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Between *Jamath* and Temple: Muslim *Nagaswaram* Musicians in Andhra

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Abstract

This essay reflects on civilisation as embodied in the life-world of Dudekula Muslim musicians, a Telugu speaking small caste-community in the Andhra region. They are, by hereditary occupation, players of nagaswaram, a piped musical instrument integral to classical Carnatic music. Nagaswaram music is also an important part of temple worship in South India and an auspicious accompaniment to domestic rites of passage. Muslim presence in Carnatic music has been negligible. The Muslim nagaswaram musicians are a significant exception. Historically, they were skilled and respected practitioners of the art in significant domains of canonical Hinduism. Though numbers are dwindling, they continue to be a prominent presence in the field. The Dudekula caste, to which they belong, are officially Muslims but observe many customs and practices in worship, belief and lifestyle common among Telugu Hindus. The historical origins of this caste lie at the intersection of the era of provincial sultanates and Sufi conversions in the Deccan area, the rise of vernacular Islam, and the flexibility of canonical temple culture in the region. The formal acceptance from the temple network and classical music system and the broadly tolerant attitude of the jamath in the past impel us to reflect on the nature of interactions between institutions of religion, art and learning in pre-modern southern India. They reflect syncretic civilisational processes of the era, which need to be interpreted in tandem with structural elements of hierarchy and power differentials. The research is based on ethnography, historical documents, oral sources and secondary literature.

Keywords: Canonical Hinduism, classical music*, jamath,* flexible identity, syncretism

I. A Festival for the Village Mother

It was the last day of the annual *Shakambhari* festival at the famous *Valluramma Thalli* temple near Ongole. Her devotees do not have a specific name for the presiding goddess. She is simply called *Valluramma Thalli* (that is, mother of the village of Vallur). I stood in the scorching heat amidst milling crowds outside the temple, waiting to go in. Small vendors thronged the entrance. The loudspeaker was blaring Telugu devotional songs interspersed with *nagaswaram* music. Distant chants floated from the *sanctum.* The morning rituals were almost over, but bus loads

were still arriving from all over Andhra to get a glimpse. Many more women than men. The atmosphere was charged with fervour.

The large and colourful structures and images in its spacious precincts were decorated with barely any flowers, but profusely with leaves and vegetables. Strings and garlands and buntings of green chilli, okra, snake gourd, bottle gourd, brinjal, pumpkin, betel leaves. It was a startling sight—a literal and surreal tribute to *Shakambhari*, the mother-goddess whose body nourishes vegetation and sustains life.

Next o ye Gods I shall support the whole world

With life sustaining vegetation

Which shall grow out of my own body

during a period of heavy rain

I shall gain fame on earth then

as Shakambhari

(Pargiter trans. 1904, 11: 48–49)

In that trance-like atmosphere, for me too, a fleeting moment of transcendence.

The temple is rooted in rich local traditions of the mother goddess in its imagery and legends. At the same time, *Valluramma* has acquired popular pan regional status as the goddess who was created by a brahmanical sacrifice. It is administered by a *devasthanam,* the term for a canonical Hindu temple.

Amidst the din and crowd stood a tall, well-built man in a dhoti, shirt and a prominent red *kumkum* dot on his forehead. He was wearing an unmistakable mantle of authority. Herding the crowds, making sure no one broke the queue, guiding devotees into the *sanctum* and then to the exit. He was the person I had come to meet.

Mattipati Masthan is a Telugu Muslim of the Dudekula caste. He plays *nagaswaram*, a piped musical instrument which is part of the Carnatic music system. It is also an auspicious instrument played at rituals and ceremonies in temples in South India. He is a permanent employee of this temple, the head of its *nagaswaram* ensemble. He belongs to a family of hereditary *nagaswaram* artistes—to his knowledge, four generations have played in temples around Ongole—Goginenipalem, Ellooru, Todaram, and Muppavaram.

Sk Masthan spends a great deal of time daily at this temple. Dressed like a Hindu devotee, he is there every morning for the *shubhodayam* pooja. Along with his ensemble of five other musicians, he stands just outside the *sanctum* and plays ragas considered appropriate for the morning—*Bhoopalam, Dhanyasi, Saveri*. He plays *Melukovaiya*, a composition by Thyagaraja, for waking up the deity. He is around till late morning, accompanying various rituals, expanding the ragas with *alapana,* and playing compositions from the Carnatic repertoire till food offerings for the deity and the auspicious *harathi* are completed. The *sanctum* is closed for the afternoon. Sk Masthan is back again for the evening pooja. His service to the temple goes beyond playing *nagaswaram*. He helps managing the crowd during festivals. He also plays at Hindu weddings and concerts at public functions—both religious as well as non-religious—and has won accolades.

Sk Masthan is a member of the local *jamath*. Marriages in his family are performed according to Islamic custom, as also death rituals. He says namaz once in a while, visits the mosque whenever he has time, which is rare. When he does, he just stands there and returns, does not say any prayers. He does not fast during Ramzan. His wife is more regular than him in her Islamic practice. Both his sons know how to play *nagaswaram*. Neither took it up professionally. Both are earnest, practising Muslims, not comfortable with their father's profession. They stay in other towns.

At his home, they worship Hindu gods and goddesses but the daily worship rituals are mostly performed by his wife. Nothing elaborate, just keeping some crystal sugar as offering. She puts a *bottu* (auspicious vermillion mark) on her forehead during worship and later removes it. They follow several culturally Hindu practices. He sees Dudekulas as primarily Hindus, playing *nagaswaram* as their traditional occupation and the temples as recognising their inalienable rights over it. "Yes," he says, "Dudekulas are now Muslims, but they were once Hindus. I prefer calling them 'Hindu-Muslims.' When Hindus go to dargahs, no one says anything. Then why should our worship of Hindu deities matter to anyone?" Sk Masthan is caught in the vortex of many pulls—his employment in a temple which is also a calling for him, his community rights over *nagaswaram*, his family's inclinations towards Islam and pressure from the *jamath* to Islamise.

The story of Sk Masthan is a window that opens into a time different from ours, where two apparently inimical faiths interweave within the classical tradition of music and within the institutional spaces of organised religion. Behind him, lies an entire community that has lived and thrived in the intermediate spaces between canonical Islam and Hinduism, negotiating with both. This conundrum is part of my ongoing research.

I come from the tradition of social anthropology that in India is treated as part of sociology. Anthropology emerged in the West in the nineteenth century, like other social sciences. It began as the study by European scholars of small, isolated micro-communities and spaces – castes, tribes, villages—in regions of the world where colonial hegemony had been established. Over two centuries, the discipline introspected on its own colonial moorings and its

problematic underlying assumptions. There was much questioning and some overturning of the older positivist methodology. But the method and craft of ethnography—intensive study of a small unit through immersive observation and participation—that defined the discipline, now revised and honed, are relevant even under new methodologies (Ganesh 2023, 201). Micro research in conjunction with analysis of macro contexts have become part of the social science tool kit. My research is based on ethnography, historical documents, oral sources and secondary literature. Within the scope of this essay, ethnographic material has been presented only sketchily. The limited purpose is to give a broad-brush picture in order to highlight the relationship between music, religion and syncretic civilisational processes in Indo-Islamic history.

In this essay, I reflect on civilisation as embodied in the life-world of Dudekula Muslim musicians, a small caste-community in the Andhra region[1] in South India. They are, by hereditary occupation, players of *nagaswaram.*[2] This piped musical instrument is integral to Carnatic music, one of the major classical music systems in the subcontinent. The *nagaswaram* musical ensemble, along with a percussion instrument known as *thavil* (in Tamil) or *dolu* (in Telugu), is an important accompaniment to the temple worship in South India. It is played during rituals and processions; it is also an auspicious accompaniment to the domestic rites of passage. For some decades now, it features as a solo concert instrument in the Carnatic music world. While Muslim artistes have contributed substantially to Hindustani classical music, they are, for reasons beyond the purview of this essay, hardly noticeable in Carnatic music.

The community of Telugu-speaking Dudekula Muslim *nagaswaram* musicians,[3] spread across several districts of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, is a small but significant exception to this situation. Historically, they were skilled practitioners of the art in two important spheres of canonical Hinduism in South India—classical music and temples. This community has had a prominent presence in Carnatic music, associated as *asthana vidwans* (resident artistes) at influential temples in Tirupati, Bhadrachalam, Srisailam and others, and in monasteries like Sringeri. Some have established *gurukulams*.[4] The caste of Dudekulas, to which they belong, are officially Muslims but observe many customs and practices in worship, belief, and lifestyle, which are common among Telugu Hindus. This is even more so for the *nagaswaram* musicians due to the nature of their profession.

The earliest musicians of this community, identified by name and place, go back to the early 1800s, but oral traditions and contextual evidence indicate a much older history. The way the community has negotiated between two major religious affiliations shows an ease with an identity that has been described variously as ‘flexible’ and ‘oscillating.’

The formal acceptance from the temple network as well as the classical music system and the broadly tolerant attitude of the *jamaths* in the past, impel us to reflect on the nature of interactions in the last two centuries between institutions of religion, art, and learning in southern India. The historical origins of this caste lie at the intersection of the era of provincial sultanates

and Sufi conversions in the Deccan area, the rise of vernacular Islam, and the flexibility of canonical temple culture in the region. The civilisational dialogues between Islam and Hinduism over the centuries have yielded some fascinating insights. Muslim *nagaswaram* musicians, through their art and everyday practices, provide us another moment to reflect on the nature and contours of this dialogue.

Inevitably, the past few decades have seen some disquieting changes in the dynamics of these interactions which I will touch upon only briefly. Pressure from Islamic organisations to disavow Hindu beliefs and practices is building up. There are murmurs from rival *nagaswaram* communities and Hindu political organisations questioning the legitimacy of their association with temples. But these are still minor in comparison to the dwindling numbers of young people from traditional *nagaswaram* families willing and able to learn the art.

II. Syncretism and Civilisation in India

For more than two centuries now, historians, philosophers, anthropologists, political scientists, and others have engaged variously with the concept of civilisation. Currently, the bird's eye view and the worm's eye view run in parallel. Civilisation takes on a symbolic mantle, even when discussions on concrete civilisations and their specific histories are ongoing. In Samuel Huntington's comparison of civilisations, there is an underlying implication of innateness and firmness of boundaries ordained to result in clashes. In Freudian thought, civilisation was a proxy for society that repressed human instincts, demanded conformity, and stood in opposition to the individual's desire for freedom.

Current historical and anthropological research looks at civilisations with a sense of 'ongoingness' within a framework of interactions, exchanges, and shifting boundaries. Civilisations have a temporal beginning; they emerged sometime after the last ice age, approximately ten thousand years ago, when certain types of complex, culturally patterned social systems over a large geographic area evolved with some kind of hierarchical system of privilege and ranking that did not previously exist (Trautmann 2012, 3). The other important input has come from anthropology's engagement with processes of interaction and intermingling among contemporary cultures and societies.

All civilisations have fuzzy boundaries, are unevenly spread and "lumpy" and continually mingle with and draw on other civilisations (Trautmann 2012, 2–3). "It is important not to think of civilisations as sharply bounded objects with a fixed nature; they are processes that overlap and draw into themselves lots of ideas and things coming from elsewhere." (Trautmann 2012, 219*).* Mixture has been part of the civilisation process from the start.

Syncretic processes have had a significant presence in Indian civilisation, given its diversities at many levels. In this section, as a way of understanding the phenomenon of Muslim *nagaswaram* musicians, I reflect on the concept of syncretism and associated vocabulary that emerged in the anthropology of India. I recall two significant moments in the course of

reconceptualising Indian civilisation that turned the tide in favour of focusing on interlinkages and exchanges. One by the scholars of the Chicago School and the other by Indian scholars who focused on the nature of tribal interaction with Hinduism.

A. India as a Syncretic Civilisation

In the pre-independence era, an indigenous discourse on nationalism and civilisation had emerged as a reaction to colonial interpretations of India as made of isolated and self-sufficient units of castes, tribes, and villages, under whimsical and despotic rule. Bhattacharya (2012) characterises the response as having multiple strands: defending Indian civilisation or glorifying it, or asserting civilisational unity in the distant past.

Whatever the specific position, the early Indian response stressed upon interlinkages between regions and cultures at various levels. Tagore's elaboration of India as historically a 'syncretic civilisation' was an especially powerful idea. Indian civilisation had established "unity in diversity" without eliminating the uniqueness of each constituent element. (Bhattacharya 2012, 67–84; Heredia 2018. See also EPW Engage 2019 for a nuanced discussion of Tagore's nationalism). For Tagore, Indian civilisation embodied give and take within and without. This idea in various forms became part of the national movement, even though Tagore himself grew ambivalent towards nationalism *per se* in his later years.

Syncretism is an idea that is in wide use in many contexts in India. It was originally used to denote a process in which distinct religions interact and merge to create a new religion (Moret 2008, 1336). In this sense, syncretism has been looked at with disfavour by those committed to the idea of immutability of religions. It is appreciated and used, often as short hand for a variety of processes, by those who see religion, like any other socio-cultural phenomenon, as one of continuous change and exchange. The use of the term has expanded tremendously in fields other than religion too. In the popular domain, it is used for ceremonies, customs, practices, art forms, and thought processes. In a broad sense, it connotes the intermingling of distinct entities, which may or may not lead to the creation of a new entity but involves some mutuality and modifications of the originals. Syncretism has become a much-used word that is in danger of losing conceptual sharpness but simply cannot be wished away from contemporary discourse.

In anthropology, which is centrally focused on culture, an entire vocabulary has grown around the intermingling processes between cultures. To be sure, culture and civilisation are distinct; they need to be differentiated in certain contexts. But some principles and processes of 'intermingling' are similar. Accommodation, adaptation, amalgamation, assimilation, accretion, acculturation, absorption, admixture, and integration are part of this lexicon. Syncretism leans on the side of characterising culture and civilisation as inevitably plural and composite.

Whether it is appropriate to call Indian civilisation as a whole as syncretic is a matter of debate. What is indubitable is that as a process of cultural intermingling and mutual exchange,

examples of syncretism are abundantly evident in studies of historical and socio-cultural change in India

The existence of civilisations as complex social forms may be ancient, but the articulations and reflections on the concept of civilisation are much more recent.[5] Broadly, there are two streams in its articulation; both originate in the colonial context.

B. Orientalists and Evolutionists

The breath-taking amazement experienced by a generation of relatively recent observers, as Devy (2023, xxiv) puts it, led to a conceptualisation of civilisation by 'orientalists,' who discovered the high technological, cultural, and artistic achievements of some past societies.

Parallelly, nineteenth century evolutionary anthropologists came up with a different take. Their theories of cultural evolution were influenced by Darwin. Culture and civilisation were interchangeable in this discourse. August Comte, Herbert Spencer, E. B. Tylor, and Lewis Henry Morgan were among the prominent scholars whose work spanned ancient and contemporary societies, often extrapolating from the latter to the former. The entire vocabulary in this phase was suffused with ideas of primitive vs complex societies and the inevitable evolution and progress from one to the other. Cultures were classified on a spectrum from 'lower' to 'higher' based on connections made between race or ethnicity and intellect, advanced human knowledge, technology, and social organisation. These theories were cast within the framework of scientific investigation that early anthropology claimed as its special strength (Ganesh 2023, 204–7). The nomenclature to denote the evolution of societies in an ascending ladder, from savagery to barbarism to civilisation has been critiqued heavily for bearing the stamp of colonial racism. Unilineal theories of evolution were soon rejected as speculative history and value judgement.

From the 1940s onwards, anthropology turned to multilinear evolution, which paved the way for a non-judgmental way of understanding diversities in cultures. The notion of each culture as unique and valuable in itself, illustrated by numerous ethnographies, came to be the hallmark of anthropology (See Steward (1972), Carneiro (2003) and Barnard (2021) for critical overviews of evolutionist theories). It was an important step in reconceptualising civilisation.[6]

C. Locality, Region, Civilisation

Another moment in the anthropological approach to civilisation drew substantially on Indian material. Milton Singer and McKim Marriott at the Chicago School did extensive fieldwork in India between the 1950s to 1970s, and elaborated on the relationship between the local culture of villages and the cultural consciousness evolved over a long period of time and synthesised over a vast territory (Singer 1959 and 1972; Marriott 1955). It also laid special emphasis on the mutuality and interdependence of the two domains. Marriott's exposition on the process of 'accretion,' or addition of layers without simple replacement of the earlier layer, was a key idea in understanding 'continuity and change.'

While the nomenclatures 'Great and Little Traditions' (first used by Singer), 'Universalisation and Parochialisation' (first used by Marriott), and their implications have been the subject of much debate, their work in connecting the macro realm of the civilisational to regional and local cultures cleared the way for contemporary approaches to civilisation. It took cognisance of how India was both a land of village, caste and tribe and also a civilisation of antiquity. Conventional anthropology, with its emphasis on the small isolated local community was revisited to conceptualise India as a whole, as a civilisation with its interlinkages with region, locality and community.

D. Tribes in the Civilisational Matrix

Virtually parallel to the Chicago School, were two Indian anthropologists whose reflections on tribes and their linkages with the larger society brought to the fore the debate on the character of Indian civilisation.

Nirmal Kumar Bose (1953) emphasised the continuities and resilience of Indian culture and civilisation. He wrote on the co-existence of tribal and non-tribal groups in India for centuries, observing both sanskritic and non-sanskritic elements in tribal rituals. He argued that tribes had become part of the wider Hindu social structure, notwithstanding some differences. This process he termed as the 'Hindu method of tribal absorption,' in which tribes were accommodated as part of Hindu society without having to abandon their particular customs. The implications of Bose's work on tribes' absorption into the lower rungs of the caste hierarchy and their unquestioning acceptance of their position in an exploitative system have sparked critiques of Bose's civilisational matrix as being narrowly brahmanical.

While validating the growth of Indian civilisation from a 'primitive cultural level' to one of complexity, Surajit Sinha, in contrast to Bose, emphasised on the separate identity of tribes. His focus shifted from adaptation and acculturation to social differentiation and centralised power organisation among tribes. Without denying influences from the 'Great Tradition,' he emphasised separate identity, using a *kshatriya* rather than a brahmanical model to understand the transformation of tribes into castes, accompanied by the establishment of tribal dynasties (Ghosh 2023, 41–58).

These examples of the Chicago School and the Bose-Sinha debate illustrate the limitations of syncretism as commonly understood in India. Sociologists engaged in analysing social structure have questioned the suggestion of harmony implicit in syncretism. It cannot be presumed that syncretic processes are necessarily between equals and accomplished peacefully. Processes of hierarchisation, power differentials and structural and cultural violence are intertwined with syncretism, as with any other social phenomenon.

The lack of adequate theorising on this dialectic is a gap that has saddled civilisation studies with a mixed legacy. In reconceptualising civilisation, hierarchy, power and violence

have to be given cognitive space. Within the scope of this essay, this concern is flagged but not pursued.

Among civilisations, India is somewhat distinct (though not unique) because of its diversities in society and culture; in languages, religions, ethnicities and way of life—on a scale higher than most other countries. The extent of continuity with the contemporary, owing to processes like accretion, is a widely accepted phenomenon.

The problem arises when their significance is exaggerated to the exclusion of other competing and conflicting aspects. The exercise of reconceptualising civilisation, warts and all, comprehensively and critically, has been under way only for a few decades in Indian scholarship and scholarship on India. It needs to mature fully. The recent substantial collection of articles, edited by Devy *et al* (2023) illuminates the way forward.

III. Returning to the *Nagaswaram*

Deeply embedded in the classical Carnatic music tradition with an ancient history, *nagaswaram* has some resemblance to the shehnai of Hindustani music. Known as *mangala vadyam* (auspicious instrument), it is an inseparable part of Hindu domestic and temple religious ceremonies across South India. Terada Yoshitaka's recent book on *nagaswaram* maestro Rajarattinam Pillai gives an excellent overview of the instrument, its structure, and context.

Many prominent *nagaswaram* musicians, Muslim and Hindu, are even now recognised by *devasthanams* (temples) and *mutths* (monasteries) as *asthana vidwans* (resident artistes/scholars) with hereditary rights in the temple. In the era of *zamindars* in Andhra, their courts appointed *nagaswaram* artistes as *asthana vidwans*. In short, the instrument has the accoutrements of 'high culture,' but its performances are part of quotidian religious life in domestic as well as popular public domains.

Nagaswaram music is an authentic Carnatic genre, closely connected to vocal music. It has been slow to enter the secular musical concert platform for many reasons, including its character as an outdoor performance instrument, which needs adaptation to the auditorium and proscenium concert stage. Although prevalent in the four states of southern India, Tamil Nadu is the most prominent location where it flourishes.

Nagaswaram music and Bharatanatyam[7] were closely intertwined with the history and culture of the erstwhile *devadasi* tradition.[8] Carnatic music as a whole has a strong textual orientation. Set compositions, cast in the devotional idiom of South India, form an important part of a concert.[9] Its connections with religion, region, and caste have arguably given this music something of an insular character.[10]

A. Dudekula Muslim *Nagaswaram* Musicians

I stumbled upon the Telugu speaking Muslim community of *nagaswaram* artistes at a lecture-demonstration at the Madras Music Academy in 2023 during the birth centenary celebrations of the eminent *nagaswaram* artiste Sheik Chinna Moulana Saheb.

A legend in his lifetime, he lived for much of his musical life in Srirangam in Tamil Nadu and garnered national and global recognition and critical appreciation. He belonged to a Telugu Muslim Dudekula family from Karavadi village near Ongole. Several generations of his family had been hereditary *nagaswaram* artistes at the Rama temple there. He had moved to Tamil Nadu as a young man in the 1950s, to polish his skills under Isai Vellalar gurus who were the dominant hereditary custodians of *nagaswaram* (Ganesh 2024).

By 1964, he had set up his own *gurukulam* in Srirangam. He inspired many other *nagaswaram* musicians in Andhra and Tamil Nadu. In subsequent years, a handful of families related to him by blood or marriage, also migrated from Andhra to Tamil Nadu. They have made a mark in the field. These migrant families have largely adopted the Isai Vellalar style of dress, deportment, speech not only in their professional lives but also to varying degrees, in their personal lifestyles. They have blended with the Carnatic musical and Tamil devotional ethos. They are officially members of the local *jamath* in their neighbourhood, and accept the minimum practices of Islam. They are in close contact with their extended families in Andhra. In Tamil Nadu, they are called Andhra Muslims; their Dudekula affiliation is not commonly known.

But the bulk of the Muslim *nagaswaram* musicians continue to live, play and perform in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. They are part of Dudekula marriage and kinship circles and share many of their beliefs and practices

Dudekulas are believed to have originally been a caste of cotton cleaners and rope and tape makers. By the nineteenth century, they had spread into a variety of occupations as farmers (but rarely big landowners), petty traders, contractors, village school masters (Thurston 1909; Saheb 2003, 4911). Their oral traditions suggest that they were Hindus converted to Islam by Baba Fakhruddin, the twelfth century Sufi saint of the *Suhrawardiya* order who migrated from Persia to South India and lived in Penukonda, Anantapur district. A grand Urs (gathering) is held annually at the Penukonda Babayya Swami (Baba Fakhruddin) Dargah in which Dudekulas are closely involved.[11]

Another strong oral tradition connects Dudekulas with Potuluri Veera Brahmendra Swami, popularly known as ‘Brahmamgaru’ of Kadappa. He was a Hindu sage of the sixteenth century who wrote *Kala Gyanam,* a book of predictions in Telugu (Malik 1981, 314). Hagiography says that when he left home on his spiritual journey, his first disciple was a Dudekula named Siddhaiah.[12] Brahmamgaru's image, in a meditative pose, with Dudekula Siddhaiah sitting at his feet, is placed on the shelf of Hindu deities in many Dudekula homes.

Siddhaiah is bearded, bare-chested, wearing a white dhoti and red Islamic *fez* cap, palms joined together in prayer. This image is widely available in Andhra calendar art and vividly captures the dual religious allegiance of Dudekulas.

Taking the historical connections of Dudekulas with Baba Fakhruddin and with Potuluri Veera Brahmendra Swami together, we can infer that their intertwined affiliations to Islam and Hinduism go back to at least five hundred years.

The most striking feature of the Dudekulas as described in the gazetteers and census reports by British administrative officials is their flexible or shifting identity. There are fascinating descriptions by Saheb (2003) of how in this "oscillating" community, syncretic processes are manifested through formal allegiance to Islamic canons mingled with everyday Telugu Hindu practices, and also in many cases, worship of Hindu deities at home.

To give a quick summary, membership of a *jamath*, allegiance to a mosque, circumcision of boys, marriage and burial conducted by a *qazi* form the Islamic baseline. But the rites of passage are associated with local Telugu Hindu customs that have to do with auspicious times, avoidance of ill omens, and rituals to prevent 'evil eye' Hindu festivals like *Saraswati Pooja*, Diwali, and *Vinayaka Chaturthi* are celebrated. *Ayudha Pooja* done on Vijaya Dashami day is also when Dudekula musicians are busy performing. As a solution they have resourcefully shifted the worship of *nagaswaram* to the day of Bakri-Id! The kinship system is patrilineal with preferential cross cousin marriage, as is the norm among Telugu Hindus. Parallel cousin marriage, favoured among some Muslim communities, is not practiced by Dudekulas. Shaik (2024) has illustrated the flexibility of identity through changing practices of naming among Dudekulas – how they are modified to accommodate Islamisation while maintaining syncretic beliefs of Hindu origin.[13]

Dudekulas are ranked low by the other Muslim castes of Andhra, mainly owing to their Hinduised practices.[14] At the same time, Muslim *jamaths* are inclusive as are the mosques. All Muslims can be members of the same *jamath*. Over some decades now, the local *jamaths* and other Muslim organisations have been persuading Dudekulas to give up their worship of Hindu deities. This has led to a degree of Islamisation. Presently Dudekulas as a community are politically engaged with their classification as 'Backward Class' Muslims in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.

The present essay, however, is focused only on the *nagaswaram* musicians among Dudekulas, who, given their traditional occupation, are more deeply engaged with canonical Hinduism as well as steeped in the South Indian devotional idiom of *bhakti*.[15]

Precise numbers are hard to estimate as there is no formal distinction between them and other Dudekulas who form part of their intermarrying universe. It is also common to have one or two sons in a family taking to the hereditary profession, and others pursuing higher studies, employment or business. The younger generations are increasingly taking to other professions

that bring more income and with greater predictability. Their traditional competitors are mainly the Nayee Brahmins and, to a smaller extent Kummaris (potters). Musicians from these two Hindu castes traditionally play *nagaswaram* and some also play the *dolu* percussion instrument.[16] Muslim Dudekulas in contrast play only *nagaswaram*. Their ensembles always include artistes from the other castes as well.

B. Yesteryear Maestros

Let me begin with their professional profile in the last two centuries. Bhusurapalle Venkateswarlu's compendium published in 1986 on distinguished *nagaswaram* and *dolu* artistes in undivided Andhra Pradesh provides rich information. Much of it was corroborated by the older musicians whom I met, who added details. Venkateswarlu lists 107 names of Muslim *nagaswaram* artistes, out of a total of 195 names. They outnumber the other *nagaswaram* communities taken together. The actual number must have been even larger, since only the well-known ones are listed. Brief bio-notes on each are included. Birth years of some are known. Also included are names of mother, father, and gurus, students, place of origin, and the musical lineage. Chilakaluripet, Guntur, Bandar, Kommuru, Rajahmundry, Kumkalagunta had prominent *gurukulams*.

Gurus emphasised on learning the texts (*sahityam*) and singing, along with playing *nagaswaram*. For many, the first gurus were their fathers or maternal or paternal uncles. They also learnt subsequently from other Isai Vellalar gurus and Brahmin vocalists from Andhra and Tamil Nadu. Even prior to Sk Chinna Moulana's time there were connections of the Chilakaluripeta school with Tamil Nadu, notably with Madurai.

What particular aspect of *nagaswaram* play was each artiste known for? *Alapana, pallavi, swara* rendering, *keerthanas*, specific ragas of specialisation are all listed. It indicates a thorough training in the technical aspects of Carnatic music. Nidadavolu Lal Saheb (born around 1915) was known for prominence of *bhava* (emotion) in his play, perhaps a result of learning the *sahityam* (Venkateswarlu, 60) Bacha Saheb (born 1888) from the Kommuru lineage not only played *nagaswaram*, but was also a singer and poet. He composed many *keerthanas* on Lord Chenna Kesava swamy of the Kommuru temple. Bacha Saheb's desendant Kommuru Pentu Saheb, born in 1890 had ragas named after him.[17] Music scholar Rachavaripalem Khasim Saheb born in 1850 was famous for his *Pallavi* which starts with "*om namah shivaya."* (Venkateswarlu, 56). Kumkulagunta Saidulu Saheb, born in 1912, was noted for his knowledge of complex *talas* or rhythmic cycles (Venkateswarlu, 63).

The patrons of *nagaswaram* music were usually temples and *zamindars* of the region. All the major temples in Andhra still continue to employ *nagaswaram* artistes, some are appointed as *asthana vidwans,* others are employees, yet others are called in on a casual basis, whenever needed. Often Muslim Dudekulas are part of these ensembles which include Nayee Brahmins, Kummaris, and others. The members of the ensemble play standing, outside the *sanctum* or

sitting in a hall within the temple or in an open space outdoors, or outside the temple at the head of a procession in which the *utsava* idol is taken around the precincts or village with fanfare.[18]

In the past, *zamindars*, termed *rajas*, appointed talented *nagaswaram* artistes from illustrious lineages as their *asthana vidwans*. Venkateswarlu specifically mentions that the *zamindars* of Mogalayakotta, Yellapeta of Khammam district, Karavadi, Nuziveedu, and Gadwal were prominent patrons. Raja Manuri Venkata Narasimha Rao, a powerful *zamindar* of Chilakaluripeta,[19] was a fan of Sheik Satuluru Nabi Saheb, who was born in the early 1800s. He invited Sk Nabi to move to Chilakaluripeta as the *asthana vidwan* of his court (Venkateswarlu, 43). Thus began the illustrious Chilakaluripeta school of nagaswaram, in which Sk Nabi's sons, grandsons and many others were trained and grew to become distinguished exponents. Several *nagaswaram* musicians I met remembered Chilakaluripeta as a thriving *gurukulam*. Sheik Kasim recollects his grandfather Sk Chinna Moulana telling him about his years there. At dawn, the entire town would echo with the notes of *nagaswaram* practice. Today all that remains of it is a symbol of a *nagaswaram* installed at the Chilakaluripeta bus stand.

It is evident from the documentation as well as from the oral histories I collected that for at least two centuries, *nagaswaram* music flourished in Andhra. Muslim musicians were a dominant group, perhaps the most prominent group with a public presence, learning from and collaborating with Hindu musicians. Soon after independence, Andhra Pradesh was carved out of Madras Presidency as a separate state. Accomplished Muslim *nagaswaram* players became accredited artistes of Hyderabad and Vijayawada branch of All India Radio. The creation of organisations for classical music like Andhra Pradesh Sangeetha Sabha and Andhra Gayaka Mahasabha offered new opportunities.

There is no documented account of when and how Dudekulas became *nagaswaram* players. Sheik Mohammad Subhani narrated to me what can be called an 'origin story.'

"I come from the Satuluru lineage. When my ancestor Hussain was a young boy, I was told by my elders, he ran away from home because his father beat him for not playing *nagaswaram* properly. He hid in the *amman* (goddess) temple on the outskirts of the village. Amma herself appeared before him. She asked tenderly, 'Husenu, why are you crying?' He said, 'I don't know what to do.' Then amma said, 'Stick out your tongue.' She wrote her *beejakshara mantra*[20] on his tongue. After this, he started improving step by step. My grandfather Nadabrahma Janabhishek Chinna Peer Saheb was his seventh-generation descendant and I am in the ninth generation."

The kernel of the story is repeated in Venkateswarlu's book (1986, 43). He identifies the boy as Sk Nabi who was born in the early 1800s and became a respected *asthana vidwan* at the Chilakaluripeta *zamindar's* court. Sheik Peda Hussain from the third generation of Chilakaluripeta gurus was a *devi* devotee. It is said that whenever he prayed to her, she would appear before him (Venkateswarlu, 44). Several musicians who spoke to me, regardless of their level of Islamisation, were emotionally attached to the presiding deities of their village temple.

Although Sk Hussain has given up playing the instrument and switched to an IT career in the US, he tries to return to his village during the temple's annual festival to play *nagaswaram* for the ceremonies. Kasim recollects Sk Chinna Moulana saying that his first god was *Sri Rama* of the Karavadi temple. Next was the *nagaswaram* maestro, Rajarattinam Pillai, whose style he emulated. Many musicians I spoke with went with families on regular pilgrimages to specific temples. At the same time, several were attached to one or more of the dargahs in the region, and would visit regularly with families.

Vocal and instrumental Carnatic music, including *nagaswaram*, is now being taught in private and government schools, open to all castes and communities. But *gurukulams* continue to play an important role. Some students of government schools, after their training, like to spend a few months in a traditional *gurukulam* polishing their style.

During my visits to the homes of *nagaswaram* artists, I saw a couple of full-scale *gurukulams* in action. The students spent between a few months and a few years living in the guru's home, immersed in learning, giving him personal assistance, helping out in household chores, accompanying him to concerts. Meals were usually in the guru's home; in some cases, students would eat out, but come back to stay for the night. No fees were supposed to be charged for teaching, but a moderate amount was taken for boarding and lodging. It was understood that competent students would play alongside the guru at concerts without any compensation. There were variations in the way *gurukulams* functioned in practice, but the ideal type, as it is presumed to have prevailed in vedic *pathashalas* and Isai Vellalar families had a hold on the imagination of the musicians I spoke to.

While women playing *nagaswaram* is not common, there are a few prominent exceptions**.** In the late nineteenth century, Chand Bibi from the third generation of the Chilakaluripeta lineage learnt to play *nagaswaram* from her father. Married into a family in Kommuru, she motivated her husband Pentu Saheb, to learn the instrument. He became the first musician of the Pentu lineage which later produced several generations of accomplished musicians (Venkateswarlu 1986, 51–52). Much later, in the 1970s–90s, two women, Kalisha Bi and Masthanamma, from hereditary *nagaswaram* families learnt to play the instrument and are currently performing professionally with great success. Both perform alongside their spouses as a team. *Gurukulam* is an advantage for women, as they learn staying at home or in the homes of close relatives. The bilaterality of kinship and cross cousin marriage makes it possible for the women to live and play professionally within a supportive kin network.

A common theme in my conversations with the *nagaswaram* musicians was about their *jamath.* The relationship was generally business-like. They paid their *jamath* fees on time. The frequency of visiting the mosque varied. Most would visit during Ramzan and on Bakri Id. Most would offer *namaz*, but irregularly. No one had taught them their Islamic prayers properly, was a common refrain. They were busy with their *nagaswaram* training, concerts and temple duties. *Jamath* members for the most part accepted that *nagaswaram* musicians were bound by their

occupation. But the former were vigilant that the latter should not excessively lean toward Hindu practices.

IV. Vignettes

The richness and complexity of the life world of this community, with seemingly incompatible axes intersecting, is difficult to convey within the span of an article. My approach has been to outline the story and highlight the dots that I think need to be joined. I have selected two vignettes to give a flavour of how issues of dual identities play out in individual lives and how responses vary.

A. Glimpses from the Sheik Yakub's *Gurukulam*

Vallabhi is known as a '*nagaswaram* village' with more than a hundred households of *nagaswaram* and *dolu* musicians, of which slightly less than half are of Dudekula Muslims. As one enters the village and walks to its central junction, one is suddenly amidst a cluster of statues erected around the clearing. N.T. Rama Rao, Indira Gandhi, Y.S.R. Reddy and Rajiv Gandhi are all there, larger than life, gazing across at each other from a distance, all with raised right hand, striking leadership poses.

This is Sk Yakub's home. A busy and popular performer and teacher of *nagaswaram* with an active network of musicians and students from Andhra. Just before entering the village, the road passes through fields, some of which are owned by his family. For at least four generations, his ancestors have been *nagaswaram* musicians. Sk Yakub's father was his first guru. He then spent a few years in the *gurukulam* of his father's relative and finally he learnt from Kanaparthy Chinna Peeru Saheb, son of Kanaparthy Hussain Saheb, who himself had learnt from the Chilakuripeta gurus. Sk Yakub has performed along with his gurus, at various times, when they played at temples in Tirupati, Vijayawada, Chilakaluripeta and Kanaparthy. He has travelled to different places to get proficiency in specific aspects. His brother plays *nagaswaram* too, but he also runs a grocery shop in the village, unlike Sk Yakub who is a full-time musician. Both his sons have trained in *nagaswaram*, but only the elder one plays professionally. Sk Yakub has played in temples in Warangal, Bhadrachalam, Vemulavada, Yadagiri Gutta. Recently, he played at the Naimishnath Vishnu temple at Naimisharanya in Uttar Pradesh. He has also performed at concerts during important functions at temples, village festivals, *grihapravesam* ceremonies for new homes. Weddings are an important source of income. He has even performed at a destination wedding at Goa.

But his passion is teaching, as it was for his father who trained more than three hundred students. Sk Yakub himself has, over the decades, taught more than hundred and fifty students. They have lived in his *gurukulam* for varying periods. His home, as we entered it, was full of students including a few girls, and local relatives, mostly *nagaswaram* players. Some students had returned to their home towns for a few days, said Sk Yakub, since it was not the marriage

season and there were no concerts for his ensembles at that time. It seemed like an open house, with people trooping in and out.

While my main conversation was with Sk Yakub, several others joined in the conversation, adding to his words. At present, he said, the girl students lived in this house with his family. They also helped in household tasks. The boys were living in his other house in the village, but would also run errands when needed. Food for everybody was in the main house. Students are from several castes including Muslim Dudekulas, Hindu OBCs and SCs, but no Urdu speaking Muslims; some are from the village itself, and some from elsewhere in the region.

Classes are often held in a corner of the family's fields on the outskirts of the village, where the loud sounds would disturb no one. There is a clearing at the near end where a local Hindu patron of music had recently, in a grand function, installed a life-size statue of Sk Yakub's father, Sheik Saidul Saheb for his outstanding contribution to *nagaswaram*. A raised platform has been constructed near it for Sk Yakub to sit and play. Students sit below on the ground that has been cleared and prepared for classes. If it rains, classes dealing with theory are conducted on the first floor of his house. Since most of his students are available full-time, practice is intensive and immersive, lasting for some hours early morning and again in the evening. He teaches them in a group and then gives time for individual play in order to correct them. They also practise by themselves or in small groups; sometimes using the precincts of a small temple near the fields.

Sk Yakub is a successful teacher and practitioner of his hereditary art. His teaching style and relationship with his students, seemingly casual, has elements of the ideal-type *gurukulam* of the classical performing arts in South India, until professional schools run by government or private bodies took over.

Sk Yakub makes a distinction between his professional life and private beliefs. At home, unlike many other Dudekula musicians, there are neither pictures of Hindu deities, nor do the women wear *bottu.* He goes to the masjid on Friday afternoons, offers namaz as and when his work allows him. Women in his family are regular with namaz at home. On *Ganesh Chaturthi* day, all the *nagaswarams* in the house are worshipped. *Guru Pournami* is celebrated at his house. Marriage is solemnised with a *nikah* as per Islamic norms with a *qazi* officiating. But celebrations are for three days, with customs and ceremonies akin to Telugu Hindus. On the first two days there is Carnatic music. Telugu marriage songs are sung.

On the third day, for the reception, light music is played. Just before the *nikah*, music is stopped and resumed afterwards. His family follows local Telugu customs like consulting astrologers and avoiding *rahu kalam*[21] for starting any new activity. There are many such negotiations between traditional Dudekula Hinduised practices and his own individual preferences.

Sk Yakub consciously avoids the overt signs and symbols of Hinduism at home, but is deeply devoted to his music. When going out to play, he dresses like a Nayee Brahmin, with white *dhoti* and a red *bottu* on his forehead, but not at home. Even though an instrumentalist, he has learnt the *sahityam* or texts of the Carnatic compositions which are in Telugu, which he understands. He has taken special lessons in Sanskrit and strives to understand Dikshitar's compositions. He is happy while playing *nagaswaram* and making others happy. That is enough for him. He is not inclined to call it by any specific name. Whether he is praying to Allah or playing songs dedicated to *Rama* or *Krishna* or *Devi*, it is all one – "Almighty is only one" (he uses the Telugu word *Bhagavantudu*). "We may give different names, but that makes no difference," he says.

Jamath people do not ask him not to play *nagaswaram*, he says, they only object to excessive Hindu practices that some Dudekula musicians follow.

"Yes, we also hear about Nayee Brahmins in some temples complaining to the administration about allowing us, that is, Muslims into the temple. But this is rare."

Sk Yakub's dedication is to his art. He does not see it as conflicting with his Islamic practice. Some Telugu Hindu customs that are part of his family he accepts, but is particular not to practise what he considers as excessive idol worship. For him the worship of any god is ultimately the same, it is the worship of the almighty.

B. Rare Gems: Kalisha Bi and Masthanamma

The only two women in the community currently playing professionally have similar profiles. Both are from traditional *nagaswaram* families, where fathers played a key role in encouraging them. Each plays together with her spouse as a team.

Kalisha Bi grew up in a home suffused with Carnatic music. She was closely related to some of the legendary gurus of the Chilakaluripeta School. Her home was also a *gurukulam*, where five or six boys lived as full-time students. They were mostly relatives, including her mother's brother's son whom she eventually married. She was an only child, born late and highly pampered. Her father wanted her to become like Ponnuthayi of Madurai, the first woman to perform *nagaswaram* in public.[22] The elders of the family collectively decided that she would be trained at home. She started learning at age six. Proficient by age nine, she started accompanying her father and his brother in concerts. After marriage, she and her husband, also from an illustrious musical lineage, started performing together. Eventually they became a successful professional team.

It was tough training for a little girl. They would all be woken up at 3 am. By 4 am they would prostrate before the *nagaswaram*, and start practising the basic exercises. At 8 am there was a break. They would all be given a meal of cooked rice soaked overnight in water, mixed

with buttermilk and salt. Kalisha Bi remembers that though it was not a wealthy household, they kept cows. Milk and curd were plentiful. Next came vocal music practice. They would learn *varnams* and *keerthanas* of Tyagaraja, Shyama Sastri and Muthuswamy Dikshitar. They were taught the correct pronunciation and given the overall meaning. In hindsight, she feels that all that effort to learn vocal music was important even though she is an instrumentalist.

Nagaswaram music gets its rich emotional tone only when played with bhakti, she says. And that bhakti comes only with intoning the *sahitya*, albeit in the mind. It colours the music that she plays. Her husband added that without knowledge of *sahityam,* the music has rough edges. It needs to have emotion and polish.

Practice would continue through the day. Another session after lunch, revising the morning lessons, again vocal practice and once again *nagaswaram* practice. No break for play and games. The schedule was adjusted for Kalisha Bi's school timings. Her mother would give her two eggs and a glass of milk daily to make her strong for playing the instrument. After fifth grade, the family decided to discontinue her schooling to concentrate on music. Looking back, she regrets not getting a better education but is happy with her life in music. Eventually, Kalisha and her husband migrated to Tamil Nadu, which had better opportunities. They became disciples of Sk Chinna Moulana and settled down there. They trained their only son in their music. He has a master's degree in computer applications but has joined his parents. They are a successful trio in the field, winning recognition and awards

At Kalisha Bi's home in Andhra, there used to be images of Hindu deities, but she does not remember worshipping them. She did not wear a *bottu* on her forehead regularly, only when going to play in public. Meat and fish were cooked once in a while at home but no beef. They observed a number of Telugu Hindu practices. After migration she has changed her lifestyle towards a more complete South Indian Hindu lifestyle in worship, food and dress. She has a grand pooja room on the first floor of her house. It is elaborately decorated with images and pictures of myriad Hindu deities. She performs daily pooja. She observes rules of ritual pollution as far as the pooja space is concerned. She entertains her Dudekula kith and kin in the ground floor. They are all aware of her poojas. On the wall of the entrance *verandah* on the ground floor is a photograph of Kaaba Sharif. Her husband recites his Islamic prayers daily. When she visits *jamath* meetings, which is rare, she removes her *bottu*, and covers her head. When occasionally asked by *jamath* members why she plays in temples, she replies, "If you are able to provide me employment which gives me the same income, I will quit." That ends the conversation.

Masthanamma is the daughter of a renowned *nagaswaram* musician originally from Velpuru. He was the seventh generation *nagaswaram* player in the family He had studied under several eminent gurus. Masthanamma was the last of seven children, all daughters. But, except her, nobody was interested in learning *nagaswaram*. She picked up many compositions just by listening to her father's students practise at home. In school she would win prizes in singing

competitions. When her teachers discovered her background, they encouraged her to learn vocal music.

Although she wanted to learn *nagaswaram*, her father felt that the required breath control and stamina would be difficult for a girl. So, when she was in eighth standard, he arranged for her to learn vocal music from his own guru. After a year, he agreed to teach her *nagaswaram*. He used to play along with his older brother, but when the latter died, there was no suitable co-artiste and Masthanamma started accompanying her father in concerts. Both father and daughter learnt with Sk Chinna Moulana for a year. Masthanamma's father had played in the famous Srisailam Mallikarjuna temple [23] for twenty years. She too played there along with him, and later along with her husband. He too is from a *nagaswaram* family but they used to play mostly at weddings. After marriage they started playing together in temples all over India, in Kashi, Dwaraka, Naimisharanyam, Puri, Rameshwaram, Bhadrachalam and Srisailam. They also spent some months in Sk Chinna Moulana's house, learning from his grandsons. Their second daughter had from childhood shown an interest in percussion. She learnt *dolu* (or *thavil*) formally and got an MA in Thavil from Annamalai University in Chidambaram. She married her class mate, a Tamil *thavil* artiste. Both are tech-savvy and have a YouTube channel. They play in concerts accompanying her parents, forming a popular ensemble.

Masthanamma's home is replete with idols and images of Hindu deities. Her elaborate pooja room, much like Kalisha Bi's, is decorated meticulously and she does regular pooja morning and evening. She recites prayers in the name of goddess Lalithambika. She grew up in a household where Hindu rituals and customs were followed earnestly and she does the same now. Her father was a Hanuman devotee. His powerful recitations of *Hanuman Dandakam* attracted many people. "People would come with various ailments. His recitation and blowing it on rice and salt would cure their ailments," she said.

Both Kalisha Bi and Masthanamma consider bhakti as the predominant emotion in their music. Their personal lives are replete with the customs and rituals of worship common to upper caste South Indian Hindus.

V. A Civilisational Moment

Our small unique community of Muslim *nagaswaram* musicians does not stand alone. It is a specialised group within the larger and well-known caste of Dudekulas spread over Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. The mother tongue of Dudekulas is Telugu; their communications and transactions are largely in Telugu. They are part of the warp and weft of Andhra society. The Hindu origins of Dudekulas, conversion around the twelfth century CE by the Sufi saint Baba Faqruddin, formal affiliation to Islam while continuing with many Telugu Hindu customs and inventing new syncretic practices, their worship of Hindu deities, deep connections with the sixteenth century saint Veera Brahmendra Swami, penchant for visiting dargahs and pilgrimages

to Hindu shrines: all these suggest a long duration, perhaps five centuries or more, of a community life that has found its own distinct ways of reconciling old beliefs and new faith.[24]

What is noteworthy about the *nagaswaram* musicians is that the association with canonical Hindu temples and Carnatic music has led to further intensification of their social networks, cultural and religious life framed within a Telugu Hindu identity. Carnatic music combines the abstract and structured grammar of the classical idiom with a centrality of *saguna bhakti* based compositions, extolling temples, shrines and presiding divinities. A few musicians like Sk Yakub try to keep their music separate from their religious inclinations. Many are attached to the deities they play for and play about, as much as they are to the music.

This community has been held up by the invisible threads of institutional support from both religions. Until recently, *jamath* organisations have largely not interfered with the musicians playing at temples. This may not have been uniformly true throughout history. But it is true enough. Bhusurapalle Venkateswarlu's book reveals that even till the mid-1980s, an astonishingly robust community of Muslim *nagaswaram* musicians flourished in Andhra, outnumbering Hindu musicians. He chronicles their brief histories and musical lineages over two centuries. The most skilled musicians were invited to play at the major temples in the region; some were designated as official musicians. They were also patronised by *zamindars* and *rajas*, given land grants, awards and titles. They learnt from Isai Vellalar and Brahmin Carnatic musicians in Andhra and Tamil Nadu, collaborated with them, established their own *gurukulams*, and travelled to other regions including North India. But they never formally renounced their Islamic faith.

We do not know what the pulls and pressures were on and from the *jamaths* during this time; there must have been confrontations. But we can presume that as long as they formally identified as Muslim, the musicians were left alone to their professions. Being an area of Sufi influence, the insistence on converts giving up old beliefs might have been negligible. Even as late as 1909, in Thurston's detailed note on the Dudekulas, there is no mention of any pressure to give up worshipping Hindu deities. However, Saheb's article nearly a century later notes growing pressure to Islamise. In the present context, this pressure is palpable. A section in fact has actively espoused a modern Muslim identity; not so much the *nagaswaram* musicians, but other Dudekulas.[25]

On the other side, it seems that historically, temples and patrons actively sought out skilled and respected Muslim *nagaswaram* musicians for festivals and ceremonies. They were honoured. The competition between different communities of musicians for getting the best concerts or connections with the most powerful temples would doubtless have been there. But there is no indication that the *devasthanams* themselves differentiated between Muslim and non-Muslim musicians who often played in the same ensemble.

One could reasonably infer that specific musician families which were attached to specific temples prior to conversion continued to do so even after conversion. The form and ethos of conversion in that particular time and space did not demand fundamental change of identity. Nor, one could argue, was it impossible to accommodate persons professing other religions within the sacred spaces of a temple.

Carnatic music viewed solely in terms of its recent past and through the lens of current sensibilities, has been sometimes uncharitably characterised as a sealed cultural system. The Dudekula *nagaswaram* musicians are an example of historical openness and flexibility which makes us wonder about such labels.

Historians and sociologists have argued persuasively that prior to colonial rule, rigid forms and divisions now ascribed to caste and religion, were not common. The specific history of Dudekula musicians is partly verifiable and partly inferable through sources like *sthala* puranas of temples, hagiographies of saints, gazetteers and surveys by British administrators, oral histories, family traditions and contemporary narratives. The contextual backdrop to this "Indo-Islamic tale" lies in the syncretic civilisational ethos of South India in the time of Sufi influence.

Trying to reconstruct a history with fragments involves a leap of imagination. But the story that emerges is within the boundaries of plausibility. At a time when religious differences are being essentialised, and history invoked selectively for settling contemporary political scores, the continued existence of Dudekula Muslim *nagaswaram* musicians suggests a past that was actuated by concerns different from the present.

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Note on Names and Spellings

Most Muslim nagaswaram musicians in Andhra use the prefix Sheik and suffix Saheb to their names. In this essay, the first usage is in full form. Subsequent usages are with name and abbreviated prefix Sk for Sheik. When quoting from other sources, the usages and spellings of the source have been retained. Some names have been changed to preserve privacy. Non-English words, unless well-known, are italicised. Their spelling is as per common usage in South India. No diacritical marks are used.

End Notes

[1]Andhra, the region was known as Andhra Desa in ancient history; here it refers to Andhra Pradesh and Telangana states together.
[2]*Nagaswaram* is the technically correct name but '*nadaswaram*' is also popular and accepted.
[3]Since the only sizable group of Telugu Muslims in Andhra are Dudekulas, I use the phrases Muslim musicians and Dudekula musicians interchangeably.
[4] In its minimal form, *gurukulam* is a traditional system of immersive learning wherein students live in the home of the teacher.
[5]As a concept denoting a high degree of social and cultural development, Therborn (2020) traces it to mid eighteenth century French.
[6]From its earliest phase, where it was all about studying small, isolated, mostly self-sufficient cultures, this has been a major shift.
[7]Bharatanatyam was earlier known as *Sadir*.
[8]Its later association with the sexual exploitation of women of the community triggered protests and campaigns, led by Muthulakshmi Reddy; the devadasi system was legally abolished in 1947. The community has been officially renamed as Isai Vellalar.
[9]It has considerable improvisational space too in the *alapana, swaraprastharam* and *neraval* sections but the structured composition is the centre piece.
[10] Please see the pieces by Ganesh (*Economic and Political Weekly* 53, no. 2, January 13: 91–93 and *Economic and Political Weekly* 53, no. 12, March 24: 121–124) and by Krishna (*Economic and Political Weekly* 53, no. 12, March 24: 118–121.)
[11]Detailed narration of Baba Fakhruddin's life, his journey to India, his miracles at Penukonda and conversion of Hindus to Islam can be found in the website of Penukonda Babayya Swami (Baba Fakruddin) Dargah Urs. See also Thurston (1909) and Saheb (2003, 4909).
[12]VKANA (Vishwakarma Association of North America). "Potuluri Veera Brahmendra Swamy." Accessed November 19, 2024. https://vkana.org/potuluri-veera-brahmendra-swamy/.
[13]Shaik's PhD dissertation, under preparation at the Central University of Hyderabad deals with current issues pertaining to Dudekulas.
[14]Saheb (2003, 4909) notes that Dudekulas have an intermediate position between Muslims and Hindus. The Hindu castes they work with consider them as Muslims.
[15]In the first phase of my fieldwork, I spent a few months tracking and conversing with *nagaswaram* artistes and their families in Srirangam, Madurai and Chennai in Tamil Nadu and in several towns and villages in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.
[16]Nayee Brahmin is a recent usage recognised by the Andhra Pradesh government, which classifies them under Backward Class category. (See Advice no. 83-115/Andhra Pradesh/2015 dated 7.1.2016 of the National Commission for Backward Classes). The Advice also mentions the older name of Mangali (used traditionally for barbers), which the community does not accept because of its derogatory connotation.
[17]Two examples are the *ragas: Kalyani Pentu* and *Kedara Gowla Pentu* (Venkateswarlu 1986, 52).
[18]While playing to accompany the rituals for the idol, the ensemble stands just outside the *sanctum,* for a concert organised by the temple, they are seated in a hall or open space, and for processions they play walking behind the *utsava vigraha*, which in contrast to the *moolavigraha* or the immovable stone idol in the *sanctum*, can be taken out in procession.
[19]The *sthalapuranam* of the Pinakahasta Lakshmi Narasimha Swamy Temple in Chilakaluripeta notes that it was built by Raja Manuri Venkata Narasimha Rao.

https://srinarasimhakutumbam.org/temples/punya-kshetra/chilkaluripeta/#:~:text=In%201712%2C%20in%20a%20village,Andhra%20Pradesh%20%E2%80%93%20Prakasham)

[20]Sanskrit mantras of single syllables considered to be especially potent.

[21]*Rahukalam* is an inauspicious period of the day according to Hindu astrological calculations. In South India, it is considered an unfavourable time to start any good activity.

[22]M.S. Ponnuthai (born 1928) was the first woman *nagaswaram* performer to play in public platforms and win recognition and critical appreciation.

[23]This ancient temple to Shiva is highly revered as one of the sacred twelve *jyotirlingas* and eighteen *shakthi peethas.*

[24]There are other communities in India like the Meos, Manganiyars and Kathats with syncretic identities that draw from both Hinduism and Islam. They cannot all be understood within the same framework.

[25]I have not dwelt sufficiently on this aspect, nor on the fact that in many families, income through playing and performing *nagaswaram* is sparse. Younger members are reluctant to take it up professionally. These are important aspects but not relevant to my main argument here.

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