



The Improvisation of North Indian Raga-Based Music in Sri Lankan Nurthi Theatrical Music



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Abstract

This study examines the ways in which North Indian musical elements were incorporated into the composition and performance practices of Sri Lankan Nurthi theatre. Evolving under the influence of Indian Parsi theatre troupes, Nurthi (from the Sanskrit Nruta, “dance/performance”) enjoyed wide popularity between 1877 and 1915 and absorbed distinct features from North Indian classical traditions—most notably murki (grace-note turn), gamaka (ornamentation), and tana (melodic runs). The standard ensemble included tabla, harmonium, and sitar. The research pursues three objectives: to identify specific musical features derived from raga-based traditions; to explore how these features were applied in theatre compositions; and to assess the extent to which such musical integration contributed to the public appeal of Nurthi in Sri Lanka. Employing a qualitative methodology, the study draws on library research and semi-structured interviews; analysis proceeded through interpretation, evaluation, and reporting. The findings indicate that Nurthi constitutes the earliest form of Sri Lankan theatre to systematically appropriate North Indian classical music, and that this musical influence was central to Nurthi’s popular success and cultural resonance.

Keywords: Raga-based music; Nurthi; Sri Lanka; Parsi theatre; North India

Research Paper

Introduction

In the decade following the complete establishment of British rule in Sri Lanka, English influence spread rapidly across society. Alongside this transformation emerged an English-educated middle class whose leisure preferences generated demand for touring entertainments. Circus troupes, dramatic companies, and dance ensembles were brought to the island from various countries. India’s geographic proximity and the ongoing maritime traffic between the two territories facilitated an especially swift influx of Indian music and theatre, which quickly became popular in Sri Lanka (Ariyaratne 01–03).

The relationship between Sri Lanka and India is inseparable. From antiquity to the present, the two countries have been closely interconnected in cultural, social, political, economic, and religious terms. Buddhism, the central lifeworld of Sri Lankan culture, and broader Buddhist cultural traditions represent a profound Indian legacy. From early periods onward, Sri

Lanka’s performing arts—drama, dance, and music—bear the imprint of Indian influence. There is evidence that Sri Lankan theatre was shaped by Sanskrit drama, and that these influences have been present since ancient times (Sarachandra 12–14). Subsequently, a direct Indian imprint became visible in the form of Nadagam, a theatre tradition marked by the influence of South Indian Carnatic music. By contrast, it was through Nurthi that Sri Lankans first encountered the aesthetics of North Indian (Hindustani) raga-based music (Maddumage 86–88).

By this time, Parsi theatre troupes—initially organized around Bombay—were flourishing across the subcontinent. These companies staged highly structured and visually engaging productions. A principal model for Parsi theatre was Indar Sabha, a Hindustani musical drama originally performed in the court of the Nawab of Awadh, Wajid Ali Shah, during the British imperial era. The Nawab, a connoisseur of music and dance, commissioned court poet Imam-ud-Din (Imanath) to

craft such a play; French advisors at court also influenced the work, which drew on the style of the French “grand opéra” (Khan 20–21; Cohen 314).

From 1853 onward, Parsi companies formed by Persian-origin impresarios popularized a style inaugurated by Indar Sabha. These troupes also staged Indar Sabha itself. Even before their arrival in Sri Lanka, Indar had already gained local popularity and a Sinhala adaptation had been performed. According to Sarachchandra, the Baliwala Company brought the original Indar to the island and staged it for Sri Lankan audiences (Sarachchandra 120–121).

Sri Lankan audiences responded enthusiastically to the Parsi companies’ stagecraft and their use of North Indian raga-based music. The pre-existing Nadagam—rooted in South Indian Carnatic practice—began to decline as the new style took hold. In this context, C. Don Bastian, who had worked within the Nadagam tradition, synthesized the Parsi influence to create a new theatrical form. His first drama, *Rolina*, premiered on 27 December 1877. This new form was initially termed *Nrutya* and later became known as *Nurthi* (Ariyaratne 02).

Research Problem

Nurthi appears to be the first mass-mediated Sri Lankan theatre form to integrate North Indian raga-based music. The central research problem is thus to identify the specific elements of North Indian raga-based music that were employed in *Nurthi* (i.e., what was borrowed and how it was musically realized).

Objectives of the Study

1. **Identification:** To identify the North Indian raga-based musical components that influenced *Nurthi*.
2. **Application:** To examine the modes of application of those components in the composition and staging of *Nurthi* music.
3. **Assessment:** To evaluate whether and to what extent this raga-based integration contributed to *Nurthi*’s popularity in Sri Lanka.

Relevance of the Study

Nurthi marks a decisive turning point in Sri Lankan theatre: it was the first genre to adopt framed scenic backdrops on stage, and it catalyzed the professionalization of theatrical practice. The fourfold acting schema (*satara abhinaya*) was employed more aptly than before, and rapidly changeable stage sets

appeared for the first time. Crucially, *Nurthi* inaugurated female performance by women in Sri Lankan theatre; previously, women did not appear on stage and female roles were played by men (Sarachchandra).

In these respects, *Nurthi* represents a distinctive milestone in the evolution of Sri Lankan theatre. Its musical significance is equally profound. Evidence suggests that Sri Lankans have long cultivated organized musical practices; historical sources relating to Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa indicate the use of plucked instruments and ensembles involving instruments such as the *vina*. During the Kandyan kingdom, strong South Indian political and cultural influence—arising from Nayakkar dynastic rule—deepened linkages with South Indian performing arts, which in turn shaped Nadagam music. The advent of *Nurthi*, however, introduced Sri Lankans to an aesthetic of raga-based melody not previously experienced locally. Through *Nurthi*, the timbral and melodic allure of the *sarangi* (as heard more broadly in North Indian practice), *tabla*, and *sitar*, and the sonic world of Hindustani ragas, reached Sri Lankan listeners (Maddumage 86–87).

Although the *Nurthi* theatre practice has since faded, many songs that fused its musical idiom have continued to enjoy popularity in Sri Lanka. Before the rise of “simple songs” (*sarala gī*) as a dominant entertainment medium, *Nurthi* songs were widely memorized and sung by the public (Bulathsinghala 10–11). As a cultural formation with mass appeal, *Nurthi* thus offers a compelling lens for studying how Indian raga-based music was localized in Sri Lanka. Today, North Indian raga-based music is globally prominent; this research provides an opportunity to gauge, through a historical case, the breadth of Indian musical influence across South and Southeast Asia during a period predating modern mass media.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design suited to analyzing the complex interrelations and aesthetic features that link *Nurthi* music and raga-based traditions. The investigation proceeded in three stages—data collection, analysis, and reporting—utilizing two principal sources of evidence: semi-structured interviews and library-based research. A series of interviews was conducted with Lionel Gunathilaka, a contemporary musician belonging to a lineage that has traditionally performed *Nurthi* music. Relevant prior research on *Nurthi* accessed through library holdings and digital repositories was also examined. Analytical procedures



involved close reading and comparative interpretation of musical descriptions, dramaturgical contexts, and historical accounts to ground the study's inferences. The analysis was framed with reference to Homi Bhabha's Cultural Hybridity Theory (1994), which was employed as an interpretive lens.

Results and Discussion

1. Historical Trajectory and Principal Directors

From the premiere of *Rolina* on 27 December 1877 by C. Don Bastian Jayawira Bandara through approximately 1911, Nurthi enjoyed prominence in Sri Lankan public culture. Three leading directors shaped the genre's development: C. Don Bastian Jayawira Bandara, John de Silva, and Charles Dias. The musical direction for their Nurthi productions was, in many instances, provided by Indian musicians. John de Silva, in particular, appears to have selected ragas in accordance with the *rasa* theory articulated in Indian dramaturgy, thereby aligning musical affect with dramatic sentiment (Sarachchandra 123). He brought to Sri Lanka the musician Vishwanath from Bombay to supply music for his productions and collaborated with a number of Indian artists—Abdul Aziz, Amir Khan, Mohammed Ghaus, Changi Maharaj, and Mahadev Jothinath—who composed for Nurthi. Raga and tala from the North Indian tradition were systematically employed, and Nurthi evolved into a theatre genre founded upon music (Ariyaratne 12). The repertory encompassed a large number of songs, and a close analysis of select pieces reveals the clear imprint of Hindustani raga-based idioms.

2. Cultural Hybridity and Musical Localization

The core aim of this research is to elucidate the effect of North Indian raga-based music on Sri Lankan Nurthi. As a localized theatre tradition that emerged in the late nineteenth century under colonial conditions—drawing both on touring Parsi companies and on South Asian musicians trained in North Indian classical practice—Nurthi is aptly understood through the lens of Cultural Hybridity Theory. As Bhabha (1994) argues, the encounter of two cultures does not yield mere imitation; rather, it generates a new cultural formation (Bhabha 02–09). Nurthi music exemplifies precisely this process. Although it incorporated raga-based materials, Nurthi recontextualized them to suit local dramaturgical settings and audience expectations.

A telling example comes from John de Silva's *Rāmāyana* (1886), specifically the song “Savan dī Rāma caritē

asav,” which functions as a prologue-like synopsis akin to the *Sūtradhāra* convention in Sanskrit theatre. The piece reportedly employs Bhoop Kalyan raga, whose ascent (*āroha*) is described as Sa Re Ga Pa Dha Sa. The choice confers a luminous, tranquil color—evoking calmness and clarity—well matched to the narrative-summarizing function of the song. The tala is *Dīpchandī*, a fourteen-mātrā cycle (3+4+3+4); this cyclic structure lends dignity and depth to the composition, supporting its expository gravitas.

A second example from the same production is “Rakinū *Īsvarā*,” (Tower Hall Theatre Foundation 2023) (figure 1) performed when Rāma, Lakshmana, and Sītā, having entered the *Daṇḍaka* forest, offer devotion to Śiva. Here the raga is *Śuddha Kanhra*. Its sonority projects devout solemnity and gravity—qualities aesthetically consonant with the worship scene. The six-beat *Bādārā* tala (3+3) imparts a gentle, processional gait, allowing the music to convey reverence without haste. Although not deploying the full grammar of the classical raga in every technical particular, the song captures the raga's *ābhāsa*—its recognizable aura—thus exemplifying how Nurthi songs channeled Hindustani raga aesthetics within dramaturgically specific, text-setting contexts.

A third illustration involves a love-tinged scene: the song “*Śriyā manamathwee māgē*,” (Tower Hall Theatre Foundation 2023) set to *Jhinjhoti* raga (rendered in the source as “*Jinjut*”) with *Lāvani* tala. The dramatic moment portrays the first meeting of Prince Rāma and Sītā, and the musical choice projects tenderness and serenity—affective shades for which *Jhinjhoti* is widely prized. The eight-beat *Lāvani* cycle (4+4) infuses a lilting, danceable rhythm, communicating joy and lightness as the scene unfolds.

Taken together, these examples chart a consistent dramaturgical logic: ragas and talas were selected for their *rasa* affordances and re-voiced in a theatre-centric idiom. Ornamentation practices familiar in Hindustani performance—*murki*, *gamaka*, *kan* (grace approach tones), *āndolan* (slow oscillation), and *viśrānti* (strategic repose)—were appropriated to the Nurthi stage, where they enhanced text declamation, heightened sentiment, and helped carve a distinctive Sri Lankan variant of raga-based theatre song (Maddumage 61–62).

3. Popular Reception and Afterlives

Nurthi songs remain popular in Sinhala society even today, notwithstanding the disappearance of the stage practice itself. Contemporary musicians perform Nurthi



repertory in concerts and media broadcasts, and such songs feature regularly in televised reality competitions (Field 29). The enduring appeal of these songs is widely understood to stem from their Hindustani raga-based sonority. By contrast, although Nadagam (preceded by Carnatic influence) once flourished, only a handful of Nadagam songs have survived in collective memory. As Professor Sunil Ariyaratne has observed, Nurthi's distinct musical alchemy grounded its persistent popularity (Ariyaratne 12).

The continuity of Nurthi music across generations is further evidenced by its absorption into radio's "simple song" (sarala gī) programs. Performers such as Pandit Amaradeva, Dr. Nanda Malini, and Amarashiri Peiris interpreted Nurthi songs for national audiences—for example, pieces from John de Silva's *Dutugæmunu* ("Suvanda Padma Olu") (Malini 2020) and *Rāmāyana* ("Savan dī pera Rāma caritayē asanan," (Rathnayake 2021) "Sītāmā Siriyā innē", (Peiris 2018) (figure 2) and from C. Don Bastian's *Śūlā hēvat Kapati Bænā* ("Roopa wirājmohiniye") (Peiris Song 2018) (Maddumage 67). In recent years the repertory has continued to circulate through reality-show formats.

The social reach of raga-based idioms in Sri Lanka—first seeded by Nurthi—has been profound. The introduction of North Indian raga-based music to the island is in fact signposted by Nurthi; its influence is visible in the national music curriculum, where the Hindustani system occupies a principal place. A majority of Sri Lankan musicians have historically trained in Eastern (as opposed to Western) traditions, and many have specifically studied North Indian raga-based music (Wimalaratne 28). A large proportion of contemporary Sinhala popular and "simple" songs reveal the *ābhāsa* of raga-based melodic organization. In short, the Nurthi conduit allowed raga-based aesthetics to enter local musical life and subsequently to adapt to changing social and cultural demands while remaining audibly tethered to the North Indian idiom.

4. Hybridity as Process: From Stage to Nation

The dynamic at work here is precisely the one Bhabha's Cultural Hybridity Theory describes: when Indian culture intersected with Sinhala culture, the result was not a replica but a novel cultural current. In Nurthi, North Indian ragas and talas were adopted *avastā-vōcitta*—context-sensitively—so as to meet local dramaturgical needs and public taste. Over time, musicians extended these adaptations beyond the theatre, carrying Nurthi songs into the sphere of popular music.

The political and symbolic purchase of Nurthi is underscored by a striking event: the song "Dannō Budunge" from John de Silva's *Sirisagabo* was sung as the national anthem on the day Sri Lanka attained independence from Britain (Bandara 72). This moment illustrates how deeply Nurthi's musical idiom had penetrated national consciousness. In parallel, the adoption of raga-based instruments such as the sarangi, tabla, and sitar, and the acculturation of raga logic in Sinhala song composition, consolidated a lasting hybrid formation.

Conclusion

This study has traced the incorporation of North Indian raga-based music into Sri Lankan Nurthi theatre, situating the process within a broader history of Indo-Sri Lankan cultural entanglement. Historically, Parsi theatre served as the immediate catalyst, importing a stagecraft and musical sensibility crystallized in Indar Sabha. Local innovators—chiefly C. Don Bastian, John de Silva, and Charles Dias—then localized these materials, partnering with Indian musicians to select ragas and talas according to dramaturgical *rasa* and to shape a theatre genre fundamentally anchored in music.

The musical language of Nurthi—with its use of ragas such as Bhoop Kalyan, Śuddha Kanhra, and Jhinjhoti, talas such as Dīpchandi, Bādārā, and Lāvani, and embellishments including murki, gamaka, kan, āndolan, and viśrānti—created a Sri Lankan articulation of Hindustani aesthetics. These idioms were not imitated wholesale; rather, in the sense articulated by Cultural Hybridity Theory, they were refunctioned to meet local poetic, dramatic, and social imperatives.

The consequences were far-reaching. Nurthi professionalized stage practice, introduced new scenographic conventions, and enabled women's performance. Musically, it opened Sri Lankan ears to the tonal world of North Indian ragas, seeded the adoption of Hindustani instruments, and furnished a template for subsequent Sinhala song traditions. Nurthi songs migrated from stage to radio and television, entered pedagogical canons, and helped cultivate a national taste that continues to value raga-based expression.

Overall, Nurthi represents the earliest sustained Sri Lankan theatre form to harness North Indian classical music, and this integration was pivotal to its popularity and lasting legacy (Ariyaratne 01–03; 12; Sarachchandra 12–14; 120–129; Maddumage 61–62; 86–88; Bulathsinghala 10–11; Field 29). The case of



Nurthi thus illuminates how raga-based music, mediated by transregional theatre circuits, generated a durable hybrid modernity in Sri Lankan musical culture—one that remains audible in contemporary performance and pedagogy.

RAKINU IISHWARA

P S S	R RP MP	PMG __	M P P
Ra ki nu	li _sh wa_	Ra ___	---
_RR R	G _ R	S __	---
Raki nu	li _sh wa_	Ra ___	---
_PS S	P S S	_PS S	P S S
_Mea pa	Sa _ma	_saka la	A pa la
_PS S	P S S	P S S	R RP MP
_Dura Ra	No ha ra	Si ri sa	Pa sa la
G _ M	R RP MP	G __	M P P
Sa _da	Ba n de	_in n	A pa da
P S S	R RP MP	G __	M P P
Sa ka la	Du ka _ha_	Ra __	---
_RR R	G _ R	S __	---
_Raki nu	li _sh wa	Ra __	---
+PP M	P G M	P N N	Ś __
+Nidi ki	Ni a pa	Ra ka si	Ya __
+NŚ R	Ř __	Ś Ś Ř	N D P
+Dinu ma	Na ni ti	Si Ri Wi	Pu l _
+PŚ N	Ś Ś Ś	P N D	N P P
+oba Gu	Na ma hi	Me _pra	Ka _sha
+RĠ _S	R RP MP	G __	M P P
+we _ya	li _sh wa_	Ra __	---
+RR R	M __	S __	---
+Raki nu	li _sh wa_	Ra __	---

Figure 1: Rakinu Iishwara... Notatons

SEETHA MA

++ Ś _	Ś _ Ś _	N _ Ś N	D _ N D
++ See _	Tha _ ma _	Si ri ya _	i n nae _
P+++p	D SRG _ R	S _ _ N	D P M _
_+++ko	Hae do _ a	Nae _ _ _	Mea ka la _
+++G	M PDN _ D	P D D P	M G RG GR
+++boe	_ wee _ ya	Sho _ ka _	Ma _ gae _
S+ + +SR	R G _ P	G R G R S	S _ _ _
_ + + + de	Da raa _ ha	Daa _ _ _	_ _ _ _
+++G	_ P _ D	N _ Ś _	Ś Ś Ś _
+++Mae	_ wa _ ra	Ya _ wee _	ni se ka _
+++ Ś	_ Ś _ Ś	N _ D P	P _ PDN _
+++Aea	_ wa _ no	De _ ka _	Ma _ Gae _
+++ Ś	Ś Ś Ś _	N _ Ś N	D _ N D
+++Mae	Hi me ri _	Ya _ ma _	Wae s dhe n
P+ + +P D	Ś R Ġ _ _ R	Ś _ _ N	D P M _
_ _ + Ra _ wa	Naa s s s	Ka le _ _	Mae ka la _
+++G	M PDN _ D	P D D P	M G RG GR
+++boe	_ wee _ ya	Sho _ ka _	Ma _ gae _
S+ + +SR	R G _ P	G R G R S	S _ _ _
_ + + + de	Da raa _ ha	Daa _ _ _	_ _ _ _

Figure 1: Seetha ma... Notatons

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