

From the Tanjore Court to the
Madras Music Academy

A Social History of Music in South India

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SUB

Contesting the Classical

THE TAMIL ISAI IYAKKAM AND THE CONTEST FOR CUSTODIANSHIP

The Tamil Isai Iyakkam (Tamil Music Movement) developed as an auxiliary element of the Tani Tamil movement. It cannot be detached from the larger issues of Tamil separatism and the non-brahmin movement that inflected the course of political agitation in the Madras Presidency from about the latter decades of the nineteenth century. Recent writings on the Tamil movement have demonstrated its complexity and emphasized the multiple strands in its constitution, none of which were the exclusive preserves of specific caste groups or interests.¹ What was central to the movement in its various incarnations of anti-Brahmanism, Tamil separatism, and assertion of self-respect, was an abiding commitment to the Tamil language as the vehicle for political and social empowerment. It was a commitment that transcended the bounds of nationalism, one that assumed proportions of devotion, passion, and sacrifice and, at the same time, held out prospects of genuine empowerment for its speakers. The compulsion to celebrate Tamil as the essential expression of an exceptional identity was not merely a political strategy to rally underprivileged groups of non-brahmin society under a banner of difference but also an ongoing psychological drive to invoke a collective memory and a unique inheritance. The issue was not one of a mimetic playing out of linguistic nationalism; it was as Sumathi Ramaswamy suggests,² about the crystallization of passion and practice centred around language. Language devotion defined the identity of the modern Tamil subject—in whom it generated a range of responses, the subjectivity of which were derived from the myriad imagings of the language while inducing the development of discourses of love, labour, and life for the language. It was *Tamilparuru* or devotion that determined

true Tamil identity, but this was of necessity conceived in multiple imaginings that inevitably produced a splintering among representatives.³

The celebration of language thus acquired a special edge in the discursive search for Tamil identity and the attendant programme of social and political empowerment in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. It was only a matter of time before the logic of the new discourse entered the domain of culture, its practice, patronage, consumption, and custodianship, all of which by the first quarter of the twentieth century had already become significant issues in the emergent nationalist agenda. This chapter investigates the issues of cultural custodianship and consumption in the context of the Tamil separatist movement, to identify the points of convergence between the nationalist and the regional cultural projects, and to understand the limited impact of the Tamil movement in reclaiming the site of neo-classical culture. More specifically, it looks at the case of classical music, which had emerged as one of the more significant emblems of the nationalist cultural project that directly and elaborately engaged with the performing arts, both as an aesthetic inheritance and as a social network of practitioners and traditional performing communities. The delineation of the project involved not just the retrieval of an artistic tradition and the repositioning of communities of performers associated with it but also the hegemonic prioritizing of a particular version of musical practice as 'classical', with strong if not wholly, Brahmanical overtones. How inclusive or exclusive this was of indigenous Tamil traditions that claimed a non-Sanskritic and non-Brahmanical identity became a key question in the debate that broke out between the Madras Academy and the Tamil Isai Sangam.

The Project and its Publicists: The Southern Experience

Of the many streams of nationalist thought, one concerned itself specifically with the cultural foundations of nation building. The logic of nationalist thought, as Partha Chatterjee has argued, dictated the demarcation of a distinct domain of sovereignty within colonial society. This was the inner domain 'bearing the essential marks of a cultural identity', and its distinctiveness and difference had to be protected and nourished in order to enshrine the already existing sovereignty of the

nation.⁴ The essential feature of this cultural inheritance was this difference, which necessarily had to be located in a whole range of expressive legacies—language, visual arts, and cultural heritage in the form of relics or living practices, as in the case of music and the performing arts. Partha Chatterjee uses the term ‘classicization’ to describe the elevation of select aspects of culture, specifically as part of a deliberate and negotiated process of national culture formation. A classicized tradition is one which has been ‘reformed, reconstructed, fortified against charges of barbarism and irrationality’, and hence made palatable for the tastes of middle-class people and appropriate content for a nationalized cultural identity. Writings on public culture in recent years have tended to emphasize the emergence of a visual and aural vocabulary for the nation and how this worked to forge a sense of community as the basis for participation in the public sphere as well as for the articulation of nationalist rhetoric.⁵ Music and the performing arts, in so far as their discursive history was concerned, were critical elements and self-professed publicists, participants,⁶ and custodians came forward to initiate a project of retrieval and revival. One cannot overstate the self-consciousness of the project and, as in any engagement with an aesthetic experience, the distinction between a rhetorical overlay and an individual, subjective orientation or a collective invocation was not always easy to figure out.

A growing interest in classical music among the middle classes, combined with a need to articulate the richness of India’s cultural legacy, produced a richly textured critique on the tradition of the performing arts. From about the last quarter of the nineteenth century, in several quarters of India, the new consumers and patrons, the urban educated elite, initiated projects for the revival of the performing arts, especially classical music. The efforts of notables like Sourindro Mohan Tagore in Bengal and the collective initiative of the members of the Gayan Samaj in Poona, typified the beginnings of a more or less spontaneous, India wide, educated metropolitan cultural project that assumed, over the years, explicitly nationalist overtones. The need of the hour lay in retrieving the tradition, re-examining, and reconstituting it in the name of artistic standards and authenticity. These new standards were largely determined by the social and intellectual imperatives of middle-class elites. For instance, there was the need to transform the social base of the tradition and to validate its authenticity by seeking a strongly grounded textual lineage and stressing the spiritual aspects of the tradition. The imperative of relocation was not simply a question of patronage, of who consumed classical music and dance, or the changing locus of the arts from the

temple and the salon to the modern concert hall or urban soiree, but one of ownership. The tradition belonged to the nation—it was part of the national legacy and as custodians of the nation’s heritage, the newly empowered middle-class elites were responsible for its preservation and dissemination.

In the Madras Presidency, the onus of responsibility for the newly emerging cultural project lay with brahmin publicists who dominated the public life of the city. Their non-brahmin associates, drawn from affluent sections of the trading and landed classes, tended to share common concerns as far as social reform and civic interests were concerned as well as of cultural tastes and patronage in the field of arts. This did not, however, counter the social and ritual divide between brahmin and non-brahmin, especially in the context of growing non-brahmin consciousness in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. For the greater part of the century, the balance lay very much with the brahmin elite. With their access to western education and professional standing, they came to represent their civic and political concerns as nationalist and, at the same time, ground the nationalist sentiment in a remembered and sanctified past, in which culture and its recovery played a central role. Their agenda was considerably informed, as we have seen, by Oriental assumptions and by Theosophist inputs that exalted the Aryan legacy and celebrated the vigour and merits of the ‘mighty brahmin’ caste performing the ultimate feat of sacrifice, of giving to the nation the power of their past.⁷ These sets of interventions enthused a generation of publicists to reconnect with their heritage and, as individual appreciation of music acquired a symbolic aura of epiphanic dimensions, an overpowering need to initiate a collective endeavour of preservation and representation developed.

The question of the brahmin’s self-image was equally important, and entered in an oblique way into the cultural project, especially as it related to the reconstitution of classical music. As V. Geeta and S.V. Rajadorai observe, the community, captivated by Besant’s rhetoric of culture, caste, and nation, came to ‘view her ideas as so many mirrors which returned to them flattering images of themselves and fortified them in their self-appointed roles of patriotic reformers and modern Hindus who would usher in a brave new world of glory and prosperity’.⁸ Exemplars of simple living and high thinking, they were best placed to balance the virtues of modernity with the wisdom of tradition and to stand forward as the custodians of India’s civilization. Deploying a discourse, largely derived from Theosophist propaganda,⁹ and which emphasized the

virtues of merit, intellect, and self-discipline, they saw themselves as natural leaders and eminently capable of providing an appropriate language of symbols for the nation. As K.S.R. Sastri observed in his address to the All India Brahmin Conference in 1935, 'Its aim is to weigh on the brahmin community so that it may realize itself by embodying the ancient culture and applying it in national service as an integral part of the modern Indian nation'. The brahmin was eminently qualified to assume a central role in national regeneration, to guide spiritual and secular life for 'they had never exploited the community by priest craft' and had always 'tried to realize higher ends by following the principles of renunciation'.¹⁰

It may be of some interest to note that European music was a particularly powerful signifier of difference for the British. It was frequently invoked as a measure of European cultural superiority, having the virtues of genteel mobilization, dignity, and scientific principles of organization. It would seem likely that, to some degree, the passionate embrace of indigenous art music as a pillar of the national identity was a proud response to this chauvinism. The rather Confucian notion of disciplined and refined music being essential to the health of the state and nation came naturally enough to empire and nation builders alike.

And how vital were the performing arts, especially music, in this pool of nationalist symbols that emphasized the spiritual and the secular? In the case of south India, very central; for music, its patronage, protection, consumption, and representation became critically tied up with issues of self-definition, taste,¹¹ and ideals of individual and collective behaviour, especially for the brahmin community, which constituted a major element in the composition of the colonial middle class in the Tamil districts of the Madras Presidency. The very organization of the musical tradition, as it had historically evolved, came into play directly supporting the brahmin's claim to custodianship and facilitating the drawing of boundaries between neo-classical and light classical, high culture and popular culture. Moreover, music as the most audible emblem of India's spiritual and artistic expression—essentially the language of bhakti—had the potential to emerge as the most effective autonomous domain of cultural difference in which the self-appointed leaders of the nation could inscribe their aspirations.

The south was especially qualified to assume the responsibility for laying out the cultural topography of the emerging nation—it was seen to have preserved the vital essentials of India's ancient traditions. The association of high-caste brahmin musicians with musical knowledge

and practice, made it easier for later brahmin publicists to emerge as spokesmen for retrieving and recasting the tradition. At the same time, the collapse of traditional sources and sites of patronage, and the dissemination of music in new urban centres, meant that the city elites became the most important patrons and consumers of classical music—a development that not only generated a genuine passion for the tradition but also fostered a sense of responsibility for it. This is not to suggest that their non-brahmin counterparts did not have an equivalent affinity with and appreciation of music. In fact, it was among the notable families of Chettiars and Pillais not to speak of zamindars and rajas of local estates and princely courts of Mysore, Vijaynagaram, Mysore, and Travancore, that classical music continued to enjoy substantial patronage. A closer look at the world of literary and performing culture in the second half of the nineteenth century in south India also suggests the interconnectedness of Brahmin-Pillai-Chettiar scholarship and cultural transactions. However, it would appear from the autobiography of U.V. Swaminatha Iyer that scholars engaged in Tamil studies were not always receptive to music and musical concerns—K. Minakshi Sundaram Pillai, the celebrated Tamil teacher, was supposedly critical of Gopalakrishnan Bharati's work. What is equally striking about Iyer's life story is the circulation of Tamil songs and kirtanams, which according to him, disappeared only in the last decades of the nineteenth century.¹² Clearly, with the articulation of the nationalist cultural project by the Madras elite, there was a self-conscious attempt to reclaim a particular style and genre as classical with the attendant particularizing markers, namely composition in Sanskrit and Telugu, the principal musical languages of the tradition. This highlights a shared continuity with the lineages of the celebrated saint composers of the eighteenth century, namely Tyagaraja, Diksitar and Syama Sastri, and a renewed emphasis on the spiritual aspects of musical expression. The result was the emergence of a cohesive discourse around music and musical reform that involved questions of content, style, language, and etiquette.

In the context of the Hindu revivalism that the Theosophical Society promoted in south India, the issue of musical reform and entertainment was inevitably tied up with Brahmanical culture and leadership wherein, notions of religiosity, custom, and scriptural erudition were stressed. In 1903, referring to the increasing popularity of kalaksepam or harikathas, which as we have noted were one of the most significant mediums for creating a listening habit in Madras, Natesa Sastri, the celebrated folklorist, wrote scathingly of its practitioners, none of whom in his opinion

had any real knowledge of the scriptures. 'Most of the *Bhagavata*s are self-styled and having managed to get a smattering knowledge of a few Puranic tales, they make *Kalaksepams* of those tales, not on religious occasions but invariably during the *rahu kala* (considered an inauspicious moment) of a Sunday evening.'¹³ Sastri urged the religious associations in Madras to come forward and clean up the act, to encourage only the really erudite among the professionals. In his words, 'A great deal of responsibility lies on the leaders of the Hindu community in this matter and if only they introduce wholesome reforms in the field of popular education, a great deal of good might in time be expected by the people'.¹⁴

If Sastri was keen on emphasizing the religious aspect in the harikathas, his musical minded colleagues, were intent on improving the quality of entertainment therein, and in demarcating the domain of classical music from that of harikatha and subsequently Tamil drama and cinema. It was in this context that the Madras Music Academy in 1944, passed two important resolutions one, urging the representation of at least two members of the Academy in the Film Censors Board to help preserve the purity and standards of classical music employed in cinema, and the other, appealing to film producers and musical directors to maintain the purity and standards of classical music.¹⁵ This was the product of an ongoing debate about the erosion of classical standards. In 1938, S. Ramamurthi referred to the stir and confusion that the Tamil talkies had created in the music world. The talkies had produced such a demand for light music 'with no supply worth the name in the market'. An inevitable consequence of this boom was the emergence on an unprecedented scale, of plagiarized versions of classical songs, especially of Tyagaraja.

Apart from the incongruity of the devotional music of the saint composer being made to do duty, though in a different linguistic garb, in intriguing and even amorous situations in the popular pictures. This questionable method has brought down the high standards of classical art and is responsible for much of the musical malnutrition of the public taste observable everywhere today.¹⁶

There should be, the author argued, 'a clear marked distinction between high classical and light music and one should not trespass on the domains of the other'.¹⁷

The anxiety of the Academy to preserve classical purity was especially pronounced as it had laboured for more than a decade to put in place an identifiable classical music tradition. The construction of a classical music repertoire, the positioning of certain compositions as the core elements

in the repertoire, the relegation of Tamil songs and other dance related compositions such as the *javalis*, *padams*, and *tillana*, to a lesser status in the artistic hierarchy on grounds of its sensual content and non-classical resonance, was very much part of the brahmin sponsored project of recasting the classical tradition and claiming its custodianship. This was not entirely the case with the more affluent non-brahmin publicists who did, at a later stage, question the hegemonic nature of the nationalist cultural project, though their identities were not necessarily at stake in the maximal versions of Tamil Isai.

Embodying tradition and as a responsible beneficiary of modernity, the nationalist Tamil brahmin considered himself eminently qualified to retrieve and recast the tradition as the nation's authentic inheritance.¹⁸ By articulating an influential discourse that simultaneously adopted the categories of tradition and modernity and by implementing a project that firmly located the practice and patronage of music within the middle class, the new publicists assumed custodianship of the performing arts. The strength of the project and its sustainability remained to be tested in the context of the alternative anti-brahmin discourse that developed in the latter decades of the century. In the contest that followed, the nationalist paradigm held firm; the brahmin elite as represented in academies and associations such as the Madras Music Academy, seemed to have the upper hand. The domain of classical culture remained very much with them, a convergence that was not without serious implications for the art form as well as for some of its traditional practitioners, like the *devadasis* and the temple *oduvars*, a class of temple singers who chanted and sang eulogies in praise of deities and who were well versed with traditional Tamil hymns and devotional compositions.

While the cause of the *devadasis* did not find resonance with the politics of the non-brahmin movement, the case of the *Oduvars* was different. Seen as the principal vehicles of Tamil culture and specialists of Tamil poetry and music, the community and its inheritance, became central to the articulation of an alternative classical tradition, put forward by the protagonists of Tamil devotion. The *Oduvars*, specialized in *Tevaram* songs¹⁹ (religious hymns associated with the *Nayanars* of the seventh to ninth centuries), which were largely recitative and set to a specific number of melodies without too many embellishments and did not in all probability figure in the traditional concert of the courts. The *Oduvars* themselves claimed to be the living custodians of traditional melodies or *panns* as they were known in the Tamil country, and were closely connected with the *nattuvan* and *nadaswaram* performers of the temple orchestra or *peria melam*.

The *Tevaram*, as the scripture of the Tamil Saiva sect, enjoyed a unique significance. The process of actual compilation of the hymns of three celebrated Saiva saints, namely Tirunanacamandar, Tirunavakkaracar, and Cuntaramurti was completed only in the eleventh century, when the term *Tevaram* was used to designate the poetry. Indira Peterson's work on the *Tevaram* demonstrates skillfully how the canonization of the *Tevaram* actually worked itself over time, and how by straddling diverse categories in religion, literature, and culture, it promoted a unique mode of communal solidarity. Saiva devotion travelled through a network of shrines and sacred places in the peninsula, especially in the Tamil country and expressed as a living tradition by ritual specialist chanters—the Oduvars who sang selections from Tirumurai texts during ritual worship and on public occasions.²⁰ The emotional appeal of *Tevaram* especially for Saivite groups like the Chettiars and Pillais who, as patrons of the language as well as of large Saiva Sidhanta maths, may explain why they were especially vocal in espousing the cause of Tamil Isai over Karanataka Sangeetam of the Music Academy variety and also why their advocacy did not strike the same chord with other non-brahmin groups for whom the investment in Tamil Isai, did not have the same resonance.

The Madras Music Academy did not in its initial years venture to speak on behalf of the community of Oduvars, or include their repertoire in any significant way in its determining of the contours of the tradition. The case of the *nadaswaram*, the lead instrument in the *peria melam*, became the exception with the emergence of its most outstanding performer T.N. Rajaratnam Pillai (1898–1956), and was an important determinant in raising the status of the *peria melam* musicians.²¹ But this did not apply to the Oduvars who had to wait for the protagonists of the Tamil Isai to take up their case.

As a performative genre, *Tevaram* appears to have undergone several changes long before the nineteenth century. Peterson suggests that even by the eleventh century, musicologically, the *Tevaram* tradition had been reconstructed and that, thereafter, the *pann* tunes had been replaced by *Karnatik raga* scales. However, *Tevaram* singing remained distinctive and was identified by what Peterson describes as the *viruttam* style where the Oduvar might select two or more verses from a hymn and render them in a set tune developed from a *raga* scale and regulated by a basic rhythmic pattern. Even if the Oduvar tried a few grace notes, the basic melodic delineation remained simple. The *viruttam* style was entirely improvisational and free in terms of both melodic and textual form—the textual line could be violated as the Oduvar took the license to repeat

one line of the verse many times and glide over others.²² To what extent the performative tradition continued in the early twentieth century is difficult to assess—the impression one gets is that of a ritual performance, which was positioned below that of scriptural chanting by the brahmin priests. It did not seem to have an independent artistic existence that commanded a space in the emerging classical music and entertainment scene, or one that was factored into by musicologists, connoisseurs, and reformers.

By the end of the 1930s, it seemed as though the classical project, initiated by the Madras Academy had achieved a consensus. It had successfully enlisted the cooperation of the musicians, defined standards of performance, printed primers, retrieved old and rare manuscripts, initiated discussions on guidelines for efficient transmission, and established a concert format. Even if it was evident that the project was largely informed by the middle-class brahmin elite and their moral and aesthetic sensibilities, and was only barely representative of other identities or ancillary traditions, the success of the Academy in establishing its credentials as the prime arbiter of classical music, and in establishing a space for middle-class performers, including women seemed unchallenged.²³ It was at this stage, that misgivings began to surface and the project faced its first serious challenge in the form of the cultural claims of the Tamil music movement, the Tamil Isai *Iyakkam* that was, in part, the cultural adjunct of the non-brahmin movement running counter to mainstream Congress politics, its ideology and social base, but that soon acquired a momentum of its own as an independent cultural imperative struggling to redefine the classical in the realm of music.

The Non-brahmin Movement and Tamil Separatism

The non-brahmin movement, from its inception in the first decades of the twentieth century to its subsequent radicalization under E.V. Ramaswamy Naiker (or Periyar as he was more popularly known), drew on an ideology of difference from both the brahmin community that had traditionally dominated civil society and from the mainstream national movement articulated through the Indian National Congress. Emerging

as a political force in the first quarter of the twentieth century, the movement mobilized substantial sections of the non-brahmin population to question the brahmin oligarchy, to contest the unequal basis of the caste system or *varnashramadharmā*, and to establish the vitality and autonomy of indigenous Tamil culture free from the alien influences the Aryan/brahmin inheritance. The movement was in its first stages dominated by the Vellalas (high-caste agricultural groups), the Chettis and Mudaliars (commercial castes), and a sprinkling of other castes and communities constituting itself as the Justice Party, contested and won the elections to the Madras Legislative Council in 1920 and 1923. Subsequently, the party floundered and its distancing itself from the *Adi Dravidas* (untouchables and depressed castes) robbed it of much of its earlier dynamism. It remained for Periyar to reconstitute the party on more inclusive and radical lines and push the demands of Tamil regionalism and separatism more stridently.²⁴

Central to the ideology of non-brahmanism was a new conception of history and a new engagement with Tamil language and literature that identified them as the most critical markers of identity. Emerging narratives of non-brahmin identity articulated through tracts and pamphlets from the latter decades of the nineteenth century, posited a new history and historical sensibility that was aggressively assertive of its Tamilness and scornful of Aryan influences in Indian culture. Inspired by the discovery of Tamil classics and the antiquity of the Tamil language, enthusiasts like Sundaram Pillai (1855–97), J.M. Nallaswami Pillai (1864–1920), K. Subramania Pillai (1888–1945) and Purnalingam Pillai projected through their writings the existence of a primordial Tamil past.²⁵ Their enterprise not only enabled the production of an alternative historical tradition that stressed the uniqueness and distinctiveness of Tamil society and religion, but also fostered a deep and self-conscious love for the language. The exaltation of classical Tamil and the simultaneous emergence of a modern secular Tamil for political communication, produced an extraordinary phenomenon of language devotion—what Sumathi Ramaswamy calls *Tamilparru*. This soon became the vehicle for political articulation as well as social empowerment.²⁶ Brahmins were not entirely absent in this engagement—but there was an important difference. For the non-brahmin aspirants, language became the principal vehicle for articulating an autonomous racial and political identity—even a nation—whose sacral order was occupied solely by Tamil from which all members claimed, shared descent. What this meant in political terms was the establishment of the absolute rule of

Tamil through the exclusive use of Tamil in the political apparatus and administration. It was in this context that the Tani Tamil and Tamil Isai movements originated, and in time, assumed a special significance. Working on the premise of a self-respect that could be secured only by jettisoning the stranglehold of Brahmanical culture expressed through Sanskrit, the Tani Tamil movement aimed at cleansing the language of all loan words and alien accretions, while the Tamil Isai movement concentrated on popularizing Tamil musical compositions to thereby establish Tamil as the principal language of classical music and dance. M.S. Purnalingam Pillai for instance, in his pamphlet *Tamil India* spoke of the distinctiveness and antiquity of Tamil music.²⁷ These narratives of Tamil identity produced a keener appreciation of the Tamil language and inspired a section of Tamil intellectuals and ideologues to stake a claim for a parallel Tamil musical culture.

The Tamil Isai Iyakkam and the Custodianship of Culture

Literally, a movement for Tamil music, the Tamil Isai Iyakkam²⁸ may be dated to the late 1920s, when senior publicists and patrons like Sir Raja Annamalai Chettiar, Dhanamugam Chettiar, Sir Muthiah Chettiar, Chidamabaram Nada Mudaliar, Sir C. Rajagopalachari and Kalki Krishnamurti, spoke for the need to patronize and popularize Tamil songs and to document the indigenous Tamil tradition of music as it was represented in classical Sangam literature. It was part of the larger discourse on *Tamilparru* but reflected more than any other strand, the myriad imaginings of Tamil devotion. Brahmin poets and litterateurs, even some senior musicians, like Musiri Subramani Iyer, Dandapani Desikar, M.K. Tyagaraja Bhagavatar, C. Saraswathi Bai among others,²⁹ joined ranks with Tamil Isai advocates, for whom language devotion was identified with Dravidian separatism, to espouse the cause of Tamil songs, and subsequently to contest the basis on which the classical music tradition had been reconstituted in the recent past. Initially, the movement remained open-ended. Its guiding light Raja Annamalai Chettiar was a true connoisseur of classical music, and a generous patron of the Madras Music Academy, who frequently spoke out against linguistic chauvinism. Subsequently, however, the movement was hijacked by a more vocal

segment, who expanded the scope of debate to the consideration of an 'alternative' tradition proposing the exclusive use of Tamil compositions in concerts and the retrieval of an older musical tradition that was unique to the Tamil country. Ironically, the modalities of the project, defining and delineating the Tamil Isai tradition, and its conceptual frame were largely derivative; it followed in almost all essentials, the Academy model. Like the Madras Academy, the Tamil Isai worked on a history project that stressed the exceptionalism of the Tamil legacy, making it the foundation stone for Karnatik music, involving traditional practitioners like the Oduvars during their deliberations and endeavouring to situate Tamil music in new institutional spaces of modern education and musical entertainment, thereby staking claims to custodianship over an alternative tradition of classical Tamil music and culture. And yet the project failed both in terms of developing a popular base for its consumption as well as of challenging the hegemony of the nationalist cultural project. For, embedded within the larger project of Tamil promotion was the problem of multiple imaginings and the need to negotiate with modernity, which made it almost impossible to singularize the local, at the expense of the national, not to speak of the global.

The Tamil Isai movement was launched in 1929,³⁰ when Annamalai Chettiar founded the Minakshi College in Chidambaram, which later became Annamalai University in 1932. He endowed a music school in the premises of the university that by the 1940s had instituted an academic degree programme centred on Tamil music, the first in south India. The university's affinity with Tamil music had earlier been made evident in 1936 when the Vice Chancellor, Srinivasa Sastri, organized a music conference, where it was resolved that Tamil songs should be included in greater numbers in public concerts and incentives should be held out to encourage original compositions in Tamil. These early efforts did not bear fruit as performers continued to follow the kacheri format popularized by the Academy which gave Tamil songs only a minor slot. The raja and his associates did not lose heart and persisted in their efforts to organize the first Tamil Isai conference in Madras (14–17 August 1941), in which a number of resolutions were passed to give the movement a comprehensive agenda to work on. The conference was convened under the auspices of Annamalai University and concluded with a number of concerts including those of Musiri Subramania Iyer, Papanasam Sivan and K. Minakshi Sundaram Pillai. In his inaugural address, Annamalai Chettiar pointed out that it was not his intention to denigrate compositions in other languages, all of which had a legitimate

place in the repertoire, but to bring out the richness of Tamil musical traditions and encourage the popularization and dissemination of Tamil compositions. He de-linked the issue of Tamil Isai from the programme of linguistic chauvinism, and linked it instead with the larger question of aesthetic expression that was ideally conveyed through 'one's mother tongue. He drew attention to the fact that despite the centrality of lyrics in Indian music, many of the singers, not to speak of the listeners, did not always understand the languages in which the music was rendered. The conference lasted four days and came up with the following resolutions.³¹

1. The conference requests the executive authorities in charge of institutions for the advancement of music to give prominence to Tamil songs in preference to songs in other languages which might be taught if necessary, but only to a very small extent (Forty per cent Tamil, forty per cent Telugu and the rest in other languages).
2. The conference requests music associations (*sangeetha sabhas*) and music academies to arrange concerts in such a way that songs are in Tamil, and that only a minor portion of the concert was devoted to songs in other languages.
3. The conference requests patrons and lovers of music to support the cause of Tamil songs.
4. The conference would at an early date approach the authorities in charge of radio stations to arrange their programmes intended for the people of Tamil Nadu in such a way that Tamil songs predominated.³²

These resolutions had the support of select musicians like Musiri Subramania Iyer, Papanasam Sivan (composer), K. Minakshi Sundaram Pillai, all of whom took part in the conference and the accompanying music concerts, but they did not go down well with the wider musical fraternity. The Madras Music Academy, while endorsing the decision to encourage and popularize Tamil compositions, did not take kindly to the suggestion of pruning the classical repertoire or of introducing the language issue in the field of classical music, which in its opinion, drew from a wide range of inspirations and cultural influences. It was not merely that the bulk of the compositions were in Telugu or Sanskrit—the languages favoured by eighteenth century composers like Tyagaraja, Dikshitar, or Syama Sastri—it was also a question of introducing divisive regional and linguistic considerations into the larger realm of the south Indian classical tradition. An editorial in *The Hindu* dated 2 September 1941 said it all.

It is one thing to wish the encouragement of the composition of great music in Tamil, those who give a fillip to this wholly laudable object by constituting prizes, holding competitions, and soon, will be doing a needed and valuable public service. But it is as futile as it is dangerous to try to affect this by laying a ban on the singing of songs composed in other languages. There is no room for protection in music. Those who think that compositions in Tamil will be stimulated by compelling singers to sing only Tamil pieces little understand the way in which the creative imagination in music or in any other art functions.³³

The editorial stressed the openness and dynamism of classical music in the south—a tradition that had produced Tyagaraja, the Telugu saint composer, and had its foundations set by the Kannada saint Purandaradasa and creative inputs in Tamil and even Marathi. It was only when singers sang from an inner compulsion that creativity and vitality could be retained not because the ‘box office or self-constituted custodians of Tamil autonomy demanded it’.³⁴ The editorial warned against the pernicious nature of the movement, which did not abide by artistic considerations and was bound to debase popular taste. In a similar but more humorous vein, the popular weekly *Ananda Vikatan* carried a piece on the controversy in the form of a dialogue between Tamil and Tyagaraja. It made the point that while genuine outpourings could only be in the mother tongue, no music lover could dismiss the composer’s songs, for the music that it embodied, was that of Tamil Nadu and a universal bhakta. There was thus no question of dislodging Tyagaraja who belonged to the traditional lineage of Tamil Alvars and bhakti saints.³⁵ In a sense, the argument typified the sentiments of brahmin stalwarts like Kalki Krishnamurti (who wrote the piece) and musicians like Ariyakudi, Musiri, and Dandapani Desikar, all of whom had a lively interest in popularizing Tamil compositions without compromising their adherence to the Karnatik tradition as they had received it. The Academy followed suit in 1941, when it convened its annual winter concert. In the presidential address to the conference, Venkataswami Naidu (Principal, Maharani College, Vijayanagaram), reminded the members that the extensive use of one language was detrimental to the cause of music and that a very special responsibility had to be shouldered by his fellow Tamil musicians, (by which he meant members of the Madras Music Academy) who happened to be ‘the custodians of the rich treasures of Carnatic music. As trustees they are above parties. On them rests the sacred duty of preserving and handing down intact their rich heritage of Telugu and Kannada songs’.³⁶

The message was unambiguous. Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar, speaking on the eighth day of the 1941 Academy conference, came down strongly on the protagonists of the Tamil Isai movement, whose agenda clearly compromised aesthetic considerations for those of linguistic pride and chauvinism. Iyengar stressed the point that he was opposed not to Tamil, but to the idea of musicians being coerced to sing Tamil songs exclusively. As an artist, his concern was aesthetic not political, and from the point of view of music, pure and simple, he found the controversy deplorable. Music had a language of its own that transcended the language of words. Further, he reminded his critics that Tamil songs had been accommodated in the new concert repertoire which was in vogue, and that he along with some other musicians had adopted the practice of singing Tamil compositions. The language controversy, therefore, had no place at all in the field of aesthetic music.³⁷ Moreover, the Tamil Isai *Iyakkam* was too limited a conception when compared to the grand classical project that nationalists had embarked upon. For Ariyakudi there was never any doubt that Tamil songs like *Tevaram* and *Tiruppugal* were recitative verses and not full-fledged musical compositions like the kritis of the trinity. They could be sung only as miscellaneous pieces and could not inform the basis of the classical music culture, which besides being inclusive of multiple genres was firmly structured round the musical contribution of the trinity.³⁸

Raja Annamalai Chettiar continued to defend his position. In fact, even before the music conference of the Academy, the Raja addressed a gathering on the occasion of Tyagaraja’s birthday celebrations in Madras in October 1941.³⁹ He argued that the Tamil Isai movement had been misrepresented in the press and that baseless fear and prejudices were informing the opposition.⁴⁰ Language in his view, was central to music—the presence of a rich tradition in vocal music testified to this. It was only proper for Tamilians to take pride in their language and to take on the project of preserving and developing compositions so that both the performer and his audience could achieve complete identification. The raja’s supporters, many of them front ranking musicians with strong affiliations to the Madras Academy, maintained that the intention of the Tamil Isai was in fact not to oust Telugu songs from the repertoire, but to give Tamil audiences the fullest access to Tamil music. Under the raja’s initiative, Tamil Music Conferences proliferated⁴¹ where Tamil songs, both contemporary and traditional were sung. Performers were encouraged to take part in these proceedings and demonstrate their enthusiasm and musical skill in order to disseminate a wider appreciation

for Tamil music. Those who responded to the call were both professional musicians and bhagavatars who had lent their support to the Madras Academy project, and stage singers and traditional performers from the Oduvar community.

To what extent the raja's patronage of Tamil music provided an alternative definition of the classical or even a more intimate and local aural legacy is debatable. For, classical music traditions, from the closing decades of the nineteenth century, had filtered down to the Tamil stage providing the rudimentary melodic basis for the music of film and drama.⁴² It went to the credit of bhagavatars, stage singers, and theatre artists that many of the Tamil songs were set to scores with an appropriately classical melodic form. The interaction between stage singers, like S.G. Kitappa for example, and artists like T.N. Rajaratnam Pillai, Govidaswamy Pillai, Gopalakrishna Iyer was creatively alive⁴³ and resulted in the emergence of a repertoire that effectively served the interests of stage music and later on film music, but could not effectively claim the space of the classical. Actually, the reverse happened; Tamil songs were partially integrated into classical concerts and sung in the second half representing a lighter variation of the classical tradition.⁴⁴

The Tamil Music Conferences became a regular feature and were not confined to Madras city. The year 1941 alone saw conferences proliferate in Devakottai, Tirichirapalli, Madurai, Pudukottai, Kumbakonam, Dindigul, and Tirunelveli.⁴⁵ The conferences drew on the support of stalwarts like Kalki Krishnamurti and musicians such as Dandapani Desikar, Tiger Varadachariar, Chittoor Subramania Pillai, and C. Saraswathi Bai, and reiterated the importance of popularizing the Tamil compositions. The inaugural address to the first Tamil Music Conference in Madras (14–17 August 1941) observed that it was in Tamil Nadu alone that songs in the mother tongue were being relegated to a lower slot.⁴⁶ In the Trichinapally conference of 1941, it was suggested that the All India Radio Station be instructed to take active steps to promote the cause of Tamil Isai and that the local Tamil Association act as a liaising agency.⁴⁷ The issue was kept alive but did not seem to make an appreciable dent in the structure of the classical music concert perfected under the aegis of the Madras Academy.

The movement gained further momentum in 1943, when the Tamil Isai Sangam was formally established in Madras (December 1943) and organized its first twelve-day conference on 2 December 1943.⁴⁸ A number of musicians including N.C. Vasanthakokilam, M.K. Thyagaraja Bhagavata, and G.N. Balasubramanian took part in the conference and

spoke on behalf of the movement. While these efforts supported the popularization of Tamil compositions and gave professional classical musicians an opportunity to set their melodic framework, they did not provide a basis for developing an alternative classical tradition. The musicians who were sympathetic to the movement did not, at any stage jettison their classical training which was strongly grounded in the lineage associated with the trinity. As Tiger Varadachariar explained in a letter to *The Hindu* dated 6 September 1941, that the object of the Tamil Isai movement was not to reject compositions in other languages but to give Tamil speaking audiences an opportunity to appreciate Tamil songs.

The Tamil Music Conference is not against Thyagaraja's kritis (compositions) being taught in schools and colleges, nor against these being sung in public conferences. The resolution of the Conference was only to speed up the pace in which Tamil songs will be composed and sung in the Tamil country.⁴⁹

It was when the Tamil Isai movement tended to bring musicians to their line, that the issue became contentious. In 1941, the Madras Academy passed a resolution endorsing the opinion of the conference of experts at the Academy that it should be the aim of all musicians and lovers of music 'to preserve and maintain the highest standards of Karnatik music and that no consideration of language should be imported as to lower or impair that standard'.⁵⁰ The realm of the classical thus remained within the jurisdiction of the brahmin elite represented by associations such as the Madras Academy, and dominated by the repertoire that it had developed and refined over the years.

The preoccupation with Tamil as the only legitimate vehicle for musical expression, gave way in the early fifties, and extended to the larger question of researching into an alternative musical tradition that had found currency in Tamil Nadu since very early times and had found expression in a huge corpus of devotional and religious hymns such as the Tevaram songs. These were sung in temples and were in the form of recitative music without embellishment and set to a limited range of specific melodies said to have originated during the Sangam centuries and known as panns. A committee for investigating the history and practice of panns was instituted by the Sangam which held its first major conference in 1960.⁵¹ Reporting on the thirteenth meeting of the Tamil Isai Research Committee in 1960, the president of the Sangam, T.M. Narayanaswami Pillai reported that the earlier emphasis on singing Tamil songs only, had been a self-defeating exercise and it was to strengthen the Tamil Isai movement that the research committee had been organized

to 'establish the antiquity and authority of Tamil Isai, to investigate its scientific form, to protect and preserve whatever has survived and to research in an orderly way the various proofs that could re-connect the broken strings of the old, traditional Tamil music and to facilitate the renaissance of Tamil Isai'.⁵² The continuity of the tradition, albeit fractured, was in part due to its practice by traditional singers associated with temples and temple rituals. Here, the movement came face to face with the issue of traditional performing communities, whose cooperation was envisaged as absolutely essential, but whose induction in the exercise of retrieval was, as we shall see, severely compromised by the nature of the Tamil Sangam's agenda, and by the absence of an organic connection between the practice and its patrons.

The Tamil Isai and the Traditional Performer

The Non-brahmin movement under E.V. Ramaswamy Naiker engaged only briefly with the issue of the traditional performer and the brahmin appropriation of the domain of classical music. Periyar was not entirely sympathetic to the issue of language devotion—in fact, he preferred to keep the issues of language exclusivity and Dravidianism separate.⁵³ For him, the questions of self-respect, social justice, and empowerment were critical and were predicated more on the subversion of the existing social and political order than on the singularity of language and the devotion that it generated. In fact, he was extremely critical of Tamilparru, especially of its celebration of the divinity and antiquity of Tamil. He deplored the extravagance and expenses incurred in the Tamil Isai conferences, referring to Sir Annamalai Chettiar and his supporters as garrulous fellows, who were guilty of perpetuating what he referred to as a useless *bhajanai* culture that only perpetuated social inequities.⁵⁴ His dilemma was, as Sumathi Ramaswamy points out, that Tamil devotion threatened his vision of a Dravidian nation that would incorporate all Dravidians of south India and not just Tamil speakers. Indeed, by the 1950's, he went to the extent of urging Tamils to give up their obsessive infatuation with the language and embrace English even in the intimate space of their homes. So while he took up cudgels on behalf of the dispossessed and degraded, he de-linked the Tamils as far as possible from the passions of the tongue.⁵⁵

On the issue of music and traditional performers Periyar commented briefly in a couple of articles in the *Kudi Arasu*, a Tamil daily that he

edited. For instance, he drew attention to the plight of the Senguttar community. This was a community of musicians and ritual performers who were skillful with wind instruments generally considered polluting by the brahmins and were part of the peria melam (temple orchestra). Their skills remained unacknowledged and as a rule drew little attention or appreciation. Periyar condemned the brahmin arrogance and the shabby treatment they meted out to their non-brahmin counterparts, notwithstanding their obvious talents.⁵⁶ His pronouncements, however, did not attempt to suggest an alternative cultural dispensation. The same ambivalence characterized his approach to the devadasi issue. There was never any doubt in his mind that the system had to be abolished for it had evolved within the abominable brahmin imaging of the cultural and religious universe. The corollary issue of relocating their artistic skills did not figure with him. In any case Periyar had very little to say about the virtues of classical culture—Tamil or otherwise. High Tamil literature or the imagined Tamil past only earned his scorn, for he believed that all of it was tainted with ritualism, casteism, and Brahmanism, and celebrating it would only perpetuate Dravidian enslavement.

But the Tamil Isai Sangam had other ideas. It did espouse the cause of the traditional performing communities but not as part of a social reform campaign, more as a means to project the richness of a 'classical' Tamil tradition that they wanted to revive and consolidate. The Oduvars, as custodians of recitative music in the temples, were central to this project and their participation in the Tamil Isai project was considered essential. Thus in the 1960 Pann conference of the Tamil Isai Sangam, the sponsors encouraged the community to come forward to express their experience and offer their comments. The conference also provided a forum for professional musicians, musicologists, and litterateurs whose participation was expected to provide a framework for further research and intervention. In so doing, the conference implicitly endorsed the broad theoretical imperatives that had informed the nationalist project to begin with, and in the process, accepted all those standards and markers of classicism that the Madras Academy had set out—the theory-practice problematic, the stress on textual authenticity, and the obsession with classification. What they failed to do as effectively was to build a genuine popular base for the alternative tradition that could become the vehicle for a shared expressive experience, and facilitate, a larger circulation of tastes and sensibilities and common affinities of social and cultural identity. Instead, it was the Madras Academy and their protégé musicians who accommodated and incorporated a whole range of Tamil songs into

their concert repertoire, giving them a wider circulation through commercial recordings and incorporating them into their own aesthetic project. The cassette culture from the late seventies testified to this phenomenon as Tamil devotional songs entered in the daily mill of worship in brahmin homes, and as amplified accompaniments to wedding receptions not to speak of the homes of Non Resident Indians for whom they offered an almost mystical resonance of the culture they had left behind.

The issues that came up for discussion in the Tamil Isai Conference on the pann were the definition and antiquity of pann, the numbers of pann that could be documented and the styles in vogue. The word pann found in traditional Sangam texts, it was concluded, referred to melodies as well as certain compositions set to specific melodies sung by Oduvars as part of the daily ritual and worship in temples. By and large, the songs sung on such occasions were Tevaram hymns of the medieval period. Traditionally, these were specific to rituals like waking the deity up, or putting the deity to sleep. For the conference authorities, it was important to establish the uninterrupted continuity of the tradition on the basis of textual references, to come to a consensus on the appropriate style of rendering them, and to examine the unique development of the pann tradition independent of the larger classical tradition of raga music.⁵⁷ They were almost entirely replicating the agenda of the Madras Academy but there was a significant lack that had to do with the ties of sociability and significance that classical music of whatever version, had in the personal experience and self-definition of the subject consuming Tamil Isai.

The deliberations of the research committee were revealing and produced interesting results. It was largely established musicologists and musicians whose intervention set the tone for the debate and incidentally put the traditional practitioners as well as the protagonists of Tamil Isai on the back-foot. Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar, in consequence of his personal energy and interest in popularizing Tamil compositions within the established Karnatik framework, presided over the 1960 meeting.⁵⁸ At the same time, the Sangam⁵⁹ could not but draw on the support of the established musical fraternity without which the existing musical material of the Oduvars could not be brought under a rational scheme of classification. Iyengar's address, while endorsing the richness and antiquity of the Tamil musical tradition, alerted the organizers to the importance of research in order to determine the position of notes and the structure of the melodic arrangement that the panns represented. It was not enough to go by just what the Oduvars sang.⁶⁰ The Oduvars themselves who were present were asked to share their expertise on panns, their classification,

and their currency. Practical demonstrations formed an important part of the conference, which battled to establish a proper basis for the tradition they sought to invoke.

The debates centred around two principle issues of classification and standardization of panns. While, there was a general agreement about the antiquity of pann traditions in the Tamil country and the rich repertoire of mystical and devotional songs (Alwar and Nayanar hymns), it was found difficult to establish historical references to the tradition between the eleventh and the late nineteenth centuries. It was also found that the Oduvars had learnt their Tevarams purely in an oral tradition and they confessed that they did not strictly adhere to the conventions. What the conference authorities sought were definitive conclusions as to the number of panns, their nomenclature, their structure in terms of note combinations used, and the times and occasions in which they were to be sung. Confusions abounded—for instance, day melodies were often sung at night and vice versa.

The Oduvars debated the issues but confessed that it was not possible to reach any definite conclusions on any of these questions. The number of panns itself was a source of contention—some early twentieth-century publications gave their number as twenty-four, others maintained that it was twenty-seven. Velayudha Oduvar, among the more articulate of the members present suggested that there were 24 panns in all—twelve panns specifically set as daytime melodies, nine as night time melodies and three that were meant for all times of the day. He, however, admitted that the method of singing them had changed, while maintaining that this was admissible and that such 'transgressions' were part of artistic license.⁶¹ Subbaya Desikar disagreed and maintained that the practice of singing daytime and evening melodies were scrupulously maintained in some of the temples that he knew and frequented.⁶² Practical demonstrations did not resolve the issue and some members like S. Rasan mounted a scathing attack on the Oduvars, who 'escape the responsibility when they say that my father sang in this manner, my grandfather in that manner and my guru in yet another manner'.⁶³ Rasan took a highly critical view of the Oduvars and their failure to apply critical methods to preserve tradition.

The discussion on the structure and nomenclature of certain panns proved to be acrimonious but desultory in terms of results. While Rasan and others urged the committee to discuss the matter in the context of Tamil literature, Oduvars like Subbaya Desikar maintained that as a living tradition, some deviations were bound to occur. Ariyakudi Ramanuja

Iyengar and P. Sambamoorthy, on the other hand, representing expert musical opinion, urged that recordings of available specimens as sung in temples be made available immediately and greater care taken to ascertain the melodic features of the panns before fixing their nomenclature. It was evident throughout the proceedings that the deciding voice lay with the experts and, P. Sundaresan addressing the assembly of Oduvars proclaimed, 'we are researching into the antiquity and tradition of *pann*. Then we will come to an evaluation and if we find that these apply to your music, and then we applaud you, we will express our gratitude for having preserved the tradition. If we find that your tradition goes against the proven grammar, we request you to correct yourself'.⁶⁴



Figure 4: Musiri, Seetha, and Balasarasvati in a scene from *Tukaram*. Reprinted from *Sruti*, May 1999.

The comment was telling for it reflected the Sangam's dependence on the professional musicians to help map the alternative tradition. By this, it locked itself into the conceptual structure set out by the Madras Academy, and failed to rework it on its own terms or independently of the markers of the classical tradition that the Academy experts had spelt out. In this sense, the Sangam could not work without these experts, or indeed consider the larger problems of the community of traditional performers. They were driven by the need to define the tradition in fixed

terms, and in the process, fell back on the same evaluative standards that the Academy had set out and elaborated having no substantive, independent musical criteria of their own. For even as experts quibbled over texts, representation, and the deviations in practice, the very space and dynamics of worship within which the traditional community had participated, had undergone an immense transformation. Most temples had dispensed with the practice of songs, and while the question of litany in Tamil (Tamil *arcanai*) became a political issue that even engaged the attention of Periyar, the question of Tamil music did not command the same attention. The community dissolved—in fact, in an interview that I had some years ago (13 October 2000) with a senior Oduvar who enjoyed the patronage of the Tamil Isai Sangam, I was told that in 1960, there were hardly fifty Oduvars left, most of them had no desire to carry on with their traditional calling and had taken up new sources of livelihood. He shared his artistic appreciation of the old stalwarts of Karnatik music and admitted that the politics of patronage had needlessly reinforced what was an artificial divide.⁶⁵

What is, in fact, striking about the attempted revival of Tevaram singing, both within and outside the patronage of the Tamil Isai Sangam, was the manner in which it modelled itself on the Brahmanical tradition. Peterson describing her field experiences with the Oduvars, mentions that the Oduvars internalized the idea of the Tevaram as the Veda, they were constantly reminded that they were like brahmin initiates, and that they were meant to memorize the scriptures (in their case the Tevaram) like the classic *adhayana* of the Vedas.⁶⁶ This had two consequences; on the one hand, it remained a limited and local Tamil sectarian confined to a specific domain of experience and communal feeling. On the other hand, it failed to develop an expansive social base and thereby lent itself to appropriation by the larger fraternity of musicians and tradition makers, who purported to speak on behalf of a larger and more inclusive tradition.

The Tamil Isai Sangam so failed to develop an adequate forum for Tamil music, that its activities were increasingly confined to seminars and workshops about classical literature on *pann* and a limited engagement with teaching Tevarams, while as far as public taste and its identification of classical music was concerned, the repertoire and the format designed under the aegis of associations such as the Madras Music Academy, became even more firmly entrenched. Musicians singing under their auspices picked up effectively elements of the Tamil Isai, popularized Tamil songs, traditional, devotional, and nationalist, and effectively incorporated them in their own vision of an archetypal classical Indian form.

The protagonists of the Tamil Isai, notwithstanding extensive public support from the ruling government, failed to carve out an independent space for the Tamil Isai tradition either in terms of creating and expanding a popular audience for its consumption, or of fostering opportunities for an effective relocation of the traditional performing communities. This failure had as much to do with a limited conceptual framework that eventually deferred to the norms of the nationalist paradigm and the categories of classicism it imposed, as it had to do with the fact that at no time did the Tamil Isai confer on classical music the central role in the articulation of an expressive space for Dravidian identity that the brahmin elite of Madras city gave it to for themselves. For the brahmin community, the consumption of classical music became an integral element in their cultural self-definition, a marker of status and taste and a cementing agent of a collective identity and presence that had no longer the same visibility in active political life.

Conclusion

The Tamil Isai movement had begun with its devotees stressing the unique legacy of their cultural inheritance—there was nothing so exalted as their language, nothing sweeter than their music. Yet they ultimately failed to give back to Tamil music its exceptionalism or to its practitioners a genuine performative space in postcolonial India. Robbed of its social context, the Tamil Isai looked for its way either in seminars sponsored by the Sangam or in carefully orchestrated concerts organized by the same association celebrating the richness of its repertoire. Invariably these concerts were dance recitals, dance dramas, and *Kuravancis* that celebrated the exploits of the unique Tamil war god Murugan and made use of melodies that were identified as indigenous. The performers were for the most part brahmin middle-class women whose adherence to Tamil Isai as a political statement was marginal. Similarly, the rendering of Tamil songs by professional and amateur musicians remained a minor adjunct of their larger commitment to the classical agenda constituted by nationalist publicists, and subsequently, by the nation state. The latter's success lay in the fact that they had been able to streamline a set of aesthetic components that had an all-India relevance, and did not get bogged down by considerations of the local. The Tamil Isai movement, despite its full share of individual, state support, and patronage, failed to

develop an original and viable framework to support the alternative tradition, and to create a strong popular base for its consumption.

Having failed to plot a marked space in the domain of high culture for Tamil Isai, the movement shifted the emphasis of its activities into the field of popular culture, cinema, and devotion, with local temples playing pre-recorded Tamil songs as part of the daily fare. The community of Tamil devotees was essentially shot through with difference, which meant that any effort to singularize and homogenize a language or a unique tradition remained half-hearted and limited. Had the promoters of Tamil Isai jettisoned the nationalist framework of classification and textual authenticity, and embarked upon a programme of rehabilitation for the traditional practitioners—the Oduvars and devadasis—and given them an alternative forum for expression, an important strand of an older tradition might have been preserved and nurtured. Instead, the Tamil Isai, barring occasional efforts to project a more authentic version of the dance forms as a challenge to Rukmini Arundale's initiative, could not sustain its efforts to establish the independence of a distinct Tamil tradition.⁶⁷ The debate continued to resonate in the domain of public culture and found its representation in films portraying the age long conflict between the classical and the local. Tamil Isai did not carry for its projected protagonists the same expressive potential as classical music did for its passionately engaged and largely brahmin advocates, and it moved over to films and popular culture, where it was destined to undergo further transmutations.

NOTES

1. Sumathi Ramaswamy, *Passions of the Tongue*. University of California Press, Berkeley, 1997. See also V. Geetha and S. Rajadorai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium. From Iyothee Thass to Periyar*, Samya, Calcutta, 1998. Eugene Irschik *Politics and Social Conflict in South India: The Non-Brahmin Movement and Tamil Separatism, 1916–1920*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1969.
2. Sumathi Ramaswamy, *Passions of the Tongue*. See Introduction, pp. 8–9.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 245–6.
4. Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1993, pp. 26–7.
5. Rachel Dwyer and Christopher Pinney (eds), *The History, Politics and Consumption of Public Culture in India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2001.
6. The work of Kathryn Hansen on Nautanki theatre of north India in trying to identify common features of classical performance traditions in India; she considers not the internal, textual features of the art but . . . the sources of a tradition's authority, its

- modes of reproduction, and its relation to dominant social groups'. Hansen is particularly concerned with the dynamic movement of performers as agents, who actively desire their work to be considered 'classical' in order to gain access to financial resources and audience support in contemporary India. She thus rejects any sort of static identification of art forms as folk or classical, including the folk/classical continuum suggested by Blackburn and Ramanujan, which acknowledged interplay and complexity between the two realms, but did not recognize agency on the part of performers. See Kathryn Hansen, *Grounds for Play: The Nautanki Theatre of North India*. University of California Press, Berkeley, 1992. Stuart H. Blackburn, and A.K. Ramanujan (eds.), *Another Harmony: New Essays on the Folklore of India*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1986.
7. Quoted in V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium*, pp. 6–7.
 8. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
 9. As Besant exhorted the brahmins, 'Go back to your people and take your rightful place again as leaders still in India. Give to them your splendid intellect, give to them your wonderful eloquence, give to them the power of your past and the influence of your names crowned no longer with the crown of privilege but with the deathless crown of self-sacrifice', quoted in V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium*, pp. 6–7ff.
 10. Ramaswami Sastri, *The Future of the Brahmin*, Madras, 1935.
 11. Music was an important practice associated with the quotidian religious and social life of the community; in fact, even women even before they emerged in the public domain would appear to have had some access to it. See Sita Anantha Raman, *Getting Girls to School*, pp. 104–5ff. Anantha Raman quotes Savitri Rajan's reminiscences where she described the learning process for her family women: 'Girls there could not learn the Vedas but they were taught Sanskrit literature and music' Other brahmin women described similar experiences to Anantha Raman. Kamakshi Natarajan observed that some of her family women were unlettered but were orally conversant with Sanskrit and music. The case of Visalakshi (b.1875) was similarly revealing. Her musical talent and language skills in Tamil and Telugu were much appreciated by elders. On the other hand, there was the case of Nagalakshmi whose husband indulged her passion for music by arranging for her instruction by trained Kannadiga women of Madhava descent. Nagalakshmi herself even paid a devadasi woman to enter the family portals to instruct her daughters in singing and the veena.
 12. K.V. Zvelebil, *The Story of My Life: An Autobiography of Dr U.V. Swaminatha Iyer* (English version), Institute of Asian Studies, Madras, 1994, pp. 14–20, 66–7, passim.
 13. S.M. Natesa Sastri, *Hindu Feast, Fasts and Ceremonies*, Madras, 1903, pp. 53–5.
 14. *Ibid.*
 15. *JMAM*, 1944.
 16. S. Ramamurthi, 'New Ferments in Karnatic Music: Talkies and Light Music', *The Indian Review*, vol. 39, February 1938, Madras, pp. 98–9.
 17. *Ibid.*
 18. In their critique of brahmin politics, V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai argue that the most complete expression of political Brahmanism was nationalism. To the brahmin, nationalism signified an atavistic desire to endow the Hindu past on a more durable and contemporary basis. See V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium*, p. 320.
 19. *Tevaram* refers to the corpus of Saivite temple hymns set to music, mainly ascribed to three revered poets and mystics, namely Tirunanacamandar, Tirunavakkaracar and Cundaramurti (approximately 6th–8th centuries) See Ludwig Pesch, *The Illustrated Companion to South Indian Classical Music*, p. 176.
 20. Indira Viswanathan Peterson, *Poems to Siva: The Hymns of the Tamil Saints*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1989, pp. 15–21. The canonization of the *Tevaram*, we are told by Peterson, is mentioned in a fourteenth century work, namely *Tirumuraikantapuram*, which was revealed to the poet Nambi Andar who with the help of his travelling partner was able to reconstruct the melodic aspect of the compositions.
 21. T. Viswanathan and Mathew Allen, *Music in South India: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2004, pp. 84–5.
 22. Indira Viswanathan Peterson, *Poems to Siva*, pp. 64–9. Peterson points to a basic difference between *Tevaram* singing and Karnataka Sangeetam. Whereas in the latter, a metrical or non-metrical text is set to a raga tune and fit into a tala or rhythmic structure, the metrical pattern of the *Tevaram* acted as the rhythmic framework.
 23. Congratulating the Academy for its efforts, the Secretary of the Krisna Gana Sabha of Trivandrum observed, 'Musical sabhas as ours in the presidency are by nature fit for only spade work. It may be argued that they do help to elevate the standard of taste to a degree but the work of pioneering ought to rest in such an executive body as the Music Academy with a wide field for experiment.' *JMAM*, vol. I, no. 1, 1930, p. 78.
 24. Eugene Irschik, *Politics and Social Conflict in South India: The Non-Brahman Movement and Tamil Separatism, 1916–1929*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1969.
 25. Sumathi Ramaswamy, *Passions of the Tongue*, pp. 25–6.
 26. *Ibid.*
 27. M.S. Purnalingam Pillai, *Tamil India*, Tirunelveli, Madras, 1927. South Indian Saiva Siddhanata Works Publishing Society, Tinnevely Ltd., p. 115.
 28. The section on Tamil Isai is mainly based on the journals of the Tamil Isai Sangam (in Tamil) dating from 1943. All translations are mine.
 29. *Ponnvzhakkollum Chennai Tamil Isai Sangatil Varalarru* (1943–93), Chennai. (A History of the Tamil Isai Sangam on the occasion of its golden jubilee celebrations, pp. 4–5.
 30. *Ibid. Ponnvzhakkollum Chennai Tamil Isai Sangatil Varalarru* (1943–93).
 31. *Ibid.*, pp. 15–17.
 32. *Ibid.* (hereafter *PCTISV*). Also see *The Hindu Speaks on Music*, edited by N. Ravi, Kasturi & Sons, Madras, 1999, p. 462.
 33. *The Hindu Speaks on Music*, pp. 464–5.
 34. *Ibid.*, pp. 464–5.
 35. *Ananda Vikatan* (Aadal-Paadal), November 3, 1940, pp. 38–9.
 36. *JMAM*, vol. XII, nos 1–4, 1941. See presidential address, pp. 6ff.
 37. *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19ff. Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar addressing the language issue on 29 December 1941.
 38. *Ibid.*
 39. *PCTISV*, p. 6.

40. *PCTISV*, pp. 6ff.
41. *Ibid.*, pp. 6–10.
42. S. Theodore Baskaran, *The Message Bearers: The Nationalist Politics and the Entertainment Media in South India 1880–1945*, 1981, pp. 121–2. Baskaran mentions that the respectability which Tamil cinema acquired through its participation in the nationalist movement attracted a number of artists from classical music. Vidwan Kothamnaglam Srinivasan became a familiar figure in films, after 1935. Musiri Subramanian Iyer acted in *Tukaram*. (1938). M.S. Dandapani Desikar opened a career in cinema with *Nandanar* (1936) while T.S. Rajaratnam Pillai came into films with *Kavirathna Kalamegam*.
43. Thumilan *Nadaguru Chakravarti T.N. Rajaratnam Pillai* (in Tamil), Madras, 1988, pp. 114–25. The author describes how in 1925, when the drama *Dasaavatharam* was being staged by the Kanayya Company as the Troche Devar Hall. Govindaswamy Pillai, Gopalakrishna Iyer, Dakshinamurthi Pillai and S.G. Kitappa were part of an enthusiastic audience and how Rajaratnam and Kitappa practiced together, spurring each other on.
44. Musicians like Tiger Varadachariar and Ariyakudi Ramnujam Iyengar took an active interest in popularizing Tamil compositions. The former, for instance, assisted by Tanjavur Sankara Iyer was responsible for preserving authentic versions of Go palakrishnan Bharati's compositions. See Ludwig Pesch, *The Illustrated Companion to South Indian Classical Music*, p. 193.
45. *PCTISV*, pp. 8–10.
46. *Ibid.*, pp. 4–5.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
48. *Ibid.*, pp. 13–18.
49. *The Hindu Speaks on Music*, pp. 468–9.
50. *JMAM*, 1941, pp. 19ff.
51. *Tamil Isai Sangam, Tamil Isai Araychi Kuzhu*, Proceedings of the Tevaram Research Committee 1960, Chennai (hereafter TIS Proceedings, 1960).
52. *Ibid.*, p. 6ff. See presidential address delivered on 25 December 1960.
53. V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadorai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium*.
54. *Tamil Isai Natippu Kalaigal* by Periyar, Kudi Arasu, Erode, 1944, pp. 1–5, p. 12.
55. Sumathi Ramaswamy, *Passions of the Tongue*, pp. 235–6.
56. V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadorai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium*, pp. 295, 318, 320.
57. *Tamil Isai Sangam Proceedings*, 1960, pp. 19–41.
58. *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12ff.
59. Here, it needs to be said that the Isai Sangam did commission musicians to write new musical compositions in Tamil. In 1941, Annamalai University commissioned T.N. Swaminatha Pillai to compose new musical settings for 60 kritis of Muttandavar, a seventeenth-century Tamil composer.
60. *Tamil Isai Sangam Proceedings*, 1960, pp. 11–13ff.
61. *Ibid.*, pp. 24–6.
62. *Ibid.*, pp. 25–9.
63. *Ibid.*, pp. 28–9, 34.
64. *Ibid.*, pp. 54–5.
65. On 13 October 2000, I had the privilege of interviewing Shanmugam Sundaram who came from a family, whose musical heritage had accrued over nine generations.

His grandfather and his brother had been nadaswaram players while his father Nataraja Sundaram Pillai began a school for nadaswaram in Swamimalai and Pazhani. He spoke of Raja Annamalai Chettiar's enthusiasm and single-minded commitment and of his own musical education with Musiri Subramania Iyer, Brinda and Chittor Subramanian. He referred to the depressed state of the community and to the fact that there were very few oduvars attached to the schools set up for tevaram singing.

66. Indira Viswanathan Peterson, *Poems to Siva*, pp. 56–7.
67. Indira Viswanathan Peterson, 'The Evolution of the Kuravanci Dance Drama in Tamilnadu: Negotiating the Folk and the 'Classical' in the Bharata Natyam Context', *South Asia Research* 18 January 1998, pp. 39–72.