



The Multifaceted Role of the Yazh in the Tamil Musical Tradition of the Sangam Period

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ABSTRACT

During the Sangam period, assemblies of learned scholars played a crucial role in the development and promotion of the Tamil language and Tamil music. The Literary works of the Sangam corpus provide substantial evidence for the cultural and musical traditions of the era. In particular, the texts belonging to the Ettuthokai & Pathppattu, which are part of the classical Sangam literature, contain numerous references to Tamil music and musical instruments. The Yazh was a stringed instrument that produced music through vibrating strings. The string and wind instruments that existed during the Sangam period were generally categorized. Among these instruments, the Yazh was considered the most significant string instrument. It was played in both Akam & Puram contexts in Sangam society. Various types of Yazh were used across the landscapes associated with the five ecological regions (Thinai) of ancient Tamil culture. Several varieties of the instrument have been identified in Sangam Literature. Such as: Sيريyazh, Periyazh, Senkootu Yazh, Sakota Yazh, Karungottu Yazh & Vil Yazh. These varieties differed mainly in their structural design and number and arrangement of strings. The yazh played an important role in the daily lives of people in the Sangam period. It was used by professional musicians such as Panar & Viraliyar to entertain audiences. Provide emotional comfort, celebrate victories in war, and accompany dance and ceremonial performances. Therefore, the Yazh occupied a significant place in the cultural and social life of the Sangam people.

In the Sangam period, when technological development had not yet advanced significantly, the Yazh nevertheless exhibited remarkable sophistication in its construction, performance technique, and musical application. This study aims to examine the structure, development, performance techniques, and musical significance of the Yazh. It also seeks to revisit and document the available literary evidence concerning the instrument in order to introduce its musical heritage to contemporary generations who may not be familiar with ancient Tamil musical traditions. Although several studies have been conducted on the structure, performance techniques, varieties & cultural significance of the Yazh, systematic research remains limited. Furthermore, the Yazh gradually disappeared from practical musical usage over time, largely due to the



emergence and evolution of other musical instruments. As a result, references to the Yazh are mostly preserved in literary sources rather than in living musical practice.

This research focuses on examining the references and descriptions of the Yazh found in Sangam literature. The study relies on both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include the Sangam literary texts & their commentaries, while secondary sources include scholarly research works, academic articles & journals. This research adopts historical, descriptive & analytical methodologies to study the musical instrument in relation to literary evidence and the cultural practices of ancient Tamil society..

KEYWORDS: *Musical instruments, Sevvazhi pan, Strings, Siriyazh, Periyazh, Sangam literature.*

The Tamil Musical Traditions of the Sangam Period

The Sangam period marks the earliest recorded phase of Tamil literature and culture, characterized by the growth of literary, artistic, and musical traditions that shaped Tamil civilization. Sangam literature offers insights into ancient Tamil society's cultural practices and social organization. Music played a crucial role in daily life, intertwined with religious rituals, festivals, royal ceremonies, and emotional expression, utilizing various string, wind, and percussion instruments that enhanced the musical tradition.

Among these musical instruments, the Yazh holds a distinctive and prominent place in Sangam Literature. The yazh was a stringed musical instrument. Structurally comparable to the harp and was highly valued for its ability to produce soft, melodious, harmonious sounds. It was widely used in musical performances. and was closely associated with poetic expression. Furthermore, the Yazh played an important role in both the Akam and Puram traditions of Sangam poetry. These Poetic traditions often incorporated musical elements, reflecting the deep interconnection between literature and music in ancient Tamil culture.

The Yazh and Musical significance.

The yazh was an important string instrument used widely in the Sangam period, The instrument produced sound through plucked strings and was renowned for its melodic qualities. Scholars have often compared the Yazh to the harp used in western musical traditions. The instrument was played by professional musicians known as Panar, who travelled across regions performing music and poetry. Female performers known as Viraliyar also accompanied musical performances through dance and song.

The Yazh played a vital role in courtly entertainment, storytelling, and poetic recitations. Sangam Literature refers to several varieties of Yazh, including Peri Yazh, SiriYazh, Senkottu Yazh, Sakottu Yazh, Karunkottu Yazh, & VilYazh. These instruments differed in their structure, number of strings & tonal qualities. Furthermore, certain types of Yazh were associated with the five ecological landscapes (Tinai) of Sangam Literature. Such as: Kurinji- Kurinji Yazh, Mullai – Mullai Yazh, Marutham – Marutha Yazh, Neithal – Neithal Yazh, Palai – Palai Yazh. (Angaiyarkanni.I, (2000: 78).

Structure and Types of the Yazh.

Sangam literary works contain numerous references to the Yazh, the ancient Tamil stringed musical instrument. In particular, texts such as Porunararruppatai, Sirupanarruppatai, Perumpanarruppatai, and

Malaipatukatam provide detailed descriptions of the construction, Structure, and various components of the Yazh.

These literary sources discuss the physical design of the instrument, the materials used in its construction, and the distinctive features of its different parts. Through poetic descriptions and comparisons, the authors present the yazh not only as a musical instrument but also as a finely crafted artistic object.

The following lines from Porunararrupatai describe the structural beauty of the Yazh:

“Kulampu vazhi anna suvadu pada patthal,
Vilakku azal uruvan visiuru pachchai,
Eyya ilanchul seyyon avvayir,
Idu mayir olugiya thorram polap” (porunararrupatai).

These poetic lines vividly portray the shape, elegance, and craftsmanship of the Yazh, comparing its form to graceful and artistic elements. Such descriptions highlight the aesthetic refinement and advanced musical culture that flourished during the Sangam period.

In Porunararrupatai, the various structural parts of the Yazh are described, including pathal, pachchai, polam, porvai, aani, varuvai, maruppu, thivavu, and narampu. In this context, the component resembling a pot-like structure is referred to as "polam." This part was covered with leather. The opening of this section was curved in a manner similar to the mouth of a vessel.

Similarly, in Purananuru, it is mentioned that the strings (narampu) of the Yazh had a golden hue and the component called pachchai shone brightly like lightning. This idea is expressed in the following verse:

“pon varattanna puriyadangu narampin
Minnerpachchai miniruk kal siriyazh....” (Purananuru)

Sangam literary works also provide references to various types of Yazh. These include Siriya Yazh, Periya Yazh, Sengottu Yazh, Sakottu Yazh, Karungottu Yazh, and Vil Yazh. Among these, the Vil Yazh is considered to be the most ancient form of the instrument.

Within Sangam Literature, references to the Siriya Yazh appear most frequently. At the same time, in Pathitru Pathu, references to the Periya Yazh occur in three different places. Some other types of Yazh, such as Naradha Periya Yazh, Thumpuru Yazh, Keerasa Yazh, and Maruthuva Yazh, are not mentioned in Sangam literary works but are referred to in later texts. (Angayarkani.I, 2000:68)

The Performance of the Yazh by Panars as a Means of Livelihood

During the period of the Sangam Age, the Panars and Viraliyars performed music playing the Yazh, a prominent stringed musical instrument of the time. The musicians of this period were highly skilled in playing the Yazh. Through their melodious performances, they delighted kings and other members of the royal court.



Because the music produced by the Yazh brought great joy and emotional pleasure to the rulers and the assembled audience, the kings generously rewarded the Panars with various gifts and honors. In this way, the rulers appreciated their musical talent and artistry and also provided them with economic support for their livelihood. (Perumal, A. N., 1984:93).

It is also recorded that a chieftain named Thithiyan, who ruled a small territory, bestowed many gifts upon the Panars who excelled in the art of playing the Siriya yazh.

This idea is expressed in a verse from Akananuru:

“Yalisai marugin nidur kilavon
Kuyval evvi eval mevar” (Akananuru, 266: 10 -11)

This verse indicates that the chieftain, who delighted in the music of the Yazh, honored and rewarded the skilled musicians who performed it.

Yazh Music as a Therapeutic Method to relieve mental distress

During the Sangam period, the Yazh was used as a musical instrument that provided emotional relief and comfort to people. Literary evidence shows that music played on the Yazh functioned as a form of psychological therapy that helped alleviate anxiety, grief, and mental distress. The Netunalvatai describes a situation in which women performers sit together and sing melodiously while playing the Yazh. There, women musicians gently pluck the strings of the instrument and sing sweet songs in harmony with its sound.

In the narrative context, when the Pan Eya King leaves for war, the queen becomes deeply distressed and anxious. Seeing her mental anguish and sorrow, the female performers attempt to console her. In order to comfort and calm her mind, they play the Siri Yazh and sing soothing songs. Through the harmonious combination of Yazh music and vocal performance, the queen’s emotional suffering is gradually relieved. Thus, both the instrumental music of the Yazh and the accompanying songs function as a means of emotional healing. They help reduce mental stress, anxiety, and sorrow experienced by individuals. Therefore, it can be understood that during the Sangam period the Yazh served not only as a musical instrument but also as a therapeutic medium for psychological relief. (Permal, A. N., 1984: 62)

“ Aadal makalir paadakola nardaar
Thanmail thritha thankural theenthodai
Kommai varumuai vemmail thadaie
Karuthkoodu siri yazh paanumurai niruippa” (netunalvatai 67-70).

Yazh as a Medium for expressing victory in war.

Another important function of the Yazh in the Sangam period was its role in expressing and celebrating victory in war. After returning victorious from battle, the king’s triumph was celebrated through music and songs performed by women musicians and court performers. These victory songs glorified the King’s courage, his conquest of enemies, and his successful return from the battlefield. (Permal. A. N., 1984: 59).

“ vandupadu kkuthan mudipunai makalir



thodaijadu peri Yazh pallai panni

Panni marapi numisai Paada

Inithu paranthanthavarikin mazh suraiththalin” (Pathirupathu: 46, 4-7)

The Performance of the Yazh in Ensemble Music (Palliyam)

Paliyam refers to a musical ensemble in which multiple instruments are brought together to perform a unified composition or rhythmic structure. This tradition of ensemble performance can be traced back to the Sangam Period, where such coordinated musical expressions were already in practice. Over time, this tradition has evolved with various developments and transformations, and it continues to be observed in different forms even today.

During the Sangam age, especially in festive and celebratory contexts, the sweet music of the Yazh was performed alongside other instruments such as the Mathalam (drum). In addition, in public spaces and streets, instruments like the flute, the Yazh, the Murasu (drum), and other percussion instruments were played together. These performances reflect the early form of ensemble music (Palliyam) during the Sangam period. Thus, literary sources indicate both the existence of the ensemble tradition in the Sangam age and the significant role played by the Yazh within such musical settings. This is further supported by references found in Pattinappalai. (Ankayarkanni.I, 2000: 83).

The Yazh as an Instrument of Joyful Occasions

The Yazh functioned as a significant musical instrument associated with joy and auspicious events in ancient Tamil society. It was predominantly regarded as a symbol of happiness and emotional delight. The playing of the Yazh was closely connected with moments of celebration, pleasure, and communal harmony. Conversely, during times of sorrow, particularly in the event of death, the use of the Yazh was consciously avoided. When a person passed away, the household and relatives would remain in deep mourning. In such circumstances, musical expression especially through the Yazh, was considered inappropriate. Thus, the deliberate silence of the instrument became a cultural marker of grief and respect.

This practice is illustrated in literary references, where it is noted that during periods of distress musicians refrained from playing the Yazh. For instance, when a woman named Perunchathan experienced bereavement, artists abstained from performing on the Yazh, signifying the emotional weight of the situation. This reflects that the Yazh was not merely a musical instrument but an integral part of the emotional and social fabric of society, one that was reserved primarily for expressing joy and not sorrow. (Permal.A.N, 1984: 92)

"Naali Yazh maruippen mella vaanki
Paanan suudan paadini aniyal” (purananooru, 242, 2-3)

The Pannars (bards) used the Yazh as a medium to express their joy.

The Panars praised through song, delighted them, and received many gifts in return. At the time of receiving these gifts, they would hold the Yazh in their hands and play it. Thus, whenever the Panars



experienced joy upon receiving rewards, they expressed that happiness through the music of the Yazh. This idea is reflected in the verse of Alattur Kilar, who sang about the Chola king:

"Kaiyathu katanirai yale" (Purananuru: 69: 1)

The Yazh as an Auspicious Instrument

The Yazh, which produces sweet music, was regarded as an auspicious object. It was honored with ritual purity reverence, adorned with garlands, and carefully preserved in decorated cases. This is indicated in another verse.

"Mangala makkalotu malai suttu
Inkural itumpai yalotu tutampa..." (Purananuru: 332: 5-6)

The role of Yazh in expressing musical culture.

During the Sangam period, the Yazh served as an important instrument that expressed the refined nature of the Tamil musical tradition. Music was prevalent everywhere—villages, towns, and cities—and it was deeply integrated into people's lives. When Pannars performed songs, the Yazh played a central role in enhancing musical expression. Its different types contributed to the richness and sophistication of music, and people actively engaged with musical experiences.

Both rural and urban settings featured Yazh performances, though different types of Yazh were used in different places (Perumal, A. N., 1984: 92)

This is further supported by the verse,

"Itimal pani vanar kottu siriyal
Kaittar narampin panar kokkaiya
Nirampa viyalpir karampai sirur" (Purananuru: 302: 5-7)

Conclusion

During the Sangam period, although percussion instruments were widely prevalent, stringed instruments also occupied an important place. Among these, the Yazh emerged as a highly significant musical instrument and was regarded as a refined melodic instrument. Various types of Yazh were found across different landscapes, each suited to the lifestyle and cultural practices of the people inhabiting those regions.

The musicians of the Sangam period played a vital role in sustaining artistic traditions by performing in diverse social contexts. Scholars of Tamil music suggest that later instruments such as the veena evolved as a continuation of the developmental progression of the yazh. The Yazh produced music through strings, and variations in the nature and tension of these strings resulted in changes in musical expression. The tonal quality and range of the instrument depended largely on the number and arrangement of its strings. Over time, practical challenges arose. Frequent changes in pitch due to climatic conditions, especially in colder seasons; the difficulty of transporting the instrument; and the emergence of the post-Sangam period, such as Silappathikaram, record the transition and evolution of the Yazh into later string instruments like the veena.



In the present day, there have been attempts to revive the Yazh. For instance, a group in Chennai has reconstructed the instrument based on references found in Sangam literature and has been actively promoting it through performances and digital media. However, these modern reconstructions differ from the original forms; the number of strings and structural design have been simplified, making them easier to play compared to their ancient counterparts.

Despite these modifications, it is evident that the Yazh once held a central place in the lives of Sangam people. It functioned not only as a musical instrument but also as a cultural symbol deeply connected to emotional expression, social rituals, and aesthetic values. It played a role in articulating both Akam & Puram themes and even served as a medium for emotional healing and expression.

In summary, although percussion instruments were dominant during the Sangam period, string instruments, particularly the Yazh, held a distinguished and meaningful position. Its role extended beyond music into cultural identity, emotional communication, and artistic expression. Therefore, the Yazh can be rightly regarded as a multifaceted and culturally rich musical instrument, whose legacy continues to inspire efforts toward revival and preservation even today.

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