

The Sound of RMRL

■ Stephen Putnam Hughes

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Roja Muthiah's collecting energies were focused entirely upon print materials. So that even though Muthiah distinguished his collection from other collectors and libraries in south India with amassing an enormously broad range of materials, he did not include any audio recordings. However, it is important to note that while Muthiah limited himself to the visual medium of print, he nonetheless assembled an impressive range of published materials related to audio recordings. Muthiah was well aware that gramophone related publications offered an important historical resource that opens the possibility of studying the history of auditory culture in south India. Indeed when I first approached Muthiah as a research student working on the history of cinema in 1991, he emphasized the importance of his collection of gramophone catalogues and songbooks for a proper study of the topic. He organized the gramophone materials separately from other music related materials and songbooks in an outer annex room from his main house, which extended outward from the *tinnai*. As part of his Kottaiyur Library Service, he proudly guided me through these print materials and opened my eyes to the importance of 78 rpm gramophone recordings for understanding the cultural history of south India. And he did so without playing even one gramophone plate. Muthiah's intervention helped change the course of my research and started me down the path towards studying how the emergence of music recording practices transformed Tamil musical drama and Tamil cinema into a mass cultural of music.¹

One could make out from Roja Muthiah's collection that commercial print media significantly helped gramophone music circulate far beyond the act of playing records. As the gramophone trade gained momentum over the first decades of the 20th century they picked up on what had already been a mainstay of small publishers throughout south India. That is, ever since popular publishing emerged in the late 19th century, small printers through Tamil south India had relied heavily songbooks containing devotional poetry, ballads on topical events drama songs, and folk songs for weddings, pilgrimage and other special occasions as a major part of their commercial income. These songbooks were widely sold at markets, fairs and festivals across south India. Building on this publishing tradition print became an important supporting parallel media that increasingly complimented

gramophone recordings into the 1920s and 1930s. This publishing output of gramophone catalogues and songbooks are particularly well represented in the collections of the Roja Muthiah Research Library.

In the first instance the south Indian record companies were especially active in publishing their own promotional materials. From at least 1911 the Gramophone Company's HMV label regularly published record catalogues and song lyrics for their south Indian releases as a kind of promotional literature. As other recording companies entered the south Indian market they followed HMV's example in publishing their own promotional materials. During the years of heavy competition in the early 1930s, record companies offered large numbers of copiously illustrated, high quality and free promotional songbooks for their records. RMRL collection contains a sizable and representative sampling of Saraswathi Stores' Odeon, Orrs Columbia House, Hutchins, Tasophone, Twin and Broadcast record catalogues covering the interwar years.

By the late 1920s, the gramophone companies were increasingly joined by private publishing companies all over the Tamil south who also started to publish their own small, inexpensive booklets or "chapbooks" containing the lyrics of gramophone songs.² Sometimes these songbooks were published on behalf of local gramophone agents, but many private publishers also produced unauthorized versions of gramophone songbooks. A typical gramophone songbook might have been eight, sixteen or thirty two pages and consisted of a mixed selection of popular songs by the leading recording stars from all the different gramophone companies. By the early 1930s gramophone books had become something of a fad with small publishers in every major town in south India publishing their own, often eclectic, selections of popular song lyrics for their local clientele. These local vendors marketed these songbooks as a service for music fans that enabled them to more easily commit the lyrics to memory and vocally reproduce the songs themselves.

The editor of one of the longest running and most comprehensive gramophone songbook series, C. Candiah Pillai ("Book Seller and Gramophone Dealer, Klang, F.M.S.") suggested that such publications "brought the amateur study of Indian music within everyone's reach."³ Though particularly difficult to document, oral histories and interviews suggest that gramophone songbooks helped facilitate a more interactive and everyday involvement with medium. At a usual price of one *anna* almost anyone

நூலகத்தில் உள்ள
கிராமபோன்
அட்டைப்படிம்



மாற்று வெளி

could afford to purchase these songbooks. Tamil music enthusiasts commonly collected these gramophone song and catalogue books and carefully bound them together as a volume of their own favourites.⁴ The large publication runs and wide spread distribution of these songs books was in part attested to by the difficulties faced by the Government of Madras Presidency in monitoring their production. Throughout the early 1930s the Madras Government tried their best, but failed repeatedly to keep up with registering this burgeoning, small-scale publishing craze.⁵

Songbooks were not the only link between the booming record industry and the business of popular publishing. Coinciding with the intensification of the trade in the late 1920s, record companies and their south Indian dealers increased their advertising in the local press, first in newspapers and then popular journals. By the early 1930s, record companies were for the first time purchasing more advertising space and using larger spreads in the south Indian newspapers than any other commercial enterprise. Especially for the debut of high-profile monthly releases, coverage of musical recordings included illustrated scenes and photos of singing stars and recording sessions at local studios. This increased advertising presence of the gramophone in print reflects aggressive investment in the suddenly crowded competition for a stake in the emergent south Indian gramophone market.

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Print materials also helped gramophone recordings acquire a new kind of diasporic reach, especially for Tamils settled all over Southeast Asia. One gramophone song compendium in the RMRL collection that was published in May 1922 tells a story of how interest in Tamil gramophone records traveled through Southeast Asia linking the Tamil diaspora through shared musical practices.⁶ The editor of this particular volume, C. Candiah Pillai, was from Jaffna, Ceylon, the book was printed in Klang, Federated Malay States, stamped by a bookseller in Rangoon, Burma and somehow found its way to back to Chettinad, Madras Presidency. The forward in the book recommended the collection as especially suited for those who are living away from their "mother country".

In the absence of this compilation, most of the records have been unintelligible and ununderstandable [sic] and merely appeared as a systematic jumble of concordant sounds, especially to those of us who are not in close touch with the mother country.⁷

The editor goes on to stress that with the aid of this songbook that the reader will be brought back "into the Tamil-speaking land." Tamil gramophone recordings and their accompanying printed song books provided new media which helped overseas Tamils to imagine themselves as part of a larger Tamil collectivity of shared music practices, something analogous with a musically imagined community. In this way the example of sound capitalism in the imagination of an extended Tamil community might well be usefully compared to Benedict Anderson's work on print media and the emergence of nationalism.⁸



The making of a sound archive

Roja Muthiah never conceived of his collection as a sound archive even though he actively gathered a substantial range of print materials related to gramophone records. Yet we can retrospectively see that Muthiah had created, albeit unknowingly, a unique foundation for the creation of a south Indian sound archive. From about 2000 the Roja Muthiah Research Library has begun to develop the unique potentiality of Muthiah's collecting legacy by adding audio records to their mission. Over the last decade RMRL has carefully begun to collect, preserve, provide access and share sound recording resources with scholars and other institutions. This has been an organic development from the rich print materials previously discussed into a concerted effort to establish a pioneering sound archive for south India. In this regard RMRL has the unique advantage of starting from an unmatched collection of supporting print media to help scholars historically contextualize audio recordings as part of the cultural heritage of south India.

The RMRL collection of audio records span from about 1920 to 1960. It includes a wide and representative range of music including south India Carnatic, Hindustani, folk, comic, drama, nationalist and film songs. At present they hold somewhere close to a total of 2500 recordings, the vast majority of which are 78-rpm records along with a few long play records, extended play records, spool tapes and

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cassettes. All the major south India recording companies are well represented in the collection with HMV, Odeon, Columbia, Hutchins, Twin and Broadcast records leading all others. Though the audio holdings are a comparatively small number of the total output of south India recordings they contain many historically important records.

Undoubtedly the overall strength of this collection lies with the Tamil records from the 1920 and 30s. This was a crucial period in the development of the gramophone in south India. In the years immediately before Tamil talkies, the music recording industry established itself as the first mass medium of sound in south India. The gramophone plates from this period were an important part of what was described at the time as a "music boom." This term "music boom," drawn from a letter to the editor and published by the Madras daily, *The Hindu*, was described as a rapid, historically unprecedented "dissemination of music among the people."⁹ The term works as a convenient shorthand for describing what was at the time widely recognized, discussed and debated as a kind of musical revolution in Tamil south India. Other contemporary accounts variously characterized the music boom as "a great awakening of musical consciousness," an "increasing interest in music and a wider diffusion of musical education," or as a change of "patronage from discerning princes and patricians to the mixed crowd of the streets."¹⁰

There are topical songs such as Ariyakudi Ramanuja Ayyankar's song, celebrating the 50th anniversary of the *Swadesamittiran* Tamil newspaper, *Mittiran.. Desa Mittiran...Sudesa Mittiran*. In addition to this there are a number of recordings sung by Vai. Mu. Kothainayaki Ammal (Vai. Mu. Ko.) the novelist and editor of the journal *Jagan Mohini*, on social issues such as alcohol abuse, the dangers of tuberculosis and the need for a clean environment.

The audio recordings held at RMRL contain a representative selection from this formative period. For example, drama songs performed by professional stage artists of the late 1920s and early 1930s were amongst the most popular gramophone records in Tamil. The RMRL audio collection holds examples from the most important drama recording stars such as of K. B. Sundarambal, S. G. Kittappa, S. V. Subbiah Bhagavathar and N. S. "Buffoon" Shanmugam. The fame was such that the Twin Record Company catalogue also held at RMRL made the claim in 1933 that: "In South India there is not even an infant who does not know S.V. Subbiah Bhagavathar. It is said that even the villager who cannot write their name knows of Subbiah."¹¹ RMRL audio collection also includes some of the earliest recordings by M. S. Subbulakshmi such as *Valiya Tamil* and Bharathiar's composition *Centamil Natennum Potinile*. There are topical songs such as Ariyakudi Ramanuja Ayyankar's song, celebrating the 50th anniversary of the *Swadesamittiran* Tamil newspaper, *Mittiran.. Desa Mittiran...Sudesa Mittiran*. In addition to this there are a number of recordings sung by Vai. Mu. Kothainayaki Ammal (Vai. Mu. Ko.) the novelist and editor of the journal *Jagan Mohini*, on social issues such as alcohol abuse, the dangers of tuberculosis and the need for a clean environment. Nationalist songs were also very popular gramophone offerings in the 1930s and are represented in the RMRL collection by recordings such as M. M. Dandipandi Desikar's tribute to Mahatma Gandhi. In addition to musical offerings, there are also recordings of political messages in support of the Indian National Party by Sathyamurthy, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and Rajagopalachari (Rajaji).

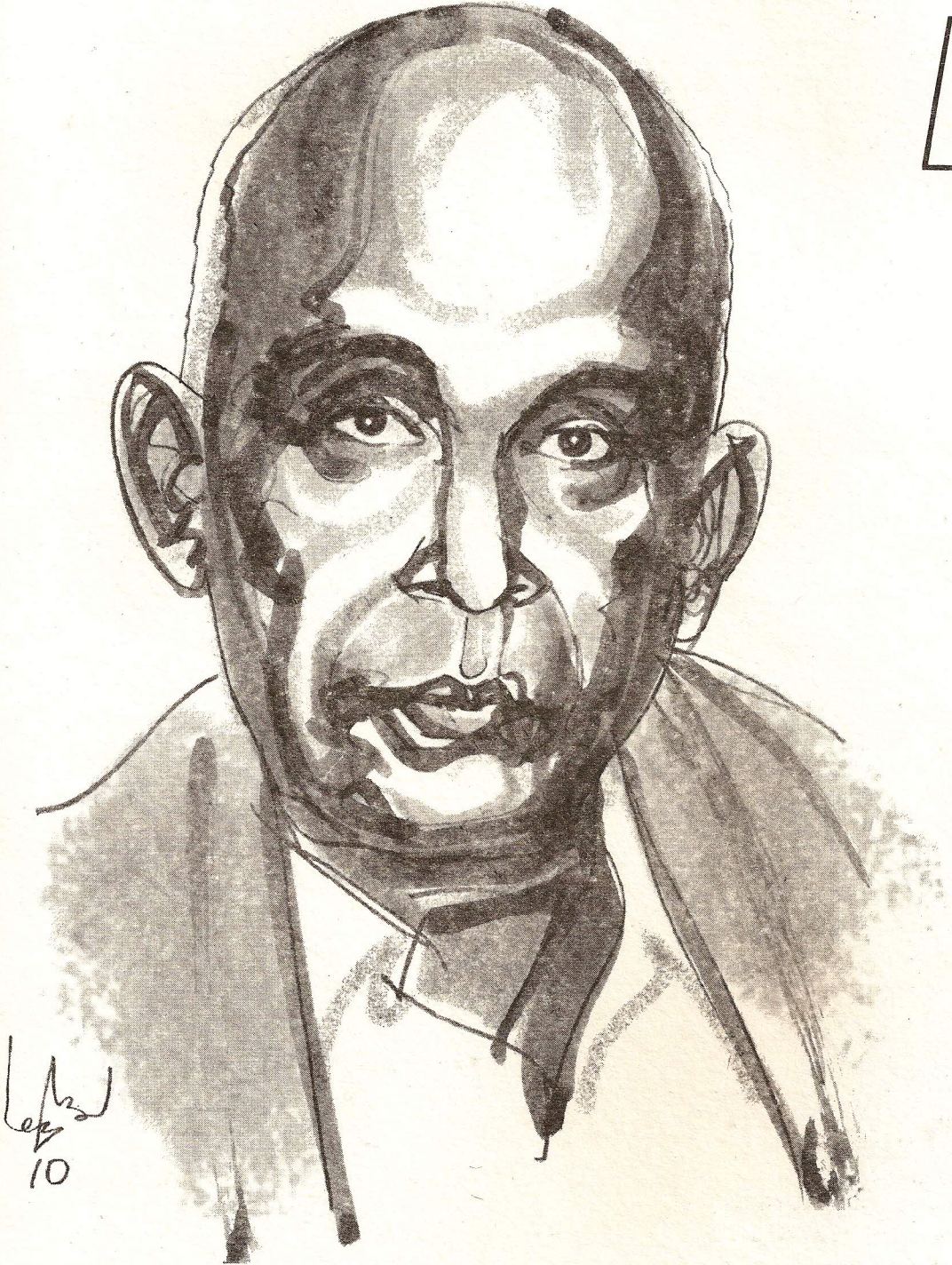
currently in the process of upgrading their digitization and sound editing equipment, which will be used for conservation of audio records and making them available for public access. In an effort to expand their collection and encourage collaborative approach the Library has also been active in reaching out to collectors, dealers and scholars. They have maintained regular consultation with prominent experts and established institutions such as V.A.K. Ranga Rao, Suresh Chandvankar of the Indian Society of Indian Record Collectors and the Ethnomusicology Sound Laboratory at the American Institute of Indian Studies in Delhi. The RMRL sound archive is an important initiative that has come at a crucial juncture for the future of auditory heritage of south India. Historical audio recordings in south India have not received the same attention as print collections and are in danger of being lost without urgent intervention. Given the strong supporting collection of print materials the RMRL sound archive is the best possible institution to preserve, conserve, digitize and promote the value of audio recordings for future generations.

- 1 See Stephen Putnam Hughes, "The 'Music Boom' in Tamil South India: gramophone, radio and the making of mass culture." In *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, vol. 22, no 4, 2003, pp. 445-473; and "Music in the age of mechanical reproduction: Drama, gramophone and the beginnings of Tamil cinema," in *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 66, no. 1, February 2007, pp. 3-34.
- 2 The RMRL collection contains gramophone songbooks from numerous private publishers including the Manoranjini Press in Sowcarpet, Madras, S. Veeraswami Naidu Bookshop, Bakyalakshmi and Company, Sri Murugan Book Depot and V. Karuppana Pillai, Bookseller who worked out of Puthumandapam, Madurai, T. S. Sundaram Pillai at the Teppakulam in Trichinopoly and K. U. Gounder Bookshop in Coimbatore.
- 3 *Sangetha Thirathoo* (part 6), (in Tamil), The Gramophone Company Ltd., Calcutta. May 1929.
- 4 These volumes can still be found in many private collections throughout Tamil Nadu.
- 5 Song books were of special concern to the colonial government on account that they often included nationalist songs considered seditious. For an official account of the government's attempts to censor gramophone songs books see "Extracts from Proscribed Tamil Books and Pamphlets, 1932" in *Selections from Government Orders relating to the Civil Disobedience Movement, 1930-35*. Tamil Nadu Archives. For the best account of the popularity of nationalist songs and recordings in south India see, S. T. Baskaran, *The Message Bearers*.
- 6 C. Candiah Pillai, editor, *Sangetha Thirathoo* (part 1), . Klang, F.M.S.: C. Candiah Pillai, Book Seller and Gramophone Dealer, May 1922. This book was part of a series originally published in 1912 and continued until at least the early 1930s.
- 7 Forward by V.K. Sabapathy (Chief Clerk, Public Works Department, Serembam, Federated Malay States), *ibid*.
- 8 *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. 2d rev. ed. London, 1993.
- 9 The letter was signed using a pen-name, "Ganapriya," Sunday, August 19, 1934.
- 10 The three quotations come from, in order, G. T. Sastry, "Musical Programmes: How to Improve Them," *The Hindu*, 14 June 1938; S. R. Murti in a letter to the editor entitled "Padams of Kshetragna" in *The Hindu*, 11 September 1933; and E. Krishna Iyer, *Personalities in Present Day Music*. Madras, 1933, p. xii.
- 11 *The Twin Record Company, Record Catalogue*, April 1933.

மாற்று வெளி

ஆய்விதழ்

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ரோஜா முத்தையா ஆராய்ச்சி நூலகச் சிறப்பிதழ்

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