

# ROLE OF CARNATIC MUSIC IN PRESERVING REGIONAL LANGUAGES

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## ABSTRACT

*Carnatic music is a major form of classical music from South India. It uses regional languages such as Telugu, Tamil, Kannada, and Sanskrit in its compositions. This article shows how Carnatic music helps in keeping these languages alive. By studying lyrics from well-known composers like Tyagaraja, Dikshitar, Purandara Dasa, and Papanasam Sivan, we can understand how music carries forward grammar, local words, cultural ideas, and ways of speaking. This article also looks at how music is taught and passed down through generations, helping people remember these languages. Carnatic music makes people listen to and repeat these languages even if they do not speak them every day. In a time when many languages are being forgotten, Carnatic music continues to support and share South Indian languages in a natural way.*

**Keywords:** Carnatic Music, Linguistic Preservation, South Indian Languages, Culture, Devotional Compositions

## Introduction

Carnatic music is known for its strong connection with regional culture and language. In Carnatic music lyrics are just as important as the melody and rhythm. The languages used in this genre are Telugu, Tamil, Kannada, and Sanskrit. The languages used in songs are not chosen randomly but a particular language might be chosen for a song based on the deity and emotion that the composer is trying to convey.

Carnatic music paves a way for people to connect with the language and the culture with increase in migration in the past two decades. Carnatic music, however, still uses all these languages in a deep and literal way. This paper explains how Carnatic music helps in keeping these languages alive. It shows that music is not only about sound, but also about words, ideas, and shared identity.

## Literature Review

Many scholars have written about the musical and devotional aspects of Carnatic music, but fewer have focused on how it preserves language. T. Viswanathan and Matthew Allen (2004) explain how lyrics are central to Carnatic performance, but their focus is more on musical structure than linguistic impact. Lakshmi Subramanian (2006) writes about the history of the Madras Music Academy and how music spread in modern India. Her work touches upon how compositions carry tradition forward, but language preservation is not her main theme.

Other writings look at individual composers. For instance, studies on Tyagaraja appreciate his Telugu poetry. Studies on Dhikshitar comment how accurate his Sanskrit is. But these studies usually consider language as a supporting aspect. There are also papers on how Papanasam sivan brought Tamil into concerts but it speaks of the musical contribution and not the language. Some linguists have looked at how classical music helps in retaining phonetics and formal grammar. Still, very little has been written about Carnatic music as a system that actively supports the survival of four languages over time. This article hopes to bring that specific angle forward.

## Research Gap

Raga systems, Tala structures and performance techniques are the main subjects of studies that are available in Carnatic music. The literature on Bhakti, music grammar and historical evolution is extensive. However, very little research has been done on how Carnatic music contributes to the

preservation of regional languages. There seems to be a gap in understanding music as a means of linguistic preservation as well as an art form. Since languages are evolving with technological advancements and changes in lifestyle, a study on language from Carnatic music perspective is crucial. This article attempts to contribute a distinct perspective to the existing studies by concentrating on how Carnatic music aids in preservation of languages like Telugu Tamil Kannada and Sanskrit.

## Methodology

This article uses a simple, qualitative method. It looks at the lyrics of popular Carnatic compositions in Telugu, Tamil, Kannada, and Sanskrit. Some of the composers studied include Tyagaraja (Telugu), Muthuswami Dikshitar (Sanskrit), Purandara Dasa (Kannada), and Papanasam Sivan (Tamil). Their songs are well-known and are still sung today.

Each song is examined for the type of language used, whether the words are formal or in casual tone, how grammar works in the lines, and whether the ideas are from religion, philosophy, or daily life. Information from books, music lessons, and live performances are also included. This helps understand how these songs are shared from teacher to student and from one generation to the next.

## Scope of the study:

This study aims to focus on how Carnatic music contributes to the preservation of regional languages specifically Telugu, Tamil, Kannada and Sanskrit. The study analyses the contribution of Carnatic music in language preservation through composition, pedagogy and textual tradition. It examines selected composers across different periods and explores how their style of writing has reflected and retained linguistic features. The scope also includes musicological books that help in structured learning of music in these languages.

## Limitations

This paper does not cover all regional languages that appear in South Indian musical tradition nor does it analyse every composer or lyrical form in detail. Instead, it selects representative examples to highlight broader patterns. The study is limited to the languages Telugu, Tamil, Kannada and Sanskrit only. The study focuses on Carnatic music and does not include parallel traditions like devotional music or regional folk. Additionally, the paper leans more on textual and lyrical analysis, rather than socio linguistic data. While the study draws examples from both historical and contemporary contexts, the primary concern is not musical structure of compositions, but how languages live through music in everyday learning and listening environments.

## Telugu

Tyagaraja wrote most of his songs in Telugu. Even though he lived in Tamil Nadu, he chose Telugu because it was his mother tongue and it's known for its beauty and softness. His songs have phrases that's very simple and still in use. Eg: "Rā Rāma inṭi dāka" is such a casual phrase to invite someone home, which still exists today. Some of his songs are conversational while other are a bit more complex. One of his famous songs "Endarō Mahānubhāvulu," the line "andariki vandanamulu" shows how Telugu grammar works to show respect. It also shows how respectful and polite one can be in stage. This is an example for a phrase that's more formal. By learning his compositions students get to know Telugu. In this way, his compositions have become a textbook for classical Telugu.

The Telugu musicological text "Sangīta Samaya Sāra Saṅgrahamu", compiled during the later medieval period, documents music grammar, classifications of ragas, and performance practices in Telugu. It is a valuable document for maintaining the scholarly tone of a Telugu and it is one of the very few musicological texts available in this language. The learners are exposed to the formal and structured form

of Telugu when this book is being introduced to them in colleges or by their gurus. This supports the continued use of Telugu in academic and real-life context. Not all Carnatic music learners are Telugu speakers, but learning songs and music texts helps them learn Telugu sounds and sentence patterns.

## Kannada

Purandara Dasa is one of the most famous Kannada composers. He lived in Karnataka and used simple Kannada to write his songs. His aim was to teach values, devotion, and everyday wisdom. Songs like "Krishna Nī Begane Baro" use local words and easy sentence structures. His language feels close to speech, but it also keeps many older phrases and expressions. His songs became popular because of group singing called bhajanas.

Another important kannada based composer is Kanakadasa. His famous song "Bārō krisnayya" he uses the word "salahalu" in the last line which means to bless or to help but this word isn't used in conversations anymore. People use *krupē kodu* or *āsīrvādisu*. This proves how archaic phrases in this language are preserved through *dasarapadas*. Kannada is one of the earliest languages to be Introduced to Carnatic students, even before they learn Telugu or tamil compositions because of the *gitam* "Kereya nīranu" by purandara dasa. The very first line is a metaphorical line which means to bring the water of the lake back to the water – "kereye nīranu kerege challi" This maintains a grammatical structure that is not popular in modern Kannada. The usage of the word *challi* demonstrates the traditional vocabulary of kannada which is hardly used in urban speech. The students get to know about this language in such an earlier stage of learning this art form without having any prior knowledge about it. This shows how Carnatic music plays an important role in taking this language to next generation. Because of these, Kannada, even older styles of it, continues to be heard even by those who do not read or write the language.

## Tamil

Papanasam Sivan brought Tamil fully into the world of Carnatic music. Before him, Tamil compositions were not used much in classical concerts. His songs, like "Ka Va Va" and "Enneramum Undhan," are rich in poetic words and emotional expression.

The compositions of *Ālwārs* and *Nāyanmārs* lead to preservation of regional vocabulary, as these people are from different parts of the state. These works date back to 7<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> centuries and these hymns are still sung today preserving the archaic tamil phrases. Some of the later composers like Arunachala kavirayar have written in formal but much simpler tamil that can be understood by contemporary native speakers. Oothukadu Venkata kavi is another popular composer although he has done a lot of works in Sanskrit, songs like *Alaipāyute* shows how intricately rhyme patterns can built in tamil. These songs mix old Tamil with devotional themes. They include words from temple poetry and old literature. Because they are popular in performances, many people get to hear and learn these forms of Tamil that are not often used in casual speech.

## Sanskrit

Sanskrit is not a spoken language in everyday life, but it has a special place in Carnatic music due to its association with religious texts, philosophical ideas, and classical aesthetics. While many people nowadays learn Sanskrit with the notion of bringing it back to life, Carnatic music has been keeping the vocabulary intact for ages. Many compositions in Carnatic music are done in Sanskrit. Among the composers who predominantly used Sanskrit, **Muthuswami Dikshitar** stands out for his scholarly command over the language. His *kritis* are rich with compounds, scriptural references, and a highly structured lyrical format that aligns closely with classical Sanskrit poetry. Compositions like *Vatapi*

*Ganapatim* and *Annapurne Visalakshi* not only praise deities but also reflect Vedantic ideas, temple iconography, and spiritual geography.

**Shyama Shastri**, though he mostly composed in Telugu and Tamil, also used Sanskrit in select compositions, particularly when expressing ideas drawn from shastras or invoking pan-Indian deities like Devi or Shiva. **Swathi Thirunal**, the royal composer from Kerala, wrote extensively in Sanskrit, viewing it as a universal cultural bridge. His works such as *Bhogendra Shāyinaṃ* demonstrate how Sanskrit was used not only for devotional content but also for royal patronage of pan-Indian classical culture.

As mentioned earlier, **Oothukkadu Venkata Kavi**, is a popular Sanskrit poet. He actually predates the Carnatic trinity. So, his works capture older Sanskrit, especially in his Krishna-based compositions like *Alokaye Rajeevalochanam*. His Sanskrit lyrics are often fast-paced, filled with rhythmic brilliance, and blend mythology with emotion.

Musicological books also contribute to language preservation. Many Carnatic music terms like raga, tala, nada, gamaka are all taken from texts like *Natya sastra*, *caturdandi prakasika* etc. These books form the syllabus of music colleges in India. The students get to learn the ancient Sanskrit verses and hence the language continues to thrive in the corridors of fine art colleges.

In modern times, Sanskrit continues to appear in the works of later composers and music scholars who aim to preserve its spiritual authority and phonetic precision. It is often chosen to express philosophical depth or to maintain a formal tone, especially in pieces performed during temple festivals or spiritual gatherings. Though Sanskrit is not spoken widely, its pronunciation, grammar, and literary style are preserved through these compositions, which are still sung, taught, and passed down orally. In this way, Carnatic music remains one of the few living traditions where Sanskrit continues to be actively used and appreciated.

## Discussion

- Carnatic music supports the survival of these four languages in different ways. First, the lyrics are respected. Singers do not usually change the words. This means the original language is preserved.
- Second, the songs are taught with care. Teachers explain the meaning of each line. This helps students understand the language and not just memorize the tune.
- Third, performances and recordings make these languages part of daily listening for many people. Even listeners who do not understand the language enjoy the sound and may pick up some words.
- Another important point is that these songs make people from different language backgrounds learn about each other. A Tamil speaker may sing in Telugu. A Kannada speaker may learn Sanskrit. This builds respect and connection among South Indian cultures.
- However, some difficulties exist. Many people learn the songs without knowing the meaning. Sometimes, the deep ideas in the lyrics are lost. Also, translations into English or Hindi do not always keep the feeling of the original language.
- Technology has both helped and changed things. Now there are videos and apps that show lyrics with meaning. This makes the music easier to learn, but it may also reduce the need to speak or read the original language. Still, many families outside India use these tools to stay connected with their language and culture.

## Conclusion

Carnatic music is one of the few cultural forms that still carries old forms of Telugu, Tamil, Kannada, and Sanskrit into the present day. It does this not by force, but through beauty and devotion. The music invites people to sing, learn, and feel these languages.

At a time when many regional languages are used way less than it used to be, Carnatic music offers a quiet but steady way of keeping them alive. The practice of learning and performing these songs creates a space where language, emotion, and tradition meet.

By respecting the original words and sharing them through teaching and performance, Carnatic music becomes more than an art form. It becomes a way of caring for and continuing the languages of South India.

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