

THE SOUND OF THE GODS

Kannan and His Nadaswaram

by Vidya Shah

Illustrations: Shivani J.



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As the wonderful aromatic filter coffee came into the room for both of us, he poured some into his *davara* and took a sip of the brew which was boiling hot, enough to burn one's tongue. But no such thing happened to him and all he said was - *Aha Kaapi soopper daa!*¹ (the coffee tastes amazing) The frail old man with a ragged beard, wirey hair - like what my mom used to call *tenga mattai* - or the outer husk of the coconut.² His teeth looked like he liked his *vettala paaku* or paan. He was complimenting his own assistant for the coffee thinking that I had come there to book him for some family wedding. Dressed typically in a veshti, worn in the *Dabba kattu* (like a box) style and a white shirt with a *tundu* thrown casually on his shoulder, this guy VKR as he is popularly known, is famous for making food for elaborate tamil weddings. But I had come to meet him because I was told he could put me in touch with a young Nadawaram Vidwan.

¹ Daa - is an affectionate way of addressing a younger person or friend, girl or boy

² My mom insists that if I do not oil my hair regularly it will become like the husk of the coconut, basically to say that it will look lifeless with no shine



I asked him if he could put me in touch with someone they hire regularly to play at weddings he nodded a helpful nod and gave me a few names. I mentioned Kannan's name to which he sneered and said the guy was a snob! Wow I was curious. Little bit of gossip is always fun. I asked him what happened.

He has too much of a "vidwan" attitude. After all, Nadaswaram artists are earning mainly from playing at weddings and in temple events. In fact, after the COVID pandemic they should be grateful people are coming back to celebrate in a big way. It's convenient for them to be a part of our catering package. That is all that people want, not some *Kutcheri*. This is not the time of Rajaratnam Pillai's and Sheikh Chinna Maulana's, although I know the Sheikh has trained his daughter in the instrument as well.



All this sounded very strange to me. The Nadaswaram can't possibly be only part of a catering package for weddings! The grand looking double reeded wind instrument I was certain had much more to offer. It was like Kannan had read my mind! I received a message almost at the same time from him saying he'd heard from a friend I was looking for him. I quietly texted Kannan sitting right there in this office. I was happy to bid adieu to this man I'd have been happier discussing the orange *Jangri*³ rather than music.

³ An Indian sweet made by deep-frying the batter of Urad dal (vigna mungo) in circular flower shapes, then dunked into sugar syrup. Found in various parts of the country other names include Amitti, Amriti, Imarti, and Jhangiri/Jaangiri.

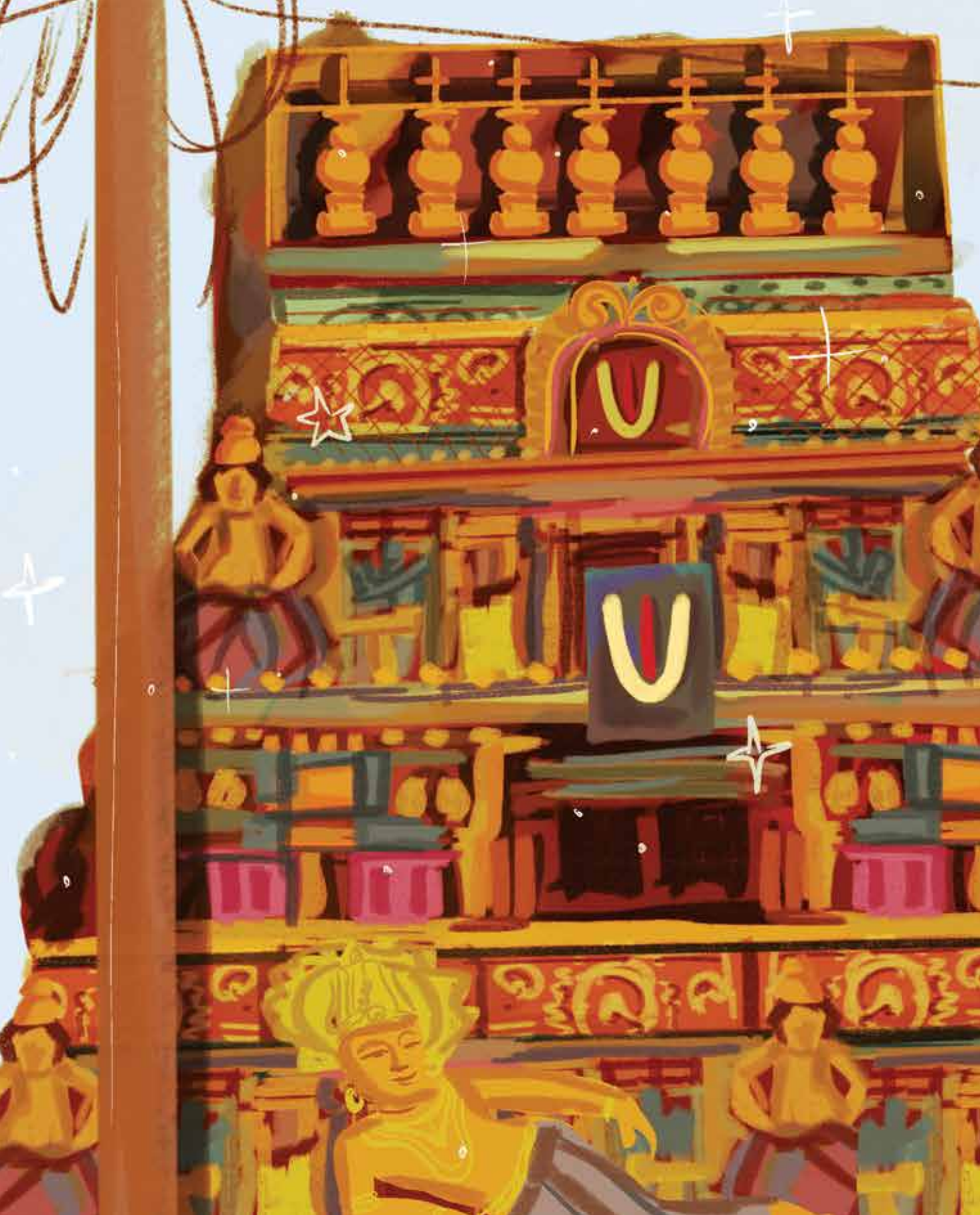


Mylapore Kannan, a young, popular Nadaswaram artist agreed to meet me at a quaint temple in the heart of Chennai – in Mylapore, also called Mylai by the locals. This is one of the oldest parts of what is today the city of Chennai, erstwhile Madras. The famous 7th Century poet Jnana Sambandar mentions it in his classic *Poompavai Padikam*. 400 years later in Sekkizhar’s *Periya Puranam*, Mylai is a flourishing harbour with bobbing boats sporting tall masts and fluttering flags, elephants arriving as cargo and a flourishing trade in precious stones.



So in this very Mylapore near this grand Kapaleeshwara temple, Kannan meets me. He's dressed in a crisp white dhoti and a brown silk shirt, with a red dot on his forehead, the gleaming gold chains around his neck are distracting. He shyly says hello to me and urges me to follow him. We walk through the bylanes of Mylapore dotted with small shops mostly selling offerings for various gods - the Bilva leaves, rose garlands, garlands made of full lemons, Karpooram or camphor packets, scary masks of demons to be taken back by devotees who wish to ward off the evil eye, and trinkets that would make lovely souvenirs for believers. And we arrive at a smaller quieter temple - the Madhava Perumal Koil. Madhava referring to the Hindu God, Vishnu and Perumal meaning God is a temple run by the Vaishnava priests. And Kannan's family is the third generation of Nadaswaram players dedicated to the service of the temple. That is to say that they would be the artists invited to all important occasions to play for the deity.





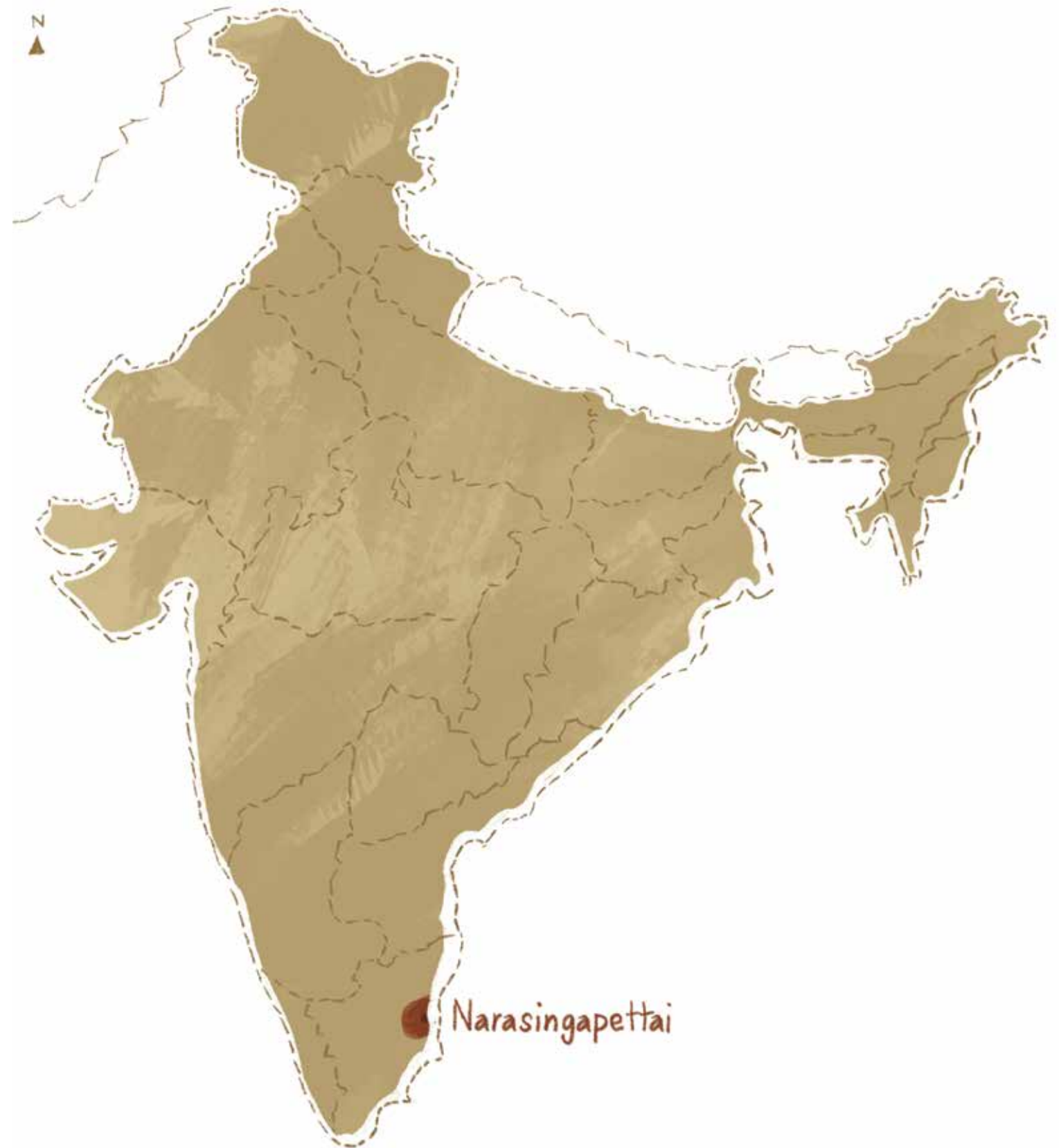
This Vishnu temple itself is a historic site. Built in the Dravidian style of architecture it is also considered to be the birth place of Periya Alvar one of the first three of the twelve Alvar saints⁴ of the 6th-9th century CE. It is undergoing major renovation but we find a cool spot to sit and start our conversation. The temple architecture is such that the heat is not unbearable, the solid stone flooring, some trees in the courtyard and an abundance of cross ventilation make the heat seem gentle, very bearable.

Kannan pulls out his grand reed out of a velvet case - an easy to carry backpack style. He gently places it on the cover and pulls out another red velvet cloth. He tells me that he places this at the end of the windpipe particularly during practice given how loud it is. In fact the Nadaswaram is considered to be one of the world's loudest non-brass acoustic instruments.

⁴ The devotional renditions of the Alvars, composed during the early medieval period of Tamil history, were important catalysts behind the Bhakti Movement through their hymns of worship to Vishnu and his avatars. These Tamil poet Saints are venerated in Vaishnavism, which regards Vishnu as the Ultimate Reality.

Then he ties up beautiful bamboo like chips on a thread, several of these hang from the instrument. They make it look more festive. These little *Seevalis*, as they are called are perhaps one of the most important aspects of the instrument. It gets attached to the top of the reed from where the artist blows into the instrument. It also sets the pitch or Shruti at which the instrument is played. The *Seevali* is tightened at the top with a small copper staple. Spare reeds and an ivory needle (not ivory anymore, given the ban its now plastic) for adjusting the reed is kept with the instrument, hanging from the metal staple. This staple is then inserted into the wooden pipe of the instrument, which is the main part of the Nadaswaram. The bottom opens out like a horn.

The artist blows through this little contraption at the top from when the world of notes flows through the instrument. The reason they have several hanging from the Nadaswaram is because they are fragile and may have to be changed during the concert. I was amazed at how something so small can have such an important role to play. The instrument is still being made in a place called Narsingapettai near Kumbakonam in Tamil Nadu. Although now there are many other centres.





I asked him is it not hard for a child to hold such a large instrument? Do they have smaller sized ones, like the sarangi players? He said that he started learning at age eight with vocal music as is usually the case. Rigorous hours of learning Carnatic music with his father and uncle laid the foundation of his musical journey. The vocal training he says sets his “*swara sthanam*” or accuracy with the notes in place. Following which they gradually moved to learning the Nadaswaram. His taatha, grandfather, was a tavil player, the grand percussion that accompanies the Nadaswaram. Kannan says to make the melody more tonally beautiful, so it sounds nicer, sweeter, this training is very important. “It is only then that you get the emotion and feeling right. *Anubhavicchu vassikardu* – play with feeling”



He then shows us the little holes in the long pipe. The permutations which will decide which note is being played. He explains to us how this is similar yet different from the more popular flute which is a similar wooden reed with holes that define the notes.

The instrument is also similar to the North Indian wind instrument known as the Shehnai but has a longer body and a large flaring bell made out of wood. The instrument is usually played/performed in solo or pairs and accompanied by the Indian traditional instrument drum known as Taval. It is also accompanied by a drone known as shruthi box or a tanpura as a pitch reference that will be played throughout the whole kuccheri (performance).





Kannan says it helps that his mother is also a Nadaswaram player. Wow a woman playing the instrument sounded amazing. Her father, his grandfather was also an artist. The sun was now really strong and we decided to go to their home, not too far from the temple. I am excited to meet his family. We arrive at an old house. Narrow, but long. As you enter there is a tiny courtyard surrounded by 3 rooms and kitchen. The house is probably 80-90 years old. As I am sitting and waiting to meet the family members, a lovely smell of Rasam wafting out of the kitchen - the heady mix of tamarind, spices and curry leaves, divine! Karpagam, his mother is not quite the image I had in mind. For one, she has short hair and was wearing a rather modern looking saree - a georgette with big flowers made on it!



“I travelled a lot with my father as a young girl, playing the *shruti potti* or the *sur peti* in his concerts. I grew up with the instrument, it was like a sibling to me. I learnt it informally was never taught it, since as a girl it was not the natural thing to do. But I could it play it alright. And then I got lucky. Maybe my father had this idea that he would be happy to see me play when he got me married to my husband, a professional player of the instrument. And then life gave me the unexpected opportunity. My husband was happy to teach me and have me play with him occasionally in concerts when I became good enough for it. And now I even play with my sons” As we chat Kannan’s wife brings us some *Mor* (Buttermilk) tempered with Curry leaves and mustard seeds, the best coolant ever!



Kannan who's looking at his mother with admiration takes over from here, he describes his experience of the kutcheri for us:

“The whole performance is like a spiritual event. Starts with a few sharp notes from the tavil. This is a typical opening where I close my eyes to feel the moment, it is to help me focus. It is like creating a sanctum through sound, clears any negativity in the air. Its meditative. I blow in the instrument, first short notes and then a longer aalap and thus begins the concert. So depending on the occasion the mood is set - whether it is a temple event like a *Kumbhabhishekam*⁵ or a *ther* or a wedding and so on. Different songs are played at different occasions. For instance during the *Ther* or religious procession we even play something called Mallari a special song. It started as a religious offering and extends itself to auspicious occasions like marriage.”

⁵ Kumbhabhishekam is a Hindu temple consecration ceremony that involves sprinkling (abhishekam) the temple with sacred waters brought in a water pot (kumbha).
Ther is a Charriot or rath Yatra



Kannan's excitement as he continues to talk about how now the instrument is nothing like how it was celebrated earlier even in movies like "Thillana Mohanambal"⁶: "we are now like some background music, summoned at important moments like when the thaali⁷ (Mangalsutra, the sacred thread that officially signifies the marriage) and people will shout out "getti melam" where a crescendo is created with the Nadaswaram and the tavil - it's like an announcement."



⁶ An old Tamil Film from 1968 that is set in the vibrant culture of Tanjavur is the story of a Nadaswaram player who falls in love with Mohanambal, a Bharatanatyam dancer

⁷ the sacred thread that is tied around the bride's neck by the groom, the ceremony that declares the bride and groom married



But the ghastly COVID gave him the opportunity to think and create new possibilities with his instrument. He is very proud of his project "Home to Carnatic" done with four musicians from across the world with contemporary and traditional sounds - an online project that took an entire year in the making was very successfully received. He says its gone offline too and they are performing at several music festivals. I like the optimism in Kannan's voice as he says the instrument which was becoming the wedding caterer's department is now finding a new brighter Naad, voice.

The double-reed wind instrument is famously known for its name Nadaswaram is used as a traditional/classical instrument of south India mainly in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Kerala. The instrument is used in auspicious occasions such as wedding and temple rituals which contributes to it to be called Manggala Vadhyam, Raja Vadhyam or Deiva Kulal.

Nadaswaram: Nada in Indian music which in literal terms means sound, implies the sound of God as in Nada Brahma and Swaram meaning the notes.

The Nadaswaram also had other names:

- *Vangiyam*
- *Pesu vangiyam*
- *Nadu vangiyam*

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An award winning musician, she writes and speaks on music and is the Author of *Jalsa: Indian Women's Journey from the Salon to the Studio* (Tulika Books). She was the Nana Shirgaokar Chair Professor for Indian Music at Goa University for 2016-20. She is the Director of Bhooma trust, set up to preserve and promote the intangible heritage of India.

