

Effects of Nostalgia : The Discourse of Decline in Periya Mēṭam Music of South India

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Effects of Nostalgia: The Discourse of Decline in *Periya Mēlam* Music of South India

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I. INTRODUCTION

Anthropologist Renato Rosaldo refutes the often-assumed notion of nostalgia as a personal, pure, and therefore innocent yearning for the past. In his essay, Rosaldo describes nostalgia as “a particularly appropriate emotion to invoke in attempting to establish one’s innocence and at the same time talk about what one has destroyed” [ROSALDO 1989: 108], which he calls imperialist nostalgia. He then argues that the pose of innocent yearning in this type of nostalgia not only captures people’s imagination but it also conceals its complicity with domination. Although Rosaldo’s observation pertains most immediately to the kind of nostalgia which agents of (Western) imperialism embrace toward the very forms of life they intentionally altered or destroyed, the effect of nostalgia in drawing attention away from the fundamental asymmetry of power, or rendering them less visible, seems to have much wider application.¹⁾

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Key Words : South India, Brahman, *Isai Vēḷāḷar*, classical music, nostalgia

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1) The abundance of recent scholarly and journalistic studies on nostalgia derives from a conviction that nostalgia is not only prevalent but also increasingly prominent in the contemporary west [DAVIS 1979; JACOBY 1985; CHASE and SHAW 1989; *et al.*]. Nostalgia has also been

In this article, I wish to examine an aspect of nostalgic reflection directed toward the first half of this century in contemporary South Indian music culture. For this purpose, I will focus upon an important musical tradition within it known as *Periya Mēlam*. One of the two major traditions of classical music in South India today, *Periya Mēlam* refers to a genre of instrumental music which accompanies temple and domestic rituals and festivities. The ensemble includes *nāgasvaram* (double-reed aerophone), *tavil* (double-headed drum), *tālam* (a pair of hand cymbals) and sruti box (*surudippeṭṭi*, free reed instrument for drone). The other classical tradition, *Karṇāṭaka* music, centers around vocal music, and is performed most prominently in concert hall recitals today. The vocalist is commonly accompanied by violin, mridangam (*mirudangam*, double-headed drum) and *tambūrā* (plucked lute for drone).²⁾ Roughly put, these two traditions are based upon the same fundamental melodic (*rāgam*) and rhythmic (*tālam*) principles and share much of repertoire, yet they are separated from each other in performance media and contexts. In existing literature, *Karṇāṭaka* music is often equated with the generic category of South Indian classical music. In such cases, *Periya Mēlam* music is considered its specialized subtradition. In this article, *Karṇāṭaka* music refers to the classical music of South India to the exclusion of *Periya Mēlam* music for clear differentiation in discussion.

Periya Mēlam music and *Karṇāṭaka* music have distinct geographic centers. *Karṇāṭaka* music has been primarily an urban phenomenon ever since the source of patronage began to shift from royal courts and wealthy landlord classes to secular voluntary organizations in the last half of the nineteenth century [HIGGINS 1976]. It is produced and consumed most profusely in metropolitan center such as Madras and Bangalore. In contrast, the functional and economic base of *Periya Mēlam* music remains rural with many practitioners attached to temples located all over Tamil Nadu and parts of its neighboring states (Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Kerala). Although many established musicians travel frequently to urban centers for performances, the majority of *Periya Mēlam* musicians reside in rural areas.

Another aspect decisively separating these two traditions is the caste affiliations of their practitioners. The vast majority of both musicians and patrons of *Karṇāṭaka* tradition are Brahmans, and activities relating to *Karṇāṭaka* music (teaching, learning, performing, and attending concerts) are dominated by Brahmans. In contrast, *Periya Mēlam* musicians are virtually all non-

conceptualized as a key metaphor or paradigm to investigate aspects of modernity and postmodernity [TURNER 1987; STAUTH and TURNER 1988].

2) A player of an instrument such as vina (*vṇai*, plucked lute), violin, and flute can take the role of the primary soloist who is supported by rhythmic accompanist(s). Although, as Viswanathan points out, a separate instrumental style has developed since the 1930s [VISWANATHAN 1975: 5, 208], musical characteristics associated with vocal style continue to serve as a model to emulate among instrumental soloists.

Brahmans while their patrons and most enthusiastic connoisseurs (excepting themselves) are Brahmans. The most influential among practitioners of *Periya Mēlam* music are those belonging to the non-Brahman caste of *Isai Vēlālar*, who virtually monopolized *Periya Mēlam* music until musicians belonging to other caste groups became prominent in the second half of the present century. *Isai Vēlālar*s are concentrated in Tanjavur and its surrounding districts in central Tamil Nadu state, and *Periya Mēlam* musicians referred to in this article are confined to this particular group of musicians.³⁾

Dominant discourse concerning South Indian music culture consists predominantly of perspectives advanced by Brahmans. Aided by their domination of scholarship and music journalism and by *Isai Vēlālar* musicians' economic dependence on Brahman patronage, Brahmans have established their perspective on South Indian music as the authoritative voice to the exclusion of *Isai Vēlālar* interpretation.⁴⁾ I take a position that Brahmans' nostalgic gaze into the idealized past has served as a pervasive rhetorical mode of articulation on which dominant discourse is predicated, and my primary aim in this article is to delineate how it has confined *Periya Mēlam* music to the past, and contributed to the widely-held notion of its artistic decline after the middle of the present century. In doing so, I will also suggest that nostalgia with its potent ability to make asymmetrical power relations appear natural and innocent is an effective means of subjugating non-Brahman practitioners of South Indian music.

II. THE PERIOD OF MAJOR TRANSFORMATION: 1900–1950

Throughout this article, the first half of this century is referred to as the period toward which nostalgic reflection is directed. In *Periya Mēlam* music,

3) The term *Isai Vēlālar* was adopted by the members of the group to discard the derogatory connotation of its previous name, *Mēlakkārār* [SRINIVASAN 1985]. Other groups associated with the playing of *Periya Mēlam* music include *Maruttuvar* in northern and western Tamil Nadu, *Nayinda* in southern Karnataka, *Mangala* in southern and coastal Andhra Pradesh, and *Kambar* in southern districts of Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Additionally, *Periya Mēlam* music has been the monopoly of male musicians. Although female players have existed, their number is minimal.

4) For *Isai Vēlālar*s, Brahmans as a group provide a major source of income as well as constitute the most knowledgeable and appreciative patrons of their artistic heritage. Brahmans are not allowed to play *Periya Mēlam* instruments which are considered ritually polluting. Brahmans depend on *Isai Vēlālar*s for *Periya Mēlam* music at temple and domestic rituals which they consider indispensable. Characterized by the complex combination of rivalry and mutual dependence, the relationship between Brahmans and *Isai Vēlālar*s is highly ambivalent. Underneath the tension between these two caste groups are the Brahmans' sense of superiority which is manifest in their manners of speech and behavior on one hand and the *Isai Vēlālar*s' frustration that their achievements are not adequately acknowledged by Brahmans on the other. The existence of such a "love-hate relationship" [SUBRAMANIAM 1993: 4] is widely recognized by Brahmans and *Isai Vēlālar*s alike, although it is not usually admitted publicly or mentioned directly in the literature [cf. SANKARAN 1987].

memory about the past rarely goes beyond the beginning of the present century. As described later, reflections of the past are often expressed with references to specific players. Few *Periya Mēlam* musicians from the previous centuries are remembered, and those who are remembered seldom serve, in sharp contrast to some past composers of *Karṇāṭaka* music, as symbols to represent the entire genre. Within many distinguished families of *Periya Mēlam* musicians, the genealogies can be established for more than five generations. Yet, even in such cases, only the members of the particular lineage remember the musicians of the past centuries.⁵⁾

The first half of the present century, especially after around 1920, may be described as that of major transformation in the history of *Periya Mēlam* music. Many new performance practices and contexts which remain intact today came into existence during this period, while older practices were either discontinued altogether or considerably attenuated. The changes which occurred during this period were drastic and pervasive, and were found in many aspects of the *Periya Mēlam* tradition, including the size and pitch of the instruments, the instrumentation of the ensemble, playing techniques, repertoire, intergroup hierarchy, and physical appearance of its practitioners. These changes were intimately connected with the introduction of new performance contexts and media for *Periya Mēlam* music such as disc recordings (by the early 1920s), concert hall performances (by the early 1930s), and radio programs (starting in 1938)⁶⁾ which were added to the traditional contexts of temple rituals and festivals as well as domestic life cycle rituals such as *kalyāṇam* (wedding) and *upanayanam* (initiation ritual for male Brahmins) [TERADA 1992: 155–73].

Of these new performance media, the existence of sound recordings since the early 1920s provide the musicians of the first half of the century with a special edge as the object of contemporary nostalgic reflection, over those who played before the advent of this technology. Elder connoisseurs and patrons of music had firsthand experience with the music and its practitioners during the first half of this century. Through their anecdotes and stories, younger musicians and patrons hear of the past time they themselves could not experience. The reissues of the 78rpm disc recordings and the private recordings of live performances by the past *Periya Mēlam* masters have been available on commercial cassette tapes since the 1980s. While the emergence of such recordings may in itself be evidence by which a degree of nostalgia is measured, it has

5) With the recent publication of biographical accounts, particularly by Sundaram [1992], more information about past *nāgasvaram* and *tavil* musicians is now being circulated beyond the boundaries of lineages.

6) In 1938, All India Radio opened its Madras station, the first in South India. Although the history of radio programs in this region goes back to 1924 when the Madras Radio Club began broadcasting with limited facility and air time. The radio performances of *Periya Mēlam* music prior to 1938 were so infrequent as to be negligible.

enabled younger musicians and patrons to affirm what they have heard from their elders, and thereby in some ways to internalize their nostalgic reflection. Many musicians and patrons speak of the great *Periya Mēlam* musicians of this period as if they themselves had seen and heard them.

Particularly pertinent to the analysis of *Periya Mēlam* music as an object of nostalgia is the continuing popularity of the Tamil film *Tillana Mohanambal*. Released in 1968, this film was based on a popular magazine serial novel with the same title.⁷⁾ While the story revolves around the romantic relationship between a *nāgasvaram* musician and a temple dancer (*dēvadāsi*), the popularity of this film, according to Randor Guy, a well-known film historian, hinges upon its successful retention of “the aroma, flavour and taste of a bygone period” [Guy 1991: 37] with a detailed depiction of the world of the *Periya Mēlam* and temple dance, “two pillars” of Tamil traditional culture [THE HINDU 1968]. The protagonist of the story is believed to have been modeled after T. N. Rajaratnam Pillai (1898–1956), a controversial and highly charismatic *nāgasvaram* player whose performing career extended from the late 1910s to 1956. This is one reason for general agreement among musicians and patrons that the film faithfully depicts the customs and sentiments of the music culture in the first half of the present century, although it contains some factual contradictions and its temporal setting is unspecified.

III. NOSTALGIA AND THE DISCOURSE OF DECLINE IN SOUTH INDIAN MUSIC

The separation of time between the present and the past is a necessary condition for nostalgia. Since nostalgia hinges upon the sense of irretrievable loss, this separated past as an object of nostalgia also has to be perceived as more favorable in some ways than the present [CHASE and SHAW 1989: 2–4]. Importantly, the ability to feel nostalgia for the past has to do with the way we make the past contrast with the present [DAVIS 1979: 11–12]. Because of its reliance on our perception (constructed image) of the present and the past, nostalgia is by no means natural. It is socially formulated and transmitted.

Nostalgia may be regarded as intensely personal when individually experienced, but this very notion conceals an aspect of nostalgia that can be politicized and manipulated. Brahmins construct their visions of a golden past in effect to legitimate their privileged position at present and to neutralize the potential criticism from *Isai Vēlālar* musicians. Nostalgia as a socially constructed phenomenon is, in short, “not just a sentiment but also a rhetorical practice” [DOANE and HODGES 1987: 3]. In this article, nostalgia is concep-

7) The continuing popularity of this film may be detected from the repeated reruns on TV, the recent releases of commercial video version and cassette tape sound track of the film, and the publication of the original novel in a book form in 1986 [SUPPU 1986].

tualized as being constituted by two types of discursively constructed image: the glorious past (how it was) and the decline since that time (why it is not). It is in their description that the dominant discourse and counter interpretations of the practitioners of the *Periya Mēlam* music differ significantly.⁸⁾

On the general level, a notion that the artistic standard of *Periya Mēlam* music today is substantially inferior to that in the first half of the present century is seldom questioned by connoisseurs, patrons, and even practitioners of *Periya Mēlam* music themselves. While expressed most frequently in oral discourse, this notion has also been advanced in academic literature and popular journals [ISAAC 1964: 384; MAHADEVAN 1988; ORR 1990]. I will describe the two aspects of the imagery surrounding the decline from “the golden past” by which nostalgia is expressed: 1) deritualization, by which I mean the decrease of ritualistic association, and 2) the close interaction with *Karṇāṭaka* music. I will then analyze the reasons given in the dominant discourse to account for the decline or disintegration of the *Periya Mēlam* tradition.

1. Deritualization of *Periya Mēlam* Music

Periya Mēlam music is believed to be invested with auspiciousness (*maṅgalam*) and majesty (*gambīram*). This belief stems from its strong contextual association with temple and domestic rituals, in which the participation of *Periya Mēlam* musicians is considered indispensable. The all-night temple procession which marked the climax of annual temple festivals was the ideal performance context for extended improvisation, the artistic hallmark of *Periya Mēlam* music. It is in the imagery of such procession as well as daily temple rituals that the connection between the music and its auspicious quality is expressed. The image of the idealized past of *Periya Mēlam* music is evoked most eloquently in the description of these performance contexts.

Frequently, *Periya Mēlam* music at temple rituals and festivals acts as a symbol to induce intense nostalgia about the early decades of this century, the period characterized by a leisurely pace of life and the piety of the masses who spent ample time in ritual activities. I will quote two observers for illustration. In the first example, a historian recollects the *Periya Mēlam* music played during the annual festival at the famous Nataraja Temple in Chidambaram, where he spent his youth, while in the second the author speaks of the daily rituals at temples presumably in Tanjavur district.

During the festival nights of Ani Tirumanjanam and Arudra Darsanam, I have lingered for hours at a stretch at the corners of the main car streets, in the thrall of Nadasvaram music of Chidambaram Vaidyanathan of revered memory. . . . Ever

8) The dominant and subordinate discourses are not conceived as completely separate entities, since the former persuasively penetrates, and sometimes absorbs or incorporates, the latter.

since my boyhood, when I heard it first, nothing has stirred me to the depths of my being as much as Chidambaram Vaidyanathan's *Mallari* in the raga, Nattai - played traditionally when Nataraja and Sivakama Sundari are taken out in procession during the festivals [NATARAJAN 1974: 137].⁹⁾

Two hundred temples studded the delta region [in Tanjavur district]. From Viswaroopa in the small hours of breaking dawn to Ardhajama of dead of night, echo of Timiri Nagasvaram and Taval kept up a symphony of stirring, soulful music everywhere [RANGARAMANUJA AYYANGAR 1977: 3].

Three points made in these quotations are common in the nostalgic description of *Periya Mēlam* music; 1) the inherent ability of the music to induce religious emotion, 2) the repertoire exclusive to the context of temple procession and *Periya Mēlam* music, and 3) the presence of virtuosic musicians. First, the sound of *Periya Mēlam* music is considered to evoke intense religious emotions. Many worshippers claim that they feel the presence of the deity in the sound of *Periya Mēlam* music. Listening to extended improvisation by *Periya Mēlam* ensembles, to quote Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer (b. 1908), the most respected senior vocalist today, "even atheists would feel overwhelmed by bhakti (devotion)" [SRINIVASA IYER 1986: 19]. Furthermore, the notion that *Periya Mēlam* music is able to evoke religious emotions is closely connected to the sound of the higher-pitched *timiri nāgasvaram* whose carrying power is regarded as the majesty of the instrument. The association with the power to affect or incite religious emotions is considered much stronger for the *timiri nāgasvaram* than for the lower-pitched *nāgasvaram* (*bāri nāgasvaram*) used today.¹⁰⁾

The positive reference to the higher-pitched *nāgasvaram* is an indirect criticism of the lowering of the pitch of the instrument during the first half of this century and *Periya Mēlam* music's apparent loss of majesty or immediate identification with the sacred context. One critic even describes the sound of the lower-pitched *nāgasvaram* as an "unmusical frog-croak" [MAHADEVAN 1988: 35; also see RANGARAMANUJA AYYANGAR 1977: 3, 8].¹¹⁾ The criticism

9) Ani Tirumanjanam and Arudra Darsanam are the two important annual festivals at Nataraja Temple in Chidambaram where Nataraja and his consort Sivakama Sundari are enshrined as the two primary deities. Nadasvaram, the term used in the quotation, is an alternate term for the *nāgasvaram*. The correct name of the instrument has been a subject of continuing controversy at least since the 1930s.

10) The two terms, *bāri* and *timiri* are relative to one another, and their approximate meanings are "higher" and "lower" instead of "high" and "low" respectively. Therefore, the pitch to which each term refers varies from one context to the next. Until the 1920s, the tonic pitch of the commonly used *nāgasvaram* was 5 (g). The pitch was lowered gradually and by the mid-1940s, the majority of musicians were playing *nāgasvarams* in pitch 2, 2 1/2, and 3 (d, d#, e). At present, most musicians play the *nāgasvaram* in pitch 2. See Terada [1992: 58] for the discrepant usage of these terms in literature.



Photo. Chidambaram Vaidyanathan (1884–1937), one of the star *nāgasvaram* musicians of the past.

directed toward the lower-pitched and longer *bāri nāgasvaram* is not limited to the tonal register of the instrument. The elongation of the instrument is said to have made the attainment of a certain pitch (*sutta mattiyamam*, perfect fourth above the tonic) difficult, and this technical difficulty has contributed to the downgraded performance standard. Some even claim that, because of this difficulty, many less competent *nāgasvaram* musicians avoided playing *rāgams* including this pitch, causing the selection of *rāgams* in a given performance to be unbalanced [SANKARAN 1990: 39].

Strongly associated with temple procession in the past is the repertoire confined to this performance context and exclusive to *Periya Mēlam* music. *Mallāri*, mentioned in the first quotation, is a type of highly technical composition which requires precise renderings of a relatively short composed melody in different speeds within a constant rhythmic cycle. Many structurally com-

plex *mallāris* were played to accompany various ritual activities in the past, but only a small number of simple *mallāris* are played rather perfunctorily today in one particular context (the commencement of a procession). Another repertoire exclusive to *Periya Mēlam* music which evokes strong nostalgia is *rakti*, a highly improvisational form based on a particular rhythmic formula, which was once a prominent feature in temple procession in the Tanjavur area. The performance tradition of the *rakti* is on the verge of extinction, and the grandiose and competitive performances of *rakti* in the past are missed by many old connoisseurs of *Periya Mēlam* music.

11) The lowering of pitch was criticized by many *Periya Mēlam* musicians themselves [VIRUSVAMI PILLAI 1962].

Another aspect of the image of temple procession is the presence of virtuosi. The performances at processions during the first half of this century are often remembered by the participation of particular musicians of repute, such as Chidambaram Vaidyanathan (1884–1937) in the first quotation. The decline of the *Periya Mēlam* tradition since that time is indicated conversely by the previous existence of many virtuosic and often charismatic musicians whose musical caliber can be matched by few contemporary counterparts. The names of one to two dozen accomplished musicians during the first half of this century are given with ease by contemporary musicians and patrons, in effect to depict the decline after that period.¹²⁾ Some even go further to assert that the participation of accomplished *Periya Mēlam* musicians was more important than the presence of the image (*mūrtti*) of the deity, the normally presumed focus of the festival. The participation of well-known *Periya Mēlam* musicians is often stated by Brahmans and non-Brahmans alike to have been essential to ensure a large turnout, an indicator of success at temple festivals.

Apart from the changes in temple procession, the decline of the *Periya Mēlam* tradition is also described in its performance practice during daily rituals at temples. In archetypal practice, rituals were offered six times a day, each ritual accompanied by a *Periya Mēlam* ensemble playing *rāgams* prescribed for that. Viswarupa and Ardhajama in the second quotation correspond to the first and last of these six daily rituals. It is generally agreed that *Periya Mēlam* musicians observed the system of playing *rāgams* prescribed for particular ritual times and activities until the early decades of this century. According to Rangaramanuja Ayyangar, the author of the second quotation, this system of music-context correspondence deteriorated during the second quarter of this century [RANGARAMANUJA AYYANGAR 1972: xii–xiii].

Yet another aspect of the deritualization of *Periya Mēlam* music is the change in the physical appearance of its players. The traditional appearance of musicians, which was considered auspicious and suitable for its ritual performance context, consisted most prominently of *kuḍumi* (shaved front part of the head with a tuft on the crown) and bare upper torso which were replaced by western hairstyle (“crop”) and western-style shirt. The *kuḍumi* and bare upper torso, both indicators of one’s devotion and obeisance to the god, have strong spiritual and ritual connotations. Gold necklaces (*taṅgaccaṅgili*) and diamond earrings (*vairakkaḍukkaṅ*) which contributed to the aura of auspiciousness are worn by few contemporary musicians. Many Brahman patrons deplore the loss of the grand appearance which characterized *Periya Mēlam* musicians in the past.

Important to my discussion is a strong correlation established between ar-

12) All the musicians mentioned to be masterful on *nāgasvaram* and *tavil* belonged to the *Isai Vēlālar* caste from the Tanjavur area. The sole exception is Madurai Ponnusami Pillai (1879–1929) who was also an *Isai Vēlālar* but from Madurai.

tistic debasement and moral corruption derived from deritualization. *Periya Mēlam* musicians are largely considered “a decadent fraternity,” although they were “[o]nce the custodians of expansive Ragam and Pallavi,” to quote Rangaramanuja Ayyangar again [1977: 34]. The evocation of the idealized image of *Periya Mēlam* musicians of the past has the effect of producing a sharper contrast between musicians in the past and their contemporary counterparts. One Brahman connoisseur of *Periya Mēlam* music emphasized the total devotion of musicians in previous times toward their art, saying “If they had nothing to eat, they drank water and kept on playing music [for the god]. They had that much devotion.” The image of the past *Periya Mēlam* musicians as single-mindedly devoted to their music is often juxtaposed with what is seen as such widespread social practices as heavy drinking and promiscuity at present.

2. Close Interaction with *Karṇāṭaka* Music

Another aspect of the “golden past” imagery of *Periya Mēlam* music is its close association with *Karṇāṭaka* music during the first half of this century. A high degree of interaction between these two traditions is mentioned by Brahman musicians and patrons. According to them, *nāgasvaram* musicians expanded their compositional repertoire by learning from Brahman practitioners of *Karṇāṭaka* music. Many compositions identified as representative of *Karṇāṭaka* music, most notably those by the famed three “saint-composers” of the early nineteenth century (Tyagaraja, Muttusvami Dikṣitar, and Syama Sastri), figure prominently in the repertoire of *Periya Mēlam* music today. The Tiruvizhimizhalai Brothers (Subramania Pillai 1893–1984, Natarajasundaram Pillai b. 1896) are mentioned as a prime example of the influence of *Karṇāṭaka* music on *Periya Mēlam* tradition. An extremely influential *nāgasvaram* duo during the 1920s through 1950s, they are considered to have popularized the performance of compositions (particularly *kīrttaṇais*) by *Periya Mēlam* ensembles as well as the typical ensemble format at present including two *nāgasvarams*.¹³⁾ It is widely believed among Brahmans that the Tiruvizhimizhalai Brothers learned many compositions from Konerirajapuram Vaidyanatha Iyer (1878–1920), one of the most influential Brahman vocalists of his day.

Conversely, *Karṇāṭaka* musicians received inspiration from the extended improvisation that was the specialty of by *nāgasvaram* musicians. For example, Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer whom I quoted earlier, recalls,

13) The *Periya Mēlam* ensemble in the early decades of the century consisted of one *nāgasvaram*, one *tavil*, one *tālam*, and one *ottu* (drone pipe). This instrumentation was suitable for a *nāgasvaram* musician playing extended improvisation, and the standardization of the two *nāgasvaram* format was largely a result of the increasing prominence of composed music in the repertoire of *Periya Mēlam* music.

I used to sit on the Kaveri bridge during festival time at Tiruvaiyaru and lose myself in the deep and powerful music of the nadaswaram. This listening experience helped me to sing [SRINIVASA IYER 1986: 20].¹⁴⁾

Srinivasa Iyer's vocal improvisation is, in fact, believed to have been heavily influenced by *nāgasvaram* music, at least at the initial stage of his career [MENON 1989: 35; PARTHASARATHY 1989: 16; PATTABHI RAMAN 1993: 5–6].¹⁵⁾

Importantly, the interaction between the two traditions, regardless of its actual prevalence, is seen as the primary reason for the achievement of high artistic standards in classical music in general. Yet, although the loss of active interaction with *Karṇāṭaka* music is considered by Brahmans to have contributed to the artistic stagnation of *Periya Mēḷam* music today, the opposite case is rarely made [MAHADEVAN 1988]. Equally important is that the image invoked in these descriptions tends to be one of a harmonious relationship between Brahmans and *Isai Vēḷāḷars* during this period despite the heightened communal tension created by social movements with an anti-Brahman orientation. Brahmans describe their relationship with *Isai Vēḷāḷar* musicians mainly by expressing their affection and respect for *Periya Mēḷam* music, and by individual cases of friendship [TUMILAN 1988].

3. Discourse of Decline and Institutional Patronage

One area in which the nostalgic mode of reflection can be observed with tangible effects is in the discourse concerning the institutional patronage of *Periya Mēḷam* music, particularly in the way in which nostalgic evocation is utilized to help legitimize the indifference of music associations to *Periya Mēḷam* music. The concert hall recital sponsored by voluntary associations of music lovers has been the most prestigious, though not the most numerous, performance context for *Karṇāṭaka* music since the early decades of this century. These associations, known as *sangita sabha* (*sangīda sabā*), filled the void created by the cessation of princely patronage. Though much later than *Karṇāṭaka* music, *Periya Mēḷam* music also began to be played in this setting in the 1930s.

In the programs sponsored by the music associations today, *Periya Mēḷam* music is, if not completely neglected, given a mere ceremonial role. During the

14) The Kaveri is a river whose tributaries run through much of northern and eastern Tanjavur district which is credited with the development of classical music and is known for the number of accomplished musicians it has produced. Tiruvaiyaru, a town on the Kaveri river, is famous for its annual festival to commemorate the death of the famed nineteenth century composer Tyagaraja. See Ramnarayan [1987] and Orr [1990] on the influence of *nāgasvaram* music on *Karṇāṭaka* musicians. For a more lengthy quotation of Srinivasa Iyer on his experience with *nāgasvaram* music, see Pattabhi Raman [1993].

15) Srinivasa Iyer is also quoted as, "If you want to develop raga nyana (knowledge on *rāgam*), you must listen to *nāgasvaram* as much as possible" [MANI 1987].

annual music festival, the most prominent and (for musicians) prestigious activity of a music association, a *Periya Mēlam* ensemble is engaged most typically at its commencement, often immediately preceding the official opening ceremony, to ensure the success of the event with auspicious music.¹⁶⁾ In such contexts, *Periya Mēlam* music merely provides the sonorous background for the occasion, and very few people listen to the music attentively. In contrast, *Periya Mēlam* music was heard in the 1930s and 1940s (and even through the 1950s) as part of the main program, often occupying the prestigious time slots instead of simply fulfilling a ceremonial function.¹⁷⁾

The officials of music associations provide several reasons for the current scarcity of *Periya Mēlam* recitals. Their most frequent explanation is the absence of master musicians like those of earlier years. Deploing the decline of artistic standards today, some officials claim that they would be willing to sponsor more *Periya Mēlam* concerts if such musicians were available. Their nostalgic reference to the past *Periya Mēlam* musicians of repute affirms their appreciation of the genre, thus protect themselves from the potential charge of categorical neglect or discrimination for not sponsoring *Periya Mēlam* recitals. For *Periya Mēlam* musicians, this reasoning is only a pretext for not giving them an opportunity to prove their ability, because most music associations encourage young performers of *Karṇāṭaka* music by sponsoring concerts and competitions while similar events for upcoming *Periya Mēlam* musicians are virtually non-existent.

The indifference to *Periya Mēlam* music among concert-goers is claimed to be another major reason for the music associations' reluctance to sponsor more recitals. Music associations are dependent for their existence upon membership fees and donations from individual patrons and supporting organizations, whose preference inevitably reflects the selection of the genre and musicians. Many associations are forced to include dramas and comedy shows in their programs, even if the officials themselves are devoted exclusively to classical music [SUBRAMANIA IYER 1966: 145], and it is all the more difficult under such circumstances to find a rationale for sponsoring *Periya Mēlam* recitals for which attendance is considered invariably low. The image that is often contrasted to the lack of interest today is the huge turnout at *Periya Mēlam* performances in the past. The interest and knowledge among the masses in classical music in general is firmly believed to have been cultivated by *Periya Mēlam* music [SUBRAMANIA IYER 1962]. Elder patrons and musicians including sabha

16) Two organizations which sponsor full-fledged concerts of *Periya Mēlam* music during their respective music festivals are the Tamil Music Association (Tamil Isai Sangam, established in 1943) which aims to propagate Tamil Music, and the Muttamil Peravai, a cultural wing of the caste organization of *Isai Vēlālars* (Isai Velalar Sangam). Both organizations are run outside of mainstream Brahman patronage.

17) The very first full-fledged concert hall recital of *Periya Mēlam* music of which I have a record was performed in 1933 at the Music Academy as part of a music festival.

(music organization) officials deplore the passing of an era in which even a lowly rickshaw driver was not only interested in listening to elaborate improvisation but also musically conversant enough to identify the *rāgams* (modes) used in it [MAHADEVAN 1990].

Although (and because) officials admire the greatness of *Periya Mēlam* music in temple procession context in the past, they claim that *Periya Mēlam* music is meant for outdoor performances and that its volume is unsuitable for performances inside concert halls. *Periya Mēlam* musicians discredit this claim by pointing out the loudness of current *Karṇāṭaka* music concerts due to amplification.¹⁸⁾ *Periya Mēlam* musicians often express their frustration that Brahmans characterize *Periya Mēlam* music as music meant for outdoor performance while not sufficiently patronizing such performances.

Periya Mēlam musicians tend to interpret the reluctance of music associations in sponsoring their music as a manifestation of the categorical neglect of the genre [cf. ORR 1990]. It is sometimes spoken of as an example of the discrimination by Brahmans, who constitute the majority of concert organizers and patrons, against *Periya Mēlam* musicians, who are virtually all non-Brahmans. In this context, *Periya Mēlam* musicians' remarks on the generosity of devoted patrons and connoisseurs in the past are not so much the sentimental yearning for a lost past as their critical judgment against the (to them) unjustifiable lack of patronage and appreciation at present.

IV. COUNTER INTERPRETATIONS OF *PERIYA MĒLAM* MUSICIANS

Perspectives of *Periya Mēlam* musicians on their artistic tradition differ significantly from the dominant discourse I have so far described. For the majority of *Periya Mēlam* musicians, the changing musical taste of the masses was a primary reason for the increasingly hostile economic and social environment for *Periya Mēlam* musicians. As in the case of Brahman patrons, *Periya Mēlam* musicians themselves idealize the first half of the century as a period in which the pace of the temple procession was leisurely and musicians could indulge themselves in extended improvisation which was listened to with acute attention and admiration by the thousands of people in attendance. However, *Periya Mēlam* musicians single out two factors external to their control to explain the dwindling interest in their music: the increasing popularity of film music and the lack of promotion from music associations, which are controlled almost invariably by Brahmans and have become the most prestigious source of patronage for *Karṇāṭaka* music during this century.

18) Nevertheless, many, including ardent patrons of *Periya Mēlam* music, believe that the music sounds best when it is heard at some distance, and more of the audience is found frequently at the back side of the hall away from the stage in *Periya Mēlam* recitals.

The increasing popularity of film songs since the 1930s paralleled the shift of interest in *Periya Mēlam* music from the improvisation-centered repertoire to that of composed music. The predilection toward composed music gradually reduced the attendance at all-night processions featuring extended improvisation. With this tendency, *Periya Mēlam* musicians began to lose the performance context for the repertoire most strongly identified with, and most valued by, themselves. The dilemma of many contemporary *Periya Mēlam* musicians lies in the gap between their professed ability to play extended improvisation as much as their predecessors did and the absence of the audience to appreciate and patronize such music.

The first half of this century is also remembered by *Periya Mēlam* musicians for many devoted and extremely generous patrons of their music. The generosity of wealthy patrons, both Brahmins and high caste non-Brahmins alike, is illustrated by expensive gifts they presented as well as the frequency of gift-giving. Expensive and valued items such as gold coins (*padakkam*) and silk shawls (*poṇṇāḍai*) were frequently presented to *Periya Mēlam* musicians as tokens of appreciation of their achievements. Anecdotes concerning gifts of such extraordinary items as automobiles and elephants to star players of the past are also circulated among *Periya Mēlam* musicians [SUNDARAM 1992]. The story of a wealthy patron during this period who died penniless because of his excessive habit of gift-giving to musicians is also known to many musicians.

Related to the presence of generous patrons in the past was the sufficient financial and moral support to *Periya Mēlam* musicians from temple administrations. At many temples, monthly salaries for musicians has become inadequate, and the lack of financial support has weakened the foundation of their entire community with an increasing number of musicians forced out of their hereditary profession. While the occupational option for the sons of *Periya Mēlam* musicians widened considerably by the weakening traditional code on hereditary professions and the increase of urban clerical jobs, *Periya Mēlam* musicians mainly blame the lack of patronage for the discontinuation of the profession in many lineages.

For *Periya Mēlam* musicians, the decline of their tradition is connected to financial and administrative changes in the temples. The financial status of many temples in the Tanjavur area was intimately intertwined with governmental politics in Tamil Nadu state. The DMK (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, Dravidian Progressive Federation), formed in 1949 to succeed the two earlier non-Brahman political parties, came into power in 1967. With their anti-Brahmanical and pro-Dravidian ideology, the DMK supported temples which housed Tamil (non-Brahmanical) deities, whereas those which enshrined Sanskrit (Brahmanical) deities became increasingly neglected. As a consequence, many Brahmanical temples in the Tanjavur area which had generously patronized *Periya Mēlam* musicians suffered from the revenue loss and inac-

cessibility to government funds, while wealthy temples of Tamil deities, such as those for Minakshi in Madurai and for Murugan in Palani, became even more prominent [KENNEDY 1974].

According to *Periya Mēlam* musicians, it is the indifference of contemporary trustees, who have the administrative authority over temple servants including *Periya Mēlam* musicians, that is more damaging than the general decline of wealth in Tanjavur temples. Hereditary temple trustees of the past were themselves often enthusiastic connoisseurs and patrons of music as well as other performing and literary arts [RAGHAVAN 1945, 1958: 21–39]. *Periya Mēlam* musicians remember many trustees who, due to their knowledge in music, acted as overseers of the traditional performance practice at their temples.¹⁹⁾ Contemporary trustees tend to be members of lower non-Brahman castes appointed by the non-Brahman oriented state government, and they often have, according to *Periya Mēlam* musicians, neither knowledge nor interest in temple rituals and the music associated with them.²⁰⁾

To counteract the lack of support from individual trustees, *Periya Mēlam* musicians have repeatedly requested the state government to regulate the salary of temple musicians as well as to institute pension, health benefits and travel concessions [VIRUSVAMI PILLAI 1962: 17–18]. The organizations that represent the castes of *Periya Mēlam* musicians such as the South Indian Nadhaswara Artists' Association have also requested the state government to help alleviate the economic predicament of musicians.²¹⁾

Images of past glory are evoked by *Periya Mēlam* musicians as proof of the intrinsic artistic merit of their music and its continuation to the present. They would argue that it was not artistic decline but rather various social changes that caused a decline in popularity and respect for *Periya Mēlam* music, and that the tradition still maintains high artistic standards today, if not exactly comparable to those in the past. In addition, while generally recollecting the past as a better time than the present, *Periya Mēlam* musicians refer to widespread tension and rivalry between Brahmans and non-Brahman musicians, and Brahmans' discriminatory practices and patronizing attitudes toward them.

19) Some trustees fined adventurous *Isai Vēḷāḷar Periya Mēlam* musicians for breaking the traditional code of behavior, such as performing with non-Hindu musicians or with Hindu musicians from low castes.

20) The appointment of trustees has been an important strategy for governing political parties to extend networks of power and influence by rewarding faithful party members and other associates [KENNEDY 1974: 286–87; PRESLER 1987: 66–71].

21) The Backward Classes Commission, which was appointed by the Tamil Nadu state government, examined the plea of the caste organizations and made a recommendation that the minimum salary of *Periya Mēlam* musicians be fixed by the Hindu Religious Endowment Department, the government agency which administers temple affairs [GOVERNMENT OF TAMIL NADU 1975: 24].

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

If nostalgia is predicated on the decisive separation of the past and present, that separation is maintained, reinforced, or stabilized by the repeated evocations of nostalgia itself. Furthermore, the past and the present are not simply separated but are also opposed to one another in dominant discourse concerning South Indian music. The positive appraisal of *Periya Mēlam* music is revealed to its fullest extent only when projected against the notion of the present deterioration, which, in turn, is strengthened by the repeated telling of such appraisal.

Within this system of opposition, Brahmans' nostalgic glorification of *Periya Mēlam* music has an effect of imprisoning the music and its practitioners in the past, and thus denying their contemporaneity, while providing Brahmans with an air of innocence in justifying such denial. More specifically, the high estimation of *Periya Mēlam* music, epitomized in the description of performance at temple contexts, has two types of damaging effects for its musicians. First, the emphasis on the inseparable connection between the artistic merit of *Periya Mēlam* music and the rural ritual context has made it difficult for *Periya Mēlam* to discard the widely accepted image that it is the music principally for rituals and to be transformed into an urban concert art form for which most present-day patronage is available. Second, the notion of moral corruption among contemporary *Periya Mēlam* musicians is solidified by the causal link, which is rhetorically highlighted, between the sacred nature of *Periya Mēlam* music, its artistic excellence, and the degree of devotion among its practitioners in the past. By this type of narrative strategy, *Periya Mēlam* musicians are rendered susceptible to criticism about their moral conduct, which in turn is utilized as the explanation for artistic disintegration.

While nostalgic reflection among *Periya Mēlam* musicians is also based on the separation of time, the present and the past are not completely opposed. Instead, it expresses their yearning for artistic continuity which has been threatened by the lack of patronage and other adverse social changes as well as a strong sense of dislocation. However, *Periya Mēlam* musicians' perception of the continuity of artistic merit from the past is incompatible with the system of opposition in dominant discourse. Even so, the act of remembering the past provides *Periya Mēlam* musicians with a positive sense of subjective identity which has been increasingly vulnerable in recent years.

The images invoked in nostalgia toward the first half of this century not only indicate the asymmetry of power, but also provide a site of ensuing struggle between competing discourses although nostalgia engenders the most compelling consequences when used by a dominant group. While nostalgic articulation of the golden past of *Periya Mēlam* music, which supports Brahman

domination, is one small segment within the dominant discourse on South Indian music, that mode of articulation appears pervasive and prevalent in such discourse. An analysis of nostalgia is, then, an attempt to expose critically the ideological underpinning which has determined the contour of the dominant discourse.

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ノスタルジアの政治的作用 ——南インドのペリヤ・メーラム音楽における衰退言説——

寺 田 吉 孝

ノスタルジアは、単に無邪気な過去への憧れではなく、現存する権力の不均衡を隠蔽する政治的なはたらきをもつ。本稿は、今世紀前半へのノスタルジックな言説が、いかに南インド古典音楽を担う二大カースト・グループ間の競合・対立関係と関連するかを考察する。南インドの古典音楽はその媒体、演奏者の帰属カーストによってペリヤ・メーラム音楽とカルナータカ音楽に大別される。前者は寺院および家庭儀礼に密着した器楽アンサンブルの伝統で、主にイサイ・ヴェーラーラルとよばれる非ブラーマン・カーストにより伝承されてきた。それに対し後者は、声楽を中心とした音楽伝統で、演奏者・パトロン共にブラーマンが大多数を占める。南インドの古典音楽における現在の演奏形態や内容は、これら二つのカースト・グループの交流・対立関係の結果と考えられるが、イサイ・ヴェーラーラルの貢献はブラーマンの支配する学界・音楽ジャーナリズムで認知されることは少ない。

序章に続く第二章では、ノスタルジーの対象となる今世紀前半という時期の特殊性に言及する。次に本稿の中核をなす第三章で、ブラーマンが、ペリヤ・メーラム音楽の衰退を儀礼コンテキストからの遊離、カルナータカ音楽との交流の減少の二点を中心に言説化することを指摘し、それらの言説がいかにペリヤ・メーラム音楽を過去に囲い込み、現在の音楽家達の価値を矮小化するかを分析する。最後に第四章では、イサイ・ヴェーラーラル演奏家達の自己の音楽伝統に対する独自の解釈が、どのようにブラーマンのノスタルジックな言説に対抗する形で存在しているかを考察する。