

From Carnatic to Hindustani: Music, Nationalism, and the Reconfiguration of Sinhala Musical Identity



Nishadi P. Meddegoda¹

Abstract

Sri Lankan music has long evolved through sustained interaction with the Indian subcontinent, yet existing scholarship has largely examined Indian influences as a continuous process, paying limited attention to the historical shift from South Indian (Carnatic) to North Indian (Hindustānī) musical influence within Sinhala musical culture. This study addresses the question of why a musical tradition that had been deeply rooted in Sinhala society through forms such as Vannam, Praśasti, and Sindu Nādagam gradually lost prominence, while North Indian musical aesthetics became culturally dominant during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The study aims to examine the historical development of Indian musical influences in Sri Lanka and to analyse how colonial modernity, Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, and changing cultural values reshaped Sinhala musical identity. Employing a qualitative historical methodology, the research draws on literary and historical sources, colonial records, theatre history, and secondary scholarship in ethnomusicology, interpreted through the theoretical perspectives of Antonio Gramsci, Eric Hobsbawm, Pierre Bourdieu, and Benedict Anderson. The findings demonstrate that the transition from Carnatic to Hindustānī musical influence was not primarily driven by musical or aesthetic superiority but by ideological and political processes. The emergence of Pārsi theatre, the popularity of Nurti drama, and the promotion of an Aryan-Sinhala identity collectively elevated Hindustānī music as a marker of cultural prestige while marginalising South Indian musical traditions within Sinhala society. The study concludes that musical transformation in Sri Lanka was closely intertwined with nationalism, cultural hegemony, and identity formation, illustrating those musical traditions function not merely as artistic practices but also as powerful instruments in constructing social and political identities.

Keywords

Carnatic Music, Colonialism, Hindustani Music, Nādagam, Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism

¹ Department of Fine Arts, Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-7641-6720> Email: nishadimeddegoda@yahoo.com

Introduction

Sri Lanka's musical heritage has evolved through centuries of interaction with the Indian subcontinent. Owing to geographical proximity and long-standing political, religious, and cultural ties, South Indian musical traditions, particularly the Carnatic system, became deeply embedded in Sinhala musical culture. Musical forms such as Vannam, Praśasti, Sindu Nādagam, and Buddhist and Hindu ritual music reflect the localisation of these traditions. However, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed a major transformation. The arrival of Pārsi theatre introduced Hindustānī musical aesthetics alongside Western theatrical techniques, while Sinhala Buddhist nationalism increasingly associated North Indian music with Aryan heritage, cultural prestige, and national identity.

Despite extensive scholarship on the Indian origins of Sri Lankan music, limited attention has been paid to explaining why Sinhala musical culture shifted from a long-established South Indian orientation to one increasingly shaped by North Indian traditions. Previous studies have largely documented musical influences and the evolution of genres such as Nādagam and Nurti without adequately examining the ideological and political forces underlying this transition. Consequently, the relationship between musical change, nationalism, colonial modernity, and identity formation remains insufficiently explored.

This study addresses this gap by analysing the transition from Carnatic to Hindustānī musical influences as a process shaped by colonialism, nationalism, religious revival, and changing ethnic identities rather than aesthetic change alone. Drawing on the theoretical perspectives of Gramsci (1971), Hobsbawm & Ranger (1983), Bourdieu (1984), and Anderson (1983), it examines how music became intertwined with cultural power and identity formation. The study aims to trace the historical development of Indian musical influences in Sri Lanka, identify the factors that reshaped Sinhala musical preferences during the colonial period, and explain how this transformation contributed to the construction of Sinhala national identity.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative historical research design to examine the transformation of Sinhala musical culture from South Indian Carnatic to North Indian Hindustānī musical influences. Employing an interpretive approach, it explores the historical, cultural, and ideological factors that shaped changes in musical identity in Sri Lanka.

The research draws on purposively selected primary and secondary sources relevant to Sri Lankan music history, Indian musical traditions, and Sinhala nationalism. Primary sources

include historical literary texts such as ‘Kavsilumiṇa’ (Sorata, 1946) and ‘Dharmapradīpikāva’ (Dharmakeerti, 1927); prefaces to Nurti dramas, particularly the preface to John de Silva’s ‘Sirisangabo Charithaya’ (Ariyaratne 1992); colonial-era writings such as ‘A Plea for the Teaching of Indian Music in Ceylon’ (1906) and ‘Music in Ceylon’ (1907), among other contemporary publications; and historical documents related to music and theatre. Secondary sources comprise books, journal articles, theses, and other scholarly publications.

Data were collected through documentary research involving the systematic review of historical texts, archival materials, and academic literature. The research was conducted in four stages: identifying and collecting relevant sources, reviewing previous scholarship, organising historical evidence thematically, and interpreting the findings through qualitative content analysis and historical interpretation.

The analysis was guided by the premise that the shift from Carnatic to Hindustānī musical influence was shaped not only by aesthetic developments but also by broader ideological, political, and cultural processes. Accordingly, the findings have been interpreted through the theoretical perspectives of Antonio Gramsci’s (1971) cultural hegemony, Eric Hobsbawm’s (1983) invented tradition, Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) cultural capital, and Benedict Anderson’s (1983) imagined communities to explain the relationship between music, nationalism, and identity in colonial Sri Lanka.

Results and Discussions

Early Indian Musical Foundations in Sri Lanka

The earliest foundations of Sri Lankan music were closely connected to the broader musical culture of ancient India. During the Vedic period (c. 2500 BCE onwards), Indian music developed sophisticated theoretical systems centred on Grāma, Mūrchanā, and Jāti, which later formed the basis of Indian classical music. It was deeply intertwined with religious themes, particularly those of Hinduism. At this stage, Indian music existed as a unified tradition before gradually evolving into the distinct Hindustānī and Carnatic systems after the thirteenth century².

² Until the 13th Century A.D. there was only one unified traditional musical system known as the Indian music system or Bhāratiya Saṅgīta Paddhati prevalent throughout India, and due to certain geographical conditions and political upheavals, there came into being two different musical systems known as the North Indian music (Hindustānī system) and South Indian music (Carnatic/ Karnāṭaka system) (Nigam, 1993). With the advent of Muslim power (Mughal) in North India, the art of Indian music intermingled with the Arabian and Persian music and developed along with a new dimension. Comparatively, the music system of South India remained in its traditional manner. Although there is not much difference between these two independent musical systems, certain modifications are present in the rāgas, tālas, musical notations, compositions, and musical instruments.

Similarly, the historical evidence suggests that these early musical concepts were already known in medieval Sri Lanka. Traditional Indian music existed in Ceylon until the Gampola period (1341- 1408 AD). Fundamental theoretical concepts of Indian music from the aforementioned period, such as Grāmas, Mūrchanā, and Jātis, are mentioned in Kavsilumina (Song 601)³, which is considered to have been written during the reign of King Parakramabahu II of Dambadeniya (1236–1270), as well as in Dharmapradīpika (Song 362) by Gurulugomi (Dharmakeerti, 1927; Sorata, 1946). These references demonstrate that Sri Lankan intellectuals possessed a sophisticated understanding of Indian musical theory several centuries before the emergence of the modern distinction between North and South Indian classical music.

These early references indicate that medieval Sri Lankan musical culture formed part of a wider Sanskritic cultural sphere extending across South Asia. Music was transmitted alongside religion, literature, philosophy, and ritual, creating a shared cultural foundation between Sri Lanka and the Indian subcontinent. Nevertheless, this common musical heritage gradually evolved in different directions as political circumstances changed. From the fourteenth century onwards, increasing interaction with South India profoundly transformed the musical landscape of Sri Lanka as discussed in the following section.

The Rise of South Indian Musical Influence

Although earlier Indian musical influence had largely reflected a common Sanskritic heritage, medieval political and religious developments strengthened Sri Lanka's cultural connections with South India. During the Kotte (1412–1597 AD) and Kandyan (1597–1815 AD) eras, South Indian musical influences became increasingly prominent, gradually transforming earlier musical traditions through various socio-political and cultural factors, including Hindu temple worship and rituals, as well as court ceremonial practices (Abhayasundara, 2004). Several historical factors contributed to this transformation. The geographical proximity between Sri Lanka and South India facilitated continuous cultural exchange across the Palk Strait. Successive invasions by the Chola and Pandya kingdoms introduced South Indian administrative practices, religious institutions, and artistic traditions. Simultaneously, Hindu temples became important centres of musical activity, preserving devotional performance traditions that increasingly influenced local ritual practice.

³ 'Sama madara tara olī – devisi haṇḍa tēgamrā,
sarasat unu panaṣṭhan – mūsa ekvisi vajambanā' (Kavsilumina, 601).

'සම මදර තර ඔලී - දෙවියි හඬ තෙගමරා,
සරසත් උණු පණස්තන් - මූස එක්වියි වජඹනා' (කවිසිඵමණ, 601)

The Royal patronage further accelerated this process. During the Kandyan period, marriages between Sinhala monarchs and South Indian princesses strengthened political alliances while simultaneously introducing South Indian musicians, dancers, and religious specialists into the royal court (Laade, 1993). Historical sources record the presence of distinguished Carnatic musicians, including Ganitalankara, Narasinghe, and Alaganaidu, although few of their compositions have survived (Ariyaratne, 2020). These combined influences dominated the musical landscape during these eras, leading to a significant shift in the country's musical preferences away from the previously dominant Indian music traditions (the Sanskrit Music tradition). Music was transmitted alongside religion, literature, philosophy, and ritual, creating a shared cultural foundation between Sri Lanka and the Indian subcontinent.

The influence of South Indian music extended beyond the royal court into Buddhist ritual practice. The musical patterns and forms of Hindu worship, such as the Stotra (hymns), Śloka (stanzas), and Yādinī (prayers), were incorporated into the traditional practices of Buddhist rituals (Alawathukotuwa, 2013). Likewise, poetic forms originally composed to praise Hindu rulers were adapted to honour Buddhist relics and Sinhala kings, illustrating the flexible processes through which imported traditions were localised.

These developments demonstrate that South Indian musical influence was not imposed upon Sri Lankan culture but selectively adapted according to local religious and political circumstances. Rather than replacing indigenous traditions, Carnatic musical elements became integrated with existing Sinhala performance practices, producing new hybrid forms that would eventually define much of Sri Lanka's musical identity.

The Localisation of South Indian Musical Traditions

The influence of South Indian music in Sri Lanka did not remain at the level of cultural importation. Instead, it underwent a long process of adaptation and transformation, resulting in the emergence of distinctly localised musical forms.

By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, South Indian musical influences had become thoroughly integrated into Sinhala cultural life. Royal patronage under the Kandyan kings fostered a network of specialised artistic institutions, including the Kavikāra Maduwa⁴, Naṭum

⁴ **Kavikāra Maduwa** - This prestigious institution was dedicated to music and held a revered place within the royal palace. It functioned as the central body for court musicians, who were often highly skilled and entrusted with performing at ceremonial and state occasions.

Ilaṅgama⁵, Wāhala Ilaṅgama⁶, Siṃharakkāransaya⁷, and Tambaru Purappeṭṭukāransaya⁸, which collectively sustained music, dance, and dramatic performance within the royal court (Kulathilake, 1996).

During the seventeenth and eighteenth CE, the kings Rajasinghe II, Sri Veera Parakrama Narendrasinhe, Keerthi Sri Rajasinghe and Rajadhirajasinghe maintained a group of professional singers. Among these institutions, the Kavikāra Maduwa played a particularly significant role in developing Praśasti (praise), elaborate musical compositions praising kings and, later, the Sacred Tooth Relic. These performances illustrate how imported South Indian musical idioms were gradually transformed into uniquely Sri Lankan ceremonial traditions. In recognition of their artistic service, the kings bestowed upon these singers not only land but also prestigious honorific titles like Kavīndra and Kavīshwara, elevating their social standing and affirming their esteemed role within the royal court.

Consequently, the history of Sri Lankan theatrical and musical forms, such as Vannam, Kirtanam, Praśasti, Kolam, Sokari, and Nādagam, was enriched by South Indian musical influences. Laade (1993) pointed out that ‘while architecture and painting had North Indian origins, the Indian classical music performed at the courts was Dravidian’ (p.54). That is because the local musicians and dancers performed Praśasti, songs that express praise and commendation, sung with drum accompaniment, and danced Vannamas based on popular Jātaka tales. Meanwhile, their Indian counterparts presented Carnatic ragas, devotional songs, and classical dances like Bharata Nāṭyam (Laade, 1993). In this transformation, music became a medium through which political legitimacy and religious authority were articulated.

Rather than representing simple imitation, these developments illustrate a process of cultural adaptation. Imported musical structures were reshaped according to the Sinhala language, Buddhist ritual practice, and local aesthetic preferences, producing distinctive forms that

⁵ **Naṭum Ilaṅgama** - Serving as the royal academy for dance, this institution was responsible for training and maintaining a corps of traditional dancers. Performers from Natum Ilaṅgama were integral to religious rituals and court festivities, preserving the grace and discipline of Kandyan dance.

⁶ **Wāhala Ilaṅgama** - This establishment was concerned with drama and other traditional performing arts. It nurtured the oral and theatrical traditions of the time, including forms of ritual performance, folk theatre, and narrative storytelling integral to the cultural fabric of the Kandyan court.

⁷ **Siṃharakkāransaya** - Comprised of ensembles specialising in indigenous percussion and wind instruments, the Sinhakkārānsaya had a demanding role. The musicians were required to perform their exuberant musical renditions eight times a day, marking important times and ceremonial rhythms throughout the royal calendar.

⁸ **Tambaru Purappeṭṭukāransaya** - This was the institution responsible for the music of royal processions. The ensemble, with its distinctive march rhythms, accompanied state parades and religious festivals, creating an atmosphere of grandeur and discipline through synchronised musical display.

simultaneously preserved Indian origins while expressing a uniquely Sri Lankan identity. The result was not cultural replacement but creative integration.

Vannam, for example, reveal rhythmic and melodic structures that reflect strong South Indian influence, particularly in their use of patterned percussion and dance-oriented musical phrasing. However, their lyrical content, thematic focus, and performance context were deeply embedded in Sinhala cultural life, often drawing upon local myths, royal symbolism, and Buddhist narrative traditions. This dual character illustrates the process through which South Indian musical grammar was absorbed into Sinhala expressive culture while simultaneously being redefined. References to instruments such as the *Mṛdaṅga*, *Vīṇā*, *Maddala*, and *Kāhala* in medieval Sinhala literature further demonstrate the extent to which South Indian musical practices had become embedded within local culture.

These developments indicate that South Indian musical influence in Sri Lanka was neither passive nor externally imposed. Rather, it was actively localised through processes of selection, reinterpretation, and cultural integration. By the Kandyan period, South Indian musical elements had become inseparable from Sinhala court culture, religious ritual, and folk performance traditions.

Nādagam and the Formation of a Hybrid Musical Culture

Among the most significant outcomes of South Indian musical influence in Sri Lanka was the emergence of Nādagam, a theatrical-musical form that occupied a central position in popular performance culture for several centuries. Drawing on South Indian theatrical elements while adapting to local cultural contexts, Nādagam served as a bridge between ritualistic performance and popular entertainment, leaving a lasting imprint on the island's performative heritage. Although Nādagam eventually became accepted as an integral component of the Sinhala theatrical tradition, its musical foundations were unmistakably rooted in the folk and devotional performance traditions of South India. Rather than representing an indigenous musical genre, Nādagam evolved through sustained interaction between South Indian theatrical practices and local Sinhala cultural expressions.

Scholars generally trace the origins of Sinhala Nādagam to the Therukkuttu (street theatre) tradition of Tamil Nadu. The musical structure of Nādagam relies heavily on *Sindu rāgas*, melodic patterns widely employed in South Indian folk performance (Sarachchandra, 2022). Unlike Sinhala folk songs, which were primarily strophic and rhythmically simple, Nādagam employed extended melodic lines, stylised vocal ornamentation, and dramatic musical

dialogue. These characteristics distinguished it from earlier Sinhala performance traditions while simultaneously making it accessible to village audiences.

The localisation of Nādagam, however, involved far more than the translation of Tamil texts into Sinhala. As Sarachchandra (2022) observed, Sinhala performers gradually replaced the original Dravidian pronunciation with Sinhala phonetics and modified melodic nuances according to local vocal practice. Over time, audiences came to perceive Nādagam not as an imported theatrical form but as an authentically Sinhala cultural expression. This process illustrates what contemporary ethnomusicologists describe as musical indigenisation, whereby borrowed traditions acquire new meanings within local cultural contexts.

Nādagam also became deeply embedded in Sri Lanka's religious and social life. Although early performances frequently adapted Biblical narratives for Christian missionary purposes, the genre quickly transcended its ecclesiastical origins (Alawathukotuwa, 2023). Stories from Buddhist literature, local folklore, and historical chronicles gradually entered the repertoire, reflecting the remarkable adaptability of the form. This expansion reflects its flexibility as a performance tradition capable of crossing religious and cultural boundaries.

From a theoretical perspective, Nādagam represents a clear example of cultural hybridisation, where imported artistic forms are neither fully preserved nor entirely replaced but are reshaped through continuous interaction with local cultural systems. In this sense, Nādagam functioned as a transitional form in Sri Lanka's musical history, mediating between South Indian musical traditions and emerging Sinhala performance aesthetics. It demonstrates that medieval Sinhala musical culture did not simply imitate South Indian models; rather, it actively reinterpreted and reconstructed them according to local aesthetic, linguistic, and religious priorities.

The Decline of Nādagam: A Shift in Cultural Value Systems

Despite its popularity for several centuries, Nādagam experienced a gradual decline during the late nineteenth century. Conventional explanations attribute this decline primarily to musical monotony and limited dramatic sophistication. Sarachchandra (2022), for example, argued that Nādagam relied excessively upon a relatively small number of repetitive Sindu melodies, forcing successive playwrights to recycle familiar musical material. Audiences consequently encountered similar songs across different productions, reducing the novelty that theatrical entertainment increasingly demanded. While such musical factors may have contributed to audience fatigue, they are insufficient to fully explain the disappearance of a once-dominant performance tradition.

Equally significant was the changing social perception of Nādagam. As an art form performed predominantly in rural communities, it gradually acquired associations with village entertainment rather than refined artistic expression. Urban audiences, particularly the emerging English-educated middle class, increasingly sought theatrical forms that reflected contemporary notions of sophistication, modernity, and cosmopolitan culture.

Yet these explanations remain incomplete, as musical repetition alone cannot account for why a tradition that had dominated Sinhala performance culture for centuries suddenly lost its prestige. Numerous musical traditions across Asia have retained their popularity despite repetitive melodic structures. The decline of the Nādagam must therefore be understood within the broader ideological and cultural transformations of the colonial period, requiring attention to the changing cultural value systems that reshaped aesthetic preferences and performance practices.

During the late nineteenth century, colonial modernity fundamentally altered concepts of artistic value throughout South Asia. Performance traditions increasingly became evaluated according to new standards of refinement, professionalism, and classical authority. The emergence of an English-educated middle class, combined with colonial cultural hierarchies, redefined notions of artistic refinement and cultural legitimacy. Within this new framework, Nādagam increasingly came to be associated with rural entertainment rather than sophisticated artistic expression. Its performative style, rooted in village culture and oral transmission, was increasingly reclassified as "folk" or "popular" culture categories that carried lower symbolic value within colonial modernity. As this new cultural hierarchy emerged, newly introduced North Indian musical traditions came to be associated with refinement, classical authority, and higher cultural prestige, contributing to the marginalization of Nādagam.

Bourdieu's (1984) concept of cultural capital provides a useful framework for understanding this transformation. Musical preferences increasingly became markers of education, social status, and intellectual sophistication. Consequently, appreciation of Hindustānī music functioned not merely as an aesthetic preference but also as an expression of elite cultural identity. Nādagam, despite its historical importance, could no longer provide the symbolic prestige desired by the emerging Sinhala middle class.

Thus, the decline of Nādagam should be understood not as the inevitable consequence of artistic exhaustion but as the result of profound changes in the cultural values through which music itself was evaluated. This transformation merely coincided with the introduction of a

new musical system through Pārsi theatre, which redefined theatrical music in Sri Lanka and introduced a radically different sonic and visual experience.

Pārsi Theatre and the Introduction of Hindustānī Musical Aesthetics

The decisive turning point in Sri Lanka's musical history occurred with the arrival of Pārsi theatre during the final decades of the nineteenth century. Originating in Bombay, Pārsi theatre represented one of the most influential forms of commercial entertainment in colonial South Asia, combining Persian dramatic traditions, Urdu literature, North Indian classical music, and Western stage technology into a highly sophisticated theatrical form.

Simultaneously, in 1877, as the revivalists promoted this Ārya-Sinhala identity, the arrival of the 'Pārsi Theatrical Company' or 'Hindustan Dramatic Company' from Bombay, North India, significantly influenced the tastes of the Sri Lankan people through their performances during the last decades of the 19th century (De Silva, 1981). Unlike Nādagam, Pārsi productions incorporated elaborate stage scenery, mechanical stage effects, orchestral accompaniment, professional female performers, and dramatic narratives supported by Hindustānī rāgas and Ghazal-inspired musical forms⁹. These innovations fundamentally altered public expectations regarding theatrical performance.

The success of companies such as the Elphinstone Dramatic Company, which returned repeatedly between 1889 and 1931, established North Indian musical aesthetics as symbols of modern theatrical excellence (Sarachchandra, 2022). Local dramatists rapidly adapted the Pārsi model, composing Sinhala librettos while retaining Hindustānī melodies and dramatic structures. This adaptation gave birth to Nurti, a uniquely Sri Lankan theatrical genre that nevertheless remained firmly grounded in North Indian musical vocabulary (Ariyaratne, 1992).

Nurti, therefore, represents much more than a theatrical innovation. It marks the beginning of a profound reorientation of Sinhala musical taste. Whereas earlier generations had become familiar with Carnatic-inspired musical forms through Nādagam and court performance, urban audiences increasingly associated artistic sophistication with Hindustānī musical idioms introduced through Pārsi theatre.

⁹ During the twentieth century, under British political and cultural influence, music and dance forms once confined to North Indian nobles and aristocrats gained popularity among the upper middle class. Pārsi (Bombay) theatre emerged as a leading form of mass entertainment across social classes, emphasising song over dialogue and drawing heavily on the Ghazal poetic structure, which had been widely popular in North India since the late nineteenth century (Meddegoda, 2020). In 1853, the first Pārsi play was performed in Bombay, and since then, they have produced old Sanskrit plays and Shakespearean plays using their music and performed them all over India, as well as in countries such as Singapore, England, Burma, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. The play 'Indra Sabhā' (a Gujarat play) was performed by the "Hidustan Dramatic Company" on 26 May 1877 (Ariyaratne, 2020).

This transformation reflects what Gramsci described as cultural hegemony (as cited in Bates, 1975). Rather than being imposed through coercion, new musical preferences became accepted voluntarily because they were presented as embodiments of refinement, education, and modern civilisation. Hindustānī music thus acquired cultural authority not because it displaced Carnatic traditions musically, but because it became associated with the values of colonial modernity itself. Under British rule, Pārsi theatre featured North Indian Rāga-based music and other performance forms closely associated with the refined cultural tastes of the North Indian aristocracy. This association endowed them with prestige and symbolic authority, while comparable South Indian theatrical traditions were largely absent in Sri Lanka. As a result, North Indian music came to be accepted as the normative “high” musical culture.

Another significant development was the gradual introduction of women into theatrical performance, replacing the earlier practice in which female roles were played by men. Although this marked an important step toward gender inclusion, it also intensified social criticism of the theatre. Influenced by prevailing Theravāda Buddhist moral values, public performance by women and participation in drama more generally were often regarded as incompatible with respectable social conduct. Such attitudes affected not only Nurti but also earlier traditions, including Sokari, Kolam, Sindu Nādagam, and Kavi Nādagam, contributing to the perception of drama as a socially inferior art form and to its declining cultural status (Sarachchandra, 2022).

However, it is also important to highlight that in 1883, ethnic tensions in Colombo saw clashes between Buddhists and Catholics, reflecting broader hostility toward non-Sinhala and non-Buddhist communities, especially Tamils (Jayawardene, 2008). The prevailing sentiment among Sinhalese was one of resentment toward Tamils, which may have contributed to the rejection of South Indian music and the preference for North Indian Hindustānī music instead.

Moreover, proponents of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism argue that the Sinhala people were of Aryan descent and thus sought to link the origins of the Sinhala civilization to North India. Within this ideological framework, North Indian music, rather than South Indian music, was positioned as the ‘authentic’ musical heritage of the Sinhala people.

Nurti and the Reinvention of Sinhala Musical Taste

The Pārsi theatrical form ‘Nṛtya’ (the Sanskrit word for drama) became known as Nurti drama, and their musicals created from a mixture of northern and Western music became popular as ‘Nurti Gī’ in Sri Lanka. The emergence of the Nurti theatre marked a decisive stage in the transformation of Sinhala musical culture under colonial modernity. Although derived

directly from Pārsi theatre, Nurti rapidly evolved into a local theatrical tradition that profoundly reshaped musical preferences throughout Sri Lanka.

Early pioneers such as C. Don Bastian and later John de Silva adapted North Indian melodies to Sinhala dramatic narratives, creating works that were simultaneously accessible to local audiences and aesthetically distinct from earlier theatrical forms. These productions retained the structural features of Pārsi theatre, song-based narration, fixed melodic frameworks, and dramatic emotional expression, while reworking them into Sinhala-language narratives rooted in Buddhist history, moral tales, and nationalist themes.

Musically, Nurti introduced a systematic incorporation of Hindustani rāgas into Sinhala dramatic composition. Unlike Nādagam, which relied on a limited set of repetitive melodic patterns, Nurti drew from a broader repertoire of North Indian semi-classical and classical forms. This expansion of musical vocabulary contributed to its popularity among urban and middle-class audiences, who increasingly associated Hindustani music with sophistication and cultural refinement.

The popularity of Nurti cannot be explained solely through musical innovation. Its success coincided with broader political and intellectual movements promoting Sinhala Buddhist cultural revival. Consequently, Hindustānī music increasingly acquired ideological significance as the musical expression of a renewed Sinhala civilisation. This transformation illustrates Hobsbawm's (1983) concept of the invented tradition. Through repeated theatrical performances, educational initiatives, and public discourse, North Indian music came to be presented as the authentic historical heritage of the Sinhala people, even though Sinhala musical culture had long been shaped predominantly by South Indian traditions. Historical complexity was gradually replaced by a simplified narrative linking Sinhala civilisation directly to an imagined Aryan past.

Nurti, therefore, functioned not merely as entertainment but also as an instrument of cultural reconstruction. Through its music, dramatic narratives, and symbolic associations, it participated actively in redefining the musical identity of Sinhala society. Through repeated performance, Hindustani musical idioms became embedded in Sinhala auditory culture, gradually displacing earlier associations with South Indian musical traditions. Over time, Nurti evolved from a borrowed form into a uniquely localised musical-theatrical genre, laying the groundwork for future developments in popular Sinhala music.

Music and Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism

The transformation of Sinhala musical culture during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries cannot be fully understood without situating it within the broader rise of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. This ideological movement played a crucial role in redefining cultural identity, historical memory, and artistic legitimacy. Central to this process was Anagarika Dharmapala, whose revivalist ideology emphasised the reconstruction of Sinhala identity through a reimagined connection to an Aryan civilizational heritage (Wijayasiriwardhana, 2024). Within this framework, North India, rather than South India, was positioned as the cultural and historical reference point for Sinhala civilisation. Music, as a highly visible cultural expression, became embedded within this ideological reorientation.

Similarly, dramatists such as John de Silva incorporated Buddhist narratives into Nurti productions while simultaneously employing Hindustani musical structures. This combination effectively aligned Sinhala theatrical culture with both religious revivalism and North Indian aesthetic models. Taken together, these developments demonstrate that music became a vehicle for expressing a redefined national identity grounded in Buddhism and Aryan lineage.

In addition, Anderson's (1983) theory of imagined communities helps explain how music contributed to the formation of national consciousness. Shared musical experiences in the Nurti theatre created a sense of collective cultural identity among Sinhala audiences, reinforcing the idea of a unified national community defined through language, religion, and aesthetic preferences.

The arguments were further developed, nourished, and popularized as a critique of colonial-era writings by Western commentators who disparaged Sri Lankan music. Therefore, the advent of Nurti developed into a national movement in challenge to the Western-oriented music culture, followed by Europeans and the Sinhala Christian nobility (Kulathilake, 1992). The main aim of these views was to confirm that Sri Lankan civilization was nourished by an Indo-Aryan connection and to show that the music of this country had acquired North Indian influence, since there was no developed music in Sri Lanka at that time, and the popular music was considered primitive.

Emphasizing the superiority of Indian music, Ariyaratne (2020) asserted that, "There is still no music in the whole world that is as captivating as the music of India. Westerners have produced many kinds of music, but scholars do not accept it as superior to the Eastern music" (p. 35). Concurrently, during the same period, several perspectives emerged suggesting that the music of the country had assimilated influences from North Indian music traditions. Among those

who contributed further to the discourse on the growing popularity of North Indian music in Sri Lanka, the ideological perspectives of Ananda Coomaraswamy and Ethel Coomaraswamy are particularly significant. Both emphasised the importance of integrating Indian music, specifically North Indian music, into Sri Lanka's educational and cultural landscape. Their shared vision advocated for the development of Indian music within the country's educational system, positioning it as an essential component of cultural revival (Coomaraswamy, 1907; Coomaraswamy, 1906).

The ideological transformation can be further interpreted through Hobsbawm's (1983) concept of invented tradition. The association of Sinhala culture with North Indian music was not a continuation of an unbroken historical lineage but rather a selective reconstruction of the past. Through theatre, education, and public discourse, North Indian music was increasingly presented as naturally aligned with Sinhala heritage, despite the long-standing presence of South Indian musical influence.

The Marginalisation of South Indian Musical Traditions

Notably, Carnatic music already had a well-established and sophisticated repertoire, Kīrtanas, Kritis, Varnams, and a fully codified raga system, deeply embedded in South Indian cultural and religious life (Viswanathan & Allen, 2004). Given this strong influence and the existing South Indian elements in Sinhala forms such as Nādagam, one might expect these structures to be absorbed into Sinhala musical traditions, especially since forms like Nādagam already drew from South Indian sources. However, this did not occur in any significant or sustained way within Sinhala music.

The rise of Hindustani music in Sinhala society was accompanied by a gradual marginalisation of South Indian musical traditions. This process did not occur through formal exclusion but through symbolic reclassification within emerging cultural hierarchies. Carnatic music and its associated forms became increasingly linked with Tamil cultural identity, rural performance contexts, and “folk” traditions. In contrast, Hindustani music was framed as classical, cosmopolitan, and aligned with broader Aryan civilisational narratives. This distinction was reinforced by colonial educational structures, elite cultural preferences, and nationalist ideology.

In a similar ideological vein, Sarachchandra's (2022) classification of South Indian music as “Dravidian” appears to support a cultural hierarchy aligned with Aryanist thought. His framing suggests a deliberate attempt to linguistically and culturally marginalise South Indian musical

traditions in favour of North Indian (Aryan) music, which he positioned as more suitable for the advancement of Sri Lankan musical culture.

From the perspective of Bourdieu (1984), this shift can be understood as a transformation in the distribution of cultural capital. Mastery of Hindustani musical forms became a marker of social distinction, particularly among educated Sinhala elites who sought alignment with perceived classical and Pan-Indian cultural standards. Conversely, Carnatic-derived forms lost symbolic value within elite cultural spaces, despite their deep historical roots in Sri Lankan performance traditions.

However, the contradictions within Sarachchandra's own position become evident upon closer examination. Despite advocating for North Indian music, he was also critical of traditional forms such as *Sindu Nādagam*, even though he drew upon that style in his early theatrical productions, 'Maname' and 'Sinhabāhu'. This ambivalence reveals the complex and, at times, contradictory nature of his ideological stance, particularly in how it intersects with issues of race, language, and cultural authenticity. Importantly, this marginalisation was not purely aesthetic but ideological. The classification of South Indian music as "Dravidian" contributed to its symbolic distancing from Sinhala Buddhist identity, while Hindustani music became associated with Aryan heritage and cultural prestige.

Divergent Musical Trajectories: Sinhala and Sri Lankan Tamil Traditions

A notable divergence emerged in the musical trajectories of Sri Lanka's Sinhala and Tamil communities. While Sinhala musical culture gradually shifted toward Hindustānī traditions under the influence of Pārsi theatre, Nurti drama, and Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, Tamil communities, particularly in Jaffna, maintained continuity with the Carnatic tradition through Hindu temple worship, devotional practices, and formal music education. This contrast demonstrates that musical traditions are not shaped solely by artistic exchange but also by religious institutions, cultural politics, and identity formation. The differing musical paths of the two communities illustrate how Indian musical traditions were selectively adopted and reinterpreted in accordance with their distinct historical and cultural identities.

Conclusion

This study examined the historical shift from South Indian Carnatic to North Indian Hindustānī musical influences in Sinhala musical culture and analyzed the ideological, cultural, and political forces that shaped this transformation. The findings indicate that this transition was

not driven primarily by musical or aesthetic superiority but by the combined influence of colonial modernity, Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, and changing cultural values.

The study demonstrates that South Indian musical traditions had long been embedded in Sri Lankan music through court, ritual, and theatrical practices, particularly in forms such as Vannam, Praśasti, and Sindu Nādagam. However, the emergence of Pārsi theatre and Nurti drama, together with the promotion of an Aryan-Sinhala identity, elevated Hindustānī music as a symbol of cultural prestige and national identity, while gradually marginalising South Indian musical traditions within Sinhala society.

By integrating historical evidence with theories of cultural hegemony, invented tradition, cultural capital, and imagined communities, this study contributes a new perspective on Sri Lankan music history. It demonstrates that musical transformation was closely linked to the construction of nationalism and cultural identity, highlighting music as both an artistic practice and a powerful instrument of social and political change.

References

- Abhayasundara, P. (2004). *Udarata Saṅgītaya*: Translation of Kandyan Music by Mahawalatenne Bandara with an Ethno-Musicological study. Wijesuriya Grantha Kendraya.
- Alawathukotuwa, M. (2013). *Evolution of Sound Recording Techniques and their impact on Sri Lankan Music* (Doctoral Thesis). University of Delhi.
- Alawathukotuwa, M. (2023). Issues in Radio Music Broadcasting in the Sri Lankan Cultural Environment. *Journal of Research in Music*, 1(2). 45–53. <https://doi.org/10.4038/jrm.v1i2.11>
- Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso.
- Ariyaratne, S. (1992). *John De Silva Nurti Nāṭya Ekātuva: Prathama Bhagaya* (The first half of the collection of John De Silva's Nurti dramas). S. Godage & Brothers.
- Ariyaratne, S. (2020). *Vishvanat Lavjee saha Sinhala Saṅgīṭayata Dayaka wu Bharatīya Gāndharwayo* (The Contribution to Sinhala Music by Vishvanat Lavjee and Other Indian Musicians). In *Gandarwa Apadana* (Vol. 6). S. Godage & Brothers.
- Bates, T. R. (1975). Gramsci and the Theory of Hegemony. *Journal of the History of Ideas*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 36(2), 351–366. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2708933>
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste* (R. Nice, Trans.). Harvard University Press. (Original work published 1979).
- Coomaraswamy, E. M. (1907). Music in Ceylon. *The Ceylon National Review*. 1 (3). 297- 301.
- Coomaraswamy, A. K. (1956). *Medieval Sinhalese Art*. (2nd ed.). Pantheon Books.

- De Silva, K. M. (1981) *A History of Sri Lanka*. University of California Press.
- Dharmakeerti, S. D. Thera (Ed.) (1927). *Dharmapradīpikāva*. Satya - Samuchchaya Press.
- Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. Quintin H. & Geoffrey N. S. (Eds.) & (Transl.). International Publishers.
- Hobsbawm, E. & Ranger, T. (1983). *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge University Press.
- Jayawardene, K. (2008). Bauddha Vignānaya Hā Janawārgika Prashnaya, In: P. D. Silva (Ed.) *Bududahama, Rājya Saha Bhikshu Samājaya: Samāja Widyātmaka Adhyayana* (Buddhism, the State and Monastic Society: Sociological Studies). (pp 45-54) Colombo Association of Sociologists.
- Kulathilake, C. de S. (1996). *Lankāwe saṅgīta sambhawaya* [The musical origins of Sri Lanka]. S. Godage.
- Laade, W. (1993). The influence of Buddhism on the Sinhalese music of Sri Lanka. *Asian Music*, 25(1/2), 51–68. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/834190>
- Meddegoda, C. P. (2020). Hindustani classical music in Sri Lanka: A dominating minority music or an imposed musical ideology? *Analytical Approaches to World Music*, 6, 41–50. <https://doi.org/10.30819/aemr.6-3>
- Nigam, V. S. (1993). *Musicology of India* (Part 4). K. K. Nigam.
- Sarachchandra, E. R. (2022). *Sinhala gemi nāṭakaya* [Sinhala folk drama] (15th ed.). S. Godage and Brothers (Pvt.) Ltd.
- Sorata, S. (Ed.). (1946). *Kavsilumiṇa* [The crown jewel of Sinhala poetry]. Navajivana Press.
- Viswanathan, T., & Allen, M. S. (2004). *Music in South India: The Karnatak concert tradition and beyond*. Oxford University Press.
- Wijayasiriwardhana, S. (2024). *Desum dahayak* [Ten sermons: Cultural and socio-political theories and reflections on social liberation]. Vidarshana Publication (Pvt.) Ltd.