Indian
Folklife

INFSC
Since 1997

A Quarterly Newsletter
from National Folklore Support Centre

Serial No.36
October 2010

Continuity and Change in Family and Community Performance Practices

Guest Editor
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NATIONAL FOLKLORE SUPPORT CENTRE (NFSC) is a non-governmental, non-profit organization, registered in Chennai dedicated to the promotion of Indian folklore research, education, training, networking, and publications. The aim of the centre is to integrate scholarship with activism, aesthetic appreciation with community development, comparative folklore studies with cultural diversities and identities, dissemination of information with multidisciplinary dialogues, folklore fieldwork with developmental issues, folklore advocacy with public programming events, digital technology with applications to voice the cultures of the marginalized and historically disadvantaged communities. Folklore is a tradition based on any expressive behavior that brings a group together, creates a convention and commits it to cultural memory. NFSC aims to achieve its goals through cooperative and experimental activities. NFSC is supported by grants from the Ford Foundation and Tata Education Trust.

CONTENTS

NFSC Websites
http://indianfolklore.org/home.htm
www.wiki.encyclopaediaindica.com
www.wiki.indianfolklore.org
www.indianfolklore.org/nfscpress/
www.encyclopaediaindica.com/nfsclore/
www.indianfolklore.org/journals/
www.YouTube.com/NFSCChennai

Cover Photo: Balasaraswati - San Francisco, California 1974.
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EDITORIAL

DOUGLAS KNIGHT, a musician and independent scholar of karnatic music, was a mridangam student of Balasaraswati's brother, drummer T. Ranganathan, from 1968 to 1978. He was coached in the accompaniment of bharata natyam by K. Kuppuswamy Mudaliar, Balasaraswati's drummer. Knight was married to Balasaraswati's daughter, Lakshmi (1943–2001), and performed with his wife throughout her distinguished career. He continues to perform bharata natyam with their son, Aniruddha. Knight studied Indian music history and theory with several American scholars and with the distinguished musicologist T. Viswanathan, and was tutored in the history of bharata natyam by B.M. Sundaram. He is the author of a number of articles and the biography, *Balasaraswati: Her Art and Life* (Wesleyan University Press, 2010). Knight has been a Fulbright Scholar, and a Fellow of the American Institute of Indian Studies, the Asian Cultural Council, and the John S. Guggenheim Foundation. He is a graduate of Wesleyan University and has a Master of Fine Arts degree from California Institute of the Arts. He taught ethnomusicology at the University of Washington, and music in performance programs at Wesleyan, UCLA, and the University of Wisconsin.

INTRODUCTION

The theme for the fall issue of *Indian Folklife* is "continuity and change in family and community performance practices". As a student of hereditary *karnatic* music, I have become personally engaged with the question of succession, how the hereditary arts are influenced by, and still survive in, a changing world. Especially important to me is how we all think—as practitioners, administrators, researchers and scholars and from different professional, personal, and cultural perspectives—about how and why hereditary and community performance practices are, and are not, changing.

The Sanskrit word *sampradaya*, sometimes translated as "community", refers to a process that reinforces cumulative knowledge of many kinds, including myth, religious and spiritual discipline, and the hereditary arts. Existing in some form in many cultures, *sampradaya* is a system of belief or knowledge orally transmitted through a teacher, who has been preceded by generations of teachers initiated into the same system, to a student or devotee. That student or devotee in turn becomes an interpreter and teacher. The variations in Hindu thought and practice that have emerged in the past two millennia are exemplary of *sampradaya*. Participation in *sampradaya* ensures continuity with the past, but at the same time provides a basis for and expectation of change, the inherited knowledge becoming the source of creative gesture, particularly in the arts.

The contributors to this issue of *Indian Folklife* are engaged with the advocacy of the hereditary arts, but each presents a distinctly individual perspective:

- The practice, transmission and cultural dynamics of traditional performing arts as an expression of community and family in an article on the Khasi tradition of Maghalaya, by Lapynshai Syiem, Associate Professor at North Eastern Hill University in Shillong.
- Observations about the influence of innovations of the iconic *nagaswaram* player, T. N. Rajaratnam Pillai, in the *periya melam* tradition in Tamil Nadu, authored by Yoshitaka Terada, professor of ethnomusicology in the Department of Cultural Research, at the National Museum of Ethnology and in the Department of Comparative Studies, at the Graduate University for Advanced Studies in Osaka, Japan.
- A commentary on the dynamics of change in the family practices of music and dance within the Vina Dhanammal family style of performance of Tamil Nadu. This article is based upon an archive of material created within the family of T. Balasaraswati that is the basis for a recently published biography of Balasaraswati, written by independent scholar and musician Douglas Knight.
- Comments on the challenges of public arts administrators in the funding and advocacy of numerous and varied traditional arts, and the adjudication of the quality—and at times,

uncomfortably—the legitimacy of practiced arts represented in communities resettled in the United States. This article is contributed by Dr. Maggie Holtzberg, Manager of the Folk Arts and Heritage Program at the Massachusetts Cultural Council in Boston, Massachusetts, one of fifty American state arts agencies.

- A response to the observed problem of the collapse of historical teacher-student relationships and their replacement with institutional learning environments. The article is a call to action for the protection and encouragement of traditional teacher-student relationships in the performing arts, written by the retired director of a major private foundation committed to the arts of Asia. Its author, Ralph Samuelson, is the former director of and current senior advisor to the Asian Cultural Council.

Each article articulates the need and role for documentation and archival work. In the contemporary context, the need for a different sort of community access than is represented by the traditional teacher-student relationship, or by the institutions that have replaced these relationships, is clearly called for—as a means of sustaining traditional practice and of recognizing and identifying change as legitimate from within the community. My own belief, the result of working with a body of material preserved within an artistic family, is that through the process of creation of an archive, an identity is articulated and defined.

That identity shapes the character of the archive. A challenge for academic and other institutional environments is that the inability to fully comprehend that identity results in an unintentional redefinition of the characteristics and values of a community. Access to an archive does not make a community's identity available for adoption or adaptation. Rather, the community- or family-generated archive serves more significantly as a standard by which other, more objective perspectives may be informed.

I have learned a great deal from observing the use of an archive of audio, film, video, and narrative records of performance. I have watched as my son, Aniruddha, has made use of these materials as an extension of what he was taught by his mother, Balasaraswati's daughter. I have also seen other practitioners of Balasaraswati's family style of music reinforce their work through recordings and notation. Once a practitioner has been taught by a member of a traditional community, the student is assisted immeasurably in the continuing process of learning through access to an archive of that practice. Learning from a master teaches the principles of an art or other body of knowledge; proper documentation enables the continuation of that process. I believe the two sources are inextricably linked.

For the traditional hereditary artist identity is not a question. The artist's role is understood from childhood, and his or her artistic inheritance is accepted as the basis for knowing what is correct, what to change and what to keep in the lifelong process of evolving individual style and repertoire. The hereditary performer's identity transcends location, gender, and nationality; it is based upon *sampradaya*. Each of these articles highlights in different ways the distinction between the adoption of identity through the performance of traditional practices, and the identity which is exhibited through the hereditary arts and artist.

One of the shared characteristics of the traditional hereditary practices, now understood as performance art, is that they were not focused upon the preferences of a general audience. The presentation of the arts, their form, content, and performance conventions are nurtured by the community of practitioners who maintain them. This is true in all cultures, I believe. The audience is expected to be challenged, educated and informed by the performance—not determine it. The common thread among these articles is the concern the authors share for the process and knowledge embodied in what we consider "traditional" practices in the arts. They share a concern for the losses that are the inevitable result of the separation of "traditional" arts and the communities from which they emerge.

The subject of my own contribution to this issue, T. Balasaraswati, is most often revered as the archetype of a traditional and hereditary artist; however, first and foremost, she understood and described herself as a contemporary, revolutionary artist. I have come to believe that traditional artists are *all* revolutionary, unique in their expressions and redefinitions of the rules and conventions they absorbed as family or community members. Change may occur within a family across generations or

within a generation. Change may occur as the role of the performer shifts with economic and social circumstances. Hereditary practice has evolved across successive boundaries—generational, gender, social structure, ways of teaching and learning and geographic placement—and survived. As a hereditary practice is subjected to the process of change, the meaning of "traditional" is revealed, not as an embodiment of content, but rather as a means for interpretation. ❄

Khasi Music: From the 'Folk' to the 'Traditional'

Lapynshai Syiem is Associate Professor of Music in the Department of Cultural and Creative Studies, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong. Dr. Syiem has done a documentary film on the compositions of her father, entitled *My father composer*. Her father, C. Khongwir, a folk musician and composer, has done extensive research on *Khasi* Folk Music and has many publications to his credit. Her mother, Dr. Helen Giri, a renowned Folk Singer was conferred the Padma Shree Award by Her Excellency, the President of India in New Delhi on 5th May, 2008 for her contribution towards *Khasi* Traditional Music. With such a firm background in *Khasi* Music, Lapynshai Syiem has published fifteen volumes of *Khasi* audio cassettes and CDs containing the songs composed by her father and has also brought out a CD of Rabindra Sangeet entitled *Amar Ey Poth*. Her book, *The Evolution of Khasi Music: A Study of the Classical Content*, which is also her PhD thesis, attempts to bring *Khasi* Music from the oral to the written notation form.

To study and analyse *Khasi* Music and its evolution is to go into the very structure of the native state formation process of the *Khasis* of Meghalaya, the reason being that *Khasi* Music has grown from the 'Folk' to the 'Traditional' and from the 'Traditional Non Religious' to the 'Traditional Religious'. The *Khasis* express their music through tunes, beats and use of various musical instruments like the male drum (*Ksing Shynrang*), the female drum (*Ksing Kynthei*), the traditional windpipe (*Tangmuri*) etc. The growth of *Khasi* Music is considered to be as old and antique as the race itself.

The concept of the native state or the *Hima* forms an interesting part in the study of the growth of *Khasi* Music from the Folk to the Traditional. The *Hima* or native state is still in existence within the Khasi-Jaintia Hills. Each *Hima* has its own native chief or native ruler called *Syiem*. The native states are composed of the administrative units called the *Raid*, which are either under the *Lyngdoh Raid* or the *Syiem Raid*. Each *Raid* is composed of several villages which are under local headmen called *Tymmen Shnong*. The *Hima* evolved with the *Syiem* (native ruler) acting as a guide and protector for his people. It is very clear that the evolution of *Syiemship* and the *Hima* began at the village level, nay, it goes further down, to the foundation of *Ka Kur* (clan) which is the nucleus of all traditional polity development. In brief, the clan, the family, and the hearth together form the foundation of a village, which in turn evolves as a *Raid* (administrative unit) and ultimately evolves as a *Hima* (native state). This can be illustrated as follows:

Hima
(Native State with *U Syiem*)
↑
Ki Raid
(Administrative Units with the *Lyngdoh Raid* or the *Syiem Raid*)
↑
Ki Shnong
(Villages with *Ki tymmen Shnong*)
↑
Ka Kur
(clan)

It is against this backdrop that the crux of *Khasi* Music, classified as Traditional Religious Music, has evolved.

However, one may ask as to what then is *Khasi* Folk Music or how does a *Khasi* define Folk Music?

I remember that in a discussion I had with my father, a prominent *Khasi* Music Composer, he opined that for many years past, the *Khasis* themselves have looked upon their "folk tunes" as *ki sur nongkyndong* (village tunes). In my opinion, however, the scenario today has changed considerably. *Khasi* Folk Music is no longer looked upon merely as village music; rather it is a classified form of *Khasi* Music.

Indeed, *Khasi* Folk Music is considered to be the mother or the base of other forms of *Khasi* Music and provides the basic structure upon which the Traditional Music (Religious and Non- Religious) and other forms of *Khasi* Music have evolved. Herein we shall have to refer to the folk drum beats which are used because when we actually speak of *Khasi* Music, Folk or Traditional, we refer to the beats and the rhythm, that are commonly referred to as *Skit*. *Skit* is a cycle of beats and one can understand a *Khasi* dance form, a ritual, a particular mood in music, and an event through *'Ka Skit'*.

There are Unorganized Folk Beats such as *Ka Lymmuh* and Organized Folk Beats such as *Ka Ksing Shad Wait* (*Ksing* means Drum, *Shad* means Dance and *Wait* denotes the Sword). *Ka Lymmuh* can be used as a single drum beat and also as a two pulse beat or two beats in each division. It contains only stresses and most of the time produces monotonous syllables. The organized folk beats have the scope of becoming 'traditional'. *Ka Ksing Shad Wait* as an organized folk beat has however, developed from *Ka Lymmuh* and contains both the accented and the unaccented beats. It contains four beats within each division and begins with the first accented beat, indicated by the sign 'Kk' or 'Kuk'. 'Kuk', as a playing technique implies "jabbing of the stick" on the male drum. The sign 'Kk' given for the first accented beat is taken from the playing technique 'Kuk'. The word is significant because its playing technique implies a call that indicates the warmth, protection and embrace of *U Syiem U Kmie* (literally meaning the *Syiem* the Mother; the *Syiem* here is the native ruler).

Khasi Traditional Music is highly systematic, disciplined and conventional. It is that type of music which is handed down from generation to generation through learning, repetitive practices and constant involvement of the performer with the music. Even gestures are significant in the development of this art form. *Ka Khublei Arti* (a traditional greeting where both the persons use both their hands in greeting one another) for example, is symbolic of good will and solidarity.

Khasi Traditional Music can be classified under two types:

(1) The Religious Music found at *Hima Khyrim* (*Khyrim Syiemship*) The Non-Religious Music found at *Hima Mylliem* (*Mylliem Syiemship*)

The two native states were formerly part of the Shyllong native state but were bifurcated during the colonial period and till date, in *Khyrim Syiemship,* the religious rites, ceremonies, and religious drum beats are retained. *Mylliem Syiemship* retains the non-religious drum beats in the form of socio-cultural dance beats. The non-religious drum beats are heartening to listen to whereas, the religious drum beats, known as *Ki Shiphew Ksing Bad Arphew Hynniew Skit* (The Ten Units of Drums and Twenty Seven Beats) and performed at the *Nongkrem Festival*, an annual native state religious festival, are played with and for a specific purpose.

The Traditional Music is closely associated with the Theory of Mood as,interestingly enough, the mood of each drum beat depends on the stages of state formation process, alongside the ritualistic practices. *Khasi* Traditional Music has distinctive features of its own—its tenacity speaks of its long history, the tradition and specifically, the thought content that lies inherent in each drum beat. It is disciplined, systematic and has a rhythmic pattern. Indeed, it is the prevalence of a well-defined rhythmic pattern that has given the essence of classical content to the religious beats of *Ki Shiphew Ksing Bad Arphew Hynniew Skit* (The Ten Units of Drums and Twenty Seven Beats). Speaking of rigidity, each unit of drums has to complete one cycle or 'Ka Shi Pyllun'. The variations also come within 'Ka Shi Pyllun', in the sense that they have to remain within the framework, despite the fact that they work more like embellishments. It is interesting to observe this Theory of Mood and recall its' prevalence in the folk

songs of the *Khasis,* in the form of Ballad*s* and *Phawar* (Couplets), that are sung rhythmically with stresses and lesser-stressed beats wherever necessary.

The first unit of drums called *Ka Ksing Blei* (*Ksing* means Drum and *Blei* means God) creates the pensive mood with the playing technique 'Krud', where the musician gently shakes the stick on the right side of the male drum, to invoke God's presence and blessings. Another religious drum beat called *Ka Ksing Khrop* symbolizes the submission to the Creator with the use of the drum syllable 'Khop' which means "to be silent" or "to be quiet". A point to be noted is that, these religious drum beats have developed over different stages, right from the village level till they attain the stature of being called *Ki Sur Hima* (Music used at the level of the Native State). It is not surprising therefore to find that there is a classification of *Khasi* Musical Instruments; there are those that are used in the family and the hearth, those usedat the village level and finally, at the level of the *Hima* (Native State).

Ka Ksing Lynti (Niam) is another religious drum beat taken from *Ki Shiphew Ksing bad Arphew Hynniew Skit* (The Ten Units of Drums and Twenty Seven beats). The essence of *Ka Ksing Lynti (Niam)* lies in the meaning of the word *Lynti. Lynti* literally means the "path" or the "way". This unit of drums is played as an invocation to God to pave the way and the path into his domain through music and rituals. It contains 'Ka Krud Ksing', a drum beat, that is both a symbolic gesture and a playing technique, signifying an appeal to God to clear the way.

In the native state formation process, music plays an important role and the *Duhalias* (Traditional Musicians) occupy an important place within the *Hima* (native state). The *Rangbah* (Head) *Duhalia* assumes this important status because his presence is significant from the beginning to the completion of any ritual and dance—be it *Ka Shad Nohkjat* (dance of the daughter of the *Syiem father* or *Syiem* Mother), or *Ka Shad Tyngkoh* (dance of the *Syiem*: native ruler or dance of the *Bakhraw* [Elder]), or *Ka Knia Muhuri* (ritual performed at midnight with the *Tangmuri* [Windpipe]).

It is here that the patronage of the *Syiem* (native ruler) is highly indispensable. However, the *Syiem* also has much to reciprocate in terms of the role and the status of the traditional musicians (*Duhalia*) in the *Hima* (native state). The patronage has found a place not only among a family of musicians but also amongst the craftsmen, which has given room to the growth of the *Guru-Shishya Parampara* in the local context. *Khasi* Folk Music, strictly speaking, is bound with the day-to-day life of the people, so much so that in the process of transmission, no teaching-learning is actually involved. Traditional Music on the other hand, is acquired through learning, repetitive practices and constant involvement of the performer with the art and the music.

At length, speaking of *Khasi* Music, it is obvious that the 'traditional' has grown from the 'folk' despite the fact that there are indeed, no water-tight distinctions between the terms 'Folk' and 'Traditional'. However, in the context of *Khasi* Music (Folk and Traditional), the native state formation process vis-à-vis the evolution of music provides amazing scope for a critical study and analysis. ❄

A musician as Catalyst for Change: T.N. Rajarattinam Pillai and Nagasvaram Music

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

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

Photo courtesy of B.M. Sundaram

T.N. Rajarattinam Pillai

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

The size and pitch of the instrument

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

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

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

Photo courtesy of B.M. Sundaram

Tirumarugal Natesa Pillai (1874-1903)

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

A lowering of the tonic pitch is also reported in Karnatak (South Indian classical) music during the same period (Higgins 1976; Rangaramanuja Ayyangar 1972:320-1). The introduction of microphones is considered chiefly responsible for the change as it makes lower-pitched musicians audible in performance (Venkataramaiyar 1971). Although this explanation seems inapt for nāgasvaram music as the microphones were not introduced in its performances until much later, nāgasvaram musicians might have been encouraged to emulate the trend in prestigious vocal music. Yet, the musicians' desire to be identified with Rajarattinam Pillai by playing the type of instrument he allegedly invented contributed, more than any other factor, to the wide distribution of this instrument.

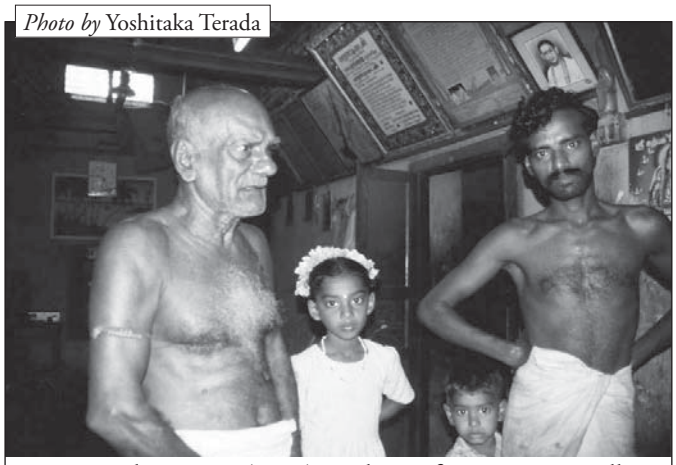
Most nāgasvaram musicians credit N.G.N. Renganada Accari for successfully manufacturing the playable pitch-2 instrument for the first time in the early 1940s, under request from Rajarattinam Pillai. His reputation as the best nāgasvaram maker could be traced to his long association with Rajarattinam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

Drone Instrument

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

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

Photo by Yoshitaka Terada



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

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

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

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

Performance practice

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

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

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

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

Playing position

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

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

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

Appearance and images of musicians

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

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

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

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

N.G.N. Renganada Accari,
Nadasvara Sirpi,
Narasinganpettai-609 802
(Tanjavur District)

Quoted from Dissertation by Terada, 1992

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

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

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

Yet, it seems remarkable that a single musician was instrumental not only in initiating many important changes, but in disseminating and stabilizing them as well. Rajarattinam Pillai's musical characteristics and extra-musical inclinations have been emulated by many musicians of the succeeding generations, in the hope that his extraordinary skills, imagination and charisma would be transmitted to them. Importantly, Rajarattinam Pillai's thrust for change was not necessarily from purely musical considerations. His desire for a longer and lower-pitched instrument, his decision to use the sruti box (for ottu), to play with the Karnatak music accompaniment, and to adopt appearances of Karnatak musicians, along with his insistence on playing music in sitting position are a result of his creativity, inclination to outshine others and conviction to challenge the practices which he regarded demeaning to him personally, and by extension, to his caste community. Regardless of his intention, the changes that Rajarattinam Pillai initiated has exerted a long and lasting effect on nāgasvaram music.

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Continuity and Change: Sampradaya in a Contemporary Artistic Practice

Douglas Knight

The following article draws upon materials in an archive collected by the family and friends of musician and dancer T. Balasaraswati, whose biography, *Balasaraswati: Her Art & Life*, was published in June 2010 by Wesleyan University Press. Among the contents of this unpublished archive are transcribed, and in some cases translated, interviews with many of Balasaraswati's contemporaries, and public statements by Balasaraswati. These translations and transcriptions are the source of several quotations without citation incorporated in this article. The details of the interviews excerpted here are fully cited in the bibliography of *Balasaraswati: Her Art & Life.*

As a student of a particular family practice of music and dance from South India for several decades, I have had the opportunity to observe a hereditary artistic process as it is affected by and affects other performance practices. I have had a personal relationship through a marriage with Balasaraswati's daughter, Lakshmi, and observed the process of absorption of the family style of music and dance by our son, Aniruddha. While delving into archival material and researching available secondary sources during my authorship of *Balasaraswati: Her Art and Life,* I have found that the subtle changes that take place within the rules and conventions of a family art are largely unrepresented in the documentation of the dance and music of *bharata natyam*.

It has been widely asserted that the traditions of the performing arts in Tamil Nadu had been forced out of use in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, necessitating the creation of institutions to "rescue" the art from oblivion through processes of "regeneration". The object of this article is not to deny that a modernized form of *bharata natyam* was invented through an institutional "revitalization", but rather to examine how the practice of *bharata natyam* changed and had in fact survived, from the perspective of a traditional performer, through its confluence with an increasingly diverse audience, and through evolution of the role of dance in the larger community. I have been a witness to and participant in the intra-family transmission of music and dance of the Dhanammal (Balasaraswati's grandmother) *parampara*. Balasaraswati and members of her immediate and extended family are the source of my understanding, and I quote several of them in the course of this article. They are among the most distinguished of hereditary artistic families in India. And they represent the vanguard of traditional performers who spread their art from the confines of community and language to national prominence, and then international distinction, constantly facing the challenge of influence from outside.

Balasaraswati was a seventh generation performer from a professional matrilineal community. Balasaraswati's family is remarkable not only for maintaining a continuous performing arts practice with stylistic continuity, but also for learning from and being influenced by composers, musicians, and dancers from outside of the family, including artists from outside of the regional music culture, and adapting that body of music to the evolving family style. The extended family's repertoire of more than one thousand orally retained compositions and intimate knowledge of the performance of more than one hundred *ragas* embraces the core of the South Indian musical tradition. The family's greatness is also measurable by its artistic persistence during a period of profound cultural shifts. Artists of distinction populated each generation; the style of music was maintained by an extended family that in 1938 boasted of more than a dozen artists.

One of the questions that surround the concept of "traditional" practices is whether or not the practice can thrive outside of a circumscribed cultural setting. The careers of Balasaraswati and her family stand as examples in response to this question. The rules and conventions that were at the heart of her art, and the belief systems that surrounded it, were learned and reinforced within her family and community.

Photo by Douglas Knight

Balasaraswati teaching grandson Aniruddha Knight at home, in Kilpauk

She was an advocate for both the matrilineal *devadasi* system and her linguistic heritage; she advocated for Tamil culture, although not for the exclusion of other languages or family systems. She was simply an advocate for her own community, in the midst of many.

Bala's life in retrospect is a window into the spread of the performing arts of India from regional practice to national, and then international, practice. Balasaraswati's first appearance outside the cultural and linguistic boundaries of Tamil Nadu was in 1934. India was still divided by language and cultural diversity, and the performing arts could not become India's pride, as they did during the 1950s, until they had migrated from one part of India to another. Bala was one of a number of distinguished traditional artists from all over India who participated in the All Bengal Music Conference in Calcutta in December 1934. There she met Ali Akbar Khan who, as a twelve year-old boy, was accompanying his father, Allaudin Khan. She also met Satyajit Ray, and again saw Ravi Shankar whom she had first met in 1932. She was particularly impressed with the *kathak* dancer Achchan Maharaj. She was surprised that a man was dancing a traditional form.

Satyajit Ray remembered meeting Bala for the first time at that concert. "This was the first performance of *bharata natyam* in Calcutta and I happened to be present in the audience, as a schoolboy of about fourteen or fifteen. That was my first exposure to *bharata natyam*. Everybody was tremendously impressed with this very young girl who performed with such grace, charm and confidence. I was very struck by this completely new kind of dancing. I'd never seen anything like that before, the music and everything. It was already announced in the papers beforehand that this was a new kind of classical Indian dancing; and to be performed by one of its best exponents." Ravi Shankar also recalled the concert: "It was something out of this world, even more so because Rabindranath Tagore, the great poet, was there, sitting in one corner of the stage on a special chair. I remember Bala was so excited."

When Bala's troupe was in Calcutta, they stayed with Venkataraman "Chinnanna" Sastri, whose nephew, Shambu, a musician and film actor, was a family friend. Shambu taught "*Jana Gana Mana Ati*," a song of Tagore's, to Bala and her mother, Jayammal, and they began the process of recasting the tune in the family style, giving it their traditional shape of melodic phrasing and specific forms of ornamentation. Musicologist T. Shankaran, Bala's cousin, commented in a letter, "I don't remember if Shambu taught it the way in which Bala and my mother were singing." Balasaraswati's youngest brother Viswanathan added in an interview, "I was very young when they were learning. They sounded totally different from when I heard it later on. [They] interpreted it into the South Indian style. The question is: the original tune. Was it closer to the way Jayammal was singing, in the Bengali style?"

In 1934 Bala performed "*Jana Gana Mana Ati*" in Calcutta; two years later she would perform the song again in Benares at the All India Music Conference, and once more at the Indian National Congress Exhibition in Madras. These were the first, and likely the last, times that the song that became the Indian national anthem would be danced in *abhinaya*. Viswanathan commented on what would be, in retrospect, a historic event. "We didn't know [the song] would become the national anthem at that time, in the thirties. When they performed in Calcutta the audience liked it so much. They were thrilled to hear South Indians singing a Bengali song."

In the house next door to Venkataraman Sastri's house, a college principal named Ram Pai lived

with his two teenage daughters, who were Bala's age. Pai's daughters were fascinated to meet Bala and spent as much time as they could with her in Sastri's small house. In their play, they taught Bala a *bhajan* in Hindi. Pai's daughters also taught Jayammal and Bala, at their request, some folk songs in Bengali. Jayammal and Bala worked together to interpret these songs in the *karnatic* music style, identifying a *raga* that matched the feel of the melody of the songs. They explored the exposition of their choice of *raga*, emphasis on certain resting tones, and other considerations involved in the setting of music with text according to a vast, intuitively executed set of conventions and rules. Bala's ensemble would perform these pieces at the end of the concert. Audiences in the north loved the inclusion of the Bengali *bhajans*, and Bala's concerts were wonderfully received.

How did this process of change and adaptation occur within a recognizably coherent style of performance? For that matter, why did it change? Authenticity in *bharata natyam* became an issue for debate when the art form became detached from its creative source, but the controversies raised within artistic communities themselves are of a different sort. They are descriptors of the process of change of a traditional practice within the confines of its own integrity—within the aspects of the practice that seem to defy emulation and nonintuitive, self-conscious imitation.

Many years later Viswanathan described the process of musical transformation and maturation: "In her early days, thirty or forty years ago, [Bala] worked on *padams* and *javalis* which had become obsolete. In fact, we worked together to revive those rare songs. I was impressed with her incredible sense of beauty and her aesthetic sense for music. As we worked I noticed that she would concentrate on a particular song for several weeks. We exchanged ideas concerning the ways in which a word or line might be interpreted. She thought constantly about that material without actually practicing the song or the *abhinaya* for the song. However, she would sing the song we were working on. I think she was trying to decide how variations should be interpreted in the music, what contour—shape—would best communicate the meaning of each particular word or line, through the music. After a long exploratory period, examining the possibilities of a song, it would appear in her concerts where we could, finally, see it performed. This process applied to lyric items only, not compositions with *nritta*.

"It was incredible how she communicated her ideas through *abhinaya* and music, blending [them] both so beautifully. This was the reason she was considered one of our greatest dancers, because of her ability to blend music and dance. We took a particular word or line and tried to see how we could interpret it musically to convey the meaning of the song; how many varieties could you have, how many ways you might express it through *abhinaya*; or, take the musical phrase and see how it influenced the dance musically and vice versa. Finally, we would decide certain things about contour, range, all sorts of things related to dance. We would then arrive at certain conclusions. Still, she thought of other possible variations. So many surprises would appear in a concert that were amazing."

Everyone in Balasaraswati's ensemble responded to the demands of the change in the audience as they first traveled outside of the south. The capacity for adaptation, and the comfort with inclusion and modification of material used for performance that is by some definitions "borrowed content," characterized Balasaraswati's family's artistic culture. And the capacity to understand another culture became a great strength for all of the members of Balasaraswati's family when they began teaching in the West three decades later.

Another mark of the traditional artist's capacity to evolve can be observed in Balasaraswati's

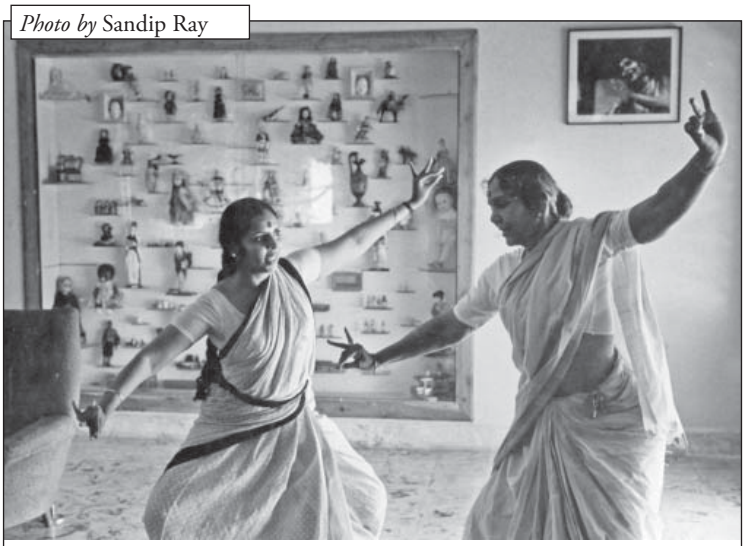
Photo courtesy of Douglas Knight

Balasaraswati and Lakshmi singing in Middletown, CT

teacher's approach to the art of *nattuvangam* and his conception of *bharata natyam* that he realized through Balasaraswati's extraordinary capacity and committment. Kandappa Pillai had been a great admirer of Vina Dhanammal, and it was her sense of refinement in music that was reflected in and distinguished his ensemble. The modifications he introduced are significant for what they tell us about what motivates the processes of change within artistic traditions.

Kandappa Pillai introduced a variety of changes, some of them imposed by the new social and performance environments, and some representing expansions of the traditional framework and material he inherited. His radical definition of the pure dance of *bharata natyam* was consistent with his family's legacy. This was the opportunity perceived and seized by Jayammal and Kandappa. The musical sensibilities defined by Dhanammal's family, the extraordinary musical repertoire of *bharata natyam* the family possessed and was expanding, and the remarkable cohesion of several artists from one family sharing a common musical core—drummers and dancers as well as melodic musicians—made possible a unique capability in performance. It may not be said that Jayammal and Kandappa intended to resurrect the practice as it had existed, although they may have had a strong instinct along those lines. They were simply acting out of an entirely contemporary urge to make new art. This was "tradition" in its most dynamic form.

Photo by Sandip Ray



Balasaraswati teaching daughter Lakshmi at home, in Kilpauk

When Bala had performed her *arangetram* in 1925, the outdoor concert platform was illuminated with oil lamps. Each performance had a basic drone pitch that was made with a small bagpipe called *tutti*. In Bala's account, three or four male musicians in red or green turbans stood at the rear of the stage to her right, and the drummer stood behind her, drum slung on a sash around his neck and waist. As the dancer moved, the drummer would shadow the dancer's movements. In the traditional setting, this would mean not moving very far; dancers and their ensembles performed in confined or roughly defined open places. There was no concept of "using" a stage. In particular, the relationship of the dancer and the drummer was musically very close. At some times during a performance, the entire ensemble moved with the dancer. The musicians sang at a high pitch in order to be audible without amplification in large open spaces.

As concerts began to be performed in enclosed spaces, Kandappa lowered the pitch at which the drone was tuned, and therefore the pitch at which the ensemble performed, allowing himself and other male musicians in the ensemble to sing within a range better suited to the male register. This change also allowed Kandappa's performance of *nattuvangam* to be heard over the music of the ensemble without being too loud; customarily, the dance masters had to shout until they were hoarse as they performed *nattuvangam*. Kandappa also used a *tambura* for a drone instead of the raucous *tutti*, and having changed the pitch in the middle of the concert, he broke with convention and presented female singers in the second half of the performance.

During most of the 1920s Kandappa used several drummers on different occasions, including Munuswamy Mudaliar and Govindaswami. Kanchipuram Kuppuswami Mudaliar became Balasaraswati's *mridangam* player during the early 1930s and was with her for the following fifty years. Kandappa Pillai replaced the *mukhuvina* with the flute and/or clarinet. He had three fine clarinetists: early in Bala's career, on several occasions, the legendary accompanist Balaraman Naidu, who was from Mylapore Gauri Ammal's ensemble; later Kuppu Rao of All India Radio; and eventually Radhakrishna Naidu, who also had a distinguished solo career. The capacity to perform beautifully as both a soloist and

a dance accompanist was rare, but Balasaraswati's musicians—including her brother Viswanathan, who began to perform with Bala in the 1940s—were also known for both. One of the vocalists in Kandappa's ensemble was Kanchipuram Ellappa Pillai, who would become Balasaraswati's *nattuvanar* following Kandappa's death in the early 1940s.

When Jayammal performed with the ensemble, Kandappa moved the musicians from a standing position behind the dancer to a seated position to the side of the dancer. (It is sometimes claimed that the seating of the musicians was an innovation introduced by Rukmini Devi, but there are photographs and reviews documenting the change in the early 1930s before Rukmini Devi began performing.) One of the reasons that he seated the musicians, was out of respect for Jayammal and other women who joined her as accompanists, whom he would not permit to stand and sing on a performance platform. Kandappa refused to wear a turban, and no one else in the ensemble wore one. Turbans had traditionally been worn as a sign of deference to the royal family. He objected to the extension of that deference to patrons who simply had the means to support performances. Kandappa also did away with the male musicians' upper-cloth, which had been the appropriate dress in a temple, in the presence of the image of the Divine, but was not appropriate for the performance platform. He replaced the upper-cloth with a shirt, the same garment concert musicians wore. There were critics who found these changes impertinent, but Kandappa would have expected that.

In traditional practice, at least in the 1920s, dance performances would begin with a composed section of drumming called *melaprapti*, sometimes accompanied by melodic instruments. It was short and called attention to the beginning of the performance. This announcement was necessary when the performance happened on the *mandapam* in a temple, where other activities could be expected to compete with the performance. Kandappa felt it unsuitable for the concert stage. Another concert practice that has disappeared, and was disappearing when Bala started to perform, was the inclusion of a drum solo after the *varnam*. Kandappa choose not to follow that practice. (At about the same time as the drum solo was dropped from the dance concert format, it was adopted as part of the music concert format and remains as a standard element today.) Instead, he added *raga alapana* between the *varnam* and the *padams* to follow. This convention eventually gave way to an intermission, a concession to impatient and restless audiences.

As a reconstructed style of bharata natyam emerged, one area of experimentation was the use of musical compositions that were not from the repertoire composed for dance. Bala objected: "Yet it is not just dancing to the words in their superficial meaning alone. Nor is the music itself detached from the words and their full inner and outer meaning." Most practitioners and teachers from the traditional professional community agreed that pieces not composed for dance could not be suitably substituted for those that were.

The great *nattuvanar* Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai, in a speech reproduced in Kalakshetra Foundation's publication *Rukmini Devi Arundale Birth Centenary Volume*, remarked: "Departure from tradition, the inclusion of totally unsuitable pieces in the name of innovation only lowers the standard of this art. I am not against change. There is bound to be change and new ideas. But these can be called by a different name and not brought under the name of Bharatanatya. Such innovations make a sublime art ridiculous. ...Bizarre costumes and inappropriate themes will only lead to destruction of this art."

However, as traditional professional musicians were replaced as accompanists for dance in the 1940s, musicians with a different repertoire took their place and these new musicians introduced the song form *kriti* (and the virtually identical *kirtana*) into *bharata natyam* concerts. Today, *kritis* have become standard features of *bharata natyam* performances. This development is significant; the poetry of *kritis* is in general more abstractly philosophical and the pacing of the text leaves relatively little room for narrative interpretation by a dancer. In contrast, in *padams*, the simplicity of the language and the pacing of the syllables in music leave more room for gesture in narrative dance.

Bala expressed discouragement about changes to the repertoire that was performed, not for the sake of continuity of the history of the dance form, but rather because of the logic of the repertoire. Often, Bala's apparently conservative attitude about what repertoire was most suitable for dance, was

interpreted as an insistence on what was old or original. It was not. She was speaking of what music best suited the dance form the way she understood it. Bala's accompanist Leela Shekar recalled: "She was ever ready to learn, ever ready to absorb new things, new ways of music. When she liked something very much, she was the first one to go and try it. But she was a stickler, remaining very original, very classical; she would not go beyond the classical mould."

Balasaraswati described the logic of the traditional concert format: "At first, mere meter; then, melody and meter; continuing with music, meaning, and meter; its expansion in the center-piece of the *varnam*; thereafter, music and meaning without meter; in variation of this, melody and meter; in contrast to the pure rhythmical beginning, a non-metrical song at the end. We see a most wonderful completeness and symmetry in this art. Surely the traditional votaries of music and dance would not wish us to take any liberties with this sequence."

Balasaraswati's family moved from a national onto a global stage at the beginning of the 1960s. The fortunes of the family were cast in part by achievements in the United States and elsewhere outside of India, that began for Balasaraswati in 1961. Although her circumstances changed, her audience changed, and her sources of income and professional support changed, Balasaraswati remained deeply rooted in the world of South Indian tradition. That landscape for her was constant, and her dedication and purpose were constant, an extension of what she had been taught: to be unperturbed by the comments and circumstances that swirled around her. Bala was fascinated by the wider world, ever curious and respectful. But she was not a part of it, and it was not a part of her.

In 1961 Bala was invited to a festival in Tokyo called the East-West Encounter, facilitated by the Congress for Cultural Freedom and the City of Tokyo. She first performed in North America at Jacob's Pillow in 1962, and went on to tour throughout the country. Over the next twenty years, she performed several hundred concerts in North America, some of which have become legendary. She performed at the Edinburgh Festival in Scotland in 1963, where again she and her musicians, some of them family, were in the company of distinguished artists from India and the West.

Bala was ideally suited to this new environment. She was both entirely accessible and recognizably unaffected by Western expectations of Indian dance. Kapila Vatsyayan commented in an interview on why she thought Bala found a following in the West: "Anyone who is sensitive to movement and the perfection of movement would be moved, even outside a cultural context. ...There was too the personality that Bala brought and communicated. Apart from her being a very successful performer, in limited groups or audiences, she was a stupendous teacher; that was what gave her the students and admirers that she has [in the United States]. She's in a class by herself. People abroad were also attracted by the fact that she, almost by volition, was not glamorous; there was a certain type of austerity, a straightness about her. These can be endearing qualities, especially for artists who rise to such heights where you expect there would be a public and private image. But [instead] you get a simple person like Bala. She was very complex at other levels, but in life and great performance, this was no doubt a very unique experience for people; therefore they were committed to it."

Perhaps it was her teaching that made most people in the US aware of her artistry. John Bergamo, the percussionist, teacher, and founder of the percussion program at California Institute of the Arts, said, "That's what teachers do, we give up what we know so that someone else can take it somewhere else. We don't keep secrets."

Kapila Vatsyayan commented: "Ted Shawn has spoken of Bala as the messenger of peace and amity. When one great artist says that about another great artist, one should consider that a great compliment. And [coming from] a person like Ted Shawn, with his experience and exposure and having been a bridge between or among dance cultures both in terms of what he did and what he promoted, this remark can have many meanings. One, naturally, was that a person so beautifully and richly rooted in her own tradition carried that message as easily to the United States, where she worked for many years. Not for a moment was Bala affected by the U.S. or [did she lose] her own security in herself, and this is what peace is all about. That you recognize the otherness of the other, be yourself and yet be able to make your dialogue. For a person of Bala's caliber to be able to do this showed both the strength of the tradition and her own

strength, because a lesser artist could have been blown off their feet as many others have been."

The challenges that faced Balasaraswati in teaching non-Indian students were manifold. Perhaps most difficult was that Western students had been trained to learn music and dance through notation. Their minds and memories worked differently. A mind trained to learn, aurally absorbs material faster and more permanently than a mind trained with notation. Bala was distracted by any student who was taking notes rather than watching her. She wanted students to be registering and absorbing directly what she was demonstrating and explaining. "Why don't you watch me? The more you see the less I have to teach," she once exclaimed.

Luise Scripps watched Bala teach many different students in the United States, including small children. She observed, "When she taught small children, which she loved to do, she ...would sit on the floor and speak very softly to them. And say, 'Now darling, you must do this and you must put your sweet feet this way and hold your arms,' and she was very gentle. And very carefully and slowly and softly mold them." Bella Lewitzki commented that on the occasions when she observed Bala teaching, she never heard her say "good" or "bad." "It was just amazing. She had finite answers; 'you do it this way.' Not, 'That is wrong, this is right'; or, 'This is bad and this is good' and 'the quality is lacking.' She never used the word quality. And since this woman personified quality I was fascinated with this dichotomy in the teaching. You had it there as a vehicle; as far as Bala was concerned, I would judge this to be true. The vehicle was there, it was very clear. . . . It was not that Bala did not expect things to be correct; she did. But she did not use the Western benchmark [or] standard.

"One of the things I realized, in watching her teach, was the difference in Western teaching and teaching from other countries; our vain assumption that teaching is only one thing, one way. [Her teaching] was very full of information. She gave me a lot of information she did not know she gave me." Bala did understand how much she was imparting, but she tried to let her students feel that the information they received was already in their possession. "[When] I saw another teacher from another culture repeating this, I was reminded that there are very many different ways you come at teaching. In the Western world, [touching a student] used to be a no-no; you do not invade people's privacy. But with her, yes, you push the hands back. You physically manipulate. I now do that and I've seen Donny [McKayle] do that. So I know we both do it. But I hadn't done that and I wouldn't have [if it hadn't been for Bala]."

In an interview years later, Lewitzki recalled where the idea to have Bala come to CalArts started: "Bala was part of a dream that I had dreamed, which was ...that history should be taught by a living person so that it was a totally encapsulated story one got. Instead of anecdotes, reading about, or dry pages and facts, one would live, as it were, with the individual that was deserving of being recorded in history. And, certainly, Bala was that. ...At California Institute of the Arts, fortunately, we had the right to shape our program with very little interference, so we did just that. We shaped it as we thought fit.

"It was decided that those students in the School of [Theater and] Dance who wanted to learn from Bala, and were accepted by Bala, were excused from the rest of their program, except for the academic programs to meet accreditation requirements. ...They were able to focus almost all of their attention on learning from Bala. . . . I think she must have taught something like three hours in the morning and three hours in the afternoon. Our object was not to exhaust her, nor to deprive her of all her information in one fell swoop, but was to expose our students to her. ...In my own mind, I think I reconfirmed something I already knew—that within the art form itself, lies something so beautiful that if you devote yourself to it fully, out of it comes the flowering that looks like a Bala. All those years, all of that input, resulted in Bala. And it was, for me, very confirming. I don't think it needs to be done with quite the severity that this woman had to undergo, because she apparently has not practiced that with her daughter. She wanted to see a little more freedom with her daughter, she told me."

Donald McKayle had very specific recollections, partly because he had already brought the aesthetics of Indian dance into his own work—and because he had seen Bala previously: "I remember being tremendously impressed with the expressive dance. I just thought it immediately opened a whole picture of life that she was trying to get across. I was completely carried away by it. I had studied Indian dance prior to this so that maybe why I had some

inkling of gestures that the other people didn't have. But, I don't think that was necessary in order to get a real feeling of what she was trying to express."

"But a lot of the things I learned from her became incorporated in my work, like the sound of the feet on the floor. I would do things where I would lift the toes and get a certain sound and let them slap onto another. ...It is just the whole use of the back, the arms, the head, the neck. ...I robbed her warm-up [*alarippu*] for my class because I felt that it extended the energy all the way out to the extremities. Also, it gave them a very different use of their bodies, so they didn't have a face that was observing the rest of their body, which was dancing. It became a much more total look."

"I've found over the years, that those people that have worked with me a long time have a very different way of performing than those who come to me at the beginning and don't have it. So I feel that that was one of the things I got from working in this art form and Bala was a very important force of that. ...And there is belief behind it. There is actual performer belief behind it. That conviction cannot be imitated. It is very strange. Even if they don't feel it after the moment is gone. It doesn't matter, it is in the dance."

Bala embodied a different vision of the performance traditions of South Asia than had been seen previously in the West. For some, including much of the American professional dance community, a renewed search for understanding of the traditions of India was informed by Bala's quiet and entirely self-assured presence. In meeting or seeing her, one was left with no doubt about her certainty of purpose or her clarity about her art.

Inevitably, in hindsight, the apparent conservatism of Balasaraswati's perspective looks, particularly to young performers, as if she were insisting on an old way of conceiving the art. But Balasaraswati was herself a revolutionary, an entirely modern dancer; the same thing can be said of any traditional artist. Reflecting on her mentor, Mylapore Gauri Ammal, Bala said, "The initial inspiration for me to take up dancing came from seeing performances of Gauri Ammal when I was very young. If this lady had not brought the dance to such a stage of development, the combination of music and dance that I have attempted to realize would not have been possible." It was Mylapore Gauri Ammal's conception of the dance that was the basis for Bala's practice, not the shape or rendition.

Charles Reinhart, now director of the American Dance Festival, declared, "Modern dance didn't come full sprung into the world. There was this great antecedent. We owe a great deal of debt to the classical art forms of Asia, and of course, Bala was the queen of her classical art form. ...She was a very important part to show the quality of what existed in Asia."❁

Supporting Traditional Arts with Public Dollars in a Transnational World

Maggie Holtzberg is Manager of the Folk Arts & Heritage Program at the Massachusetts Cultural Council (1999 to the present). As a folklorist, she works closely with traditional artists and communities through documentary fieldwork, grant programs, presenting, and technical assistance. She is curator of *Keepers of Tradition: Art and Folk Heritage in Massachusetts* (2008), *The Lost World of the Craft Printer* (1992), *Portrait of Spirit: One Story at a Time* (1996), producer of the sound recording *Georgia Folk: A Sampler of Traditional Sound* (1990), and co-director/producer of the documentary film *Gandy Dancers* (1994). Holtzberg holds a Ph.D. in Folklore and Folklife from the University of Pennsylvania and served as Folklife Program Director of the Georgia Council for the Arts, prior to coming to Massachusetts.

In a multicultural society, it is a challenge to recognize, understand, and support the traditional arts of all who call Massachusetts home. This essay raises more questions than it provides answers. I write from the perspective of an arts administer/folklorist working at the

Massachusetts Cultural Council (MCC), a state arts agency. The goal of the MCC's Folk Arts & Heritage Program is to support, promote, and build appreciation for the cultural traditions and expressions of the many diverse populations in Massachusetts.[1]

What qualifies as traditional art is at the core of how we decide what to document through field research, what we will support through grants, and what we present to the public in the way of exhibitions, books, performances, and other programs. Like my colleagues working as public folklorists across the United States, I find myself in the position of defining what constitutes "traditional." We write and publish grant guidelines, provide review criteria, process grant applications, and strive to manage a fair and equitable panel review process. Here is how our grant guidelines define traditional art:

"Traditional arts are part of the cultural heritage of a group of people whose members share a common ethnic heritage, language, religion, occupation, or geographic region. These artistic traditions are passed down through generations and reflect the values of their shared culture. Skills are typically learned directly through observation and imitation from someone steeped in the tradition, rather than through classes, books, or other means of institutional instruction."[2]

Our field research and grant giving are guided by who the people of Massachusetts are and what artistic expressions they value. As folk arts scholar Henry Glassie has noted, in shaping their own styles, all cultures come to emphasize certain media. Spend enough time with people and they will lead you to "robust centers of culture" where certain material forms or performances are imbued with beauty and power.[3] In Massachusetts, where successive waves of immigration have increasingly diversified the population, one finds many such centers of culture. The longer a cultural group has been here, the more likely it is for people to associate its traditions as Massachusetts art forms, such as Yankee quilting, stonewall building and decoy carving, or Native quill work. Yet each successive wave of immigration and settlement brings its own cultural expressions, which, over time, have become traditionalized, and associated with places in Massachusetts, e.g., Irish fiddling, Italian feast day celebrations, and Caribbean carnival processions. Some of the newest of immigrants to Massachusetts have brought some of the most ancient traditions with them, e.g., Malian drumming and Cambodian dance. All of these cultural expressive forms are worthy of our attention and support.

One of the more tangible ways we support traditional arts is by awarding direct grants to individual artists. In 2001, the MCC began awarding Artist Fellowships in the traditional arts, using the review criteria of artistic excellence, authenticity, and significance of the artist's work to the traditional community. Panelists evaluate the artistic excellence of an applicant's work within its cultural context. The Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program was introduced in 2002. It provides a financial incentive for master artists to work with promising apprentices. Review criteria include artistic excellence, the master's standing within the traditional community, significance of the art form, quality of budget and work plan, and demonstrated commitment to the traditional art form. Apprentices learn directly by observing and imitating, and by processing the critique of the master artist. The program is designed to fund more than just lessons; it is intended to support a special, mentoring relationship between master artist and apprentice. It does not fund an ongoing class or school.

Given that tradition never stands still, how is change to be understood, especially by someone completely outside of a tradition? As trained folklorists, we must develop skills to identify excellence within someone else's tradition. We look to the community for guidance. What traditional art forms are revered within a traditional community? How is artistic excellence defined within the tradition? How is an individual crafts person, musician, or dancer regarded by other practitioners within the community? Does this individual adhere to traditional technique, repertoire, and performance practice?

Things get complicated when traditions with deep roots elsewhere are transplanted and are now practiced in Massachusetts. This is especially true when it comes to hereditary practices. We have funded a few hereditary artists—Malian griot Balla Kouyaté whose balaphon playing ancestry goes back to the 12th century and wooden boat builder Harold

A. Burnham, whose shipyard is located on the banks of a tidal river where, for 11 generations, members of the same family have built and launched wooden vessels. While Kouyaté and Burnham were born into a tradition, the more common situation here in Massachusetts is that a tradition is passed on within a cultural community rather than through a direct familial tie.

Hereditary practices are especially vulnerable to change in the context of immigration and acculturation. This can be seen within the region's growing Indo-American community, who I have come to know largely though their applications to our Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program. Master artists and their students apply for grants to support the teaching of Carnatic violin, Dhrupad vocal singing, mridangam and tabla playing, Bharatanatyam and Odissi dance. From my limited purview, it appears that geographic displacement, social and economic circumstances, and acculturation are having a profound effect on how these traditional art forms are being defined, transmitted, presented, and consumed.

What happens to a dance tradition when individuals seek out government support for something that was once solely supported within the hereditary traditional community? When does a reconstructed dance form (e.g., Bharatanatyam) become a new tradition in its own right? Who are we to criticize when dancers dance to recorded music? What are we to make of an Indo-American apprentice's facial expressions which, in India, would be inappropriate to a young girl's age? What happens to an ancient music tradition when the role of the guru is essentially professionalized, when teachers now can earn $10,000 to $15,000 training a student for his or her arangetram? Traditionally, the arangetram was an offering performed in temples and signified the first major accomplishment in a girl or boy's life. In the metro-Boston area, among the children of first-generation middle class immigrants who are employed largely in high tech, science, and medical fields, the phenomenon of the arangetram has become one of American largesse. Evoking other culture's rites of passage, such as the Jewish girl's bat mitzvah or Latina's quinciñeara, the arangetrams are elaborately produced events with glossy printed invitations and programs, hired musicians, hand-stitched costumes, professional videography, and food for hundreds.

Acknowledging that the arangetram, and the years of preparation for it, is an important cultural phenomenon, it does bring to light one of the challenges facing public funding of the arts. Our Apprenticeships, which pair an experienced master artist with an apprentice in a 9-month long, one-on-one learning experience, are meant to help ensure the continued vitality of a traditional art form. And yet, for the majority of young Indo-American students here in New England, the arangetram is a form of closure rather than a beginning, as many students do not continue their intensive study after high school. What is our role in adjudicating limited resources? This is not just about the arts of India, but of Ireland, Cambodia, Armenia, Nigeria, Puerto Rico and the countless other world traditions that find new life here in the United States. As communities that we support mature here in America, they become more deeply integrated and acculturated. They also seek ways of describing themselves in ways that differentiate them from other cultural traditions. Public funding of the traditional arts becomes increasingly complex as the state, region, and country continues to become more and more culturally diverse.

Endnote

[1] Support for the traditional arts in the United States has grown since the establishment of the National Endowment for the Arts in the late 1960s. Through the leadership of Bess Lomax Hawes, the NEA's Folk and Traditional Arts Program has funded fellowships, apprenticeships, folklore field research, exhibitions, films, and other public programs.

[2] From http://www.massculturalcouncil.org/applications/apr_guidelines.html

[3] Henry Glassie, The Spirit of Folk Art: The Girard Collection at the Museum of International Folk Art, New York, 1989, 36.

Council of Elders—
An Intergenerational Dialogue

Knowledge Pathways for Traditional Arts in the 21st Century

Since 1976, **Ralph Samuelson** has pursued a dual career as a foundation professional, facilitating and supporting Asia-US cultural exchange and as a performer and teacher of the Japanese bamboo flute, shakuhachi. From 1991 to 2008 he was the director of the Asian Cultural Council (ACC), a foundation whose program was established in 1963 by John D. Rockefeller 3rd, to support cultural exchange in the arts and humanities, between the United States and the countries of Asia. Prior to his tenure as director, he served as the foundation's associate director (1983-1990) and as program associate of The JDR 3rd Fund (1976-1982), predecessor of the ACC. He currently serves as Senior Advisor to the ACC and as a consultant to other organizations engaged with international exchange. A graduate of Cornell University, Ralph Samuelson has an M.A. degree in ethnomusicology from Wesleyan University. He was trained in the classical style and repertoire of the Kinko School of shakuhachi by the late Living National Treasure Goro Yamaguchi and other leading Japanese musicians, and is recognized as one of the foremost shakuhachi players and teachers outside of Japan.

Throughout Asia, and indeed across the world, historically, art forms and practices have been transmitted from one generation to the next in an all-encompassing nexus of teaching and learning, giving and receiving. This may take the form of an intimate, lifelong teacher/student relationship; may take place within a holistic, nurturing community; and/or may be part of a system of court or similar patronage. Such transmission has ensured a depth of detailed, nuanced knowledge and practice in highly specific art forms and styles and a firm, natural foundation in both refined technique and profound spiritual understanding. At the same time, the intense and often isolated manner of learning and practice has sometimes limited the broader education or knowledge base of many traditional artists.

In more recent years, certainly in the late 20th and early 21st century, these time-tested modes of transmission, these deeply ingrained knowledge pathways, gradually have been giving way to a new kind of teaching and learning. In many regions of Asia, for example, the master/disciple, village-based, and court teachings have moved into more modern institutional settings such as arts academies, universities, or other formalized schools. The time frame is shortened, and students are exposed to myriad styles, genres, and teachers, as well as to subjects far beyond the art form in question. Furthermore, new technologies that permeate contemporary life—recording, television, Internet, etc. offer greater exposure to a wide range of arts and ideas. In this new context, younger artists of today may lack a certain grasp of the deep wells of traditional knowledge that underlie their practice, yet may be better positioned to communicate with contemporary audiences and reflect contemporary sensibilities in their work.

Of course tradition is never stagnant and has always both produced and accepted change over time. Yet the changes at this moment in history seem more profound in that, they reflect a huge transformation in the entire milieu and ethos in which the arts are taught, learned, and practiced - not simply a transformation in style. Anecdotal evidence observed and gathered during 40 years of travel and study in Asia leads me to conclude that, in many cases, the generation of artists now in their 60s—that generation born near or shortly after the end of World War II—may be the last generation trained entirely or primarily within traditional systems of giving and receiving. When this generation is gone, something of great significance may be lost, something lying far beyond technique and form. It is therefore critical to create opportunities for these artists to convey to the younger generation some sense of this elusive wisdom. Likewise, younger artists should be given an opportunity to share with their elders the challenges they face as young artists in contemporary society and the creative energy and

Indian Folklife Regd. No. R.N. TNENG / 2001 / 5251
ISSN 0972-6470

ideas they have incorporated from the lives they are living in the new world of our times.

Several years ago a well-known choreographer of contemporary dance in one Asian country was invited to another Asian country to offer a choreography workshop for young dancers who had trained in traditional dance forms within academy settings. The guest choreographer had spent time in the host country many years before and was deeply drawn to traditional dance idioms there. While he was impressed with the creative energy and ideas of the students in the workshop, he was deeply dismayed to discover how much they had lost the connection to the spiritual foundation of the dance, and to the interwoven relationship between the dance and its associated music. Indeed, the close integration of different genres and of technique, with spirit, to create a unified whole, are distinctive hallmarks of the arts of Asia.

Proposal: A Council of Elders

We are living in a time of unprecedented speed-of-change. Changes in how art forms are transmitted are part of larger changes within society. Following and often interspersed with periods of colonialism, political upheaval, and war and turmoil, modernity brings new ideas, new economic and social models, and sometimes progress However, it also brings dislocation, confusion, and questions of identity. We are witnessing a transformation, but what is gained, what is lost?

For those of us engaged with the traditional arts of Asia, this is the right time (and indeed may be the last time) to bring together older artists who have trained within traditional knowledge systems and younger artists whose education reflects the world of today. I therefore want to encourage the convening of a diverse group of artists in a "Council of Elders" (more accurately, a council of elders and youngsters), a give-and-take gathering to explore knowledge pathways; modes of teaching and learning; technique, style, and spiritual understanding; and creative expression.

Tradition and change in the arts of Asia is too big a topic to address in one gathering. Different countries, regions, communities, art forms, and individual artists are affected in different ways by forces of change. In Japan, for example, traditional music continues to be taught by hereditary teachers, but the leading young musicians of today are often graduates of a university music program. In Java and Bali, traditional dance has been taught within a chain of government arts academies since the mid-20th century. In Southeast Asia and elsewhere, traditional crafts have often been revived and supported by the international marketplace.

To begin a regional and intergenerational dialogue and exploration, I propose an initial Council of Elders gathering in 2012, a prelude to what I hope can be an ongoing series of discussions and workshops. To simplify the process, this first step would focus on the performing arts and would comprise of no more than 20 core participants, up to 10 elder/younger pairs representing different art forms and countries across Asia. The group dynamics might work best if each pair consists of a teacher and his or her student, and if, in most cases, one person in each pair can communicate in English. The group would come together over a period of several days in a program of discussions, workshops, and performances, all to be thoroughly documented and reported. Institutions in Thailand, Japan, Indonesia, and India have already expressed an interest in hosting such a gathering, and I can envision an annual rotating series. Future programs could draw in other parts of the world as well, and participants could be expanded to include scholars, students, administrators, and others. The recording of artists' oral histories should be an important component of this work, ideally with the cooperation of a museum, library, or research institute with a commitment to traditional arts.

The African proverb, "when an elder dies, a library burns to the ground," reminds us that indigenous knowledge is deep and powerful, and if it is not carried forward to the next generation, much can be lost. At the same time, traditional arts are organic, always changing with the inner and outer lives of the practitioners and their communities. The "Council of Elders" is one attempt to look at tradition and change in the transmission of art and knowledge, at a most unusual time in human history. The project is now in an early planning phase, and a planning/advisory committee is being formed. Suggestions, ideas, and comments from readers of this journal are most welcome indeed. ❁

Published by M.D. Muthukumaraswamy for National Folklore Support Centre, #508, V Floor, Kaveri Complex, 96, Mahatma Gandhi Road, Nungambakkam, Chennai - 600 034 (Inda) Tel/fax: 28229192 / 42138410 and printed by M.S. Raju Seshadrinathan at Nagaraj and Company Pvt. Ltd., Plot #156, Developed Plots Industrial Estate, Perungudi, Chennai 600 096, INDIA. Ph:+91-44-66149291/92 ***Editor: M.D. Muthukumaraswamy***
(For free private circulation only.)