

A MUSICIAN AS CATALYST FOR CHANGE: T.N. RAJARATTINAM PILLAI AND NAGASVARAM MUSIC

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T.N. Rajarattinam Pillai (1898-1956) was a widely influential musician who is frequently described as the greatest nāgasvaram player ever lived. His popularity as a musician was so pervasive that his musical characteristics and predilections, as well as his appearance and extra-musical tendencies, have been emulated by many musicians of his and succeeding generations. With his influence, many of the changes that he initiated (or is believed to have initiated) have become a norm in nāgasvaram music. In this brief essay, I will describe to what extent this extraordinary musician has been instrumental in bringing fundamental changes to a music genre of which he was part.

Nāgasvaram is a quintessential double-reed instrument of South India, performed in wide contexts ranging from temple rituals and festivals, to life-cycle rituals as well as accompanying folk dances and street theaters. The folk nāgasvaram traditions are separated from the ritual and classical traditions in not just the contexts of performance but in almost all other aspects of music making that include the repertoire, playing styles, performing practice as well as the social status, caste and religious affiliations of musicians. In this essay, discussion will be confined to the ritual and classical traditions of nāgasvaram playing, which largely share the common music theory and repertoire due to decades, if not centuries, of cross fertilization.

The first half of the twentieth century may be described as the period of greatest change in the history of nāgasvaram music. The changes during this period were drastic and pervasive, and were found in many aspects of the nāgasvaram music. I will describe below the five areas of change in which Rajarattinam Pillai presumably played a decisive role: (1) the size and pitch of the instrument; (2) drone instrument; (3) performance practice; (4) playing position; and (5) appearance and images of musicians.



The size and pitch of the instrument

The type of nāgasvaram that is most frequently performed at present has a strong association with Rajarattinam Pillai. Until about the 1920s, the instrument was considerably shorter in length (about 60 cm) and therefore higher in pitch (in pitch-5, or g above the middle c). The high pitch enabled the sound to be carried for a greater distance. Judging from the sound recordings (from the 1920s to 1950s) and interviews with older musicians, the pitch was lowered gradually and the majority of musicians were playing nāgasvarams in pitch 2,

2 1/2 and 3 (d, d#, and e) by the mid-1940s. The great majority of musicians today play the pitch-2 nāgasvaram, with a fewer number performing in pitches 2 1/2 and 3. Since the 1950s, the size and pitch have remained constant.

The pitch-2 nāgasvaram is often called bāri nāgasvaram, in opposition to timiri nāgasvaram, which usually refers to all the higher-pitched types of nāgasvaram. Although the bāri nāgasvaram is used today as a synonym to pitch-2 nāgasvaram, the bāri and timiri only point to relative pitch, and the actual pitches they refer to depends upon the context. For example, the pitch-3 nāgasvaram is called timiri as opposed to pitch-2 nāgasvaram today, but it was referred to as bāri when it was compared to pitch-4 or pitch-5 nāgasvaram (cf. Ramachandran 1931).

Most frequently, Rajarattinam Pillai is identified as an “inventor” of pitch-2 bāri nāgasvaram. According to the Tamil Lexicon, the word bāri is a derivative of Urdu bhari and is defined as “that which is heavy or big” (1932:2623). The grand name and the implied size of the instrument are conceptually linked with his great achievements, though he played instruments in all the other pitches at different stages of his life (Sankaran 1990:39). Nāgasvaram musicians today generally attribute their selection of the instrument to the unmistakable sound quality that Rajarattinam Pillai achieved on this instrument.

A lowering of the tonic pitch is also reported in Karnatak (South Indian classical) music during the same period (Higgins 1976; Rangaramanuja Ayyangar 1972:320-1). The introduction of microphones is considered chiefly responsible for the change as it makes lower-pitched musicians audible in performance (Venkataramaiyar 1971). Although this explanation seems inapt for nāgasvaram music as the microphones were not introduced in its performances until much later, nāgasvaram musicians might have been encouraged to emulate the trend in

prestigious vocal music. Yet, the musicians’ desire to be identified with Rajarattinam Pillai by playing the type of instrument he allegedly invented contributed, more than any other factor, to the wide distribution of this instrument.

Most nāgasvaram musicians credit N.G.N. Renganada Accari for successfully manufacturing the playable pitch-2 instrument for the first time in the early 1940s, under request from Rajarattinam Pillai. His reputation as the best nāgasvaram maker could be traced to his long association with Rajarattinam Pillai, who, ecstatic about the Accari’s instrument, repeatedly praised his skill publicly and even conferred him the title of Nādasvara Sirpi (Architect of Nāgasvaram). Accari’s craftsmanship and his association with Rajarattinam Pillai, are prominently stated in his letterhead (Figure-1). The vast majority of top-ranking nāgasvaram musicians exclusively used the instruments made by Accari until his demise several years ago.

Drone Instrument

The indispensable drone instrument of the nāgasvaram ensemble in the past was the ottu, a double-reed instrument that resembled the nāgasvaram in size, shape, and construction, but had no finger holes. The sruti box began to substitute for the ottu in the 1940s and it is widely believed that Rajarattinam Pillai initiated this shift. The dissemination of the new format with sruti box is also attributed to him as his popularity compelled many musicians to imitate him. Its gradual takeover was largely completed in the late 1960s by which time very few ottu players were actively involved in performance.

One distinguishing feature of this instrument is the use of circular breathing to provide an uninterrupted drone. This breathing technique has never been utilized in nāgasvaram playing within the living memory of contemporary musicians, although it is a common technique among double-reed instrument players in Eurasia and North Africa (Bryant 1990). With the disappearance of the ottu, the tradition



Photo courtesy of B.M. Sundaram

Tirumarugal Natesa Pillai
(1874-1903)

Photo by Yoshitaka Terada



Renganatha Arccari (1999); A photo of Rajarattinam Pillai is displayed just above the young man's head.

of circular breathing became extinct in the tradition of temple ritual music in South India.

In places where the temple musical traditions were systematized, such as Tiruvarur and Chidambaram, there were families whose hereditary occupation was to play the ottu at the temple rituals and processions. Occasionally, less talented offspring in the family of nāgasvaram players were encouraged to learn the ottu. Mannargudi Chinna Pakkiri (1869-1915), regarded as one of the best nāgasvaram exponents of his generation, in fact started his career as an ottu player. However, his case appears rather exceptional, and most of those who switched to the nāgasvaram achieved neither a high level of musicianship nor popularity.

The shift from the ottu to the sruti box engendered a notable musical change. Because the reed used for the nāgasvaram and ottu absorb much moisture while being played, the pitch of the instrument will descend slightly. Since the pitch of the ottu will descend along with that of the nāgasvaram, and is adjustable with the change in air pressure and the position of the lips in relation to the reed, the nāgasvaram player can perform for a much longer duration in tune with the drone without changing his reed (Sankaran 1990:39-40). With the stable drone provided by the sruti box, on the other hand, reeds have to be replaced frequently. As many as fifty reeds are attached to the top end of the string, which runs parallel to the body of the nāgasvaram, and nāgasvaram players often check the condition of the reed by blowing into it during the performance.

Performance practice

In the typical ensemble format, the nāgasvaram is accompanied by three types of instruments: (1) tavil (double-headed barrel-shaped drum that provides rhythmic accompaniment), (2) tālam (a pair of small hand cymbals that delineates rhythmic cycle) and (3) ottu or sruti box (providing drone). Even when the music was played in the newly emerged performing context of concert-halls in the style of Karnatak music, this format remained constant.

Rajarattinam Pillai is described as the first musician to play nāgasvaram to the accompaniment of Karnatak music, which typically includes violin, mridangam, and tambūrā (*The Hindu*, December 13, 1956 issue; Isaac 1964:402; and Rajagopalan 1990:225). Since the tambūrā is the preferred drone instrument for Karnatak music, this accompaniment format is known as tambūrā sruti, even when the sruti box substitutes for the tambūrā, as it often does today. Many believe that Rajarattinam Pillai originated the idea of playing nāgasvaram to the tambūrā sruti himself and that he gave such a performance for All India Radio (AIR) for the first time. Others opine that AIR officers at the Tiruchirappalli station advanced the idea to Rajarattinam Pillai, who agreed to this suggestion. Regardless of who came up with the novel idea, there is evidence that Rajarattinam Pillai planned a concert-hall recital with the tambūrā sruti in Madras, at least on one occasion in 1937, prior to the opening of AIR in South India (*The Hindu*, December 11, 1936). Furthermore, it has been recorded that a nāgasvaram musician named Mannargudi Manickam Pillai played twice for Madras Corporation Radio programs with tambūrā sruti in 1935 (*The Hindu*, January 23 and August 7, 1935). While either evidence refutes the popular belief concerning the origin of tambūrā sruti performance on AIR stations, the fact remains that most nāgasvaram musicians came to know about the new format through Rajarattinam Pillai's programs on AIR.

Although playing nāgasvaram to the accompanying instruments of Karnatak music remains uncommon, his experimentation was a precursor of many creative attempts to combine instruments from hitherto separate traditions, including Vadya Lahari, an experimental instrumental ensemble that violinist

A. Kanyakumari assembled in the 1990s, violin, mridangam, nāgasvaram and tavil, and Nithyasree Mahadevan's vocal performances in recent years with the nāgasvaram accompaniment.

Playing position

During the lifetime of Rajarattinam Pillai, the playing position of nāgasvaram musician also changed. When they played at temples, either as part of daily rituals or calendrical festivals, they did so only in standing position, which is an expression of respect to the deity on the part of the musicians. The sitting-standing dichotomy is also an expression of, and therefore a venue for maintaining, social stratification including caste hierarchy. The act of standing and sitting expresses the relative positions of the actors and the direction of respect given and received: those who sit down receive respect from, therefore assuming higher standing than, those who stand.

In music, the standing position of nāgasvaram musicians is ambivalent as their expression of devotion in religious terms can also be interpreted as an inferior position in social terms. In Tyagaraja Aradhana, the annual festival to commemorate Tyagaraja's death in Tiruvaiyaru, only Karnatak musicians were allowed to perform sitting on the stage while nāgasvaram musicians had to perform off stage, standing on the ground. Rajarattinam Pillai decided to challenge this customary practice and used his influence to negotiate with the festival organizers to change it. It was during the 1939 (or 1940) festival that nāgasvaram players were allowed for the first time to play on the stage in sitting position as Karnatak musicians had always done (cf. Sundaram 1998:9). This new playing position became gradually accepted in the 1940s outside of this performance context, after the age-old practice was broken in Tiruvaiyaru.

Rajarattinam Pillai also requested that he sit on the vehicle (ox cart or truck) and play music in a sitting position to accompany a procession which musicians would normally lead by walking in front and playing music. This practice became common in temple festivals and marriage ceremonies alike. Today, musicians are also found performing in a sitting position, either inside of, or near the entrance to, the sanctum sanctorum when they accompany the daily ritual at temples.

Appearance and images of musicians

The physical appearance of nāgasvaram musicians also changed drastically during the first half of the twentieth century and the change is almost invariably traced to Rajarattinam Pillai. He was the first nāgasvaram player to adopt a western hairstyle and to wear a western-style shirt during performances. Prior to the change, nāgasvaram musicians had the traditional hairdo known as kudumi (with the front part of the head shaved with a tuft remaining at the crown) and wore nothing to cover the upper torso, excepting a long shawl that could be tied around their waist or placed on their shoulders.

The kudumi and bare upper torso were considered important ways of expressing one's devotion and obeisance to God, and held a strong spiritual and ritual connotation. They were strictly observed by nāgasvaram musicians prior to Rajarattinam Pillai's innovation. While his decisions to abandon the traditional appearance was, at least in part, his way



The artist who makes the nadasvaram, the auspicious musical instrument, with the right suttamattimam.

The artist who became world-famous, having made nadasvaram with the right suttamattimam pitch which nobody has ever done, who received the title of Ahila Indiya Nadasvara Sirpi (World-Famous Nadasvaram Artist) and a testifying certificate from T.N.R., the only authority of the instrument, who received a gift from the Chief Minister, Kamaraj in Madras, who received a gold medal from nadasvaram musicians in Madurai, who received awards from many distinguished musicians, who makes the world-famous nadasvaram.

N.G.N. Renganada Accari,

Nadasvara Sirpi,

Narasinganpettai-609 802

(Tanjavur District)

Quoted from Dissertation by Terada, 1992

of challenging the hierarchy in music by explicitly adopting the performance practice among Karnatak musicians, he also paved the way for nāgasvaram music to break away from the original ritual context by discarding the physical appearance and customs associated with it.

Even before the time of Rajarattinam Pillai, nāgasvaram musicians were generally known for extravagance in ornamenting themselves with expensive earrings, necklaces, finger rings, and silk vēṭṭi (dhoti or waist cloth). Their grandiose appearance was appreciated by patrons as it added exuberance and pomp to the auspicious occasions in which nāgasvaram music was played, such as weddings (kalyāṇam). In Rajarattinam Pillai however, one finds an extreme case of this tendency and stories of his inclinations have perpetuated the image of nāgasvaram musicians as being excessive. His diamond earrings were compared to the automobile headlights and the blinding light reflected from the huge diamond rings is remembered along with the speed with which his fingers moved on his nāgasvaram. A categorical characterization of nāgasvaram musicians as heavy drinkers and womanizers has also spread through well-known anecdotes of Rajarattinam Pillai.

By focusing on the effect Rajarattinam Pillai had on the changes in nāgasvaram music, I am not arguing that all the major changes are attributed to his initiatives alone. In fact, he went against the tide of the period in some cases. One such example is a shift of emphasis in repertoire from extended improvisation to composition. Extensive improvisation, for which Rajarattinam Pillai was known for, was gradually replaced by a performance practice featuring more compositions, with shorter rounds of improvisation.

Yet, it seems remarkable that a single musician was instrumental not only in initiating many important changes, but in disseminating and stabilizing them as well. Rajarattinam Pillai's musical characteristics and extra-musical inclinations have been emulated by many musicians of the succeeding generations, in the hope that his extraordinary skills, imagination and charisma would be transmitted to them. Importantly, Rajarattinam Pillai's thrust for

change was not necessarily from purely musical considerations. His desire for a longer and lower-pitched instrument, his decision to use the sruti box (for ottu), to play with the Karnatak music accompaniment, and to adopt appearances of Karnatak musicians, along with his insistence on playing music in sitting position are a result of his creativity, inclination to outshine others and conviction to challenge the practices which he regarded demeaning to him personally, and by extension, to his caste community. Regardless of his intention, the changes that Rajarattinam Pillai initiated has exerted a long and lasting effect on nāgasvaram music.

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