



Nagore Hanifa: Vocalist of the Dravidian movement

Dr. T G Seema Gopal

Assistant Professor, Department of History, Muslim Arts College, Thiruvithancode, Kanyakumari, Tamil nadu, India

Abstract

This research article chronicles the life, contributions, and socio-political impact of Nagore Hanifa, affectionately known as the "Isai Murasu" (Musical Drum) of Tamil Nadu. Spanning nearly a century, Hanifa's life embodied music, activism, and unwavering devotion to the Dravidian movement. Drawing upon historical records, books, and newspaper sources, this article investigates the evolution of Hanifa's role in Tamil musical history, Dravidian socio-political activism, and anti-colonial resistance, presenting a comprehensive analysis relevant to scholars of South Indian studies, ethnomusicology, and political science.

Keywords: Dravidian movement, anti hindi agitation, culture, arts, songs, periyar, anna, kalaignar karunanithi, quide millath, nagore, religious harmony, cinema

Introduction

The history of South Indian politics and culture in the 20th century is inseparable from the figures who fused artistic expression with political agitation. Nagore Hanifa (1925–2015) stands as a unique personality at the crossroads of music, identity, and activism. From his birth in Ramanathapuram district to his emergence as a pan-Tamil icon, Hanifa's voice became synonymous with Dravidian ethos — playing a critical role in shaping the public consciousness through his performances at major events, his advocacy, and his defiance against linguistic and religious impositions. This article explores Hanifa's journey through the intertwined worlds of music and movement politics.

Early Life and First Musical Experiences

Born on December 25, 1925, in Velipattinam, Ramanathapuram district, Nagore Hanifa was the third child of Muhammad Ismail and Mariam Beevi. Hanifa's first exposure to music occurred during his school years in Nagore, where he sang devotional songs for the school assembly. His transition into public performance began with singing at wedding processions and family gatherings, soon blossoming into a career that combined tradition and innovation. Notably, his first paid concert came at age 15, in 1941, in Therizhandur, Thanjavur district, where he performed at a marriage and received a fee of 25 rupees. Hanifa was not formally trained in music; rather, his resonant voice was a natural gift, allowing him to captivate audiences and adapt to various musical contexts^[1].

Musical Legacy and Societal Impact

Hanifa's contributions to Tamil music are both vast and transformative. With over thousands of songs performed and countless concerts spanning six decades, his impact reached not only the urban centers but also rural communities, reinforcing Dravidian values while uplifting social morale. Hanifa's ability to bridge religious divides was exceptional—his songs are staples at Muslim weddings, but they also echo through Hindu and Christian households. In 1954, his songs were recorded for the first time, including Bharathidasan's famed "Engal

Vaazhvum Engal Valamum Mangaatha Tamizh Endru Sange Muzhangu" and Nellathambi Paavalar's children's instructional song, "Chinna Chinna Palargale! Singara Thozhargale!"

Hanifa's musical journey extended internationally, with performances in Sri Lanka (starting in Jaffna, 1949), Singapore, Malaysia, and several Gulf countries — an early example of Tamil musical globalization. His concert repertoire, built over 65 years, remains unmatched in scale and longevity. Devotees like Kundrakudi Adigalar and even the Madurai Aadheenam preferred listening to Hanifa's spiritual and motivational songs, highlighting the profound resonance of Hanifa's music across religious and caste boundaries^[2].

Hanifa in Tamil Cinema

Hanifa's connection to Tamil cinema helped further extend his cultural influence. He contributed notable songs to films such as:

- "Naayagame Nabi Naayagame" in "Kulebakavali" (with Jikki and L.G. Krishnan)
- "Ellorum Kondaduvom" in "Paavamannipu" (with T.M. Soundararajan)
- "Natta Nadu Kadal Meethu" in "Semparuthi"
- "Un Mathama En Mathama" in "Raman Abdulla"

Despite minimal formal musical training, Hanifa's powerful voice made him an asset to the industry. Cultural commentators, like Charu Nivedita, noted that Hanifa's potential for global fame would have been realized had he been born in Europe or Morocco, such was the uniqueness and beauty of his voice. Singapore's Straits Times even hailed him as "Golden Voice from India," while Tamil scholar Shanmuga Desikar awarded him the honorary title "Isai Murasu"^[3].

Ideological Roots and Political Activism

Hanifa was not merely a performer; he was an activist and ideologue deeply invested in the Dravidian movement. He cultivated close relationships with stalwarts such as Periyar, Pattukottai Azhagiri, Arignar Anna, Kalaignar Karunanidhi, and Quidé Millath. As a child, Hanifa actively participated

in collecting and mailing Dravidian movement publications like "Kudiyarasu" and "Tharul Islam" for his father, meticulously reading them to internalize self-respect ideologies.

In 1939, at age 13, Hanifa was arrested for waving black flags during anti-Hindi protests coinciding with Rajaji's visit to Nagore. This early activism instilled lifelong commitment to resistance against cultural hegemony [4]. Hanifa's association with Periyar deepened over years, singing at nearly every public gathering attended by the leader, whose admiration for Hanifa's voice was legendary [5].

Hanifa also garnered respect and personal affection from Anna and Pattukottai Azhagiri. His role as a singer at DMK events, from its founding in 1949 until his last concert in 2006 in

Trichy, remains a record unmatched for devotion and continuity. Anna's relationship with Hanifa was cemented through moments of solidarity—such as Anna comforting him following public hostility at a Dravidian event, strengthening Hanifa's resolve to continue performing despite adversity [6].

Karunanidhi's friendship with Hanifa was born in childhood, with Hanifa performing at early Karunanidhi-organized events by the river at Thiruvarur. Karunanidhi lauded Hanifa's selfless commitment to Tamil and Dravidian causes, celebrating his contributions upon Hanifa's death and decreeing a three-day half-mast for DMK party flags [7].

Political Engagements and Imprisonments

Hanifa remained closely aligned with DMK's direct action policies, participating in key historic protests:

- Anti-Hindi agitations (1952, 1965)
- Anti Price hike protests (1962, arrested and jailed for three months)
- Burning the constitutional law (1965, 32 days in jail) [8]

Throughout his activism, Hanifa endured 11 jail terms, demonstrating the deep links between cultural leadership and political risk in the period. He was contesting from Nagapattinam in 1957 and Vaniyambadi in 2002 as a DMK candidate and defeated despite electoral losses, Hanifa remained a vital figure in political mobilization, eventually appointed Chairman of the Tamil Nadu Waqf Board under Karunanidhi's government [9].

Interreligious and Social Harmony

Hanifa's music fostered communal harmony in Tamil Nadu, with his songs often serving as the backdrop to Hindu and Christian celebrations as well as Islamic weddings — a rarity amidst the often sectarian fabric of South Asian societies. His presence and music are credited as factors in reducing interreligious tensions and promoting unity. Spiritual figures like Kundrakudi Adigalar were notably ardent supporters and listeners of Hanifa's songs.

Final Years, Death, and Legacy

Hanifa lived his final years in Kotturpuram, Chennai, passing away on April 8, 2015. His funeral in Nagore saw attendance by thousands of citizens and leaders from across the political spectrum. The Tamil Nadu government commemorated his legacy by naming a street and beachside park after him, and officially celebrating his birth centenary

as a state event in 2024, following proposals by legislative members and approval by Chief Minister M. K. Stalin.

Among Hanifa's enduring contributions, the song "Traivanidam Kaiyenthungal Avan Illaiyendru Solluvadhillai" has become an anthem for unity, heard across diverse households. As Chief Minister Stalin noted, Hanifa's political and cultural life was inseparable from the growth of the Justice Party, Dravidian movements, and the expansion of social justice in Tamil Nadu.

Conclusion

Nagore Hanifa's life stands as a testament to the power of music as a vehicle for political and social change. His voice was not merely artistic, but activist; his performances wove together ideology, resilience, and hope. In chronicling Hanifa's journey from a schoolboy singer to the musical sentinel of Tamil Nadu's Dravidian movement, this article highlights how individual agency in music and activism can reshape communities, influence governance, and unite diverse societies.

Nagore Hanifa's work remains essential to understanding the intersections of art, identity, and politics in South Asia, offering scholars a vivid case study in lived resistance and enduring legacy.

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