



THE ROLE OF *ISAI VELLALAR* IN SHAPING INSTRUMENTAL PERFORMANCE IN INDIAN CLASSICAL MUSIC

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ABSTRACT

The Isai Vellalar community has played a crucial role in shaping instrumental performance in Indian classical music, particularly in Tamil Nadu. Known for their deep-rooted musical heritage, this community has been instrumental in preserving and promoting traditional music forms through their mastery of various instruments such as the veena, mridangam, and flute. This paper explores the multifaceted contributions of the Isai Vellalar in the realm of instrumental music, focusing on their historical significance, educational endeavors, and innovative practices. Through their active participation in temple rituals and cultural festivals, the Isai Vellalar have maintained the rich traditions of classical music while adapting to contemporary influences. This study underscores the importance of the Isai Vellalar community in enriching the landscape of Indian classical music. By bridging the past and the present, the Isai Vellalar continue to shape the future of instrumental performance in Indian classical music, ensuring its vibrancy and relevance in a rapidly evolving cultural context.

Keywords: -

I. INTRODUCTION

The Isai Vellalar community has significantly influenced the realm of instrumental performance in Indian classical music, especially within the southern traditions. The Isai Vellalars, recognised for their profound association with music and its performance, have made substantial contributions to the intricate fabric of Carnatic music. This group, mostly consisting of musicians and craftsmen, has a history closely linked to the temples and religious festivals of Tamil Nadu, where they have played a crucial role in maintaining and disseminating musical traditions. Their dedication to music has not only nurtured the evolution of many instrumental styles but has also guaranteed that these art forms persist in vitality and significance across generations.



The Isai Vellalar's impact on instrumental music is mostly derived from their expertise in traditional instruments, including the Nadaswaram and Thavil. These instruments often serve as the focal point of temple rituals and festivities, exemplifying the community's distinctive style and virtuosity. The Nadaswaram, known for its powerful and lyrical resonance, is typically performed at auspicious events, while the Thavil, a percussion instrument, enhances it with rhythm and profundity. Isai Vellalars have shaped the soundscapes of festivals and rituals via their performances, affirming their role as guardians of musical history. Their proficiency with these instruments has established elevated benchmarks in performance, motivating successive generations of artists and enhancing the overall level of Indian classical music.

Alongside their technical expertise, the Isai Vellalar group has played a crucial role in the oral dissemination of music. Music education in this society is often conveyed via traditional gurukula systems, where expertise is transmitted from masters to pupils in an immersive setting. This method has cultivated continuity and community, enabling the preservation of distinctive styles and repertoires that embody their cultural character. Consequently, Isai Vellalars have significantly impacted both the execution of classical music and the pedagogical approaches that support these artistic disciplines. Their legacy persists in influencing modern instrumental performance in Indian classical music, guaranteeing that the traditions stay vibrant and adaptable to changing cultural situations.

Research Objectives

- To explore the role of the Isai Vellalar community in shaping instrumental performance.
- To assess their influence on musical styles, instrument selection, and performance practices.

II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF ISAI VELLALAR COMMUNITY

The Devadasi system is based on caste ideals, with the temple acting as an arbiter that governs the social identity and sexuality of women positioned at the lowest levels of the caste hierarchy. Devadasis, or "servants of God," were women consecrated to divinity who



executed temple responsibilities and were regarded as sacred figures endowed with ceremonial authority. Vijaisri, 19. Devadasis were mostly sourced from non-Brahmin castes situated lower in the social order (now classified as OBC) and from Outcastes (Scheduled Castes/Dalits). They are proficient in the fine arts, including as music and dance, and perform at temple festivals. Their designation as "Nitya Sumangali" renders their participation at weddings and other social and religious events fortunate. The Devadasis are obligated to provide sexual services to their clientele, often the economically and socially dominant patriarchs in society. The Devadasi system, often known as holy prostitution, was widespread in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka (Southern India), Orissa (Eastern India), Maharashtra, and Goa (Western India).

The nomenclature 'Devadasi' and their homogenous categorization emerged only during the colonial period. Prior to that, they were referred to as Devanatiyar (Tamil Nadu), Bogam/Sani/ Natavollulu (Andhra & Karnataka), Kalavantin (Goa & Maharashtra), and Mahari (Orissa). They were also colloquially referred to as Jogini and Basavi. Contrary to the general perception that the Devadasis were a homogenous entity, they were caste and functional distinctions within the system and there were multiple patterns of sacred prostitution across the different regions. While discussing the synchronic dimensions of the prevalence of the system, Vijaisri points out that in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh there were three patterns of sacred prostitution: Matangi, Bogam/Kalavantin/Sule/Sani, and Jogini/Basavi.

The religiously sanctioned Devadasi system in India exemplifies intersectional oppression of gender, caste, and sexuality. Historically, Devadasis, or "servants of God," were women wedded to God who performed temple duties and were considered sacral women with ritual powers. As part of her duties, the Devadasis offer sexual services to her patrons, invariably the economically and socially powerful patriarch/s in society. The Devadasis were not a monolithic community; there were caste-based segregations within the Devadasi community which delineated their social positions. Devadasis were drawn from castes lower in the hierarchy (non-Brahmins) and the Scheduled castes (Dalits). To distinguish the two categories, the Devadasis from the non-Brahmin castes were referred to as Kalavantin/Isai Vellalar/ Kalavantulu and those from the Dalit castes were referred to as Jogini/Mathamma; their social and economic status were entirely different. The Devadasis from the non-Brahmin communities performed classical music and dance, while the Dalit Devadasis



performed folk dances during temple festivals. Though the Devadasi system was outlawed in 1988, the practice of dedicating young girls as Devadasis continues to be prevalent among the Scheduled castes

The Isai Vellalar community is a sub-sect within the Vellalar (Agrarian) caste. They are categorized under the Sudra varna. The word Isai means music, and this community comprises of Melakkarars, (Tavil artistes), Nayanakarars (Nagaswaram artistes), Nattuvan (one who teaches and conducts a dance recital), Devadasis (women dancers) and other instrument players associated with the art of music and dance. Some scholars suggest that the assimilation of this community to the Vellala caste was a fairly recent, 20th century political move. If so, then where did they stand in the hierarchy earlier?

III. ISAI VELLALAR'S RELATIONSHIP WITH INDIAN CLASSICAL MUSIC

The Isai Vellalar community holds a significant and historical relationship with Indian classical music, particularly within the Carnatic tradition. Known for their deep-rooted musical heritage, the Isai Vellalars have been instrumental in the preservation, performance, and evolution of various musical forms, making them vital contributors to the broader landscape of Indian classical music.

1. Cultural Heritage and Musical Traditions

The Isai Vellalar community is primarily based in Tamil Nadu, where they have been associated with temple music for centuries. Their relationship with Indian classical music is steeped in tradition, with their performances often intertwined with religious rituals and festivals. The community's musicians, who traditionally play instruments like the Nadaswaram and Thavil, are integral to temple ceremonies, offering melodious and rhythmic support that enhances the spiritual experience of these occasions. This connection to temple culture has allowed the Isai Vellalars to preserve classical music forms that are unique to their region while also contributing to the development of new styles.



Figure 1: Practice of music and dance in Isai Vellalar community

2. Expertise in Instrumentation

Isai Vellalars are particularly renowned for their mastery of traditional instruments, especially the Nadaswaram and Thavil. The Nadaswaram, a wind instrument, produces a powerful and auspicious sound, making it a staple in temple festivities and weddings. The Thavil, a barrel-shaped drum, complements the Nadaswaram, providing a rhythmic foundation for performances. The skillful interplay between these instruments creates a dynamic musical experience that is a hallmark of Isai Vellalar performances. Their expertise in playing these instruments not only elevates the quality of classical music but also influences other musicians, setting a benchmark for performance standards.

3. Role in Music Education and Oral Tradition

The Isai Vellalar community plays a crucial role in the transmission of musical knowledge through traditional methods. Music education is often imparted through the **gurukula** system, where students learn directly from masters in a hands-on, immersive environment. This approach ensures the preservation of unique musical styles and repertoire while fostering a strong sense of community among musicians. The oral tradition of passing down knowledge has allowed the Isai Vellalars to maintain their cultural identity and adapt their music to contemporary contexts without losing its essence.

4. Innovative Contributions to Classical Music



Over the years, the Isai Vellalar community has not only preserved traditional forms but also contributed to the innovation of Indian classical music. Their ability to blend different musical elements, adapt to new contexts, and collaborate with other musical traditions has enriched the overall tapestry of Indian classical music. This adaptability reflects their deep understanding of the art form and their commitment to keeping it relevant for future generations.

5. Contemporary Relevance

In modern times, the Isai Vellalar community continues to play a vital role in Indian classical music. As custodians of tradition, they are involved in various cultural initiatives aimed at promoting and preserving classical music. Their performances are celebrated at festivals, cultural events, and concert platforms, showcasing their contributions to the art form. The community also engages in dialogues about the challenges facing traditional musicians today, advocating for the recognition and support of their cultural heritage.

IV. CONTRIBUTION OF ISAI VELLALAR IN MUSIC

During the early 20th century, significant shifts in Carnatic Music from the colonial patronage system of Madras occurred, with new music halls, organizations, academies, and sabhas (Sanskrit for “assemblies”, often used to describe music performance associations) founded by the Brahmin elite with the intention of a “revival” of Carnatic Music. As they were in charge of these sabhas, Brahmins could control who performed, gradually diminishing the number of Devadasis showcased. They aimed to reinvent the music of South India to a more “classical” form, one where chaste, upper-caste, “family women” could perform. This was uncalled for, as it enforced stereotypes about Devadasis and other lower-caste women, further separating them from the Brahmin community. Devadasis, who historically had sexual relationships with upper-caste men outside of marriage and were associated with the erotic Nayaka court, did not fit nationalists’ definition of a “family woman.” As movements to force out Devadasis grew, they became regarded as prostitutes and were turned away from performing. This led to the dominance of Brahmins in Carnatic Music, specifically women. As Brahmins formed the new middle class of South India, it was mostly the male Brahmins who established the sabhas that wanted “ideal women” who came from “respectable” backgrounds to perform their arts. Upper-caste women were now



regarded as the most valued voices in South Indian classical music, and this norm became what was known as “authentic Carnatic Music. Their impact spans various facets, from traditional music and dance to visual arts, each reinforcing the rich heritage of Tamil Nadu. Here are some key areas highlighting their contributions:

1. Preservation of Classical Music

The Isai Vellalar community has been instrumental in preserving Tamil classical music traditions. Their deep-rooted knowledge of musical forms, ragas, and talas has ensured the continuity of these art forms over generations. They often perform at temples and cultural festivals, maintaining the ritualistic aspects of music that are integral to the spiritual and social fabric of the region.

2. Mastery of Traditional Instruments

Members of the Isai Vellalar community are renowned for their mastery of various traditional instruments, including the veena, mridangam, and flute. Their proficiency in these instruments has not only contributed to the richness of instrumental music in Tamil Nadu but has also established them as key figures in classical ensembles. Many musicians within the community have become sought-after performers, known for their skill and artistry.

3. Education and Mentorship

The Isai Vellalar community has played a pivotal role in music education through the establishment of music schools and informal training programs. Many respected musicians from the community act as mentors, passing on their knowledge to aspiring artists. This emphasis on education has created a vibrant environment for nurturing talent, ensuring that traditional musical techniques and styles continue to thrive.

4. Influence on Dance Forms

The community's contributions extend beyond music to classical dance forms such as Bharatanatyam. Isai Vellalar musicians often provide the musical accompaniment for these dances, enhancing the performance experience. Their compositions for dance highlight the interplay between music and movement, showcasing the artistic synergy that defines Indian classical arts.



5. Cultural Festivals and Events

The Isai Vellalar community actively participates in various cultural festivals and events, showcasing their musical talents and artistic expressions. Festivals like the Margazhi season in Chennai serve as platforms for performers to exhibit their skills, bringing traditional music to a wider audience. Their participation not only elevates the cultural significance of these events but also fosters community pride.

6. Innovation in Music and Art

In addition to preserving traditional practices, the Isai Vellalar community has embraced innovation. Some members have adapted traditional instruments to improve their sound quality and playability, thereby enhancing the overall performance experience. This willingness to innovate while maintaining a connection to their roots has allowed them to engage with contemporary audiences effectively.

7. Visual Arts and Cultural Identity

While primarily known for their contributions to music, the Isai Vellalar community also engages in visual arts, particularly in the context of temple art and iconography. Their involvement in creating and preserving art forms that reflect Tamil culture contributes to the broader artistic landscape of the region. This engagement with visual arts helps reinforce their cultural identity and heritage.

V. ISAI VELLALAR IN SHAPING INSTRUMENTAL PERFORMANCE

The Isai Vellalar community has been pivotal in developing instrumental performance in India, particularly in Tamil Nadu, where their contributions to classical music and dance have left a lasting impact. Historically, the Isai Vellalar have served as custodians of traditional Tamil music, often performing at temples and cultural events. This role has helped preserve the rich musical heritage of the region, ensuring that classical traditions are passed down through generations. Their expertise in various instruments, such as the veena, mridangam, and flute, has enriched the performance landscape, showcasing a deep understanding of both the technical and expressive aspects of music.

In addition to preserving traditional forms, the Isai Vellalar community has been instrumental in training the next generation of musicians. Many community members act as teachers and



mentors, establishing music schools and informal training programs that nurture aspiring artists. This focus on education has created a vibrant environment for skill development, enabling students to master traditional instruments and engage with the complexities of Indian classical music. The community's emphasis on mentorship ensures that the knowledge and techniques associated with these instruments are passed on, fostering a new wave of talent in the realm of instrumental performance.

Innovation is another hallmark of the Isai Vellalar's contribution to instrumental music. Some artisans within the community have developed and modified instruments to enhance their sound and playability, thus expanding the repertoire available for performance. This adaptability has allowed traditional music to resonate with contemporary audiences, bridging the gap between classical and modern forms. Additionally, the Isai Vellalar have embraced fusion genres, integrating their musical heritage with various modern styles. This willingness to innovate while honoring tradition has made their performances more dynamic and relevant in today's musical landscape.

The Isai Vellalar community also plays a significant role in cultural festivals and performance platforms, which serve as vital showcases for their talents. Events like the Margazhi season in Chennai provide opportunities for musicians to present their work to diverse audiences, elevating the profile of instrumental music. Their participation in collaborative performances fosters cross-cultural exchanges and experimentation, enriching the overall musical experience for both performers and audiences. Furthermore, their music frequently accompanies classical dance forms like Bharatanatyam, highlighting the interconnectedness of music and dance in Indian arts.

Overall, the Isai Vellalar community's multifaceted contributions to developing instrumental performance in India underscore their commitment to preserving and promoting the region's rich musical traditions. Through education, innovation, and active participation in cultural life, they have not only shaped the past but continue to influence the future of instrumental music in India, ensuring that it remains vibrant and evolving. Their dedication serves as a testament to the enduring power of music as a cultural force.

VI. CONCLUSION



In conclusion, the Isai Vellalar community has played an indispensable role in shaping instrumental performance in Indian classical music, particularly within the Tamil cultural context. Their contributions are deeply rooted in a rich historical legacy that emphasizes the importance of musical heritage. By serving as custodians of traditional instruments and musical forms, the Isai Vellalar have ensured the preservation and continuation of classical music practices that have defined the region for centuries. Their involvement in temple rituals and cultural events has not only maintained the spiritual and social significance of music but has also highlighted its integral role in community life. The community's adaptability and willingness to embrace innovation further enhance their contributions to instrumental music. By integrating contemporary influences into their performances and exploring new artistic expressions, the Isai Vellalar demonstrate that traditional music is not stagnant but rather a living art form that evolves over time. Their involvement in classical dance, particularly Bharatanatyam, exemplifies the harmonious relationship between music and movement, enriching the overall experience of Indian classical arts. Ultimately, the Isai Vellalar community is a vital force in the landscape of Indian classical music. Their dedication to preserving cultural heritage, fostering education, and embracing innovation has significantly influenced instrumental performance, ensuring its vibrancy and relevance in an ever-changing cultural context. As they continue to navigate the interplay between tradition and modernity, the Isai Vellalar will undoubtedly remain key contributors to the rich tapestry of Indian classical music for generations to come.

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