names for Nagaswaram are “*Volaga*” and “*Melam*”. Both these words denote an ensemble or procession. Since the Nagaswaram has always been the lead instrument in an ensemble and has been an integral part of all temple or marriage processions the above names became its synonyms. The Nagaswaram has also been called by different names based on different regions. While it is called as *Volaga, Sannadi, Mela* and *Kahale* in Karnataka, it is also called as ‘*Nayanam*’ (*Nai* referring to wind instrument and *inam* means a variety) and ‘*Melam*’ in Tamil Nadu\(^{13}\). The very term *Melam* signifies the presence of an ensemble.

The North Indian cousin of the Nagaswaram is the ‘*Shehnai*’ which was widely played by the musicians of the Gangetic plains and Maharashtra. The term “*Nai*” refers to wind instrument according to Dr BM Sundaram. Thus the *Shehnai* meant that the instrument was fit for the kings (*shah+nai*). Ancient references to this close cousin are also found in Hassan Nizami’s “*Taj-ul-Masir*” (12\(^{th}\) AD) and Sreenatha Kavi’s “*Pallati Veera Charithra*” (Telugu 14\(^{th}\) AD). Both these treatises mention the name as *Sannai*. Another widely used name was *Sannadi* which has been mentioned by Ahobala in his *Sangeetha Parijata*. The Sannadi is the popular name of the *Timiri* Nagaswaram and not of the *Nadu Bari* type that is found today.

\(^{13}\) BVK Sastry – Origin and development of Nagaswara – Gayana Samrajya of Gayana Samaj
Finding the exact origin of the Nagaswaram is as daunting a task as tracing the birth of Karnataka music. It has been evolving throughout the ages. According to Kalaimamani Vid BM Sundaram the Nagaswaram has been mentioned in the Rig Veda and Bharatha Sastram of Aravathi Navallar (1565 AD). In the Rig Veda many wind instruments have been described. There has also been a special mention of an instrument called “Nadi Santhanam”. This instrument was supposed to have been played during yagnas and other religious ceremonies. Dr BM Sundaram is of the opinion that the very word ‘Nadi’ means ‘Kuzhal’ or a wind instrument where wind is blown from one hole and is brought out through another. He believes that this Nadi Santhanam is the predecessor of the Nagaswaram.

According to Professor Dr CA Sreedhara, University of Mysore, the ancient colloquial name of the Nagaswaram could have been Nagasara. Renowned musicologist BVK Sastry is of the opinion too that the current term of Nagaswaram came into usage during the 17th century while the names still used in the rural areas are Volaga, Mori and Mohari. The Karnataka government files dating a hundred years back have records of Volaga artists who used to play in the morning and evening during Deeparadhana, being maintained by the temple. They used to play every day and also for special temple festivals. A popular saying in Kannada goes, “Volaga...
mundhe- uthsava hindhe” meaning if there is a Volaga procession ahead then the festival isn’t far behind (Sreedhara, 2002).

The Nagaswaram was an instrument which was exclusively reserved for temple music or Alaya Vazhivadu. For centuries the temple in India was not only a place of worship but also a seat of learning and they also played an important role in the preservation and development of music in the form of a Patron. Later on the Nagaswaram concerts were also held in Royal Courts till it reached the Music Sabha. Classical music itself was supposed to be religious in nature and was deemed to be an offering to god according to Dr BM Sundharam. The Nagaswaram was exclusively catering to this in its early days. Those were the days when most of the concerts and dance performances were held in the temples especially during festivals. It preceded the Bhajana sampradaya which gained popularity during the 15th century. Much before the Bhajana Sampradaya vocal music in the form Tevaram hymns and Divya Prabandhas came to be centred on the temple institution. Some of the wind instruments used during temple rituals were, the Timiri Nagaswaram, Bari Nagaswaram, Mukhaveena, Ekkalam, Kombu, Gowrikalai, Nabari, Ottu, Sangu etc (Sambamurthy, South Indian Music, 1999). In this era the Nagaswaram had an important position. During the rituals there were specific ragas played during special occasions and ragas to be played specifically for the corresponding Sannidhi. During temple processions there were even specifications as to what kind of compositions were to be performed. It is only later on that music was brought out of the temples to the Royal Courts and then later on to the Sabha platforms.

In Karnataka this instrument dates back atleast to eight centuries ago. It has been mentioned in the Vachanas of Adyaya who was among the earliest Shivasharanas (12th AD). After this it has been mentioned in the Kavya Chandhas. During that period the Nagaswaram was part of a Vadhya Mela or Instrumental ensemble called “Thuriya” according to BVK Sastry. In ancient literature like that of Kalidasa these Thuriyas’ were called upon to perform during marriages, special baby showers, awakening the king and also to call public attention and make announcements. Yet the Nagaswaram gained most popularity in the Cauvery river.

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14 Dr CA Sreedhara – “Karnataka Shastriya Sangeethadalli susheera vadyagalu – ondu adhyayana” Ch. 6 Pg. 281-285
15 Prof P Sambamurthy – South Indian Music, Book V, Pg. 228
belt. Thiruchinapalli, Kulikkarai, Nidamangalam, Tiruvarur, Tiruveezhimizhalai, Keeranur and Mannargudi are the towns’ most famous for Nagaswaram music.

There used to be an active Nagaswaram music scenario in Karnataka in the yester years. Pasupatikovil Veerabhadra Pillai was a great Tavil Vidwan and the father in law of Needamangalam Meenakshisundaram Pillai. He was an Asthana Vidwan of the Mysore royal court and he was a close friend of Ramaswamy Sivan (composer brother of Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer). It is said that he even provided Tavil accompaniment once for Mahavaidyanatha Iyer when the latter sang a Pallavi in Simhanandana tala at the Mysore court (Pillai N., 1994 )\(^{16}\). Nanjangud and Srirangapatnam boasted of many temples that maintained Nagaswaram artists and held grand festivals. The Sree Lakshmikanta Swamy temple in the village called Kalale in Nanjangud Taluk was one such temple. Every year during February to March, the temple saw grand celebrations called Pushpaka Alankara Teradi Uthsava (chariot adorned with flowers). Here the processions would begin around 10pm and the deity would return to the temple after covering all streets by 6am. As always the Nagaswaram troupe led the procession and the devotees were treated to a very high order of music for about eight to eight and a half hours. At a time when there would be a stillness about the night, absence of traffic and Television, the music of the Nagaswaram left a very deep imprint on the mind of its audiences. Place where the melam halted for the double Tavil Tani avarthanams were known sometimes as Akhadas. Ragas such as Bhairavi, Shankarabharanam and Yadukulakamboji were elaborated. During the temple Teppotsava, the rafts carrying the deity were also made wide enough to accommodate the Nagaswaram Vidwans. Krithis such as “Ksheera Saagara Shayana” (Devagandhari raga) of Tyagaraja was played on certain exceptional occasions. Similarly the Girija Kalyana in the Nanjangud Temple was a grand affair which featured many famous Nagaswaram vidwans. One such occasion saw the TN Rajarathinam Pillai perform raga Todi alapana from 10.45 in the Night to 3.15 am (Rao, 1999)\(^{17}\). Among the famous Nagaswaram artists of Karnataka are Vid R Parthasarathy of Mysore who once regaled his audience with a very scholarly and elaborate Ravichandrika raga. Mysore SC Belur ayya was another famous

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\(^{16}\) Narayanan Pillai – Sruti Issue 121, Oct 1994 Pg. 25

\(^{17}\) Nagaswaram Music in Karnataka : Reminiscences of an Old-Timer, K Raghavendra Rao, Sruti Issue 179, August 1999, Pg 17
Nagaswaram Vidwan (Sundaram, Mangala Isai Mannargal, 2013). N Nagaraju was another such Vidwan along with Bangalore Kodandaraman.

**Peria Melam**

The Peria melam referred to the main Nagaswaram troupe which offered its service directly to the temple deity and not as accompaniment to the Devadasis’. The Peria Melam troupe consists of one or two lead Nagaswarams’, the *Otthu* Nagaswaram or the pipe which is blown with the sole purpose of maintaining sruti, Tala accompaniment which is the keeping of time measure with the help of two hand cymbals and Tavil for rhythmic accompaniment. The traditional Otthu has now been replaced with the modern *sruti petti* or bellows reed organ. The Tavil is a double headed barrel drum which has a brittle and penetrating sound. This barrel shaped drum is made from the wood of the jackfruit tree and the hide of a cow. The smaller bass side is played with a stick while the larger treble side is played with the bare hands and fingers. Hardened cups are attached to the fingers. The practise of engaging two Tavil vidwans was started by Tavil maestro Needamangalam Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai. In the earlier years a Nagaswaram troupe consisted of only one Tavil player. The opportunities he got to play with Tavil vidwan Vazhuvoor Muthuveer Pillai gave him the idea of a double Tavil so that the *Tani avarthanam laya vinyasam* would became more interesting. Initially it would be one of his own disciples who would come on stage with him, however later on even other special Tavil artists’ like Illupur Panjami Pillai would join him.

The Chinna Melam consisted of a troupe of Nagaswaram players who solely catered as accompaniment to the temple dancers.

**Nagaswaram as a Mangala Vadhyam**

As mentioned earlier, music in the Indian context was always used as an offering to god or for any other celebrations. The Nagaswaram slowly became an inevitable part of our cultural and social fabric. So much so that they were a special community amongst themselves who catered exclusively to music and made it their livelihood. The knowledge of music and its practise was passed on from one generation to another. Irrespective of the region or state, no temple festival would

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18 Dr BM Sundaram – Mangala Isai Mannargal
begin without the music of the Nagaswaram. There is a mythological story from the Agama Sastras (ancient Hindu religious scriptures) that gives the reason and validates the practise of playing the Nagaswaram as a Mangala Vadhyam. Once Narada muni who was an eminent music scholar in Devaloka (heaven), performed in front of Nagaraja in Pathaalaloka (the under world). Even though he played on the Veena in the most enchanting manner it failed to make an impression on the Nagas. When he asked the king for the reason, Nagaraja replied that the music he played was not enchanting enough to make the Nagas’ sway in admiration. Immediately the great musician Naradha caught hold of a serpent and turned it into a Nagaswaram with his divine powers and started to play on it. The result was divine music which put all the Nagas in a trance. The news of this divine instrument spread everywhere and reached the ears of Lord Shiva. After hearing its music he stated that Nagaswaram should be compulsorily played whenever worship was conducted in his name. This story gives us a clue as to how the Nagaswaram came to be used as a compulsory offering to god.

The purpose of a Mangala Vadhyam is to use music as a means of invoking god and also to ward off evil spirits. Kalidasa describes the usage of Mangala Vadhyas during the birth ceremony of Tilipa Maharaja’s son Raghu. Mangala Vadhyas have also been described in Valmiki’s Ramayana describing Sita-kalyanam and Illango describing the marriage of Kannagi. The melam consisted of the Panchanadham, Panchamahasabdham, Maddalam, Kahale and Shankham. In temples the group or melam should always be in the numbers of 5,16,18,24 according to Dr V Raghavan. Mangala Vadyams are believed to have been blessed by goddess Lakshmi, Natarajan and Sarangapani. Some of the most ancient Mangala Vadhyams are the Veena, Sankha, Flute, Nagaswaram, Kahale and Tarai. The Mahabadha Choodamani has included the names of the Mukhaveena, Nagaswaram, Pambai and Kuzhal as Mangala Vadhyas in its 855th Chapter. It contains a detailed description of the Nagaswaram, Jodi Nagaswaram, Otthu Nagaswaram, Mandha Tavil, Sutru Tavil, Sankeerna Talam, Chakra Vadhyam, Kidibidi, Pambai, Nagaara, Maha Bheri, Pani, Dhakka, Tavandai etc. according to Karnagam each one has its own use. The Kuzhal Karuvi was different from the Kuzhal. Kuzhal referred to the modern Flute whereas the Kuzhal Karuvi was the Nagaswaram. The Nagaswaram reached its peak during

19 Dr CA Sreedhar : “Karnataka sangitadhalli Susheera Vadhyagalu – ondu adhyayana” Ch. 6, Pg. 281-287
the reign of the Chola Dynasty. The term Nagaswaram started being used somewhere during the 15th AD according to Dr V Raghavan.

The Nagaswaram was always accompanied with the Dholu in Karnataka and Kandai in Andhra Pradesh. Sri Nada, a poet from Andhra Pradesh, who lived around 1400 AD mentions the Nagaswaram twice in his work “Kridabhiramam”. In 1549 the Vijayanagar King Sadashivaraya had arranged for Nagaswaram player to play in the “Nedanur Chennakeshava perumal” temple of Tadabhadra Taluk (Raghavan, 1949). Plenty of evidence for this has been found in sculptures. Sculptures dating back to 1632 AD found in Karnataka also give evidence of Nagaswaram players accompanied by Dholu. Even the Jain temple of Sirramur in Tamil Nadu, which dates back to 1582 AD has evidence of Nagaswaram players along with Tavil and Nattuvanar playing for religious festivals. One must note that all the above works and sculptures mention the instruments name as Nagaswaram and not Nadhaswaram.

Ramaswamy Dixitar, the father of Muttuswamy Dixitar (one of the Karnataka classical music trinity) was the chief architect for the revival and standardizing of the Nagaswaram Sampradaya (tradition) in the Tiruvaiyaru Tyagaraja perumal Temple. He has been credited with formulating the Thiruvaiyyaru Nagaswaram traditions and he could do this with ease due to his expertise on the Agama Sastras. Ragas played during 5-6am were Bhupalam, Bhouli and Malayamarutha. Then during the Vilapuja (Morning rituals) which started at 7am ragas such as Bilahari and Kedaram were played. At 8am Dhanyasi, Saveri and Asaveri were played and at 10am Surutti, Manirang and Mukhari were offered by the Nagaswaram vidwans. The Ucchikala (noon rituals)puja at noon included ragas Poornachandrika and Mandari. The pujas at night which began at 8.00pm (Ardhajamapuja – rituals performed at night) included major ragas Shankarabharanam, Bhairavi, Kamboji etc. The Palliarai puja when the Lord is put to sleep, around 10pm ragas such as Neelambari and Anandabhairavi were played. By listening and identifying these ragas every day, people were able to tell the time. The Nagaswaram was one of the instruments which stuck to the principles of Ganakala Niyama. Prof P Sambamurthy gives us the ragas in the order in which they were performed at Temples as

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20 Dr V Raghavan, Music Academy Journal – 1949 Vol XX
From 4am to sunrise: Bhupalam, Bhauli, Malayamarutham, Valaji, Nadanamakriya, Mayamalavagoula.

From sunrise to 8am: Bilahari, Kedaram, Jaganmohini, Gaulipantu, Suddha dhanyasi

From 8am to 10am: Dhanyasi, Saveri, Asaveri, Shuddha Saveri, Shuddha Bangala, Abhagi, Devagandhari, Arabhi, Devamanohari.

From 10am to 12noon: Sriragam, Manirangu, Madhyamavathi, Brindavana sarangi, Darbar

From 4pm till Sunset: Purya Kalyani, Mandari, Vasanta, Kalyani, Saraswati.

From Sunset to 8pm: Sankarabharana, Hamsadhwni, Bhairavi, Todi, Kharaharapriya, Shanmukhapriya, Simhendramadhyama, Anadabhairavi, Kaanada, Sama, Kedaragowla.

Raga Mohana is played during the rituals pertaining to Lord Aghora Murthi at the temple in Tiruvengadu (Tanjore District) by the asthana Nagaswaram vidwans (Sambamurthy, South Indian Music, 1999).

This automatically resulted in a deep bond at the subconscious level with the classical music being rendered at the time since it had become an integral part of the village life and the music of the Nagaswaram determined the daily activities of its people. The need for raga identification to tell the time gave rise to some basic amount of swara gnana in the general public. The temple services would proceed with clockwork precision with the strains of the Nagaswaram serving as time signals to which the entire routine of the village was depended on, at a time when clocks were not known of.

**Is It Nagaswaram or Nadhaswaram**

There seems to be a lot of confusion regarding the present name of the Nagaswaram. Colloquial or regional names such as Volaga and Nayanam have always been in usage and still are in many rural areas of Karnataka, yet nobody seems to be able to trace the origin of the current usage of Nadhaswaram. Scholars and historians are of the opinion that this is a wrong usage that has suddenly sprung upon the music

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22 Prof P Sambamurthy – South Indian Music, Book V, Pg. 230
scenario. One must understand that the Nagaswaram musicians come from a hereditary tradition of music which has been practised within a relatively closed community. Thus their knowledge of the instrument is that which has been passed on for generations. There are historical references to the Nagaswaram in sculptures and inscriptions but never has the term Nadhaswaram been used. One of the solid evidences for the correct terminology comes from a Jain temple in South Arcot district (Raghavan, 1949)\textsuperscript{23}. It is interesting to note that in spite of being a Jain temple the ceremonies were similar to the Hindu counter parts. The temple records mention a Dholu player (Tavil), Nagawaram player and a Nattuvanar for whom a gift of wet and dry lands were given as maintainence. This temple diety was Simhapurinatha Swami of Sirramur. The inscription was found on the banks of tank which was to water the lands that were donated to the Nagaswaram players. The donor was Timmappa Nayaka, an agent of Achyuthappa Nayaka, the Nayak king of Tanjore. Inscriptions of his son Raghnatha Nayak a well know name in music history is also found at Sirramur. The record is dated roughly from 1504 AD to 1582 AD. This inscription describes the reign of Singaraya, the Vijayanagar King.

Another epigraphical evidence we get which mentions the Nagaswaram is found in Tadpatri Taluk. Dated around 1549 AD Vaishaka Shuddha Dhwadashi, this evidence epigraphic evidence was inscribed during the reign of Sadashivaraya of the Vijayanagar Empire. The grant was made by one Tirumale Naidu to Lord Chennakeshwara, found in front of the Neelakanta Temple in Nittur Village, Tadpatri Taluk. The inscription records the gift of land for maintaining the god’s services along with six Devadasis, the recitation of Bhagavatha and ‘Nagasara’ Pipers.

The Tirupathi temple has epigraphical evidence on the Nagaswaram too. The inscription dates back to 1554AD. One ‘Tiruvengallapan’ a descendent of Talapakkam Annamacharya and a Sanskrit scholar is said to have engaged two Nagaswaram Players for service at the Temple according to the inscription\textsuperscript{24}.

There are many mythological stories about the Nagaswaram which give us a hint as to its name. Ages ago there was a demon called the “Nagasuran” who lived in Dakshinapatha. He was especially gifted a musician, a great vidwan and a great

\textsuperscript{23} Dr V Raghavan/Music Academy Journal – 1949 Vol XX
\textsuperscript{24} Vid Lalitha Nandini – ‘Musical Instruments in Divinity – Nagaswaram’ Arkay convention, Mylapore, Chennai. 21\textsuperscript{st} November 2014, Under the Ministry of India production grant.
devotee of Shiva. Unfortunately like all other demons he was cruel and a tyrant to the people of Dakshinapatha. When the citizen prayed to the gods to rid them of the demon, Lord Shiva himself decided to kill Nagasuran. During his fall Nagasuran prayed to lord Shiva for moksha or riddance from a rebirth. His only wish was that his body be used to create divine music in the service of Lord Shiva himself. Extremely pleased by such a high thought Lord Shiva granted the demon his wish. Thus the worldly body of Nagasuran grew on Bhuloka as a tree. This rosewood tree is called “Acchaamaram” and it is the wood of this tree that is used to make the body of the Nagaswaram\textsuperscript{25}. The speciality of this wood is that it does not absorb water and does not react to seasonal changes in the weather. This belief that the Nagaswaram got its name from the demon Nagasuran is not just a mythological story but an orally passed on belief which gives us a clear insight into the correct name of the instrument. This story was also narrated to me with hardly any difference in versions by the Nagaswaram Vidwans’ both in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. However there are different versions of this Acchaamaram. Although some versions seem to indicate that it is a kind of tree, others indicate that this is just a well-seasoned rosewood. According to leading Nagaswaram exponent Vid Sheik Meheboob Subhani, the Aacharis go in search of old house that are about to be demolished. Many of the palatial bungalows had very strong beams made of hardwood or rosewood. These beams were bought by the Aacharis for their ability to withstand the onslaught of weather. They are then fashioned in Nagaswarams’. The advantage of such wood being that it has already been seasoned over many years. Prof P Sambamurthy however states that the Aachamaram is a type of Blackwood and gives its scientific name as Diospyos ebenaster (Sambamurthy, South Indian Music, 1999)\textsuperscript{26}.

Though there is a confusion of the term Nagaswaram or Nadhaswaram, it is the opinion of most scholars that the correct term is Nagaswaram. All ancient lakshanagrathas and Kannada kavyas mention the term “Nagaswara” or “Nagasara”. Muthuswamy Dixitar, the great composer and one of the trinity has clearly mentioned the instrument as “Nagaswaram” in his Shree Raga Kruthi “Tyagaraja Mahadhwajaroham”. This Krithi describes the annual Dhwajaroham festival of Lord Tyagaraja conducted at Tiruvarur and he describes the Nagaswara rendering its

\textsuperscript{25}Dr CA Sreedhar – “Karnataka Shastriya Sangitadalli Susheera Vadhyagalu – Ondhu adhyayana” Ch. 6, Pg. 281-287
\textsuperscript{26}Prof P Sambamurthy – South Indian Music, Book V, Pg. 238
services. The anupallavi of this song is “agama siddhaantha prathipadhyam, ananda chandrashekara vedhyam, nagaswara-maddaladi vadhyam”. Muthuswamy Dixitar himself had many Nagaswaram players among his disciples.

Prominent scholars like V Raghavan, BVK Sastry and BM Sundaram have insisted that the term Nadhaswaram has no validity. There are records of the Nagaswaram being very popular during the 15\textsuperscript{th} century. The shape of the instrument and its history both suggest that it has been closely associated with the worship of snakes or “Nagas”. The story of Narada in Pathaloka also gives us a hint about its right terminology (Hariharan, 2004)\textsuperscript{27}. Since this instrument was said to have been created from the body of serpent by Narada Muni it came to be called as Nagaswaram. Even the “Pipi” or the blowing reed of this instrument is made out of the tree around which snakes are found\textsuperscript{28}. This tree is believed to have magical powers which facilitates progeny. It is also believed to have evolved both structurally and musically from the snake charmers “pungi”.

A Kannada dictionary compiled during 1158 AD called “Mangarasana Mangabhidhana” mention the Nagaswaram in its lines “Sunadhahim thorpudhadhim Nagasaram”. The Veerashaiva poet or Vachana karaka Nanjunda Kavi in his “Ramanatha Charitha” (1525 AD) also mentions the Nagaswaram in the lines, ‘Gagarave gidibidi tholuvare chenna, boginna hareyina gaahale, heggaale guddugu maddale nagasaragala mogaravu hatthu hatthu’. This implies that the Nagaswaram was also used as a war cry instrument. Similarly another literary proof for the Nagaswaram lies in the “Bharathesha Vaibhava” authored by king Rathnakaravarni (Jain poet king 1560 AD). In the lines “Kolalige-pashuvige, ghantege-hasule, jogulakke sarpavu nagasarakke”. He also mentions Naga women dancing to the tune of the Nagaswaram.

Haribhatta, a contemporary of Krishnadevaraya mentions a list of music instruments in the 72\textsuperscript{nd} verse of the third canto of his Telugu work ‘Narasimhapurana’. In this list he clearly mentions the instrument as Nagaswaram\textsuperscript{29}. Even Kallinatha’s Telugu treatise, Kreedabhiramam mentions the instrument as

\textsuperscript{27} Gowri Kuppuswamy and Dr Hariharan – “Music in Indian Arts” Pg. 56
\textsuperscript{28} Dr CA Sreedhar - “Karnataka Shastriya Sangitadalli Susheera Vadyagalu – Ondhu adhyayana” Ch. 6, Pg. 281-287
\textsuperscript{29} Vid Lalitha Nandini – ‘Musical Instruments in Divinity – Nagaswaram’ Arkay convention, Mylapore, Chennai. 21\textsuperscript{st} November 2014, Under the Ministry of India production grant.
Nagaswaram in a clever alliteration. The line goes on to stress on the syllable Ga, as Nagasara, Nagavarali and Raga\textsuperscript{30}.

Nagaswaram Vid Namagiripetta Krishnan has also given a few evidences of the Nagaswaram correct term in an interview for the Shruthi magazine. Palani Mambazha Kavichinga Navalbar (19\textsuperscript{th} cen) belonging to the Vishwakarma sect who was an Aachari (A Nagaswaram maker) and made Nagaswarams’ referred to the instrument as “Nagachinnam”. The same term appears in the dictionary of the Madras Tamil Sangam. Namagiripettai has further very clearly stated that the correct term for the mangala vadhyam is Nagaswaram and not Nadha-swaram (MANNA, 2001)\textsuperscript{31}.

However during the course of interviews most of the Nagaswarm Vidwans referred to the instrument as Nadhaswaram. Some of them are Denkanikote Mani (Tavi) Sheik Meheboob and Khaleshthi Subhani and Vid Vyasarapadi Kothandaraman. They say that it is the swaram that is born out of a full blown sound or Naadham. According to Vidushi Kalavathy Avadhooth who spoke about the instrument at Bangalore Gayana Samaj, the ancient terminology is definitely Nagaswaram but the recent term Nadhaswaram cannot be completely dismissed. The instrument which brings out the swarams of Karnataka music with the full force of Naadham (musical sound) (Kannada – “thumbu naadaadinda swaravannu kodatthakanthaddhu”) may definitely called Nadhaswaram. It is also the issue of refinement and evolution. The process is often called as “Sanskritization” by many scholars such as renowned sociologist MN Srinivas. Renowned musicologist also talks about this process with reference to the Madhukari. He goes on to say that Madhukari is said to have been corrupted to mavari and madhukari itself is derived from madhu = sweet and kari= one which makes, and hence is a sweet sounding instrument. This was perhaps the Sanskritization of more popular colloquial names to make them suitable for the ancient musicological treatises. Another example of this is the popularly known Magudi traditionally played by the snake charmers. It is also known as the Bhujanga svaram (Sambamoorthy, South Indian Music, 2001)\textsuperscript{32} The Magudi also signifies a kind of composition within the Nagaswaram repertoire.

\textsuperscript{30} Vid Lalitha Nandini – ‘Musical Instruments in Divinity – Nagaswaram’ Arkay convention, Mylapore, Chennai. 21\textsuperscript{st} November 2014, Under the Ministry of India production grant.
\textsuperscript{31} Namagiripetta Krishnan for Sruti Magazine – July 2001, Issue 202, Pg. 20
\textsuperscript{32} Prof P Sambamurthy – South Indian Music, Book III, Pg 259
similar to the snake charmers tune which is sometimes played towards the end of a concert. Similarly, calling the instrument as Nadhaswaram could be the artist’s many efforts during the 19th century to bring their music to the front line along with the other practitioners of Karnataka music and according it the status of a classical instrument. The term Naga seemed to always bring the instrument closer to the Snake charmer and his pipe and this could have been a hindrance in the Nagaswaram’s path to attaining the Classical-instrument and Sabha- vadhya status which seemed to elude it for quite some time.

The music of the Nagaswaram was highly regarded across musicians of all castes according to Dr BM Sundaram (musicologist) who is the son of Tavil Chakravathy Needamangalam Meenakshisundaram Pillai and brother of Tavildar Nachiar Koil Raghava Pillai. Upper class court musicians made it a point to attend many of the temple festivals, especially the Vidhiula (deity taken out in procession) in order to catch up with the music of the Nagaswaram. Heated discussions about the raga chosen for the day and its presentation ensued and comparisons between one Nagaswaram Vidwan’s Shankarabharanam to another’s were intensely debated. The music scholars would take part in the procession and revel in the elaborate Manodharma. However in spite of their music being held in such high regard, they were considered lower in social status. While the other musicians were regarded in great respect (the upper class musicians were reffered to as Iyyeraval, and their music as Iyyeraval pattu), even little children of the village took to calling the Nagaswaram artists in singular person. There were no (if not few exceptions) upper caste musicians who took up the Nagaswaram and the Isai Vellalars’ in general did not receive any other formal lettering. Among Nagaswaram players, there was one exception of an upper caste born taking up this instrument. Lakshminarasimha Iyer was born in 1940 at Sikkil, in an illustrious family who were descendants of Uthukadu Venkattasubba Ayyar. He learnt to play the Nagaswaram under the tutelage of Kivalur Ganesha Pillai. This was a very rare instance and he met with a lot of opposition from many sides. This led to Lakshminarasimha Iyer shifting to Palani where an upper catse Nagaswaram player was tolerated. He retired as a music teacher at the Ghatam Krishnaier Music School, A kalayamputhu, Palani (Rajagopalan, 1992)\(^3^3\). Even stars of Nagaswaram music like TN Rajarathinam Pillai and Karaikurichi P Arunachalam

\(^3^3\) N Rajagopalan – Another Garlang, Pg. 183
were called by every third person by their names without any respectful prefixes (Sundaram, Mangala Isai Mannargal, 2013)\textsuperscript{34}. Till about the later half of 19\textsuperscript{th} century the Nagaswaram Vidwans were expected to play standing up. The son of Nagaswaram Vidwan Semmpanarakoil Rajanna who were known for their Temple-service heritage recalls his father playing concerts, standing for about four to five hours, in the rain without wearing a shirt. Tradition dictated that they refrain from covering their upper bodies and they generally tied their Angavasthram around their waist as a mark of respect to the deity and the upper castes. Vid TN Rajarathinam Pillai rebelled against these practices and he was a great Nagaswaram player who had a great pull with the Sabha’s due to the sheer brilliance of his music and the popular demand for it among the audience. He was one of the first Nayanakaras (Nagaswaram artists) to crop his hair, wear a Shervani (A traditional North Indian festive garment) and play on a stage. Many temples obliged to his demand of a Pandal and stage and he refused to play standing in the later part of his career. He was one of the earliest to make a successful transition from the Alaya Vazhivadu to the Sabha concert scenario.

In spite of many social setbacks, the Nagaswaram players and their community practised and performed their art with great devotion and verve. Music and the Nagaswaram was their way of life. Their community, the Isai Vellalars’ were known for their sacrifices and service towards the preservation and propogation of Karnataka classical music according to Vocalist Vid PS Narayanaswamy.

Irrespective of their lower social status, this community soldiered on until recently. Today the number of good Nagaswaram players is dwindling. Many Nayanakaras themselves advise their children against picking up the instrument as a livelihood out of it is no longer feasible. Social inequalities have ceased to exist in today’s city life scenario however the Nagaswaram is yet to form a stronghold in the Sabha concert scenario. The turn of events in the history of music and change in patronage has dealt a severe card to the Nagaswaram players. It now faces a new challenge of retaining its traditional heritage as well as the formation of an identity to suit the needs of today’s modern Karnataka classical music scenario.

\textsuperscript{34} Dr BM Sundaram – Mangala Isai Mannargal – Pg 4