

The Beauty of Manipravaalam : Linguistic Fusion in Carnatic Music Compositions

First Author

Nithyashree.B
M.A Music 2nd Year,
Department of Music,
Suravaram Pratapa Reddy
Telugu University,
Hyderabad, Telangana, India.
Email ID : nitbal20@gmail.com

Second Author

Dr. Vyzarsu Balasubrahmanyam
Assistant Professor,
Department of Music,
Suravaram Pratapa Reddy
Telugu University,
Hyderabad, Telangana, India.
Email ID : vyzarsu4balu@gmail.com

Abstract

Carnatic music is one of the richest classical traditions, where melody, rhythm, and lyrics interact intricately. Beyond musicality, its use of language plays a profound role. Manipravaalam is a classical literary and linguistic style blending Sanskrit with regional Dravidian languages—most commonly Tamil, Telugu, or Malayalam, and occasionally Hindi, English, or Urdu—where Sanskrit serves as the “mani” (gem) and the regional language as the “pravaalam” (coral). For example, the javali “Oh my lovely lalana elane pommanti” by Karur Shri. Shivaramayya blends English and Telugu. Studying manipravaalam reveals how language becomes a creative force, enriching expression and bridging classical and local cultures, reflecting South India’s inclusive tradition where fusion celebrates diversity and artistic freedom.

This study explores how manipravaalam enhances beauty, meaning, and emotional depth in Carnatic compositions. It examines how this fusion helps composers convey complex ideas while connecting with varied audiences, demonstrating the culturally rich and inclusive nature of South Indian classical music. Sanskrit offers spiritual depth and structural clarity, while local languages add emotional warmth and lyrical ease. This balance supports gamakas, smooth melodic flow, and accessible devotional expression, allowing composers to combine classical poetry with regional nuance.

Adopting a qualitative approach, the study analyzes selected kritis where manipravaalam is prominent. Textual and musicological analysis focuses on lexical blending, contextual meaning, and performance practice, supported by secondary sources including composer biographies, scholarly works, and oral traditions. The findings show that manipravaalam bridges sacred Sanskrit and emotive regional languages, enriching poetic and musical nuance, shaping pronunciation, tone, and interpretive depth. More than a stylistic device, manipravaalam is a cultural statement of unity in diversity, fostering connection among

composers, performers, and audiences, while sustaining tradition and promoting evolution within Carnatic music.

Keywords: Manipravaalam, Carnatic Music, Linguistic Fusion, Sanskrit and Dravidian Languages

1. Introduction

Carnatic music is an integrated tradition where melody (rāga), rhythm (tāla), and lyrics (sahitya) interact harmoniously. The lyrics of a krithi shape melodic phrasing, guide rhythm, and convey devotional and cultural meaning. Within this framework, manipravaalam—a refined blend of Sanskrit and regional Dravidian languages such as Tamil, Malayalam, and Telugu—derives from mani (gem) and pravaalam (coral), symbolizing the fusion of grandeur and warmth, respectively.

Originating in medieval literary and devotional traditions, manipravaalam enabled composers to express complex theological ideas in a form both elevated and accessible. Sanskrit offered philosophical depth and ritual authority, while Tamil and Malayalam added emotional immediacy and regional flavor (Varma, 2001). By alternating between the two, composers reached diverse audiences across linguistic and devotional lines (Subramanian, 2006).

This article explores manipravaalam as a musical-linguistic strategy in Carnatic music, analyzing its structural, aesthetic, and cultural roles. It underscores its enduring relevance as both a poetic device and a bridge between traditions.

2. Objective

- The primary aim of this study is to explore the aesthetic role of manipravaalam in Carnatic compositions, focusing on how the fusion of Sanskrit and regional languages influences prosody, melodic phrasing, and bhāva in selected kritis (Subramanian, 2006).
- It traces the historical and cultural evolution of manipravaalam—from medieval literary practices and the Bhakti movement to temple and court traditions—highlighting its devotional and performative importance in connecting both learned and common audiences (Varma, 2001; Peterson, 1989).
- The study also examines pedagogical perspectives, suggesting effective teaching methods and classroom activities (Soneji, 2012), while evaluating oral and written modes of transmission, including possibilities for digital preservation and archiving (Subramanian, 2006).
- Finally, it proposes future research directions through interdisciplinary approaches, linking linguistics, cognitive musicology, and digital humanities to support the continued study and revival of manipravaalam (Zvelebil, 1974).

3. Literature Review & Historical Context

The roots Manipravaalam emerged in South India as a distinctive blend of Sanskrit and vernacular languages. Early traces appear in Sangam and post-Sangam Tamil works, where Sanskrit terms enriched poetic expression (Zvelebil, 1974). The medieval Kerala treatise *Līlātilakam* codified Sanskrit–Malayalam fusion, showing how grammar, phonetics, and style could coexist (Varma, 2001), while the *champu* tradition highlighted the creative potential of alternating prose and verse (Nair, 2010).

During the Bhakti movement, Tamil Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava saints composed vernacular hymns alongside Sanskrit stotras, combining devotional immediacy with philosophical depth (Younger, 1995). Supported by temples and courts, composers used manipravaalam in *varnams*, *kritis*, and *tillanas*, bridging elite Sanskrit audiences and regional devotees (Subramanian, 2006). Unlike Hindustani parallels, South Indian manipravaalam was a deliberate, enduring synthesis, uniting creativity, devotion, and culture into a refined artistic and spiritual expression (Varma, 2001; Subramanian, 2006).

4. Methodology

The methodology of this study adopts an interdisciplinary, qualitative approach, combining textual, linguistic, and musicological analysis.

Primary sources include classical compositions, foundational treatises such as *Līlātilakam* and *Saṅgīta Sampradāya Pradarśinī*, critical editions, and archival recordings of prominent composers like Muthuswami Dikshitar and Swathi Thirunal . Secondary sources include scholarly articles, translations, and historical studies for context and interpretation.

Analytical methods involve close reading to identify patterns of code-mixing, prosodic alignment, and semantic layering in selected *kritis*, alongside musicological examination of *rāga*, phrase structure, and ornamentation in relation to text. A comparative perspective situates these findings within broader multilingual traditions in Indian music.

Field observation involves examining contemporary performances and pedagogical practices to assess continuity, variation, and modern interpretations of the bilingual repertoire.

Using language study, music analysis, and observing performances, the study shows that linguistic fusion is not just a literary tool but an important part of Carnatic music today.

4. Theoretical Framework

The study of manipravaalam in Carnatic music draws on linguistics, musicology, and cultural theory. At its core, manipravaalam is a deliberate blending of Sanskrit with regional languages like Tamil and Malayalam (Annamalai, 2001). Sanskrit provides precision and formality, while the vernacular adds emotional warmth and accessibility.

From a musicological perspective, manipravaalam illustrates the dynamic relationship between *sahitya* (lyrics) and *rāga* (melody). Sanskrit syllables, being expansive, often suit elongated *gamakas*, whereas Tamil or Malayalam words, compact and rhythmic, align with brisk

passages, reinforcing unity between linguistic rhythm and melodic architecture (Sambamoorthy, 1972).

Rasa theory shows that Sanskrit conveys devotion and serenity, while Tamil or Malayalam adds intimacy, making abstract ideas relatable (Pollock, 2006). Alternating languages also create tonal shifts that affect listeners differently depending on their familiarity.

Together, these perspectives show that manipravaalam serves as a literary, musical, and cultural tool, enhancing the artistry, structure, and expressive depth of Carnatic music.

5. Linguistic Features of Manipravaalam

Manipravaalam is more than a simple juxtaposition of languages, it is a carefully structured system with unique grammatical, phonetic, and poetic conventions..

5.1 Structural Characteristics

Manipravaalam employs linguistic fusion, embedding Sanskrit compounds—often rich in samāsa constructions—within vernacular sentences governed by Dravidian syntax (Varma, 2001). Sanskrit words are sometimes combined with Dravidian endings, forming hybrids that keep their meaning while fitting local grammar. This structure puts formal or religious content at the centre, surrounded by expressive vernacular lines, balancing poetry and musicality (Annamalai, 2001; Sridhar, 2015).

5.2 Phonetic and Prosodic Compatibility

Phonetic alignment is essential for musical rendering. Sanskrit polysyllables being longer, fit extended notes and ornamentation, while vernacular words, being shorter, suit faster rhythmic phrases (Sambamoorthy, 1972). Performers apply sandhi smoothing and consonant simplification to enhance clarity. Historically, Grantha script marked Sanskrit words in Tamil and Malayalam texts to guide pronunciation and rhythm (Varma, 2001).

5.3 Semantic and Poetic Devices

Manipravaalam employs puns, double meanings, and vivid imagery to convey layered messages. Lines often express deep Sanskrit concepts alongside heartfelt vernacular thoughts. Classical symbols like lotuses and stars mix with everyday images such as rivers and local plants, making them relatable. Sound patterns—repetition, alliteration, and internal rhyme—aid memory and musical flow, allowing compositions to serve as spiritual teaching, personal prayer, and artistic expression (Shankar, 2012; Venkatesan, 2018).

5.4 Practical Implications for Performance and Notation

These linguistic traits influence how music is taught, performed, and preserved. Transliteration and notation should clearly reflect sandhi, stress, and pronunciation. In teaching, Sanskrit and vernacular sections are often learned separately before being combined to retain balance. Editors and archivists ensure that written forms capture both language detail and performance style (Subramanian, 2006).

6. Why Manipravaalam Matters

Manipravaalam is more than a linguistic curiosity; it is a strategic and expressive medium that shapes how Carnatic music communicates, conveys emotion, and sustains tradition.

6.1 Bridges registers

By combining Sanskrit's formal density with the immediacy of Tamil or Malayalam, manipravaalam renders philosophical ideas accessible without diminishing liturgical weight.

6.2 Enhances musicality

The bilingual phrasing creates varied prosodic shapes—elongated Sanskrit cadences for ornamentation and compact vernacular lines for rhythmic clarity—enabling richer rāga-sahitya interplay.

6.3 Deepens affect

Juxtaposing the two languages produces layered meanings and emotional contrast, amplifying bhāva and engaging listeners more profoundly.

6.4 Cultural inclusion

Manipravaalam allowed compositions to resonate with both courtly/scholarly and popular/devotional audiences, fostering communal participation in temples and concert spaces.

6.5 Practical legacy

It facilitated transmission across regions and genres, including dance, ritual, and theatre, and continues to provide fertile ground for pedagogy, archival work, and creative revival.

Overall, manipravaalam functions as a versatile aesthetic medium, preserving doctrinal depth while inviting emotional resonance—making Carnatic compositions both intellectually engaging and profoundly expressive.

7. Composers and Representative Kritis: Linguistic Fusion in Practice

Manipravaalam reaches its highest expression in the works of composers who used language blending not merely for decoration, but as a means of musical, poetic, and spiritual communication. Through their creations, the synthesis of Sanskrit with Tamil, Telugu, and Malayalam became a hallmark of Carnatic music's expressive depth.

7.1 Muthuswami Dikshitar: Sacred Syntax and Musical Precision

Among the Trinity, Muthuswami Dikshitar is the foremost exponent of Sanskrit-based manipravaalam. His kritis blend Sanskrit, Tamil, and Telugu with lyrical fluidity while maintaining rhythmic precision (Subramanian, 2006).

In the concluding maṅgala kriti from his Abhayamba Vibhakti set, “**Shri Abhayamba Ninnu Chintinchana Variki**”, the linguistic fusion is clear: Shri Abhayamba is Sanskrit, ninnu chintinchana variki is Telugu, and indha kavalai ellam is Tamil. Similarly, in “**Venkata**

Chālapathē”, the lines Venkata Chālapathē are Sanskrit, ninnu nammithi vegame nannu is Telugu, and rakshiyum ayya is Tamil.

For Dikshitar, this multilingual approach conveys a symbolic duality: Sanskrit expresses divine grandeur, Tamil adds intimacy, and Telugu conveys lyrical warmth and devotion, reflecting the philosophical harmony of jnana (knowledge) and bhakti (devotion).

7.2 Swathi Thirunal Rama Varma: The Royal Polyglot

Swathi Thirunal’s compositions exemplify linguistic cosmopolitanism, blending Sanskrit and Malayalam seamlessly (Varma, 2001). In the krithi “**Alarsara Parithapam**”, the line Alarsara paritapam colvatin-nalivEni pANi bAIE showcases this fusion: Alarsara paritapam (Sanskrit), colvatin-nalivEni (Malayalam), and pANi bAIE (Sanskrit). Similarly, in “**AndOLika VāhanE jagatpatiyAm ambhOja nAbhan lasiccITunnu**”, Sanskrit compounds AndOLika VāhanE, jagatpati, and ambhoja nAbhan are interwoven with Malayalam grammar and verbs like lasiccITunnu.

The kriti “**Hanta Jeevanayaka**” in Neelaambari rāgam further demonstrates this style. The Pallavi, Hanta jeevanayaka durlabham mama priya darsanam, blends the Sanskrit interjection Hanta with Malayalam-infused grammar. The Anupallavi, Chintayami tava roopam aho gopala balike njan, combines pure Sanskrit (Chintayami tava roopam) with mixed phrases (aho gopala balike and Malayalam pronoun njan). In the Charanam, Sanskrit words like bhojendraputhrane and kouthukam appear alongside Malayalam expressions such as karanam cholluvaan aarum illallo and kaanmaan ullil kouthukam.

Swathi Thirunal’s manipulation of Sanskrit and Malayalam demonstrates how lighter vernacular rhythms can complement weighty Sanskrit phrasing (Menon, 1998). His music bridges royal scholarship and popular devotion, uniting courtly and temple traditions.

7.3 Manipravaalam in Muthiah Bhagavata’s Compositions

In Muthiah Bhagavata’s composition “**Ambā Mahāvāṇi Akhila Vidyādayini**,” the Anupallavi beautifully demonstrates the seamless fusion of Sanskrit and Kannada, embodying the essence of manipravaalam.

The line — “Ambuja bhavānandē Āna tāmara brndē kambugalē karuṇisau kamala padē śārade” — alternates fluidly between the two languages. Words such as ambuja, bhavānandē, kamala padē, śārade belong to Sanskrit, while expressions like Āna tāmara brndē, kambugaLē, karuṇisau reflect Kannada structure and phonetics.

This blending creates a graceful linguistic rhythm—Sanskrit adds classical dignity, while Kannada anchors it in regional flavour. Through this fusion, Bhagavata carries the manipravaalam tradition into the 20th century with devotional and artistic harmony.

7.4 Contemporary composers

In the modern era, composers like Ambujam Krishna and Chitravina N. Ravikiran have continued the legacy of linguistic fusion, bringing manipravaalam into new creative and devotional contexts. Their works show that this blend of Sanskrit and regional languages remains a living medium—capable of expressing spiritual depth while appealing to contemporary audiences.

Ambujam Krishna’s compositions often reflect spiritual intimacy expressed through a blend of Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu, and even Hindi. In her kriti “**Ashrayāmyaham Satatam**,” the pallavi alternates between Sanskrit (Ashrayāmyaham satatam) and Tamil (aruL tarum varada rAjanai), while the anupallavi continues in Sanskrit (bhUsurAdi sEvitam ambujAsanAdi pUjitam). The charanam demonstrates her creative freedom—mixing Tamil (karumukhil vaNNamum karuNai vaDivum), Telugu (karigina manasuna dalacina vADugi), Hindi (phir dUr karNē kō), and Tamil again (sadA kAnciyuraiyum karuNArUDhanai). Through this multilingual layering, Ambujam Krishna brings out both personal devotion and universality, showing how manipravaalam can still speak to diverse listeners while preserving lyrical grace.

A leading contemporary composer and performer, Chitravina N. Ravikiran employs manipravaalam with artistic precision. In his kriti “**Kanavilum Nanavilum**,” he blends Tamil (kanavilum nanavilum), Telugu (nee pada), and Sanskrit (kamala smaraNE), with the refrain (koDaiyya murugaiyyA) returning to Tamil. The anupallavi combines Sanskrit (anavaratamum), Telugu (ninnu), Kannada (nambi bandEnE), and a multilingual mix in (amudai pozhindu daya mADO en). The charanam, rich in rhythmic movement, merges Sanskrit invocations (shree kArtikEya shiva bAlA tAraka shoorapadma hara) with Telugu and Tamil expressions, demonstrating effortless transitions between linguistic and melodic registers.

Ravikiran’s manipravaalam style shows how linguistic fusion can enhance both the rhythmic and emotional dynamics of a composition, linking classical tradition with modern creativity.

Together, Ambujam Krishna and Chitravina Ravikiran reaffirm that manipravaalam is not a relic of the past but a living, evolving form—uniting devotion, language, and music in a single expressive continuum.

7.5 Cinematic Adaptations of Manipravaalam: Contemporary Expressions of Linguistic Fusion

The spirit of manipravaalam finds a vibrant modern echo in Indian cinema, where composers creatively merge multiple languages within a single song. One striking example is “**Why This Kolaveri Di**” from the Tamil film 3 (2012), composed by Anirudh Ravichander and sung by Dhanush. The very title “Why this kolaveri di” illustrates linguistic blending—why this is English, while kolaveri is Tamil and di is a Tamil vocative suffix. Further within the song, lines such as “Girl-u heart-u black-u” and “Distance-la moonu” combine English words (girl, heart, distance) with Tamil grammatical endings like -u (used for rhythmic emphasis) and -la (indicating location). This playful mix enhances rhythm and mirrors urban cross-cultural identity—English adds modernity and reach, while Tamil roots it in local flavour.

A subtler yet equally beautiful example is A. R. Rahman’s “**Jiya Jale**” from the Hindi film Dil Se (1998), with lyrics by Gulzar (Hindi) and Malayalam interludes penned by Gireesh Puthenchery. The song “Jiya Jale” beautifully blends Hindi and Malayalam, where the Hindi refrain “Jiya jale jaan jale” seamlessly transitions into the Malayalam phrase “Punchiri thanu konchiko”, creating a smooth interplay between the two languages within the same melodic line.

8. Pedagogy, Performance, and Contemporary Relevance

Manipravaalam endures through traditional teaching, performance practice, and modern preservation efforts. In gurukulas and temple settings, emphasis was placed on pronunciation, prosody, and emotional delivery, ensuring clarity in both Sanskrit and Dravidian syllables (Subramanian, 2006). Performers use Sanskrit for melodic elaboration and vernacular lines for rhythmic expression, maintaining linguistic and musical balance (Venkatesan, 2018).

From early notations like Sangeetha Sampradaya Pradarshini to digital archives, documentation secures continuity despite challenges in script representation (Narayan, 2017). In the modern era, manipravālam finds renewed presence in bilingual kritis, thematic concerts, and academic studies exploring linguistic and musical interaction (Rao, 2020; Menon, 2022). Digitization and transliteration projects further aid accessibility and preservation (Subrahmanyam, 2021).

Together, these efforts sustain manipravālam as a living bridge between linguistic heritage and contemporary musical expression.

Conclusion

The exploration of linguistic fusion in South Indian classical music reveals a deep connection between language, culture, and melody. The blending of Sanskrit with Tamil and Malayalam has enriched the poetic and musical dimensions of the Carnatic tradition, sustaining a dialogue between devotion, artistry, and scholarship.

Manipravaalam compositions are not mere linguistic hybrids but thoughtful aesthetic syntheses where rāga and sāhitya align seamlessly. Sanskrit lends sacred precision and grandeur, while regional languages bring warmth and emotional immediacy, making the music both intellectually engaging and spiritually intimate.

This bilingual artistry connects generations of composers, performers, and listeners—from the works of Muthuswami Dikshitar and Swathi Thirunal to modern reinterpretations. It continues to influence music, dance, and interdisciplinary performance, symbolizing harmony amidst diversity and reflecting the inclusive spirit of South Indian culture.

Moving forward, digital preservation, comparative linguistic study, and pedagogical integration can ensure its continued vitality. Manipravaalam thus stands as a living testament to India's composite identity—celebrating unity without uniformity, tradition without stagnation, and an ever-evolving artistry that continues to resonate across time.

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