

PANNMURAI

The musical system of the Tamils is among the most ancient systems of music in India. The ancient Tamils used a scale of 22 Shrutis and it is amazing how, with out the use of the any electronic equipment, they have recorded the frequencies of notes, which they called Alagu or Mattirai. The Tamil names for the seven notes were Kural, Tuttam, Kaikkilai, Uzhai, Ili, Vilari and Taram. Most of its musical forms later merged into what came to be known as ‘Carnatic Music’. Valuable references to the old music of the Tamils are available from Tamil works like the ‘Silappadhikaram’ (2nd century A.D.), ‘Tolkappiyam’ and ‘Kalladam’, from various inscriptions and individual treatises on music. These show that the Tamils were a highly musical race. They had a limited but fairly well developed system of music and were familiar with the “solfa” method, concordant and discordant notes and other acoustic phenomena. Their scales were known as ‘Palais’ and their equivalent of the modern raga is known as ‘Pann’.

Although the ‘lakshanas’ of the present day ragas of Carnatic music are described in Sanskrit works written after the 14th century A.D., there is no doubt that many of them have their basis on the ‘Palais’ and ‘Panns’ of the old ‘Thevaram’ music. The earliest record of such a transformation of ‘Panns’ into ragas is the Kudimiyamalai inscription of Mahendra Varman (600 – 630 A.D.), the Pallava king of Kanchi. This inscription is invaluable as it indicates that the Sanskrit solfa letter sa, ri, ga, ma, pa, dha, ni, for the seven notes were used in South Indian music even in the 7th century. The ‘Palais’ referred to in this inscription are those used for singing the ‘Thevaram’ music during that time.

The ‘Pann’ corresponded to the raga. The Thevarakaras sang in the ‘Panns’, which were already in existence. An analysis of the music of the different hymns will show that the ‘Panns’ like the ragas had their (1) arohana and avarohana (2) varjya-varjya karma, (3) graha svaras (4) nyasa svaras (5) amsa svaras (6) rakti prayogas, (7) datu prayogas and (8) characteristic srutis and gamakas. The ‘Panns’ paved the way for the emergence of classifications like (1) Audava-shadava, shadava-sampurna (2) Suddha-chhayalaga-sankirna and (3) Upanga-bhashanga. The classification of ‘Panns’ into (1) ‘Pagal Pann’ i.e., those appropriate for being sung during daytime (2) ‘Iravuppan’ i.e., those appropriate for being sung during nighttime and (3) ‘Poduppan’ i.e., those which can be sung at all times, is noteworthy.

The ‘Panns’ of the Thevaram are historically old ragas. Ragas like Nadanamakriya and Navroz are found in the ‘Panns’ of the Thevaram and these are indigenous to folk music. Nilambari, the lullaby raga is an ancient raga. Bhupalam, an early morning raga is known to every housewife. Both of these are found in the ‘Panns’ of the Thevaram. Nata and Kedaragaula are the time-honoured ragas used in Purana Patanam and these are also found in the Thevaram. The bulk of the ‘Panns’ of the Thevaram hymns are either ‘janyas’ of the Harikambhoji mela or Sankarabharana mela (which is the madhyama murchhana of Harikambhoji). The ‘Panns’ of the Thevaram are all jiva ragas and will continue to be sung forever.

At a time when the habit of recording songs in notation was not cultivated, the only method by which musical compositions were handed down to posterity was through oral tradition. The disciple apprenticed himself to a well-known master and learnt to

sing all the hymns of the Thevaram correctly and with bhava. The endowments created in Temples for the recital of the sacred hymns during the rituals paved the way for the emergence of a new class of professional singers, the Oduvars. These endowments in some of the great temples of South India are reported to be more than a thousand years old. It became the duty of the Oduvars to learn and sing the Thevaram not only correctly but also with a sense of understanding and feeling. The Thevaram came to be widely sung both by men and women. When the music of a hymn was widely known, nobody will dare to change it. The Oduvars have been God-fearing men and they were the custodians of the Tevaram music for more than a thousand years. They were alive to the solemnity and religious dignity of that music. They instinctively felt that if they effected any change in it, they would incur divine displeasure. Any Oduvar who tampered with the original 'varnamettu' was in danger of losing his job in the temple. The society itself would have looked upon him with suspiciously. Thevaram concerts and Thevaram bhajans were regular features of festivals of the medieval period.