

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 *tinna*. 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

