



Sopana musicians of Kerala temples : Problems and prospects

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ABSTRACT

Studies dealing with ritualistic music and allied arts of Kerala are rare. Not much research has gone deep into this area which cut across the periphery and superficial layers and touch the real core. An analytical study on the virtually vanishing temple art of Kerala, the *Sopana* Music, is really significant in this context. Their existence is greatly threatened by the process of modernisation and commercialization of life in the contemporary age and the accompanying changes in social and economic structure. At one time, *Sopana* music system was associated with most of the rituals and the performing arts. Yet what one sadly realises now-a-days is the fact that *Sopana* music is still groping in darkness and is yet to be restored to its original spirit and charm. Owing to historical reasons, the recital of this music came to be neglected and virtually discarded in most of the areas except in some temples where it was preserved as a ritual. The reasons for its setback could be many- the practitioners inability to verbalise the content and substance of their art and their inhibition to violate the rigid, protective, orthodox rules and norms intended to preserve their sanctity. The foremost among the reasons being the fear of ominous consequences, if sacred practices were exposed outside the temple sanctum. It was apprehended, that putting the sacred oral traditions in writing, would defile the divinity and sanctity of the art forms, as it might distort the authentic expression of many typical sounds, their volume, cadence, intonations, signs, accents etc. There appears to be no consensus regarding the mode of preservation of this ritualistic art form.

INTRODUCTION

The life of the vast majority of Hindus in India is centered around temples even today. This is true not only of life at the individual level but also at the social level. The fabric of socio-cultural activities of the Hindus is made up of the warp and woof of religious beliefs and rituals. Music, sculpture, painting, dance and a host of performing arts, besides architecture, *Vaastu shashtra*, astronomy and astrology owe their origin to the institution of the temple. Though temples are devoted for the worship of the supramundane, it is paradoxical but true that they

serve as the centre of the mundane life of the people (Sankar, 2000).

Sopana Music is the traditional and typical age old music school of Kerala with a hoary past. It may be broadly defined as the vocal music rendered at the temple *Sopana*, the steps leading to the sanctum sanctorum of the temple, to the accompaniment of *Idakka*, the mellifluous percussion instrument. In simple terms *Sopana* Music can be described as temple Music. The recital of the *Sopana* Music is meant for creating an atmosphere of *Bhakti* within the temple premises and at the same time invoking a mood of devotion in the minds

of the devotees (Killius, 2006). *Sopana* Music in its traditional form is seen at its best among the communities called *Marar*, *Pothuval*, *Kurup*, *Nambeesan*, *Nambiar* etc., who were the hereditary experts in this music system. The singer who is at the *Sopanam* begins to sing the hymns, *Slokas*, *Keerthanas* etc. after closing the doors of the *Sreekovil* (Sanctum Sanctorum) for the performance of the rituals. The singing and the instrumental play of *Idakka* will be continued till the doors of the *Sreekovil* (Sanctum Sanctorum) re-opened.

The essential features of *Sopana* Music were born out of a happy blending of the Vedic, the folk and tribal music of the region. Though the music system is most ancient, the term “*Sopana*” came to denote it only around 8th century because the temples built out of granite, towers, single stone mandapams, roofs having peculiar architectural style, *Koothambalams* (temple theatres) and the Sanctum Sanctorum having steps leading to it are supposed to have become special features of the temples of Kerala from the time of the Chera King, Kulasekhara Varman.

Jayadeva’s *Ashtapathi* had immense influence on *Sopana* Music. This music system got the greatest rejuvenation when *Geetha Govindam*, India’s first light music composition with 24 songs, popularly called as *Ashtapathi* was introduced to Kerala in the local musical mould during the 14th and 15th centuries AD. Soon it became a custom for devotional songs to be sung in the Vaishnava temples of Kerala. Infact, it fostered the growth of *Sopana sangeetham* in the temples and outside, in the stages of Kerala. Before the introduction of *Gita Govinda*, *Bhadrakali* hymns and invocations to *Devi* or *Tyani* were sung as *Sopana* songs (Bhalla, 2006). *Tyani* is a song in praise of the goddess of the temple.

It is the *Sopana* musicians who contributes a lot in the popularization of this unique musical tradition, which was languishing unnoticed within the temple precincts. Among them who stands foremost is Njeralathu Rama Pothuval (Fig. A), who dedicated a whole life for *Sopana* Music. It was he who brought it out into the midst of people and made the public aware of the existence of pure *Sopana* Musical Tradition. For him it was not singing but Bhajana, another form of worship, reaching peaks of unforeseen intensity (Ramanath, 1996). At a time, when the indigenous music tradition of Kerala was almost disappearing under the influence of Carnatic music, Pothuval nourished and sustained the *Sopana* Music

sacrificing his own life in the process.



Fig. A : *Sopana* musician Njeralathu Ramapothuval singing with the accompaniment of the musical instrument *Idakka*

In 1996, when Ramapothuval expired, music lovers thought that the music that Ramapothuval had raised to great heights would soon fade out from public memory. But Njeralathu Harigovindan, the sixth son of Ramapothuval is well on his way to establish a firm foot hold in the arena once dominated by his father. When authorities in charge neglected his efforts to preserve the last glimpses of Kerala’s musical heritage, Harigovindan built Njeralathu Kalashramam, a real hermitage of music and normal life style, in memory of his father. It was inaugurated on May 6th 2010 by Ex. MP

Abdu Samad Samadani at Angadippuram in Malappuram district. On that day *Kalashramam* started the ever first “kerala Music festival” which was exclusively designed and projected by Harigovindan.

Till the first half of the 20th century *Sopana Music* had enjoyed a significant place in Kerala. But the land reforms and regulations which introduced later dragged the temples and *uralars* (the temple trustees) into utmost poverty. Not only the *uralars* but *Sopana* music system also got badly affected by this as there occurred a reduction in the income of the temple artists. Moreover, *Sopana sangeetham* at that time had greatly influenced by carnatic music. This music system which reigned supreme till then could not withstand the sweeping intrusion of carnatic music (Nair, 1998).

Today itself the caste discrimination stand as an obstacle on the way of the progress of this unique art. The experience of Njeralath Harigovindan in this field is the best example for that. The right of singing at the temple *Sopanas* is reserved exclusively for the communities of *pothuvals* and *marars*. The desire of Njeralath Harigovindan to sing in the *Sopanams* of some temples was denied as he was born as the son of a *pothual* in a nair woman. Even Njeralathu Ramapothual was asked to never perform at the temple premises after his marriage to a young nair girl. He was singled out of the *pothual* group of drummers. He couldn't care less for the injustice. Ramapothual brought out this art outside from the walls of the temple and made it popular among people of all castes (Harigovindan, 2005). Like his father Harigovindan is taking *Sopana* Music public. To preserve this vanishing culture he performs at various cultural gatherings and festivals. He even sings it at the church alters and muslim festivals.

This exquisite rustic music of Kerala is facing a setback in its traditionalized form, utility and popularity for the past several years. The number of persons interested in it becoming less and less. It is feared that attempts to revive it may not have any substantial results. The condition of the *Sopana* artists became more and more pathetic when the administration of the temples was taken over by *Devaswam* Boards. Their stand was that *Devaswam* Board has no money to spend for posts like this in the temples. As a result of this attitude of the *Devaswam* Boards so many *Sopana* singers lost their jobs in temples and they had to thrive hard to earn a living. Keeping in mind these facts, present study was

done to find out the problems facing by the *Sopana* Musicians of Kerala today and there by finding out the reasons for it. Suggestion of possible solutions for the problem was also serve as one of the objectives of the study.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

In order to achieve the above objectives, case study method was adopted. About 15 *Sopana* Musicians of the temples under the administration of Travancore *Devaswom* was selected for the study. The information was gathered with the help of Questionnaire cum interview technique. Various questions related to the problems of the *Sopana* Musicians including the issues regarding wages, indifferent attitude of the temple authorities and caste discriminations etc. were included in the questionnaire. The collected datas were analysed and thereby formulated possible solutions.

Visits to many temples and artists were undertaken which helped to get familiar with the fast fading culture of the temples. Many facts and information related to it, which were rarely known, have been identified through systematic research of primary and secondary sources, especially the information contained in the old palm leaf manuscripts collected from ancient families and temples.

OBSERVATIONS AND ANALYSIS

Analysis of the data collected reveals that, unfortunately the *Sopana* Music system is fast fading as a result of the slow death of the temple culture and the growing neglect of its custodians. The datas shows that the number of the *Sopana* singers in the Southern Kerala (Most of the temples in the Southern Kerala comes under the administration of Travancore *Devaswom* Board) is fast decreasing. Compared to that of the Northern and the Central regions of Kerala, the number of *Sopana* Musicians in the Southern part of Kerala is very low. Out of the total 86 *Sopana* Musicians in the State, 60 per cent are singing in the temples of Northern Kerala, 23 per cent in Central Kerala and the remaining 17 per cent in the Southern Kerala region (Fig. 1). The reason behind this, as the musicians said, is the disinterest from the part of the temple authorities in Southern Kerala to the practise of performing *Sopana* singing in the temples here.

The study discloses the following factors as the main causes for the decline of the *Sopana* Music and its

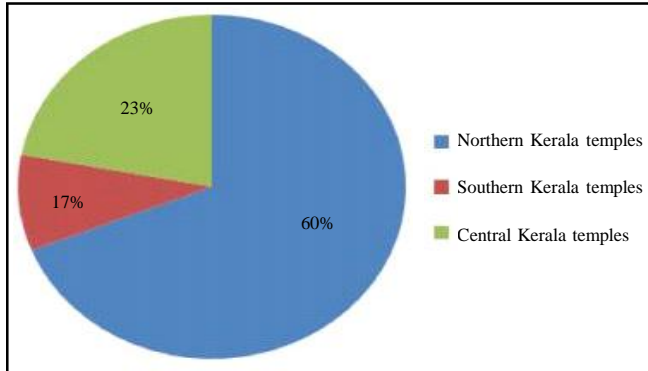


Fig. 1 : Percentage of *Sopana* musicians singing in the temples of Kerala

musicians.

Causes for the downfall of the *Sopana* system of music :

- Neglect of temples and temple culture.
- Lack of patronage and neglect of the traditional gurus and gurukulams.
- Dangerous trends in the name of experimentation by ignorant people, with commercial interests, modifying the traits to suit popular tastes, leading to ultimate ruin.
- Lack of encouragement and opportunities for talented artistes.
- Mediocre gurus, indifferent learners and ignorant listeners.
- Popularity of popular musical items through colourful media like T.V., films etc.

While answering to the questions, 27 per cent of the musicians responded that low wages giving to them from the temples is a major issue to them (Table 1). Because the life of the *Sopana* Musicians were entirely depended upon the income from the respective temples. As a result of the reduction in the income of the temple artists, the young generation found that they could not lead a satisfactory life only from practicing *Sopana* Music. So they gradually began to withdraw from the field and

searched for better jobs. And many others find it only as a side activity. About 27 per cent of musicians replied so regarding less interest from the part of the Young generation.

The study discloses the fact that today itself the caste discriminations stand as an obstacle on the way of the progress of this unique art. About 13 per cent of the singers reacted that way. The right of singing at the temple *Sopanas* are reserved exclusively for the communities of *Pothuvals* and *Marars*. Artists from other communities have not been permitting to sing at the *Sopanam* and to play the musical instruments like *chenda*, *idakka* and *maddalam* within the temple premises (Rajagopalan, 2010).

Moreover, *Sopana* Music had greatly influenced by Carnatic Music. This music system which reigned supreme till then could not withstand the sweeping intrusion of Carnatic Music. The *Sopana* Musicians of the time were not financially sound enough to obtain lessons of *Carnatic* Music. And for those few, who were determined to learn classical music, were to meet with some disappointment because, for a long time, the field of Carnatic Music was dominated by Tamil Brahmins. Moreover restrictions of caste also kept them away from acquiring proficiency in *Carnatic* Music (Bhagyalakshmy, 2004).

The results of the study shows that *Sopana* Music is slowly going into oblivion. Owing to historical reasons, the recital of this music came to be neglected and virtually discarded in most of the areas except in temples where it was preserved as a ritual. The reasons for its setback could be many- as 13 per cent of the singers responded, the practitioners inability to verbalise the content and substance of their art and their inhibition to violate the rigid ,protective ,orthodox rules and norms intended to preserve their sanctity. The foremost among the reasons being the fear of ominous consequences, if sacred practices were exposed outside the temple sanctum. It was apprehended , that putting the sacred oral traditions in writing, would defile the divinity and sanctity of the art

Table 1 : Responses of the <i>Sopana</i> musicians on the anticipated causes of their decline			
Sr. No.	Anticipated causes	No. of musicians responded favourably (n=15)	Percentage (%)
1.	Indifferent attitude of the Govt. and the temple authorities	3	20
2.	Caste discriminations	2	13
3.	Lack of interest of the young generation	4	27
4.	Lack of proper training and basic knowledge	2	13
5.	Low wages	4	27

forms, as it might distort the authentic expression of many typical sounds, their volume, cadence, intonations, signs, accents etc. Another 20 per cent of the musicians complains about the indifferent and discouraging attitude of the Temple authorities as they considered it as an unnecessary thing in the temples.

Again a variety of new styles like concert music, Western music, Light music, Drama music, Film music etc. which very well suit the busy life of modern man are being given exposition through TV, Radio etc. Unable to withstand the growing popularity of such well-organised music disciplines, *Sopana* music and their artists either receded from the field or modified themselves in form and character in their anxiety to claim a suitable place among other styles. Moreover, the present day younger generation may not even know what *Sopana* Music is.

Though there have been many outstanding traditional practitioners of this style, no systematic efforts were made to institutionalize and popularize this music system or to codify its theoretical base. It is said that reforming of *Sopana* music is not possible because then it will lose its originality. In establishing *Sopana* Music to its original spirit and charm, the main hurdles are the absence of,

- Written materials dealing with its science and techniques.
- Scholars who can talk about it analytically and authoritatively.
- Masters and artists who can present it distinctively and differently from the classical and the folk styles.

Steps to be taken to safeguard the tradition of *sopana* musicians :

- Locating the learned gurus, bringing them to limelight and patronising them, Still, there are a few Gurus alive.
- Attracting the young and the talented people to the discipline through scholarships, fellowships, programmes, jobs etc.
- Introducing it in the Schools, University Curriculum, especially in Kerala.
- Raising its standard without losing its traits.

It is not easy to find an effective way of preserving our art forms. The problem is more acute in the case of ritualistic arts because preserving them also means preserving the belief that gave birth to them. To preserve

the old beliefs would perhaps be an unscientific and obscurantist approach. However, there appears to be no consensus regarding the mode of preservation of ritualistic art forms. Some expect them to change with the times whereas others want them to be kept in their pristine form. There are still others who demand that such outdated art forms should be discarded totally.

It would be a futile exercise to either preserve ritualistic arts in their original form or to improve upon them. Ritual and art are inseparably united and so it would not be feasible to remove the ritual component and preserve the art form alone. If it is done, we get only pseudo-art. It is therefore, preferable to draw inspiration from and to absorb the essence of these ancient forms and create new ones or enliven existing ones.

To the question as to how ritualistic arts continue to exist, E.B. Tyler had a reply, penned roughly nine decades ago. He felt that once a ritual or an art takes shape, it will pass on from one generation to the next. Superficial changes that overcome society cannot remove deep-rooted beliefs and the art forms that project them. Time instead will decide their fate. Neither blind acceptance nor outright rejection of tradition is desirable. Only if tradition is understood thoroughly, can the good elements be preserved and the bad discarded (Cherian, 1999).

What we need is not a complete revival but collection, documentation and objective analysis of ritualistic art forms leading to dissemination of knowledge about them. They should be studied with scientific insight and in relation to modern trends. Further, monographs on extinct and extant art forms should be prepared, they should be recorded in audio and video tapes and preserved in folklore archives as well as museums.

Conclusion :

Around 80 years ago, temples were the epicenter of the performing arts. The artist's needs were looked after by rich temples which owned huge tracts of prosperity. Payments were not in cash, but in kind. But after the sweeping land reforms by the Marxist government in the 60's, lands were taken away from the temples, and their prosperity stunted. The worst sufferers were temple artists. Gradually performances became few and remuneration dwindled. Today, few temples patronize these artists and few spectators evince interest in their traditional art. The artists are a vanishing tribe, caught between their commitment to their art and the biting reality

of their poverty. If the temple arts are surviving today, it is only because of the artist's dedication.

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