

Artists Down The Alcohol Spiral in Tamilnadu

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ABSTRACT

An exploration of the relationship between psychopathology and creativity, especially with respect to alcoholism, is very sparse in our Indian psychiatric literature. The habits of two of our prominent artists of the twentieth century, one a Carnatic musician and another a film actor and singer, along with a few others are described in this article.

Keywords: creativity, mental illness, alcohol, Rajarathinam Pillai, Chandrababu

Running title: Artists and alcohol in Tamilnadu

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The relationship between psychopathology and creativity is an intriguing one and has attracted the attention of various scholars from ancient times to the present day. There is an extensive literature on the subject from western psychiatrists. Creative artists like Schumann, Beethoven, Mozart, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, especially those with psychopathology, have come under the scrutiny of notable scholars like Roy Porter¹ and Kay Redfield Jamieson.² The psychiatric historian Roy Porter has given recent examples like Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, to mention a few. Jamieson has taken an interest in the mad/genius and her writings are familiar to most of us.

Surprisingly, very little information is available about the Indian scenario.

In the present work, we are concerned mainly about two of the great creative artists from Tamilnadu: T N Rajarathinam Pillai, the virtuoso of the instrument Nagaswaram, and J P Chandrababu, the great comedian-dancer. The biographical details have been collected from the materials published in Tamil recently (vide infra). The concerned artists are interested in attracting the glamour of the public. The drinking habits and the coexisting drug misuse, which a psychiatrist would like to know, are only hinted at, but details are missing in the biographies. The perspective of the present writing is more from a behavioural aspect. The latter two biographies are concerned with the happenings of the the Tamil film world - Kollywood during late sixties and seventies and there is no need for apportioning blame for the misfortunes to these personalities.

Another extremely important aspect of this type of writing is the non-judgmental attitude to be observed. The medical aspects, as available from the biographies, are very incomplete. Psychological interpretations are once again extremely subjective and could be mistaken or even misleading. The introspective accounts of these artists are almost unavailable to us.

It is somewhat surprising that the Indian psychiatrists have not paid attention to various individual artists. It might be possible that some of these artists are discussed in the various regional meetings and have not come to the notice at the national level. To overcome this shortage we have, during past decades, published some works from our region

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The material is extracted from their biographies written by knowledgeable writers who target the interests of the lay person. Hence the information which is of vital interest to the psychiatrist in deciding the type of disability suffered by the individual is naturally lacking. The biographer cannot be expected to be aware of the significance of details like the quantity and the quality of the drink(s), whether alcoholic beverages or stronger spirits or illicit country liquor. The bias in reporting might be due to ignorance or to 'protect' the heroes from infamy. The details of their respective final illnesses are very meagre or nil.

Presently, we are bringing to the notice of the Indian psychiatrists, some of the outstanding artists in Carnatic music and film celebrities of the recent past. Special note is made of their unfortunate encounter with alcohol which ended in disaster.

TN Rajarathinam Pillai - the 'Nagaswara Chakravarthy' (1898-1956)

It was midnight of 15th August 1947, when freedom dawned on the Indians of the continent. Pandit Nehru was to assume office as the first prime minister of India. Despite his well-known indifference to religious practices, he accepted the various rites; the orthodox Dr Rajendra Prasad performed the yagna.³

It was TN Rajarathinam Pillai (TNR) who carried the blessings of the Head-Priest of the prestigious *saivite* Mutt of Thiruvavaduthurai near Thanjavur, along with a golden chain, to the future prime minister. TNR approached Dr. P. Subbarayan, who was to be included in the Nehru cabinet, to present his case to inaugurate the great function with his *nagaswaram* performance. With Dr. Subbarayan's intervention, Pandit Nehru acceded to his request, and TNR was to perform his music with his *nagaswaram* and lead the motorcade of the VIPs. Nagaswaram music is the sine qua non for all the religious performances of South Indians, like marriage and various initiation ceremonies like naming ceremony, school entry, sacred thread ceremony and the like. This is the highest honor done to the individual and his genius as a Carnatic musician.

TN Rajarathinam Pillai (TNR) is considered as the greatest *nagaswaram* player of Carnatic music in the first half of the twentieth century and his genius was recognized by the great North Indian Hindustani

vocalist Bade Ghulam Ali Khan and Shehnai Bismillah Khan. He was born on 27/8/1898 to Kuppusamy Pillai and Govindammal. He had an elder sister, Dayalammal. His father was an exponent of Carnatic music, who was the *nagaswaram* player at the Thirumarugal temple, who died soon after; and TNR was brought up by his maternal uncle Natesa Pillai, who subsequently adopted him. Natesa Pillai was the "*Nagaswara Vidwan*" at the Thiruvavaduthurai Mutt in Thanjavur district of Tamil Nadu. It is a prestigious and rich *saivite* Mutt; where the successive *adheenams* (meaning 'high priests') have been renowned scholars in Tamil Literature, especially the *saivite* canon, and have encouraged literature and the fine arts.^{4,5}

TNR and his sister were sent to learn Carnatic music from their uncle Kathiresan Pillai. Natesa Pillai was ambitious that the children should be trained by more well-known musicians. So, he arranged *gurukulam* for them with Krishna Iyer and Vaidhyathanalayar. Even as a young child, Rajarathinam used to wake up very early in the morning to listen to some of the local musicians practising, and to the great *veena* player Dhanammal. With such astute training, Rajarathinam gave his first Carnatic performance before the Thiruvavaduthurai *adheenam*, when he was only ten years old. Greatly pleased with his performance, the high priest appointed him "*Adheena Vidwan*" with a monthly salary of seven rupees. The *adheenam* wanted TNR to be trained as "*Nagaswara Vidwan*" of the Mutt and planned for his training. It must be noted here that it is greatly opined by *saivite* devotees that the *nagaswaram* is Lord Siva's favourite musical instrument, comparable to the flute of Lord Krishna. The training started with Markanda Pillai of the Mutt. For further training, he was sent to Kannusamy Pillai, the then famous instrumentalist of the area. Later, training continued with Keeranur Muthu Pillai. After all this training, TNR became the "*Nagaswara Vidwan*" of the Mutt with a salary of one hundred *kalams* (a measure of rice). In the days which followed, TNR adopted his own style of playing the instrument which was unique and cannot be copied to this day. No wonder he deserves the honorific of Nagaswara Chakravarthy!

TNR's practice of the several ragas with their intricacies, nuances and their extensive exploration (*sadhagam*) attracted the attention of many great

Carnatic musicians of the early twentieth century. “*GaanaGandharva*” SG Kittappa, KB Sundarambal, Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, GN Balasubramaniam, *Veenai*Dhanammal and many others were thrilled, and he was acclaimed as “*Todi*” Rajarathinam as early as in the 1930s. Gramophone records of his music became very popular. It was rather unusual that these virtuosi were fascinated by his music, so much so that they never missed an opportunity to listen to TNR, in person, sitting in the first row. His relation with them was cordial and harmonious. It is probably a great tribute to his genius that when almost all the Carnatic music world was dominated by (and continues to be so) the high caste *brahmins*, he shone amidst them. There are only very few exceptions to this – the likes of MM Dhandapani Desikar, Sirkazhi Govindarajan and TS Jayaraman. All the *nagaswaramvidwans*, of the past as well as the present, belong to the more backward classes of the society. Even though TNR did not give training (*shikshai*) to his juniors, he encouraged them and kept them in good humour.

TNR’s introduction to alcoholic drinks is a benign affair. While he and his friend were awaiting the arrival of a train at a station; his friend, seeing TNR with cough and cold, took him to the refreshment room and told him about the “extraordinary” healing property of “harmless” drinks like “biscuit brandy”, which was being given to children below 1 year with throat infections without any harm, and suggested that his friend have a drink with him. He enlightened him on the qualities of alcoholic beverages and spirits. Thus, alcohol found its fertile soil in our *Vidwan*.

On many occasions, TNR in a weary mood complained of the lack of male progeny to carry on his prestigious profession, which led him to this habit. The occurrence of his five marriages is due to this reason. TNR was always respectful towards and listened to the words of his first wife; but when she herself suggested to him the idea of remarriage, TNR spurned the notion and summarily rejected the idea. In course of time, TNR agreed to this idea and he became a five times married man. In his family affairs, the pride of place was given to his eldest wife. Promiscuity was not the reason for his many marriages. It is interesting to note that his youngest wife sometimes accompanied him on the *nagaswaram*.

The biographies available to the authors are devoid of his drinking habits. We are not told as to what the drinks were, whether in company or in solitude, the effects on behaviour, hangovers and most importantly the amount spent on the drinks. The biographies of the western geniuses of art, music and literature are replete with these details; our Indian writers probably do not want to hurt the image of the foregone heroes.

TNR’s great career had been wrecked by alcoholism in many ways, some of which were directly or indirectly mentioned in the social media of those days. The failure to keep appointments or being late to recitals and to be unable or awkward to perform on the dais was commonly noted. When such observations were brought to the notice of TNR, he took it in a highly sportive way and never disputed with the writers. He used to laughingly mention that his behavior was due to drinking. It is worth recalling some of his unfortunate incidents and how TNR faced them. There was an invitation from the Maharaja of Travancore to become the *Asthana Vidwan*. He arrived very late for the appointment, somewhat disarrayed. This displeased Dewan Sir CP Ramasamy Iyer and the appointment was never made. On another occasion, he went to Mumbai. On his arrival, he was mobbed; so pleased with the welcome, he became heavily drunk, and at the music hall he could produce only noises with his instrument. The irate crowd pelted stones at him and he had to be escorted to his room. On the next day, he performed divinely and there were repeated applauds from the admiring, swelling crowd, some of whom apologized to him for their previous day’s rude behavior towards him. On a visit to a Kerala temple for his performance, he was deeply asleep till eight in the night, when the temple procession was to start at nine o clock. The confused managers of the show went to his room and poured cold water on him at 9 PM. TNR enthralled his audience with his masterly music.

TNR was a great innovator and ardent devotee of the Carnatic music. He never liked the idea of disrespecting his divine music by playing it on the streets, walking, when the Maharajah of Mysore was caparisoned on the elephant during the DussZehra procession. He was the first *Nagaswaram* musician to play in Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Singapore. He was the first Carnatic musician to don the western attire.

His last days, during the year 1956, were an unfortunate period in his history and the history of Carnatic music. His health failed due to excessive drinking, and poverty ruled his environment. He left his palatial house with so many rooms for his so many wives, and *puja* halls. His admiring friends never deserted him, and Mr. Sitarama Rao accommodated him, free, in his Dasaprakash Hotel for a considerable time. He later moved to a smaller quarter in Adyar. He never stopped practising (*sadhagam*), and his drinking. His intimate friend Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer tried to dissuade him from this practice. TNR told him frankly that if he does not practise *sadhagam* he is not 'Raja' Rathinam but 'Ass' Rathinam. The great dramatist MR Radha performed a benefit performance and gave the money to TNR. On the last occasion, on the twelfth of December of 1956, when Radha and comedian NS Krishnan visited him in his Adyar residence, he collapsed while putting on a shirt. An overworked lung and the alcohol abused heart stopped. One of the greatest careers in Indian music thus came to an end.

Before concluding this section, it would be interesting to note the presence of harmful use of alcohol in the contemporary Carnatic musicians. As mentioned before, this aspect of biography is omitted by our writers, probably with the concern of offending their prestige and reducing our respect towards them; which is in marked contrast to the habit of the Western historians. One of the most famous among them is S G Kittappa, who was admired and given the honorific "Gandharva Gaanam" ("Divine Voice"). It is interesting to recall that the Court Musician of Akbar was known as *Tansen*, meaning "Divine Voice". There was much interaction & mutual admiration between TNR & Kittappa. It is reported that each of them sat in the first row to watch the other's performance. It is a great tragedy that Kittappa also contracted this habit very early & he died of cirrhosis of the liver despite advice from his wife, the famous singer K B Sundarambal, and doctors, in his twenty seventh year. Another internationally famous Carnatic musician flautist is T R Mahalingam, popularly known as "Mali". Due to his erratic drinking, he missed many of the appointments and/or would entertain only for a few minutes to the great shock & disappointment of his admirers. Other two famous names of Carnatic music are Tiger Varadachariar & Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar. Unfortunately, more details are not available to us.

JP Chandrababu (1927-1974)

Another remarkable personality belonging to the artistic and entertaining profession of the Tamil land (and of the Indian subcontinent and Tamil speaking countries of South-East Asia) is JP Chandrababu (Joseph Panimayadas Chandrababu). His remarkable and tragic life came to an early end due to his heavy drinking habits and opiate use.

It is not proposed to write a detailed biography of the actor and interested readers are referred to two of the recent biographies of his in Tamil.^{6,7} The writers are targeting the average interested reader and do not provide detailed information which is of particular psychiatric interest. Compared to the earlier biography of TNR, the drug history of JP Chandrababu (JPC) is very stormy with negative personality traits and prominent psychopathological factors.

JPC belonged to the fisherman community on the east coast of Tamil Nadu. He was the sixth child in the family of thirteen children. His father Rodriguez was a freedom fighter and a close friend of Congress leader and former chief minister K Kamaraj. His formal education was very minimal and interrupted by his sojourn to Sri Lanka for a considerable time (1929-1943). He had a good chance to learn and practice music and dance, not only in Tamil and Sinhalese but also, to a remarkable degree, in western music and dance.

He was obsessed with acting in Tamil films and made numerous attempts towards this end. In 1952, he entered the Gemini studios, but could not meet its owner SS Vasan. He procured some water for drinking from one of the attendants and swallowed the copper sulphate in his possession. He was rushed to the General Hospital for emergency treatment and he recovered, but the police charge-sheeted him for the attempted suicide. When he was produced before the magistrate, who asked him whether he can reassure him that he would not repeat the episode; he lit a match stick, placed it on his palm, showed it to the magistrate and told him "*You can see what I have done but you cannot feel how I feel!*" The magistrate asked him to perform a piece of acting. JPC enacted a scene from Shakespeare. The impressed magistrate put him on parole for a period of one year.

This is how JPC entered the film world. In a short period, his name and fame shot up in the Tamil screen.

The great tragedy struck him in 1958. He became acquainted with a family in Madurai and fell in love with Sheela, who was extremely gorgeous. Marriage was immediately arranged and performed in the month of May of that year. Many important personalities from various fields graced the occasion, and it deserves special mention that the then chief minister of TN, K Kamaraj attended the marriage. Immediately after the marriage, JPC realized that there was an impregnable wall in his relationship with Sheela. One night, she offered quite a large drink, and told him that it was to protect him from a great shock. She told him that she had been sexually abused many times, and raped after knocking her unconscious, by a close family friend of hers. She had undergone abortions on a few occasions. A few days later when JPC was acting in one of his famous films, 'Sabash Meena' he was informed that Sheela had consumed poison. After resuscitation, JPC informed her that their marriage could not continue any further. He returned all the marriage presents to her; he accompanied her to Port Cochin and sent her by a ship to London. Subsequently, he learnt that she had remarried and settled down happily in London. This indelible scar haunted him throughout his life, and even if he heard the name Sheela he shuddered and asked his friends not to mention the name.

Instead of going through the various films in which JPC acted and detailing the many desirable and undesirable aspects of the environment of the then Tamil film world, we are confining ourselves only to two films which unmade JPC.

One was the film 'Kavalaiillathan' (*"The carefree man"*) in which the famous Tamil poet and film producer Kannadasan contracted JPC as the hero with heavy pay and great difficulty. Due to his heavy drinking, JPC was skipping many 'call sheets'. When the climax scene was being shot, JPC was absent at the studios! Greatly worried, Kannadasan rushed to JPC's residence. He was promptly informed that JPC was not at home. Meanwhile the heavily drunk actor had left the house by jumping over the compound wall! With the kind intervention of great actors, MR Radha and

TS Balayyah, he was brought to the studios and the film was completed. Kannadasan suffered major financial loss and was very unhappy with JPC.

JPC was enamored by the most popular actor and politician of the times, and future chief minister of Tamil Nadu, MGR; and with great difficulty JPC persuaded him to play the hero's role in his film 'Maadiveetuyelai' (*"A poor man in a high-rise building"*). At that time, JPC was himself involved in constructing a posh house with parking facility at the top. It was difficult for JPC to pay the hero and fulfil his grandiose plans about his building at the same time. He could not manage his financial affairs, and so he took the help of his good friend and magnanimous lady Savithri, who helped him with cash but refused to accept his building documents as mortgage. When JPC was finding it difficult to pay the hero and get 'call sheets' from him, in an angry and aggressive mood, he went and demanded the 'call sheet' from MGR's brother, MG Chakrapani. Hot words were exchanged and JPC took the furniture to attack him. With great difficulty JPC was pacified and he returned home. That was the end of his grand plans and career. JPC used to abuse alcohol before he started the film, but now he became a heavy drinker (described rather disparagingly as 'modakudi' in Colloquial Tamil). His last days were rather pitiable. He could not pay his electricity bills and his house was plunged in darkness. He could not even get a ten-rupee loan from his friends. He was admitted for severe jaundice as a free patient at the Govt. General Hospital, Chennai. He was drinking even there and died of massive hematemesis on March 8, 1974.

Besides his impulsiveness, he was outspoken and very frank, without inhibitions. He knew it was hurting the feelings of others but was happy to do it. When asked about the acting qualities of the top stars of those days his replies were as follows (Names of the actors are omitted): 1. "He has not improved in his acting all these years. It is better if he becomes a money lender." 2. "He is surrounded by sycophants. It is better he leaves them." 3. "I heard he is building a hospital in Kodambakkam. It is better if he becomes a compounder there." When asked how much he wants for his role in a film, he said "one rupee more than what you pay him (name omitted)". He

was a great narcissist and knew his worth. He compared himself with Charlie Chaplin. He was a devout Christian and incorporated the name of the famous church of Tuticorin, hence the name, Joseph Panimayadas Chandrababu. He was also very particular that his community of fishermen should advance economically and educationally. We may try to understand the many unfortunate factors in making him an alcohol addict. His impulsiveness, his personality traits of narcissism and grandiosity, fear of loss especially financial losses, his outspoken and fearless and tactless comments on colleagues which gave him more enemies than friends. The depression which was associated with his unfortunate marriage must have affected his career.

Other renowned and artists of great talent whose careers were unfortunately marred by alcohol use include PU Chinnappa (1916-1951), a great film personality of the 1930s and 40s and Savithri (1936-1981). PU Chinnappa, with his melodious voice and great clarity, sang without the help of playback singers. With his practice in martial arts characteristic of the “*maravars*” of the southern districts of Tamil Nadu, he was well versed in “*Silambam*” (duel in which staffs are used in place of swords). He never required dupes to play his stunts. His box office hits of those days are still remembered by the senior author - *Ariyamala, Jagathalaprataban, Kannagi*, etc., Unfortunately, he took to drinks and drank heavily. He developed cirrhosis of liver and died of uncontrollable hematemesis in his thirty-fifth year. Savithri was a famous and popular artiste who was held in great respect.⁸ In her case, co-morbid diabetes mellitus played great havoc. She was using not only licit drinks but also started using illicit liquor. During shooting time, it was reported that she would ask the attendants in the studios to bring her alcohol and would consume it. Her behavior became erratic, she abused drinks & anti-diabetics. She suffered an irreversible coma due to hypoglycemia. This lasted for a considerable time before end came in 1981. [Interested readers are advised to see the recently produced film version of her life (2018).]

CONCLUSION

It deserves mention that members of the film industry, both professional and technical, are at a greater risk of alcohol dependence and its consequent harmful effects. The film industry is fortunately a highly organized profession. It shouldn't be difficult to have a mental health professional in their union. They should identify the people at risk and the people who require treatment.

Epilogue

An unrequited love can send the unsuccessful lover to a life of alcohol addiction which could be considered as a form of slow suicide. We could mention two great classic examples from literature. One is the delineation of the character of Sydney Carton in Charles Dickens' “*A Tale of Two Cities*”. Here the London lawyer, Carton fails to win the affection of Lucie Manette. He takes the path of untraceable addiction and decides to sacrifice his life to the successful rival, Charles Darnay whom he resembles like an identical twin. He goes to the guillotine when Charles Darnay was convicted by the French revolutionary regime for his nobility.

Another classic example is from our Indian literature, where Sharath Chandra Chattopadhyay depicts Devdas, who fails to marry his lover Parvati, due to his parents' opposition on grounds of her belonging to an inferior class. His subsequent life as an alcoholic and the emotional torment he undergoes could be understood only by reading Sharath Chandra's classic.

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