

Two of the most important contributions of South India to the world body of knowledge are Carnatic Music and Tamil literature. Both these fields are ancient, rich and provide intellectual and emotional satisfaction to millions of people.

It is interesting to note that Tamil literature (particularly Iyal, in Prose and poetry form) contains in itself vast amounts of knowledge on Music. Starting from the earliest Tamil Literature available to us today (around 200 BC*), it is possible to trace the various forms of music (Isai) that had existed in different periods and the way it has transformed into today's Carnatic music, by absorbing techniques from other Indian forms of music.

During the Sangam Age (500 BC to 200 AD*), there are enormous amounts of Tamil literature produced, most of which are available even today. They are mostly in Verse (Seyyul) form and concern with the rules of righteous living (Aram). There are, however many references of well developed music and musical instruments, even at that stage. The popular "Kuzhal Inidhu Yazh Inidhu" verse of Thiruvalluvar, besides establishing the popular use of the Flute and Veena (Yazh), also indicates that the Flute is an older instrument and the Yazh came later. There are also references to non-musical drums (Parai) that were in use at that time.

The first detailed information on music, in Tamil literature can be found in Silappathikaaram (Middle of 5th Century AD*). This was written by a Jain Monk, Ilango Adigal. It is also from this time, that Tamil literature blossomed in all its three branches –Mutthamizh, namely Iyal, Isai and Natakam, respectively Prose/Poetry, Music and Stage/Drama.

The roots of today's Carnatic music can clearly be seen in the music and dance forms elaborated in the literature of 5th Century AD. The nomenclature, of course is different . The system based on Ragams (Pann) with unique ascending and descending scales and Saptha Swaras (Ezu padham) were already in place.

Terms in Tamil and Carnatic Music -

Tamil Music
Carnatic Music

pann
raagam

padham
swaram

thaalam
thaalam

aarochai
aarohanam

amarochai
avarohanam

padham Ezu
saptha swaram

kural
shadjam

thuththam
Rishabham

kaikkilai
gaandhaaram

uzai
madhyamam

ili
panchamam

vilari
dhaivatham

thaaram
nishadham

Silappathikaaram gives fascinating accounts of the details of the musical systems in Aycchiyar Kuravai Kuravaik koothu ,mullait theempaani (presently known as Mohanam).

Sruti Bedham or Griha Bedham: Interesting details are also given as to how one raagam can generate other raagams by a process of shift in the modulation of the tonic . Thus the thuththam of the raagam mullaittheempaani would yield madyamaavathi , the kaikkilai would yield hindolam, ili would give suddhasaaveri and thaaram would yield udayaravichandrika .

The discussion into musical system prevalent in the Silappathikaram period was necessary to emphasize the depth and originality of Tamil authors in the field of music and dance almost 1500 years ago. In these days of narrow specialization, the holistic approach to literature adopted by Ilango Adigal and others is incredible indeed.

The Bakthi Period: There was a powerful religious renaissance by Hindu Saints and poets between the 5th and 11th Centuries AD*. This was to counteract the predominance acquired by Buddhism and Jainism during the previous century. This Bakthi movement was spearheaded by great literary work by 63 Saivaite saints called Nayanmaars and 12 Vaishnavite saints called Azhwaars. The works of the former were compiled in the 11th Century* as 12 Thirumurais and that of the latter were compiled in the 9th Century* as Naalayira Divya Prabandam (4000 hymns). This is a body of great devotional literature and the medium of expression was through music and dance. The poems composed by these Hindu saints were carried to the masses with the help of easy musical tunes by singers who were called Paanars (those who were proficient in Pann-Raga) and Oduvaars (those who could recite the musical devotional poems). Even to this day the Oduvaars carry on the tradition of singing the compositions like Thevaaram and Thiruvaachakam in temples. In today's concert stage too, these compositions find an important place. It is worth noting that Ariyakudi Sri Ramanuja Iyengar, who systematized the concert format, sang at least one Thiruppavai song in every concert. This is a composition of Aandal, one of the Aalwaars.

The other important landmark in the history of Tamil literature is the epic –Kamba Ramayanam dated 9th Century AD*. This is primarily a very large literary work and its devotional content is only incidental. As it was planned to be a “perunkappiyam” (large literary work), the poems shine with different colours and emotional content (navarasam) at different stages. It gives great opportunity to musicians to use the songs in this story, to express emotions like chivalry, sadness, anger, humour, etc., in musical form.

Arunagirinathar who lived in the 15th Century AD, composed more than 1000 songs on Lord Subramanya, which is called Thiruppugazh. This work, besides its devotional and literary value, is greatly significant due to its musical content. The songs cover all the 108 taala-s(rhythmic beats), as per the carnatic tradition. These songs are widely sung in concert stages (although the taala is generally simplified) and they add a special status and flavour to Carnatic music.

Mahaakavi Subramania Bharathi who lived till the early 20th Century has composed several patriotic and devotional songs in simple Tamil, but still fully conforming to the complex Grammar rules of the language. Most of the songs have now been set to music and are being sung in carnatic concerts.

There are many later year composers, whose main focus was the musical content of the

compositions . Although the value of these compositions to carnatic music is indisputable, it may be difficult for experts to accept them as part of “Tamil Literature”.

Tamil literature also gives details of various musical instruments used at that time. The most important one is the Yazh (similar to today's veena) .Four types of Yazh are detailed in the Sangam classic. The Makara Yazh with the head of an alligator and canine body and limbs, the Senkottu Yazh shaped like a boat as also the Sagoda Yazh, and the Periyazh also known as Paravai Yazh. The Vil Yazh in the form of a bow points to the origins of the instrument as it was born from the twang of the arrow from the hunter's bow. Paanars (Singers) who could play the yazh were called Yazhpanars. Even today there is a place in Srilanka by name Yazhpanam.

Carnatic music was also widely used in Drama (Naatakam) from olden days till recent times. It is also interesting to note that, when the Movies/ Talkies emerged as an independent entertainment medium, they had borrowed many of their methods from the stage. This resulted in some of the earliest Talkies like Nandanaar and Sivakavi, where it was proudly announced that it contained some 40 or 50 songs, most of which were chaste carnatic compositions!!

The amount of information on carnatic music in Tamil literature is a vast treasure and it needs deep research to bring it out completely. This article is only an attempt to show an outline of the possibilities that exist in this direction.

Some of the ragas of today and their (near) parallel in Tamil Pann-s are also listed below -

pan raaga

nattapaadai naattai

Kolli/ kollik kauvaanam
navaros

Indhalam/Cheekaamaram
naadhanaamakriyaa

kurinychi
harikaambhodhi

chenthuruththi
madhyamaavadhi

yaazmoori
ataana

natta raakam
pandhuvaraali

thakkaraakam/ thakkesi
kaambodhi

pazanthakkaraakam
sudhdha saaveri

pazam panychuram
shankaraaparanam

chevvazi
yadhukula kaambhodhi

kaandhaara panychamam
kedhaara gaulai

kausikam
bhairavi

panychamam
aakiri

saadhaari
pandhuvaraali

puraneermai
bhoopaalam

andhaalik kurinychi
saamaa

mekaraakak kurinchi
neelaampari

viyaazak kurinchi
sauraashtram

*All dates are rough estimates, as different studies contradict each other as to the exact period of the particular literary work.

Courtesy World Wide Web