



SELECTIVE SUSTENANCE OF FLUTE OVER CLARINET AS PART OF THE CHINNAMELAM FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF CULTURAL HEGEMONY

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Abstract

The presence of clarinet and flute in the dance ensemble called “chinnamealam” of the south Indian dance music tradition popularly termed as “Bharatanatyam” has been in vogue from the mid 19th century. However, Clarinet has been discontinued from the tradition of chinnamealam when the concert culture of practice was initiated in Madras from the temple and court tradition during the early 20th century. Consequently, the need for analysing the research question as to how the intriguing presence of flute and omission of clarinet has been sustained through the transition and the upheaval of the revived music culture keeping the socio-cultural background as a framework. Subsequently, the present study attempts to validate the hypothesis that the cultural hegemony could have played a vital role in preferential sustenance of flute over clarinet and interpreted using the theoretical framework for cultural hegemony proposed by the great Italian philosopher, Antonio Gramsci.. The argument has been built by gleaning through the data sourced from the Music academy, Chennai from 1930 to 1940, presumed to be the period of transition and complementing the same from the literature report.

Keywords

Chinnamealam, Sadir, dance, South Indian, Classical Dance, cultural hegemony, Antonio Gramsci, intellectual, consent, Tamil, Culture, Devadasi, flute, clarinet

Introduction

Flute has been considered to be the oldest of all the instruments on earth. In Tamil literature it was referred to as kuzhal. Owing to the grass variety as precursor from which it was derived, it was also termed as pullankuzhal. Under religious connotations, it was termed as venu or venkuzhal referring to Lord Krishna of Hinduism. According to the literature [ref], flute was prevalent in the dance music of mid 18th century referred to as “chinnamealam” and considered to occupy an important part in the dance ensemble of south India. The ensemble consisted of a vocalist, two nattuvanars, a percussionist playing on the mathalam or the mridangam, a wind player (on mukhavina, the short pipe with high pitched frequency or the flute), a player on thuthi to keep the up drone for the reference of the musicians. Mukhavina, a precursor of the nagaswaram was used to be played for the dance ensemble. Prof. Sambamoorthy explains about the instruments employed for dance music ensemble of chinnamealam as,

“provided by a performer on the flute or the mukhavina [a small oboe like nagaswaram] and the drone was provided by a performer on the bag pipe. Now the musical accompaniment is



provided by a performer on the clarinet. On account of the larger compass [three octaves instead of two and a half octaves on the flute] and the ease with which one could play on different srutis [key areas, owing to the mechanical keys on the instrument], the clarinet came to supersede the flute and the mukhavina."

In the beginning of the 19th century there was an inclusion of the European wind instrument called clarinet into the South Indian dance ensemble of Chinnamelam.

All the wind instruments were handled only by the traditional musicians for either dance or for vocals till the awakening of the nationalist movement initiated by the congress, the theosophical society and the elite upper class at the beginning of the 20th century that called for the systematization of art and culture to reinforce the ancient legacy of music and dance of India to the colonizers. Subsequently, the selective appropriation of flute as a concert instrument and accompaniment for dance with the denial of clarinet from the dance music took place when Rukmini Devi and Krishnayyar transformed the chinnamelam/sadir dance into Bharatanatyam (Matthew Harp Allen 1997). The transfer of the art of dance from the hereditary musicians to the upper class resulted in the fall of devadasi's dance tradition who were left to a liminal period.

Discussion

The burgeoning force of the nationalist movement wanted to restructure India's art as classical that Jackson (1985) explains in terms of Gramsci's cultural hegemony as,

"characterization of hegemony as 'the 'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is 'historically' caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production."

He explained that a society can be held under the hegemonic power though the consent given by the great mass of people. In this context, consent was not given by the great mass but by the powerful men of the devadasi matrilineal system. The consent given by nattuvanars for the anti nautch bill can be viewed as consent without the consensus of the devadasis in terms of Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony revealing as to how the cultural exploitation occurs in a known intracultural space partly with consent. This is expressed by Eula in terms of Gramsci's theory as, *"Instead, Gramsci offers a two-dimensional model of consent which can be categorised as passive/indirect or active/direct. In the first instance, he is referring to those historical moments in which changes are instituted regardless of popular wishes (Eula Michael J. (1986)."*

There was no force acting upon the nattuvanars from the British Government and still they chose to be passive in lieu of their inheritance laws in the matrilineal system along with the other women who were not into dancing profession. On account of the lack of support from the nattuvanars the association formed by the Devadasis came to a halt by 1928. It can be speculated that since music was predominantly with both Pillai and men from Brahmin communities, the relationship would have fostered faith that made them to look upon Brahmins as the guardians of art as one of the reason for providing their consent that aided in the transformation of Chinnamelam into Bharatanatyam by 1935. The present article exposes how the hegemony was carried out in order to reinvent flute as an accompanying instrument for dance and as a concert instrument. For the epistemology the Gramsci's theory of hegemony was applied to understand the process and intention behind the selective sustenance of flute in a given context.



Stigma shadowing the Wind instruments

The caste hierarchical structure that was carried over for centuries together in India had its implications in the society. The art that prevailed with the lower class or the devadasis were considered as polluted. The percentage of Brahmins learning nagaswaram, the indigenous instrument of South India seems to be negligible compared to the pursuing performing community of the the auspicious instrument who belong to the lower class of the society. The reason for the avoidance of learning nagaswaram by the upper class can be inferred from the article in Hindu that expresses the stigma faced by an upper caste who took to nagaswaram as, *"How can a Brahmin play an instrument with its reed tipped in human saliva, " was the contention of the local Brahmins. His teacher and noted nagaswaram player Keevalur Ganesan came under fire from his own community – the Isai Vellalars – for teaching a Brahmin to play the nagaswaram"* (Hindu 2016). Hence, the wind instruments such as nagaswaram, flute, clarinet and saxophone and even the percussion instruments such as thavil and mridangam made up of the animal skin were not considered fit to be played by the upper caste. Whereas String instruments like veena and violin were performed by the Brahmins. Abbe Dubois, the French traveller explains the Brahman belief as, *"the defilement which the players contact by putting such instruments in their mouths after they have been touched by saliva. There is by no means the same feeling with regard to stringed instruments."*

Even among the string instruments certain instruments were considered as unclean because of the sociological background of the instrument. This difference was explained by the Flemish artist Francois Baltazard Solvyns who lived in India during the 18th century who describes the associations of string instrument such as veena with the upper class whereas certain string instruments such as sarangi, wind instruments and percussion as connected with the lower class. Further, he records the hierarchy existing in the Indian culture between wind and the reed instruments such as surnai and shehnai where the entire mouthpiece of surmai was held within the lips but the reed alone was held with the lips in shehnai making it a less abhorred instrument in the hierarchical structure.

From the literature it can be inferred that in Calcutta, the northern part of India even the flute was played through the nose for the fear of discrimination and to avoid the contamination with the saliva of the mouth. It is not known whether the same practice existed in south India or just in Calcutta alone. From the above literature evidences it can be reasoned that both flute and clarinet being wind instruments were abhorred by due to the religious beliefs of Brahmins, but after the renaissance of Bharatanatyam from Sadir, flute was **recaste**, deified and became a worthy instrument to be played by the upper caste.

Concepts opposing the accustomed narratives of the land

Flute was a simple instrument of the common folk as indicated in the Tamil literature of the sangam period. Perumpanattrupadai, the compilations of patthupattu, provide the details regarding the construction of flute, the presence of a large flute and a flute to keep up the drone. Later it was called as the thutthi or the othu found in both chinamelam and periya melam tradition. According to Tamil people, flute was a common folk instrument played every day by the shepherds to keep their flock away from the predators by playing the ambal pann over their flutes.

Beth Bullard (1998), performer of the south Indian flute mentions the narratives for the flute from the perspective of her Brahmin informants as,



"Vedic writings connect the flute with sacred rituals; and the treatises reveal the flute's compatibility with the highest levels of musical complexity, for which the classical music of India is famous around the world."

From the above narratives three major concepts can be derived. They are 1) Rituals that played a major role in the life of a Brahmin 2) Vedas being the supreme law connecting the flute with ritual practices that bring auspiciousness inferring the supremacy of the flute and 3) classical intricacies of flute that makes it a sophisticated instrument

While the concepts constructed from the narratives of Tamil are 1) connected to nature 2) flute attached to specific ragas for five regions indicating the emotions of the land and 3) simplicity associated with the performance practice of flute.

The references to flute provided in the vedas acted as a primary source to connect flute with the sacred rituals not the temple rituals thus separating flute from nagaswaram. The sacred ritual is performed only by a Brahman as it is believed to bring auspiciousness facilitating goodness to the family thus serving as the basis for the reconstruction of flute in chinna melam and also as a concert instrument. Further, the construction of the underlying meaning of the term 'Classical' that is separated from simple *folk music* is said to convey the sophistication and complexity of the nature of musicality in flute. Hence, to be represented as classical it has to be expressed through the above two characters clearly opposing the concepts of the Tamils who practiced the flute on an everyday basis as a language of communication between the five regions and flute was instrumental for the shepherds to protect their flock away from the predators.

The Rise of the Organic Intellectual

The role of Theosophical society in the life of Rukmini Devi has to be intently observed for how the progressive thinking of Annie Besant influenced the politically naive but intelligent Rukmini in the transformation of Sadir dance to Bharatanatyam. Mathew Harp Allen (1988, p.70), the student of T.Viswanathan, the great south Indian flutist describe the impact of the society on Rukmini Devi as,

"the extent to which her young person was the site of absolutely feverish Orientalist-internationalist Theosophical activity, culminating in the proclamation of Rukmini Devi as World mother person (twice in 1925 and again in 1928), and further, the extent to which this activity may have coloured and shaped Rukmini Devi's subsequent involvement with the so-called revival dance in South India."

The society attracted many intellectuals from Brahmin society such as Neelakanta sasthriar the father of Rukmini Devi. Organic intellectuals such as Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy, Krishnamurthi, Rukmini Devi were influenced by the ideologies of Theosophical society. Having gained a refined aesthetic sense for visuals from her exposure with intellectuals and politicians from Europe as well as from India provided great support to her. Rukmini Devi dealt with the refinement of the art of Sadir/chinna melam especially the erotic love projected through the padams expressed by Mathew Harp Allen (1988) as,

"Affiliated changes were the renaming of the dance as Bharatanatyam, evoking a connection with a presumed glorious Hindu golden age; the excising repertoire songs(or parts songs) that contained textual references judged to be erotically suggestive; a general increase in tempo and in nritya, the rhythmic component of the dance' (at the expense of the graceful mimetic technique of abhinaya, which flourishes best in a leisurely tempo); the movement of dance from



the premises of temple and salon to the public stage; and the advent of Nataraja as both patron deity for dance and a subject for portrayal in dance."

The portrayal of extreme affection of the Sadir dancers towards Lord Krishna was negated by Rukmini Devi and her agency through minimising the text of the repertoire piece as well as with symbolic gestures through initiating the idol of Nataraja depicting the distant relationship with the fiery dancer god thereby neutralising the devadasi dance from the perspective of eroticism to chastity. These changes can be seen as an intelligent move by Rukmini Devi along with her other friends to present Bharatanatyam as a fitting dance for the traditional women to learn and pursue it as an art. This can be explained by the theory of intellectuals in a society by Gramsci as,

"an independent class of intellectuals does not exist, but rather every social group has its own intellectuals. However, the intellectuals of the historically progressive class ... exercise such a power of attraction that they end ... by subordinating the intellectuals of other social groups and thus create a system of solidarity among all intellectuals, with links of a psychological (vanity) or caste nature."

The above phenomena is realised spontaneously in historical periods in which the given social group is truly progressive such as the theosophical society. The dynamics of how the hegemony works with the rise of intellectuals as proposed by Gramsci can be understood in the role played by society in shaping Rukmini Devi as an intelligent revivalist as mentioned by Mathew Harp Allen as,

"the mentoring of Rukmini Devi by theosophical leaders argues a strong role for the society, with all its international implications in the revival of dance in South India."

She succeeded in discarding the excesses of Sringara rasa by depicting Lord Nataraja as a symbol but ironically the presence of flute which had replaced clarinet in Bharatanatyam during the same period was not viewed as a metaphor transmitting the erotic love of Lord Krishna for his gopikas but expressed as,

"Legend has it that, at the sound of Krishna's flute, the human soul flies to unite with Krishna as godhead, just as a woman rushes to meet her lover. Krishna's iconography stresses the power of his flute to charm all in nature."

Consequently, the flute became a holy instrument in the hands of the superordinate that justifies the discursive narrative of the flute being the instrument of Lord Krishna. The role played by Rukmini Devi and her group can be stated as the fundamental role that culture and traditional intellectuals play in the formation of cultural hegemony according to Gramsci analysis.

Analysis and Discussion

Although clarinet is said to have replaced flute from 1860, did flute completely evade from the dance music? It leaves us with the speculation about the ingenuity of the saying that flute was not present in the dance after 1860 building the oral discursive narratives that were spread to establish flute as a classical and pure instrument. **During the fight for the abolition of anti-nautch bill started from 1928 by Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy, (Douglas knight 2010).** It can be gleaned from the literature that nattuvanars used the opportunity to liberate themselves from the matrilineal tradition that became a devastation for the devadasis as if the fight against the anti-nautch was done with unification of the entire hereditary family, the case would have had a different turn but still Gramsci says that if the consent was not made then coercion is the method followed by the people in power to possess the hegemony. According to AKCN, flute was nonexistent in chinamelam and was introduced only after 1940s similar to the narrative of Prof. Sambamoorthy as discussed earlier. Interestingly, the book Sarva Deva Vilasa records the



presence of clarinet in dance as early as in 1800 in Madras. It can be understood that flute and clarinet were both present in the dance music right from 1800s. From the article featured in Hindu a picture of the celebrated devadasi dancer was displayed supposed to be captured by Nicholas & Co. who had a photo studio in Madras by 1860s as shown in the figure 1 reveals the name of the dancer as Gnyana who was mentioned as the most beautiful dancer that performed for the prince of Wales at his reception in the Royapuram railway station hall in 1875. According to the oral report from B.M. Sundaram, Gnyana had learnt from the great Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai who was the teacher of Balasaraswathi and Rukmini Devi.

The ensemble consists of a single reeded pipe resembling the Clarinet of simple Albert system by the musician seated on right side of the ensemble. The drone is provided by the musician standing on the right with thuthi the bag pipe, and the non-Brahmin flutist seated on the left revealing its use in chinnamelam alongside clarinet. The drone provided a constant pitch signifying the relation between the tonic and the mode. The two musicians seated on the front are nattuvanars who are supposed to be the choreographers for the dance. The musician on the left providing the percussion on mridangam was Manargudi Gopalan. Was mridangam, again an instrument attached to Devadasis present in vocal music but how did the polluted instrument was reinvented is a question that is beyond the scope of the present research.

Though the presence of flute can be traced to 1875 through the photograph of Gnyana, the devadasi dancer, the reports by Navaneetham, the flutist from the hereditary lineage about the status of flute as a main instrument. She clarifies that flute was a main instrument as her guru Muthu Pillai's used to perform solo concerts on flute. According to her, none of the musicians played flute as an accompaniment. Based on her statement, the duration when flute was reinstated over clarinet can be speculated as 1930-1935 when Rukmini Devi performed her first Sadir dance during the diamond jubilee convention of the theosophical society during December 1935.

The above sayings from varied musicians depicts the following 1) presence of clarinet and flute in chinnamelam right from 1800s 2) clarinet was adapted in dance from mid of 1860s (Seetha) and flute was dropped, it can be speculated that flute became a concert instrument 3) Flute as a main concert instrument and not as an accompaniment for dance from the mid of 19th century (Navaneetham) 4) Absence of clarinet from the chinmmelam/Bharatanatyam after 1935s while flute stayed with the dance as a permanent accompaniment. 5) presence of flute and clarinet in the dance dramas.

PREVALENCE OF FLUTISTS DURING THE PERIOD OF 1930-1940 IN MUSIC ACADEMY

Early flutists appeared in the concert music as soon as the patronage shifted from Tanjore to Music academy in Madras (Chennai) during 1927. The first person to have made flute as the concert instrument was Sarabha Sastri (1872-1904) according to the literature report. He learnt from Natesa Pillai, the legendary Nagaswaram Vidwan from the hereditary lineage. Natesa Pillai knew to play both the flute and nagaswaram owing to the same fingering present in both the instruments. Further Beth Bullard in her dissertation states the act of choosing a polluted instrument by a Brahman as,

"The implication seems to be that, were it not for his blindness, he as a Brahmin, would not have been handed a flute."

The data from Music Academy's concert schedule for flute from 1930-1940 records the performance of three flutists. While Thiruppambaram Swaminatha Pillai (1898-1961) was



featured in the prime time denoting the precedence of hereditary musicians as the flutists, whereas, the other two flutists were featured in the sub senior category whose information was not able to be traced. While the data of dance featured during 1930-40 has only the names of the hereditary musicians but gradually was taken over by the upper class.

Data From Music Academy for Flute

Flutist	Date	Time	Category
Mayavaram K.V. Rajam Iyer	26/12/35	3pm	Sub Senior
Master Varma	29/12/35	3pm	Sub Senior
Thiruppambaram Swaminatha Pillai	2/1/36	5pm	Sub Senior
Thiruppambaram Swaminatha Pillai	27/12/39	5pm	Evening Senior I

Data From Music Academy for Bharatanatyam

Lead Artist	Date	Time	Category
Miss.Balasaraswathi	27/12/35	6pm	Evening II Senior
Srimati Muthuratnambal of Tinnevely (Grand-Daughter of Nallanayakam)	27/12/37	5.30-8.30pm	Evening I Senior
Srimathi Balachandra	28/12/38	5.30-8.30pm	Evening I Senior
Srimathi Balasaraswathi	01/01/39	5.30-8.30pm	Evening I Senior
Srimathi Balasaraswathi	27/12/2039	5.15-8.15pm	Evening I Senior

Thus the details captured through the photo of Gnyana, the devadasi shot by 1875, it can be comprehended that both clarinet and flute existed together justifying the existence of flute in chinamelam/sadir tradition during the time when the art was not popularly termed with its formal name Bharatanatyam. It can be logically argued that both flute and clarinet being ritually polluted instruments had no necessity to be sanctified as far as hereditary musicians are concerned. Though, flute was said to be the main instrument and not an accompanying instrument according to flutist Navaneetham, disassociating it from Devadasis yet it was an instrument in within the hold of traditional practitioners. Thus, the change of the performance practice of improvisations based on ragas to performance repertoires of trinities of Tiruvarur can be viewed as an attempt made by Sarabha Sastri to present flute as a concert instrument. Since



flute was out of touch with devadasis for 80 years though not in the real sense and with flute as the concert instrument in the hands of the upper class aided in reinstating flute for the recreated Bharatanatyam.

Thus above discussions indicate that symbolisation of flute with Krishna enabled the social construct to alleviate flute from a lowly instrument to a higher state. Ironically the same Krishna's flute was distanced in the dance repertoire of chinnamelam transformed by Rukmini Devi through the introduction of the fiery god Shiva in the form of the Nataraja idol. Further, with the comprehension of flute being polluted instrument it is highly unlikely that it got dissociated from dance music of chinnamelam to transform into a main instrument by the end of 20th century. Moreover the narravites of the dissociation of flute from the dance music for over 80 years and the forced disappearance of devadasis from 1947s made the ideology behind flute to be suitable for the upper class society in order to present it as a concert instrument. But though oral tradition is powerful still the intellectuals frame the ideologies through scholarly medium that stays with the public, framed through new concepts to establish the hegemony.

CONCLUSIONS

The favourable stand of the nattuvanars and other women from devadasi community who were not practicing dance towards the anti nautch bill can be explained in terms of Gramsci's theory of '*passive consent without consensus*' of the majority of devadasis that enabled the superordinate to exercise hegemony over the subaltern.

The connectivity of flute with the vedas, rituals and complexity of musical characteristics provided the discursive narratives that projected opposing concepts to that of the flute represented in Tamil literature and practiced by the people that enabled the transformation of the flute into an instrument worthy for the upper class.

The association with devadasis was nullified in order to reinstate the flute in Bharatanatyam through the narratives in the society that clarinet has replaced flute that projected flute as non-existent in chinnamelam though in reality both the instruments coexisted.

The omissions and additions of clarinet and flute explains Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony of the ruling class to create their desired changes without the consent of the lower caste. The rise of Rukmini Devi and her agency in the transformation of the dance of devadasis to Bharatanatyam within a class can be seen as the fundamental role played by intellectuals in the society in the construction of Cultural hegemony.

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