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“Ideas for Chennai Sangamam”

by Eric Miller

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The sharp rhythmic sounds of the chendai and other south Indian drums were joined by the deep smooth sounds of an electric bass, and so World Music came of age in Tamil Nadu. World Music combines traditional local music with elements of jazz and rock. It was a thrilling moment at the Inaugural Event of the 2009 Chennai Sangamam, providing irrefutable evidence that Tamil folk music -- on its own and also in combination with other types of music -- can be immensely valuable as soul-stirring art, and also as marketable commodity.

South Indian drummers have generally hesitated to use their drums beyond ritual and ceremonial settings. When playing in light orchestras, for example, they have tended to want to play a tabla, triple-congo, or Western drumset. Now Tamil folk drummers might become more willing to use their traditional drums and rhythms in new settings. But as far as the Chennai Sangamam goes, the traditional folk arts should remain centre stage, and the folk artists should continue to have a large degree of artistic control. The urban-based entertainment-industry and media professionals who help to facilitate the event should continue to play only supporting roles.

An English language meaning of Sangamam is, a confluence, a flowing together of streams, and Chennai Sangamam co-founder Ms. Kanimozhi has very wisely stated that she would like to see the Sangamam's arts and artists be more integrated into year-round everyday public life. The following words suggest some ways that this could occur.

This year the Chennai Sangamam was marketed as an Open Festival. To make the Sangamam even more open, language translation could be provided for some events. One way of doing this might be to provide simultaneous visual translation: as people would speak and sing in Tamil, words in English and other languages could appear on a screen on a side of the stage. For events in which speech is improvised, such translation could either be typed manually, or produced by automatic software. Not every word need be translated, just enough to help people follow along.

Members of the public should be able to engage in conversation with the folk artists, and one context in which this could occur could be seminars about particular folk artforms. Such seminars could be facilitated by scholars, journalists, writers, etc. It would be good to hear from the tradition-bearers



themselves regarding the meaning, influence, and significance of the folk artforms they perform; it would also be interesting to hear music and dance directors discuss how folk music and dance have been used and transformed in movies and in other realms of culture.

Some folk artists might be interested in presenting, in separate performances, traditional and modernised versions of their artforms. People who work in the fields of cinema, and contemporary theatre, music, and dance, could also present their versions of folk artforms. Collaborations could develop between folk artists and others.

A Tamil equivalent of Bhangra music is waiting to emerge. Bhangra is a mix of Punjabi folk music, Bollywood cinema music, and electronic dance music. The Tamil version could be called something like Tamil mix music. Perhaps on the fringe of Chennai Sangamam, music events of this type could occur, with audience members who might wish to dance to the music being permitted to do so.

This year's Chennai Sangamam once again featured poetry and discourses. What is needed are links between what is done by the poets, novelists, short story writers, and essayists, and what is done by the folk arts performers. In the West, it has long been a dream of members of the urban intelligentsia to reconnect with the folk, the proverbial singing-dancing throng in the countryside. In Tamil Nadu, the split between the urban intelligentsia and the rural folk did not occur to nearly as great a degree, so a culturally-unified public sphere is much more possible here.

A link between the folk and the intelligentsia could be supplied by folk storytelling and drama. Three types of Tamil storytelling are Kathaiyum pattum (Story and song), Villupattu (Bow song), and Katha Kalak Chebam (also known as Harikatha, God story). The latter is a classical art, so perhaps it should not be extensively featured in the Sangamam. Villupattu was featured in this year's Sangamam, and hopefully this will continue and develop. Special attention could be paid to how N.S. Krishnan, and his student Subbu Arumugam, have pioneered the use of Villupattu for educational purposes.

Tamil Nadu's great untapped storytelling treasure, however, is Story and song, the telling of Grandmother stories, Raja-Rani stories, Thenali Raman stories, and stories in which animals speak (famous collections of animal stories include *Aesop's Fables*, and *Panchatantra*). In animal stories, each animal is associated with a particular personality trait, telling us what the culture thinks of that animal's nature, and also, by implication, what it thinks are prominent aspects of human nature.

Folk and popular theatre forms such as Therukoothu (also known as Kattaikoothu), Isai Natakam (Company Drama), and Special Drama, could also be included in the Sangamam. Folk culture is a very elastic term. It can include some classical culture, and some commercial popular culture. Often in comedy sections of folk theatre, everything under the sun can be discussed.

Many folk dance and music forms are not performed by the folk for each other, but rather have been developed for presentation to the king and other dignitaries. On the other hand, there are domestic and non-professional artforms such as Thalattu (lullabies); and songs, dances, rituals, and ceremonies performed in relation to stages of the life cycle (for example, Oppari, lament singing) -- and ways could be found to demonstrate these activities in the Sangamam. Puns, rhymes, repetition of phrases with variations -- and many other techniques of verbal arts -- are introduced to children in singing-games, and these activities could be added to the children's physical games that were featured in the Sangamam this year.

The crafts and crafts-artists with whom the Poompuhar organisation works could be integrated into the Sangamam. Methods of preparing food have been added to the Sangamam: medicinal uses of plants could also be included.

Training in each of these activities -- and in the Tamil language itself -- could be offered as part of the Sangamam experience. During and after the Sangamam, some performances, seminars, and lessons could occur via videoconference. The widespread arrival of cellphone videoconferencing is almost upon us: plans could be developed to usher in this technology in relation to the Sangamam.

After the Sangamam, members of the public could visit some of the folk artists' home areas. Material relating to an artist's artform, and village or town, could be placed on a website: people could visit the website, and then the actual place.

People could be taken on folk arts tours -- with talks, performances, and lessons along the way. One such tour could be to the "Places of Kannagi": Poompuhar on the east coast, Madurai, and locations in the Western Ghats Mountains (including meetings with Muthuvar tribal people in the Valparai area, near Pollachi, who claim that their ancestors came to that place with Kannagi). Kannagi is a great unifying figure of Tamil culture, as she interacted with people from all levels of society, and passed through each of the five geo-cultural areas: 1) the coast, 2) agricultural areas, 3) barren areas, 4) pasture areas, and 5) mountain forests.

Chennai Sangamam has a life of its own now. It goes far beyond politics. Future Chennai Sangamams can be developed together by all of those who love Tamil folk culture. From time immemorial, aspects of Tamil Nadu's folk culture have been used by local community members and others to comment upon social conditions. Causes to which Tamil folk arts have been applied have included the expulsion of the British, and the promotion of the Dravidian Movement. Today a leading cause for Tamil folk artists would be the right of their own communities to continue to exist in the face of market and regulatory conditions that could dissolve and scatter their communities. Many folk groups, including tribal peoples, are in danger of being evicted from their traditional homes -- especially from coastal areas, and from forest areas (from newly-formed tiger reserves, in some instances). If a people as a whole is removed from its traditional environment, and there is no home population and homeland to look to, that people's identity and culture could also disappear. To nurture the development of a folk art, society must help to protect individual folk artists, folk artists' groups and communities, and the natural environments in which these communities have traditionally existed -- and these elements are inextricably interlinked. The true supporters of the Chennai Sangamam, politically-speaking, will be those politicians and political parties which provide serious nurturance to folk communities, beginning with helping them to stay on the land where they have traditionally lived.

The Chennai Sangamam could serve as a model of how to develop not just a folk arts festival, but also a whole society. If a theatre especially for folk performances is indeed to be built in Chennai -- a possibility that was raised at the Inaugural Event of this year's Sangamam -- let it be not just an auditorium (a place where people come to hear). Let it also be a telitorium (a place where people come to be with distant others, "tele" being a Greek word for "distant"), equipped with videoconferencing technology and a large screen! It was thought-provoking that the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (a forum for the Indian global Diaspora), which was held in Chennai this year, ended just before the Sangamam began: a folk arts telitorium in Chennai would be a wonderful way by which members of the Indian Diaspora could maintain and deepen their relationships with India.

At the Inaugural Event of this year's Chennai Sangamam, Ms. Ambika Soni, Union Minister of Tourism and Culture, called for a Bharat Sangamam. Such a

Sangamam could involve sending Tamil folk artists to perform in other states of India. It could also involve helping folk artists in other states to develop their own folk arts festivals. Chennai has -- in addition to Tamil Maiyam -- a great wealth of support organisations that could help to facilitate the Sangamam of Chennai and beyond, including: Government entities such as Tamil Nadu's Iyal Isai Nataka Mandram, and Tourism Dept; NGOs such as Dakshin Chitra, the National Folklore Support Centre, and the World Storytelling Institute; theatre groups that combine folk and modern culture, such as Kuttu-p-pattarai; and Folk and World Music production companies such as Bodhi Muzzik (led by Paul Jacobs, who did such a splendid job as musical director, and electric bass player, at the Inaugural Event of this year's Sangamam), Earth Sync, and many more.

Is it Chennai Sangamam, Tamil Sangamam, or Bharat Sangamam? Let there also be a Global Sangamam! Let all the rivers bring their waters to the ocean!

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Both of these organisations are based in Chennai. He is near completion of a PhD in Folklore at the University of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia): his dissertation concerns the use of videoconferencing for educational and performance events. Originally from New York City -- where he taught at St. John's University, Fordham University, and New York University -- Eric has settled in Chennai. He is married to Chennai native Magdalene Jeyarathnam, the Founder-Director of Chennai's Center for Counseling, and they have a daughter.

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