

***Tamiḷ Isai* as a Challenge to Brahmanical Music Culture in South India**

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Two overlapping terms refer to classical music in South India. By far the better known of the two is *Karṇāṭaka Saṅgīta* (or Karnatak music), which is for many synonymous with South Indian classical music.¹⁾ The other term, *Tamiḷ Isai*, is relatively unknown outside the state of Tamil Nadu, where the majority of residents speak Tamil as their mother tongue. These two terms do not necessarily refer to two decisively separate musical systems, but rather point to different modes of historical interpretation and competing ideologies based on language and caste. The contrastive use of *saṅgīta* (Sanskrit) and *isai* (Tamil), which have both been translated into English as “music,” is an eloquent testimony to the different linguistic and caste orientations. Schematically put, *Karṇāṭaka Saṅgīta* refers to the culture of classical music based on compositions in Telugu and Sanskrit and performed and patronized primarily by members of the Brahman caste, whereas *Tamiḷ Isai*, music in the Tamil language and/or a musical tradition nurtured by Tamils, has been advanced mostly by non-Brahmans.

The relationship between caste and language has long been intricate, ambivalent and contentious in the culture of South Indian classical music. This paper is a preliminary exploration of an aspect of this relationship as manifested in the controversial events relating to the issues of *Tamiḷ Isai* (music). In particular, I will focus on the methods of popularizing Tamil songs used by different organizations, and their role in promoting or maintaining differing perspectives on music history. Music organizations such as the Music Academy, Madras and the Tamil Isai Sangam symbolize and actively promote competing ideologies based on caste and language in South Indian classical music. My primary aim in this paper is to gauge to what extent the Music Academy has contributed to the maintenance of Brahmanical dominance based on its continual authorization of Brahman-centered history, and the degree to which the non-Brahman organizations have represented the oppressed perspectives to form counter forces to the Music Academy.

Music Academy as a Citadel of Brahmanical Music Culture

The Music Academy (hereafter “Academy”) was established in 1928 to develop and disseminate classical music and dance. The plan to establish the Academy was adopted at the session of the Indian National Congress in Chennai (then Madras) in 1927. This beginning indicates that the surging nationalism behind the National Congress meeting and the desire to create “Indian music” as being just as honorable as, yet distinct from, “Western music,” formed the backdrop for the establishment of the Academy.

What is known as classical music today lost its previous royal patronage due to the cessation of princely courts in South India in the middle of the 19th century, and needed to find new patrons if they were to survive. Many musicians migrated to Madras in search of individual patrons who acquired wealth from the city's burgeoning economy and by working with the British as *dubash*, agents who mediated between the colonial government and the local society. For such music to find a wider audience, however, it needed to be reformulated (or "revived") to make it attractive to the emerging urban middle classes, and the Academy was instrumental in such reformulation both by providing academic legitimacy, which rendered music a respectable profession and leisure activity, and by broadening the audience base through education (Subramanian 1999).

The Academy became the center of musical performance and research early on, and it has been since then the most influential and prestigious organization for South Indian classical music. The Academy confers the *Saṅgīta Kalānidhi*, the most coveted musical title, which is presented to a musician each year at its annual music festival in December. The opportunity to perform at this festival is often considered the emblem of "making it" as a professional musician. It has become a yardstick by which to measure the degree of success and rank in the hierarchy among musicians. For this reason, the Academy has been the site of intense lobbying by aspiring musicians and their supporting patrons (Plate 1).

The Academy was also a source of inspiration for other music organizations (known as *saṅgīta sabhas*) which were established in great number throughout the 20th century. Modeling themselves after the Academy, they started organizing annual music and dance festivals, increasing performance opportunities for musicians. Despite the proliferation of *sabhas*, the Academy has maintained its uniqueness among such organizations for its



Plate 1 The main building of the Music Academy (Chennai, 1998)

academic activities. At the scholarly sessions during its annual festival, musicologists and musicians gather to discuss a wide range of topics relating to music and dance. The content of the session is reported daily in *The Hindu*, a leading English newspaper in South India. Prominent musicologists at the Academy, including P. Sambamurthy (1901-1973) and V. Raghavan (1908-1979), were also affiliated with the Department of Indian Music at Madras University. Because the Academy provided a prestigious venue for scholarly discussion via its annual conference and journal, it became the center of research activities. The Academy, along with Madras University, has provided both physical space and institutional support for Brahman musicians, patrons, critics, and journalists who form a rather exclusive network for mutual support and encouragement.

Deification of the Musical Trinity

What type of history has been collectively projected by Brahman scholars and musicians, and how have musical organizations such as the Academy helped maintain or fortify the history portrayed in this way? The most important historical figure in this issue is Tyagaraja, the 19th-century composer whose name has been equated with the essence of South Indian classical music. Tyagaraja is one of the three Brahman composers collectively known as the *saṅgīta mummūrtti* or Musical Trinity, who are said to represent the pinnacle of South Indian music history. The contributions of these composers are regarded with such high esteem that the history of South Indian music is often divided into three eras: the Trinity era, which is often described as the “Golden Age” of South Indian music (Venkatarama Iyer 1979; Music Academy 1988: 170), and two eras preceding and following this period. All three composers are described as “saint composers” and their lives characterized by their passionate devotion to the deity and avoidance of worldly affairs. The power of their music is said to have been so potent that it caused miracles such as opening temple gates, inducing rainfall, lighting lamps or even reviving the dead (Srinivasan 1962: 42-3; Sambamurthy 1970: 169-70). Moreover, writings on music history almost unanimously agree that the Trinity composers were born in the same time period (the late 18th century) and in the same locality (the famous temple town of Tiruvarur) (Jackson 1991: 30). This narrative suggests the work of the higher being who sent them to the human world for some divine purpose, thereby enhancing their status as extraordinary beings (Srinivasan 1962: 94).

The image of the Trinity (especially Tyagaraja) as saintly figures has been advanced through the activities of the Academy, which include publishing articles on the Trinity in the *Journal of the Music Academy* (started in 1930), teaching their compositions at its Teachers’ College of Music (opened in 1931), conducting commemorative festivals and music competitions highlighting their work, and celebrating their achievements at the annual music conference. Their auditorium is adorned with portraits of the Trinity, as is the case of performance venues for many other Brahman-controlled music associations (Plate 2). With all these activities, the image of the Trinity as saint composers who define South Indian classical music has been repeatedly evoked and confirmed.



Plate 2 The portrait of the Music Trinity decorates the concert hall of a music organization (Chennai, 1999).

The narrative accounts of Tyagaraja are numerous, and virtually all writings on him impress readers with his saintly attributes. P. Sambamurthy, who was a professor of music at Madras University for 25 years (1937-61) and an active participant in the Academy's academic conferences, states, "Tyagaraja, the poet, saint and composer is the greatest name in the history of South Indian Music. He is one of those minstrels of god, who came to this world to contribute to human happiness and uplift" (1970: 1). S. Seetha, Sambamurthy's student and successor at Madras University, depicts Tyagaraja as "both a saint and a great composer whose compositions breathe the highest spiritual truths" (1981: 201). H. Narayanaswami describes his eminence as "If Carnatic Music could be imagined as a living thing, Saint Tyagaraja will be its heart; the rest of the Composers will form the other parts" (1989: 2). Hundreds of other writings reconfirm and perpetuate the centrality of Tyagaraja in South Indian music by repeatedly projecting his saintly image.

Paramount to my argument is the discourse on the Trinity's caste affiliation and the line of artistic transmission: they were not only all Brahmans, but were also described as having inherited music that had been passed down by a string of Brahman composers. In Tyagaraja's case, frequently mentioned composers include Purandara Dasa (16th century), Kshetranya (17th century), and Sonti Venkataramanayya, with whom Tyagaraja is believed to have studied in person (Sambamurthy 1970; Raghavan 1979, 1983). Within this dominant narrative, one is easily led to conclude that Brahman musicians have inherited a musical tradition of their own that saw its highest manifestation in Tyagaraja. Focusing upon the narrative construction, my aim here is not to belittle Tyagaraja's tremendous contribution, but simply to bring to the foreground the power of such narrative to create an illusion of unmediated reality that Ana Maria Alonso calls "effects of truth" (1988). As I

later discuss, it was this construction of narrative that became a focal point of contention for non-Brahmans, both individuals and organizations, who denounced Brahman dominance in music.

Tyagaraja was a Telugu Brahman, and composed almost all his songs in Telugu. The other two composers of the Trinity, Muttusvami Dikshitar and Syama Satri, were both Tamil Brahmins who nevertheless composed their songs primarily in Sanskrit and Telugu. The prominence of these two languages in their compositions requires a historical explanation. Tanjavur, where the Trinity lived, had been ruled by Telugu-speaking Nayak kings between 1544 and 1673. Because of their generous patronage toward the performing arts and because Telugu was the official language, they attracted scholars, poets and musicians from Telugu-speaking areas.² Sanskrit, on the other hand, has been the sacred language of religious scriptures and rituals, and historically Brahmins have been its primary custodians.

Within the context of a performance, the hierarchy of languages in music was evident: the Telugu and Sanskrit compositions by the Trinity and other Brahmin composers are played as main items whereas a few short pieces in Tamil are played at the end of the performance as *tukkadā* (miscellaneous, minor, or insignificant pieces). With the increasing awareness of the antiquity of Tamil language around the turn of the century, many non-Brahmins began to ask a deceptively simple question: why are Tamil songs given little importance in Tamil-speaking areas?

Tamiḷ Isai Movement

It was out of frustration at what was perceived to be the denigration of Tamil songs (and by extension Tamil language and culture) in predominantly Tamil-speaking areas that the *Tamiḷ Isai* movement (*Tamiḷ Isai Iyakkam*) emerged. It proposed to propagate Tamil songs to oppose the domination of Telugu and Sanskrit compositions in which Brahmin musicians historically specialized. The first concerted effort to popularize Tamil songs was made by Annamalai Chettiar (1881-1948), a prominent patron of Tamil culture. In 1935 he made a substantial donation to Annamalai University, which he had himself established earlier.

As its promoters were dissatisfied with the slow rate of progress, many *Tamiḷ Isai* conferences were held in the first half of the 1940s. In 1941, Annamalai Chettiar organized the first *Tamiḷ Isai* conference at Annamalai University, and stated in his inaugural speech, “Music performances should begin with Tamil songs and end too with Tamil songs. The lion’s share of the performance should be in Tamil. Songs from other languages can also form part of the concert,” and his insistence was passed as a resolution of the conference (Ramanathan Chettiar 1992: 24).³ This resolution jolted the classical music world “like a clap of thunder,” to quote Anandhi Ramachandran (1983: 4), and similar public statements that followed it became a source of controversy, generating a series of heated debates regarding the issue of language in music at conferences, public gatherings, and mass media.

Criticism from the Music Academy

The most trenchant (and often indignant) criticism of the *Tamil Isai* movement came from the Academy and individual Brahmans closely associated with it, while supporters of the movement were by and large non-Brahmans (Nambi Arooran 1980: 265; Rajadurai 1997: 3-28). The major points of contention may be summarized in the following four areas.

First, many Brahman musicians and scholars emphasized the primacy of music over language. Reacting against the 1941 resolution at the Annamalai conference, a prominent Brahman performer and scholar, Mudikondan Venkatrama Iyer (1897-1975), stated, "Music in its highest form did not require the help of language" (Music Academy 1942: 17). Venkatrama Iyer served later as the principal of the Teacher's College of Music for 25 years (1948-72) and was a frequent speaker at the Academy. Many other speakers stressed that the essence of classical music is *rāga*, and language is secondary in importance (Music Academy 1942: 17; 1945: 8-9; 1946: 3, 6-7).⁴⁾ Similarly, T. T. Krishnamachari, a major patron of the Academy, claimed that "Music was a wordless search for beauty in sound" (in Ramachandran 1983: 6).⁵⁾ During its annual conference, the Academy passed the resolution that "it should be the aim of all musicians and lovers of music to preserve and maintain the highest standard of classical Carnatic music and that no consideration of language should be imported so as to lower or impair that standard" (Music Academy 1941: 17).

The second criticism concerned the artistic freedom of musicians. Some Brahman musicians opposed the 1941 resolution as a rude intrusion into their inherent right to choose compositions for their performance. Opposing the method, rather than the intent, of popularizing Tamil songs, Musiri Subramaniya Iyer (1899-1975) stated during the annual Music Academy conference in the same year that musicians have the right to choose what they play. Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer (1908-2003) added that the masses cannot define good music and that "democracy in music is [an] evil" (Music Academy 1944; Nambi Arooran 1975: 57; 1980: 261).

Their objection was intensified when another resolution was passed at the *Tamil Isai* conference in 1943. This resolution requested radio stations to enforce the "fair" representation of Tamil songs, with 80% of songs in Tamil and 20% in other languages on radio programs from the Tiruchirapalli station, and 40% in Tamil and 40% in Telugu from the Madras station (Ramanatha Chettiar 1993: 15-6).⁶⁾ Reflecting the views of influential Brahman musicians such as those quoted above, a unanimously passed resolution during the conference declared, "in the interest of classical music it is not desirable to prescribe any percentage of songs in any language in the recitals, in public concerts, Radio programmes or in university syllabuses" (Music Academy 1944: 11-2).

Another common criticism of the *Tamil Isai* movement concerns the supposed dearth of Tamil compositions of high order. Many musicians expressed the view that the great composers of classical music wrote lyrics in Telugu and Sanskrit, and that it is wrong to popularize Tamil songs at the expense of worthy songs in other languages.⁷⁾ Behind this criticism is the widely accepted characterization of Telugu as the most suitable language for music, often hailed as the "Italian of the East." The common view at the Academy then was that "(t)he inclusion of greater number of Tamil songs would lower the quality of Carnatic

music” (Ramachandran 1983: 6).

In response to such criticism, proponents of the movement stressed that there were many worthy compositions in Tamil but that these were simply neglected by musicians. They quoted the recollection of U. V. Swaminada Iyer (1885-1942), a highly respected Brahman scholar of Tamil language and literature, of the custom of singing Tamil songs in the past and of their fall into oblivion (Ramachandran 1983: 6). Other proponents of the movement maintained that songs by non-Brahman composers such as Muttutandavar “exercised great influence over ‘Carnatic’ [Karnatak] musicians till about 1900 A.D. that is until the craze of Telugu songs got hold of them” (Arunachalam 1989: 139).⁸ At the same time as these counter-arguments were advanced, proponents of the movement responded to this particular criticism by making efforts to enlarge the repertoire of Tamil songs of high caliber. Competitions with cash awards for singing Tamil songs were instituted at Annamalai University, which also published the notations of more than 1,300 Tamil songs in multiple volumes starting in 1943 (Chelladurai 1996).

Lastly, yet another criticism was advanced from the Academy that the *Tamiḷ Isai* movement was a political movement in disguise, based on language and caste prejudice. According to them, the movement was not about music, but rather was essentially an outlet for a non-Brahman political party (Justice Party) to circumvent Brahman ideology and authority. The proponents of the movement negated this criticism by pointing to the existence of many Brahman supporters, including highly prominent public figures such as C. Rajagopalacharia (1878-1972)⁹ and Kalki Krishnamurthy (1897-1968).¹⁰ Even E. Krishna Iyer (1897-1968), secretary of the Academy for the first ten years of its existence, called in 1929 for more Tamil songs to be performed (Nambi Arooran 1980: 254; Music Academy 1997: 22-3), but his support for Tamil songs was an exception at the Academy, and was not reflected in its 1941 resolution to denounce the *Tamiḷ Isai* movement. His proposal for a resolution that would reconcile the both sides of argument was flatly rejected by the all-Brahman Experts Committee (Music Academy 1941: 17; 1997: 22-3).

Tamiḷ Isai Saṅgam

The Tamil Isai Saṅgam (Tamil Music Association, hereafter “Sangam”) was established in 1943 at the peak of this controversy over *Tamiḷ Isai*. Faced with stiff resistance from the Academy, protagonists of the movement realized the need to establish an organization of their own that would embody their beliefs. The Sangam started organizing an annual festival in December to challenge the dominance of the Academy by sponsoring many performances of Tamil songs. While the Sangam sponsored both Brahman and non-Brahman musicians, the ratio of participating non-Brahman musicians was much higher here than at the Academy. It also held academic conferences on *Tamiḷ Isai*, to give a sense of official authorization to their activities and to assess the continuity between ancient Tamil music and present practice.

A music school (*Tamiḷ Isai Kallūri* or Tamil Music College) was established in 1944 in Madras and later at a few other places to popularize Tamil songs. Songs in other languages are excluded from the curricula. Instruction is given mostly in vocal music, while a course on *periyā mēḷam* music was also recently created (Plate 3).¹¹ Annual competitions with



Plate 3 A vocal music class at *Tamiḷ Isai Kallūri* (Chennai, 1999)

cash awards were instituted by the Sangam to popularize Tamil songs and to encourage *periyā mēlam* music.

Because non-Brahman musicians were the primary purveyors of Tamil compositions, the Sangam became the single most important patron of non-Brahman musicians and their repertoire, as opposed to the Academy and other Brahman controlled organizations which, according to many non-Brahmans, provided preferential patronage to Brahman musicians.¹²⁾

Are Tamil Songs More Popular Today?

Many Brahmans believe that the *Tamiḷ Isai* movement's intent to popularize Tamil songs has gradually been accepted by mainstream classical music. It is true that many Brahman opponents of the movement eventually performed at the Sangam's annual festival. Prominent Brahman musicians such as Musiri Subramaniya Iyer and Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer who, as mentioned earlier, initially criticized the *Tamiḷ Isai* movement, eventually sang Tamil songs at the Sangam, and both were awarded the musical title of *Isai Pēraṟiṅṅar* in 1963 and 1969 respectively.¹³⁾

On the other hand, the dominance of Trinity compositions in Telugu and Sanskrit remains intact at the Academy and other Brahman-controlled *sabhas*. For example, during the 1998 festival, 470 compositions were presented at the Academy, of which 143 (33%) were songs by Tyagaraja. The total number of Trinity compositions was 228, comprising 49% of the whole. A rough estimate of Tamil songs would be about 5%. While these figures may be read either as improvement or as stagnation depending on who interprets them, the representation of Tamil songs at Brahman-controlled organizations continues to appear far from the objectives initially set some 60 years ago by the movement.¹⁴⁾

Public music education has also become a site of negotiation for popularizing Tamil songs. For example, Telugu and Sanskrit songs had been predominant in the curriculum of the Tamil Nadu Government Music College (*Tamiḷnāḍu Arasu Isai Kallūri*), a performing arts college run by the state since 1949.¹⁵ When Tiruppanburam S. Shanmukasundaram (b. 1937) was appointed as the principal of the college in 1988 as the first non-Brahman to assume the post, he managed to overhaul its Telugu- and Sanskrit-dominated curriculum to one with predominantly Tamil songs (approximately 70% according to the teachers) and hired many young non-Brahman musicians as instructors. Shanmukasundaram is a non-Brahman (of the *Isai Vēḷāḷar* caste) vocalist from an illustrious family of musicians who has a long association with the *Tamiḷ Isai* movement. One of his uncles, Tiruppamburam Swaminatha Pillai (1900-1961), was not only a famous flute player but was also considered one of the most prominent supporters of the movement.¹⁶ However, when Shanmukasundaram retired in 1999 and a Brahman succeeded to his position as principal, the Telugu- and Sanskrit-oriented syllabus was restored and the representation of Tamil songs became marginalized once again, as virtually all non-Brahman teachers at the college had predicted.

Moreover, the state of Tamil Nadu, led by Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi, declared in the mid-1990s that it would open a state-run music school (*Tamiḷ Nāḍu Arasu Isaippaḷḷi*) to teach *Tamiḷ Isai* in each of the 30 districts of the state. This program began in 1997 with the opening of 10 schools, and 17 schools were in operation as of 2001 offering courses in classical vocal music (Tamil songs), *periyā mēḷam*, *tēvāram* (Tamil hymns on the deity Siva) and *bharata nāṭyam*.¹⁷ As the practitioners of these forms are mostly non-Brahmans, these government schools provide them with more employment opportunities.

Even the Department of Indian Music at Madras University, another center of Brahman music scholarship, has been under pressure from the university administration to modify the Telugu- and Sanskrit-centered curriculum. During the tenure of a non-Brahman vice chancellor, the decision to gradually Tamilize the syllabus was made through laborious negotiations and careful lobbying.¹⁸ As of 2004, the curriculum of the corresponding course was largely Tamil-based, and a plan to expand it to the regular courses is underway. In addition to placing emphasis on teaching Tamil songs, the Tamilization of Sanskrit-derived musical terminology has been proposed, and some changes have already been made.

New Radicalism against Brahmanical Music Culture

The Sangam claims to have spearheaded the movement to propagate Tamil songs, but the evaluation of its success has not gone unchallenged: several organizations have been established out of frustration with the Sangam's moderate stance toward caste-based discrimination in music and/or its inability to fight it. Two of the most radical, and thus controversial, organizations to have appeared in the 1990s are *Makkaḷ Kalai Illakiya Kalaham* and *Tandai Periyār Tamiḷ Isai Maṅṅam*. The existence of these organizations is rarely documented in music scholarship and journalism, as these tacitly assume a kind of spiritualist universalism in which music stands beyond mundane human activities; attempts to refocus music-making as a social phenomenon (not to mention a "caste" issue that has

already been stigmatized) are consequently shunned as distasteful or even blasphemous.

Nothing but Tamil Songs

I have already discussed the image-manipulation of Tyagaraja in Brahmanical music culture. Apart from the activities of the Academy, one of the most potent venues for conjuring up Tyagaraja's saintly image is Tyagaraja Aradhana, a musical tribute on his death anniversary in Tiruvaiyaru, a small town on the Kaveri River near the city of Tanjavur, where he is believed to have died (attained *samādi* or eternal bliss).¹⁹⁾ The function in Tiruvaiyaru, the oldest of its kind, started in 1908, but for the past 25 years or so, it has spread not only to other parts of India, but also to many locations outside India (North America, Europe, Australia) where South Indians have migrated (Hansen 1996; Ravi 1999: 449-51). Musicians of all grades and fans gather to pay homage to Tyagaraja by singing his compositions in Telugu. In recent years, it has also become a media event as portions of the festival are broadcast on TV and radio.

A scandal erupted during the Tyagaraja Aradhana in Tiruvaiyaru in 1997, which marked the 150th anniversary of Tyagaraja's death. The members of a left-wing organization called *Makkaḷ Kalai Illakiya Kalaham* (hereafter MKIK; People's Association for Arts and Literature) disrupted the festival by shouting pro-Tamil slogans and raising a banner that read "Sing in Tamil" (*Tamiḷil Pāḍu*). They requested that only Tamil songs be sung in Tamil Nadu, and that Tyagaraja's Telugu lyrics be translated into Tamil (Kaliyappan 1999: 46; Pudiya Kalaccaram 2002). The protesters were quickly taken away from the site (and reportedly beaten afterwards) by the police.²⁰⁾ Although it attracted media attention, as the MKIK had hoped, this incident has furthered Brahmans' exasperation toward what they often refer to as "Tamil chauvinists." During the festival in 1998 and 1999, the organizers appealed to the audience for the issue of language and caste not to be a factor at the festival for the saint, who transcended human or worldly divisions such as caste and language (*The Hindu*, January 3, 1999), but the police security was so heavy that it spoiled the reverential atmosphere the organizers had striven to create. Even a few participating musicians were not allowed inside the site.

The event in 1997 was by no means the first clash of interests at the Tyagaraja Aradhana festival. Ever since its inception, it has been plagued with communal tension between Brahman and non-Brahman musicians, despite its portrayal of universal humanism and comradeship based on the sacred art of music.²¹⁾ For many non-Brahman musicians, the festival has long been a site of negotiation to eliminate discriminatory practices, including the separation of places for eating and performance at the festival site, and more generally to challenge Brahmans' condescending attitude and treatment toward non-Brahmans. For example, it was during the 1939 festival that the performers of *periya mēlam* (all non-Brahmans) were allowed for the first time to play onstage in sitting positions, as their Brahman counterparts had always done. This change was achieved only after intense negotiation by a charismatic and influential *nāgasvaram* musician, T. N. Rajarattinam Pillai (1898-1956) (Sundaram 1998: 9). This practice became gradually accepted in the 1940s outside this performance context after the age-old practice was broken in Tiruvaiyaru. More recently, many posters were placed around the town in 1971 during the festival,

condemning the Brahman domination of music (*The Hindu*, January 17, 1971), and a group of *periya mēlam* musicians attempted, though unsuccessfully, to boycott a performance for the procession during the festival, allegedly to humiliate the organizers.

At least for the past ten years, pro-*Tamil Isai* slogans have been written on the walls around Tiruvaiyaru at the time of the festival, offending Brahmans and alienating moderate non-Brahmans (Srinivasan 1999). In 1999, anti-Tyagaraja Aradhana slogans were written on the walls on the road connecting Tiruvaiyaru and Tanjavur (Plates 4 and 5).



Plates 4-5 The MKIK slogans on the wall (near Tiruvaiyaru, 1999)

The text of two such slogans reads:

Plate 4

Karnataka music is a stolen music.
Sing in Tamil, or we will make you sing [in Tamil].

Plate 5

Demand a public apology from the Tyagaraja Festival Committee
which disgraced the *Tamil Isai* artist Dandapani Desikar for his singing in Tamil.²²⁾

The supporters of *Tamil Isai* often cite anecdotes illustrating the ill treatment of non-Brahman musicians and the contempt toward the Tamil language felt by Brahmans. M. M. Dandapani Desikar (1908-1972) was a famous vocalist and a prominent supporter of the movement (Plate 6).²³⁾ When he sang at the Tyagaraja Aradhana in 1952, he gave a performance mostly of Tyagaraja compositions, but started and ended his performance with Tamil songs as was his custom at any public concert. After his performance, the stage where he was sitting was purified with water, because the sanctity of Tyagaraja had been rudely violated by the singing of Tamil songs (Kaliyappan 1999: 39; Irankumaran 1993: 38).²⁴⁾ Articles critical of his insertion of Tamil songs also appeared in newspapers and magazines. For non-Brahmans, this is one of the most widely distributed anecdotes, often told to illustrate not only the Brahman suppression of Tamil songs but also the Brahman



Plate 6 M. M. Dandapani Desikar

discrimination against non-Brahman musicians.²⁵⁾

According to K. Kaliyappan, the secretary of the MKIK's Tanjavur branch, they are not opposed to Tyagaraja's music since they regard it as deriving from *Tamil Isai*. Their objective is the complete elimination of songs written in any languages but Tamil from Tamil-speaking areas. While uncomfortable with the MKIK's confrontational method of protest, many moderate non-Brahmans sympathize with their thesis of Brahman domination of music.²⁶⁾

In Pursuit of Non-Devotional Tamil Songs

The *Tandai Periyār Tamil Isai Maṭṭam* (Periyar Tamil Music Association, hereafter TPTIM) was established in 1993 by a wealthy Chennai-based entrepreneur, N. Arunachalam. The name of the organization derives from Periyar or E.V. Ramasamy Naicker (1879-1973), who was the central figure in the non-Brahman movement, a sociopolitical movement that condemned the Brahman monopoly of power in South Indian society. Periyar's vehement criticism of caste-based discrimination was extended to the Brahman monopoly of music and their suppression of non-Brahman musicians (Rajadurai 1997; Geetha and Rajadurai 1998: 318). Through his writings and speeches, he encouraged non-Brahmans to support their fellow musicians and himself organized a music festival for non-Brahman musicians in 1930 (Nambi Arooran 1983: 255).²⁷⁾

A staunch supporter of Periyar, Arunachalam aimed to realize his philosophy (known as *Periyār koḷgai*, or Periyar's principle) by establishing the organization. Arunachalam was disillusioned not only with the Brahman monopoly of music, which he considers the manifestation of Brahman cultural hegemony, but also with what he describes as the "Brahman takeover of the Tamil Isai Sangam" and its consequent inability to promote *Tamil Isai* and non-Brahman musicians.²⁸⁾ According to Arunachalam, Brahmins tactfully positioned themselves into the organization through personal friendship and networking, and began influencing the organization in their favor. Although the heads of the organization remain descendants of Annamalai Chettiar, the founder of the organization, many Brahmins have in fact become officers of the Sangam.

Many supporters of the TPTIM point to the strong presence of Brahman musicians at the Sangam's music festival which, from their perspective, should patronize primarily non-Brahman musicians. They believe that the Sangam was providing more patronage to Brahman musicians than to non-Brahman counterparts. For the festival for 1998-99, for example, 11 (35%) out of 32 music recitals were headed by Brahman soloists; and at least 43 (47%) out of 92 accompanists were Brahmins. These figures include the performers of *nāgasvaram* (double-reed aerophone) who invariably belong to non-Brahman castes, and if these are excluded the figure for Brahman musicians will be even higher. The supporters of the TPTIM emphatically comment on Sangam's "excessive" support of Brahman musicians at the expense of non-Brahman counterparts.

The primary activity of the TPTIM is its annual festival in Chennai. One would hear none of the compositions performed either at the Academy or at the Sangam. Participating musicians are exclusively non-Brahman, and only Tamil songs are allowed to be part of the program. Restrictions are placed not only on language, but also on the content of the song

text. Reflecting Periyar's atheistic philosophy, the TPTIM does not endorse compositions in praise of deities, and this policy excludes virtually all compositions patronized by the Sangam. Not even compositions in Tamil are spared. Instead, the compositions performed at this festival are songs to praise the beauty of the Tamil language and culture, or songs that criticize what they consider anti-Tamil practices.

One frequently sung composition, *Tamiḷā! Nī Pēsuvaḍu Tamiḷā?* (Tamil! Is it Tamil that you are speaking?), is a good example of this. The first verse of this composition reads:

Tamil! Is it Tamil that you are speaking?
 You are calling a beautiful child "Baby"
 What the heck? You are calling your father "Daddy"
 You are killing the life of Tamil
 Does English eat up this beautiful Tamil?
 Is it okay if your mother tongue dies in front of your eyes?
 Tamil! Is it Tamil that you are speaking?²⁹⁾

The song may appear on the surface as a straightforward warning toward Tamilians in general against the excessive use of English, but the non-Brahman audience at the festival tended to interpret it as a criticism of the Brahman custom to make heavy use of English words and expressions in their daily conversation. Many even assert that English is so much a part of Brahman speech that they can not speak Tamil properly. According to Ramaswamy, Brahmins were already seen by the 1920s as destroying the Tamil language with their excessive use of English and Sanskrit (1997: 28, 194-7).

The TPTIM makes no claim of direct affiliation with the Dravida Karaham (DK), a political party that Periyar led, but many supporters in fact belong to the party. In addition, Arunachalam is known to be a supporter of the LTTE (the Liberation Tigers for Tamil Elam) which has been engaged in the militant separatist movement for minority Tamils against the Sri Lankan government since the 1980s. In his office in Chennai, a portrait of a tiger, the symbol of the LTTE, is hung prominently behind his desk. Arunachalam is also a close ally and generous patron of Kasi Anandan (b. 1938), a Sri Lankan poet who has provided lyrics for many of the songs performed at the TPTIM music festival. Arunachalam has published Anandan's poems from his own printing house (Anandan 1998), and released cassette recordings of Tamil compositions including Anandan's songs.³⁰⁾

The TPTIM strives for the complete Tamilization of the Tamil language, which they regard as having been polluted with the intrusion of other languages – a fact for which they hold Brahmins responsible. They have replaced many Sanskrit-derived technical terms in music with Tamil equivalents. For example, *isai vaḷaṅgiyavar* has replaced *saṅgīta vittuvāṇ*, a common term for a musician. The Tamilization of language is not restricted to musical terms, and is a part of their effort to eliminate foreign words from the Tamil language in general. Even for a foreign item such as the telephone they use a coined Tamil term (*tolaipēsi*, literally "distance talk").

Because of the TPTIM's overt anti-Brahmanism and Tamilization of music, many non-Brahman musicians shy away from performing at this festival for fear of being branded as



Plate 7 A concert at the TPTIM's annual music festival (Chennai, 1999). Note the portrait of Periyar prominently displayed on stage right.

“Brahman haters” and as a consequence losing Brahman patronage. Even those who perform for this festival do not necessarily share the organization’s objectives. Such musicians will perform at other venues, including Brahman-controlled *sabhas*, if given the opportunity, and in such cases they mostly perform the repertoire of classical music that the TPTIM aspires to eliminate. Most non-Brahman musicians I have talked to are critical of Brahman preferential treatment to their fellow musicians, and the reluctance on the part of the Academy and other Brahman music organizations to patronize non-Brahman musicians. Yet they are ambivalent about the TPTIM’s radical anti-Brahman stance: while grateful for the performance opportunities, they are hesitant to identify themselves with it completely to avoid being ostracized by other performance venues (Plate 7).

Moreover, the musicians’ ambivalence derives not only from ideological reasons but also from musical considerations. Since the TPTIM endorses no classical repertoire, musicians are obliged to learn compositions that are suggested for their performances. Consequently, many are seen performing with texts and/or notation in front of them. Apart from the frequently expressed criticism against the TPTIM’s overtly anti-Brahman rhetoric, one of the major problems for the TPTIM is a lack of compositions that would not contradict their ideology, and one would frequently hear the same songs performed repeatedly, such as the work that can be identified as their theme song, *Tamilē Uirē Vanakkam*. In order to break the monotony of playing the same songs repeatedly, some musicians re-set this composition to different *rāgams* (melodic modes).³¹⁾

Rewriting the History

Many proponents of the *Tamiḷ Isai* movement claim that what is known as *Karṇāṭaka Saṅgīta* is in fact *Tamiḷ Isai*, renamed with a Sanskrit-derived designation to make it appear to be a tradition created and transmitted by Brahmans (Arunachalam 1989: 10). They have no disagreement with the notion that Tyagaraja was one of the most significant musicians that South India has ever produced, and do not generally question his saintly disposition. In fact, many non-Brahmans, musicians and patrons alike, including the founder of the *Tamiḷ Isai* movement, Annamalai Chettiar, have expressed their adoration for his music.

Many musicians who belong to the non-Brahman caste of *Isai Vēlāḷar* believe that Tyagaraja's main musical influence came from their own ancestors during his lifetime. For example, some question Tyagaraja's discipleship with Sonti Venkataramanayya, a theme unanimously accepted in the dominant discourse, asserting instead that Tyagaraja learned music mostly from *nāgasvaram* musicians in Tiruvaivaru.³² They "are prepared to honor him [Tyagaraja] as the greatest musician of *Tamiḷ Isai*" who simply used the language medium of Telugu with the music nurtured by Tamils (Arunachalam 1989; Iankumaran 1993: 37).³³ Similarly, while Muttusvami Diksitar is known to have taught a number of non-Brahman disciples, their musical influence on this esteemed composer – on which many non-Brahman musicians emphatically remark – is virtually absent from the writings of Academy affiliated scholars such as T. L. Venkatarama Iyer (1968, 1979) and V. Raghavan (1975a, 1975b) (Terada 2000: 479).

The proponents of the *Tamiḷ Isai* movement challenge the absolute position of the Trinity in Brahman discourse by highlighting the presence of non-Brahman composers of Tamil songs. M. Arunachalam, for example, characterizes three prominent non-Brahman composers of the 16th to 18th centuries as the Elder Trinity or Sirkari Trinity.³⁴ By describing Tyagaraja and two other Brahman composers of the 18th century as the Tiruvarur Trinity (instead of the one and only Trinity) and juxtaposing them with the Sirkari Trinity, they aim to challenge the monopoly of Brahman composers (and by extension of Telugu and Sanskrit compositions) in South Indian classical music. The portraits of these non-Brahman composers are prominently displayed in the auditorium of the Sangam, in sharp contrast to the Academy and other Brahman-controlled organizations where the portraits of the Tiruvarur Trinity adorn their interior to the exclusion of the non-Brahman Trinity.

In so doing, the proponents of the *Tamiḷ Isai* movement have attempted to relativize the position of the Trinity as the pinnacle of South Indian music, and insist that they are only one set of the Trinities that have appeared in the history of South Indian music. Few supporters of *Tamiḷ Isai* aim to belittle the contribution of Tyagaraja, and they only criticize the manner in which Tyagaraja has been made into a potent cultural icon to symbolize Brahman music culture exclusively.

Concluding Remarks

I have discussed the role of the Academy in maintaining Brahman-centered music culture, and various forms of resistance manifested in the activities of non-Brahman organizations. By the various means described above (such as publications, speeches, conference resolutions, portraits, festivals, and establishing music colleges), these organizations each try to create and disseminate a particular sense of history.

For Brahmans, creating and maintaining a music culture of their own where they alone have the privileged position for self-definition is crucial for maintaining their cultural identity, which has been threatened throughout the 20th century by sociopolitical movements against Brahmans.³⁵⁾ For many non-Brahmans, the *Tamiḷ Isai* movement manifests their desire to reclaim their history, which according to them has been “stolen” (*kalavāḍiya*) or denied by Brahmans. They assert that Brahman scholars have fabricated an image of South Indian music around a succession of Brahman composers, largely to the exclusion of non-Brahman contributions. While the methods of popularizing *Tamiḷ Isai* vary from the moderate and reconciliatory strategies by the Tamil Isai Sangam to the more radical and confrontational tactics adopted by the MKIK and TPTIM, they appear to share the perception that Brahmans have appropriated the music and dance tradition that non-Brahmans created and nurtured.

Lastly, investigating the issues concerning *Tamiḷ Isai* will enable us (as outside researchers) to break away from the constriction of the powerful dominant discourse. The Academy, along with Madras University, has been one of the best-known music organizations outside South India, serving as a gateway for foreign students and scholars interested in South Indian music. Their accessibility and use of English in their writings have made Brahman scholars and musicians the favored collaborators for non-Indian researchers who might have internalized Brahman perspectives, thereby unwittingly becoming instrumental in perpetuating the “Trinity myth” and the Brahman interpretations of history.³⁶⁾

Notes

- 1) An earlier version of this paper was presented at the biannual World Conference of the International Council for Traditional Music (ICTM) in Hiroshima, Japan (1999) and at the Annual Conference of the Society for Ethnomusicology (SEM) in Toronto, Canada (2000). I benefited greatly from the comments from the floor at both meetings. A special thanks is due to the late T. Viswanathan, who gave me a detailed response to the manuscript, and his perspectives were invaluable in revising the paper. I would also like to thank A. Raman Unni and B. Subramaniam for their assistance during my research in India.
- 2) Tyagaraja’s ancestor came to the Tanjavur area from what is today the Kurnool district in Andhra Pradesh. Tyagaraja’s father, Rama Brahman, was patronized by Tulaja II, a Nayaka king. He was given a house and land, which Tyagaraja is believed to have inherited. The compositions of Tyagaraja have dominated the concert stage of classical music at least since the 1920s.
- 3) Nine more *Tamiḷ Isai* conferences were held between 1941 and 1945 to raise awareness of the

merit of Tamil songs: Tiruchy, Madras (September, 1941), Devakotai (October, 1941), Tiruchy (December, 1941), Madurai (August, 1942), Pudukottai (October, 1942), Kumbakonam (April, 1943), Valampuri (May, 1944), and Ayampettai (August, 1945). At each conference a resolution was passed regarding ways to popularize Tamil songs (Ramanathan Chettiar 1993; Ilankumaran 1993).

- 4) Even before the 1941 resolution, resentment was expressed toward the *Tamiḷ Isai* movement. For example, in his speech at the All India Oriental Conference in Tirupati, T. V. Subba Rao stated, "Linguistic considerations ought not [to] be allowed to prevail in the selection of classical items. The highest music transcends the limitation of language." (Music Academy 1941: 53)
- 5) Krishnamachari's son, T. T. Vasu (1929-2005), was the president of the Music Academy between 1983 and 2005.
- 6) The different percentages of Tamil songs requested in the resolution are due to the linguistic constitution of the population. Madras, located in close proximity to Andhra Pradesh, had many Telugu-speaking residents, whereas the Tiruchirapalli station covered central Tamil Nadu where the vast majority of the population was Tamil.
- 7) For example, Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar mentioned in his lecture, "Language in Music," that "(w)here pieces that came up to approved technical standards were available, there was no reason why Tamil pieces should not be sung. But such pieces were very few in number." (Music Academy 1942: 19).
- 8) The compositions of Tyagaraja have dominated the concert stage of classical music at least since the 1920s. William Jackson believes that nationalistic zeal contributed to the promotion of Tyagaraja as the national composer (1991: 106).
- 9) Popularly known as Rajaji, he was a powerful leader of the Congress party and prime minister of Madras Presidency in 1937-39 and 1952-54. See Muttaiya for a sample of his pro-*Tamiḷ Isai* speech (1996: 24-9). Despite his professed pro-Tamil stance, his intentions were questioned by some non-Brahmans (Ramaswamy 1997: 199).
- 10) Kalki Krishnamurthy was an influential journalist and publisher who frequently wrote articles in favor of the *Tamiḷ Isai* movement in a popular Tamil weekly, *Kalki*, which he had established in 1941. A sample of his writing is provided in Muttaiya (1996: 83-7).
- 11) *Periya mēlam* refers to a tradition of instrumental ensemble that provides music at both temple and life-cycle rituals in South India. It features *nāgasvaram* (double-reed aerophone), *tavil* (barrel-shaped double-headed drum), *tālam* (a pair of small hand cymbals) and *sruṭi* box (free reed instrument to provide drone).
- 12) For example, in the 1960s and 1970s, an average of five *periya mēlam* concerts were sponsored by the Sangam during its annual music festival in December, whereas only one was given at the Academy.
- 13) Some non-Brahmans regard these acts as representing Brahmans' cunning tendency in pursuit of money.
- 14) The figures given here are based on the list of compositions in the concert souvenir program. Musicians occasionally makes changes in their performance and the figures for the songs actually performed may be slightly different. But for my analysis, the musicians' intentions are just as significant as what they actually played.
- 15) For its first 25 years of existence (1949-74), it was called the Central College of Carnatic Music

(*Mattiya Karnāṭaka Isai Kallūri*).

- 16) Some opine that his motivation to appear frequently at *Tamiḷ Isai*-related events was more for monetary rewards than from his commitment to the movement. Even so, his participation should be read, regardless of his real intentions, in the context that performance opportunities for non-Brahman musicians were limited and that the sense of being discriminated against by Brahmins was shared by virtually all non-Brahman musicians.
- 17) Interview with T. S. Latchappa Pillai, director of the program (Chennai, 2001). *Bharata nāṭyam* traces its origin to the ritual dance offered at Hindu temples, and its practitioners (known as *dēvadāsi*) belonged invariably to non-Brahman castes. As the institution of temple dance was banned due to its suspected connection to prostitution, it was “revived” in the 1930s as a respectable and national (*bharata* meaning India) art form for the emerging urban middle class. Brahmins were instrumental in sanitizing the tainted dance tradition by changing its name (from *sadir* to *bharata nāṭyam*) and practitioners (*dēvadāsi* to Brahmins) and by reformulating the repertoire to eliminate excessive eroticism (Allen 1997; Natarajan 1997).
- 18) Interviews with P. Kodandaraman, Vice Chancellor of Madras University, and N. Ramanathan, Head of the Department of Indian Music (Chennai, 2000).
- 19) The *āradhana* refers to a ritual of worship in memory of saints.
- 20) According to *the Hindu*, the disruption occurred three times, and a total of 18 persons were arrested (January 29, 1997).
- 21) Written communication with T. Sankaran (1991).
- 22) The original Tamil texts read as follows:

*kalavāḍiya isaiyē karnāṭaka isai
tamiḷil pāḍu! Illaiyēl Pāḍavaippōṅ
tamiḷsai mēdai daṇḍapāṇi dēsikar
tamiḷil pāḍiyatarku tīṭṭukalittu
avamāṇappaḍuttiya tiyāgayyar
viḷākkulu kumbalē
pagiraṅga maṇṇippukkē!*

The theme of Brahman (Aryan) appropriation of non-Brahman (Dravidian) culture and their claim of it as their own is by no means new. For examples, see Ramaswamy (1997: 44)

- 23) He served as dean of the Music Department at Annamalai University in the 1950s-60s, and supported the *Tamiḷ Isai* movement by giving all-Tamil performances, giving speeches at conferences and appearing on radio programs.
- 24) Somasudara Desikar, a disciple of Dandapani Desikar who accompanied him in Tiruvaiyaru, remembers that some Brahman musicians requested the stage to be purified because it had been polluted by Desikar’s singing of Tamil songs (interview, Chennai, 2000). Desikar never performed for the Aradhana again. This anecdote has been exaggerated to the extent that many believe Desikar was physically removed from the stage by angry Brahmins when he was singing a Tamil song.
- 25) A similar incident is also frequently mentioned regarding T. N. Rajarattinam Pillai (1898-1956) who was one of the top-ranking musicians during the first half of this century. He was an extraordinary player of *nāgasvaram*, but he was also a fine vocalist. When he sang Tamil songs in a temple in Koraccal (near Tiruvaiyaru), the place he had been sitting was washed with cow dung

for purification after he left the site, allegedly because Tamil songs were sung (interview with Periya Dasan, Chennai, 1999). While this anecdote is told mostly to illustrate Brahman discrimination against non-Brahman musicians, even those musicians whose ability is highly appreciated by Brahmans, this provocative action was possibly a display of their criticism of the *Tamiḷ Isai* movement as Rajarattinam Pillai was considered one of its ardent supporters (Sadasivam 1992: 34; Soranadan 1998: 53).

- 26) At the Aradhana function held at the Music Academy in 1999, the *pañcaratna kīrtana* (a set of five compositions by Tyagaraja) were performed according to custom by about 50 musicians on the stage who were invited for the occasion. Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, the senior vocalist, was seen directing the group, while B. Rajam Iyer, the principal of the music college attached to the Music Academy, was the host of the gathering, sitting prominently in the center. The musicians on the stage were virtually all Brahmans, as were the vast majority of the audience. None of the surviving non-Brahman *saṅgīta kalānidhis* were present. Many non-Brahmans mentioned to me that non-Brahman recipients of the coveted title stay away from the Music Academy because of the overtly brahmanical orientation with which most of the Academy's activities are perceived. For most non-Brahmans, it was an exclusively Brahman affair. Non-Brahmans were not prohibited from entering the site, but many have stated that the atmosphere was so overtly brahmanical as to make it prohibitive for them to participate. The deification of the “saint-composer” was evident in this event. Prominent on the left side of the stage was a portrait of Tyagaraja to which worship (*pūjā*) was conducted after the performance in a manner identical to that for a deity. The songs were sung with outwardly visible devotion, emulating, consciously or not, the spiritualism that Tyagaraja was supposed to represent.
- 27) Periyar served as the president of the Second Tamil Isai Conference in Tiruchirapalli in 1941 (Ramanathan Chettiar 1993: 4-5).
- 28) Interview with N. Arunachalam (Chennai, 1998).
- 29) The portion of the original poem translated in the main text is given blow (Anandan 1998: 142-3).

Tamiḷā! Nī pēsuvadu Tamiḷā?

Aṇṇaiyai tamiḷvāyāl

'Mammi' eṇṇalaittāy...

Aḷahuk kuḷandaiyai

'Bēbi' eṇṇalaittāy...

Eṇṇaḍā tandaiyai

'Dāḍi' eṇṇalaittāy...

Iṇṇuyirt tamiḷai

Koṇṇu tolaittāy...

Tamiḷā! Nī pēsuvadu Tamiḷā?

- 30) *Tamizhisai Paadalgal* [*Tamiḷ Isai* songs] by Pushpavanam Kuppusami (Vijay Musicals, VMC 556-557).
- 31) During the festival in 1999, the composition written in *Mōhanam rāgam* (C-D-E-G-A) was reset in another pentatonic *rāgam*, *Hamsadvāṇi* (C-D-E-G-B).
- 32) Interview with B. M. Sundaram (Tanjavur, 1999). Sundaram also questions the validity of the widely believed notion that Tyagaraja was born in Tiruvaiyaru, challenging the rare coincidence of their birth places (also see Gurukrupa 1985).

- 33) Also interview with Muttukumarasami, a disciple of Dandapani Desikar (Chennai, 2000).
- 34) Other related terms such as Sirkari Muvar (Chelladurai 1996) and Tamil Isai Muvar (TPTIM 1999) have been used to refer to these three non-Brahman composers of Tamil songs. They comprise Muttutandavar (1525-1625), Arunachala Kavirayar (1711-1779), and Marimutta Pillai (1712-1787). The Sirkari in the appellation is taken from the name of the town where Muttutandavar was born. Also see Selvaganapati (1996) for a similar argument.
- 35) Music and dance are the only remaining cultural spheres of Brahmins; their dominance in other spheres such as politics, administration, and education has been taken away as the result of the non-Brahman movement (interview with S. V. Rajadurai and V. Geetha, Chennai, 1999).
- 36) Shanmukasundaram Pillai is frustrated over the internalization of the dominant discourse by foreign scholars and students who already have a preconceived notion of South Indian music, drawn from the dominant Brahmanical narrative on history and present practice (interview, Chennai, 1999).

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