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# Know Your City: The evolution of Chennai's Margazhi festival – a season of classical music, dance and sabha-hopping

The Margazhi Kutcheri is the annual performing arts season in Chennai when artists across the globe visit Chennai to take part in a celebration of music and dance during the Margazhi month in the Tamil calendar that falls between mid-December and mid-January.

Written by [Varsha Sriram](#)

Chennai | Updated: December 9, 2022 9:55:24 pm

 NewsGuard



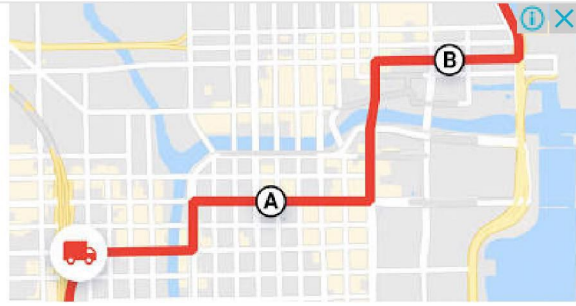
More than 100 organisations put up hundreds of music and dance performances during the annual celebration in Chennai. (Top left and bottom right: K Shyamakrishnan/Top right and bottom left: Express archives)

It is often said in jest that Chennai has only one season throughout the year — summer. There is, however, a short period between November and January when the city cools down a bit to a more pleasant weather. During this period, the city plays host to a unique festival called the **Margazhi season of music and dance**.

The Margazhi Kutcheri (concert in Tamil) is the annual performing arts season in Chennai when amateur and established artists across the globe visit the coastal capital of Tamil Nadu to take part in a celebration of music and dance for weeks. The festival is celebrated during the Margazhi month in the Tamil calendar which falls between mid-December and mid-January.

Margazhi's relationship with **Chennai** has evolved so much that the two have come to define each other. For Chennai, Margazhi is part of its culture and there is no other city that celebrates the December music season the way it does. More than 100 organisations put up hundreds of music and dance performances during the annual celebration.





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The festival is not just meant for entertainment, but it also defines Chennai as the 'seat of culture' and has stood the test of time.

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Several renowned performers are regulars at the Margazhi Music Festival, including Sudha Raghunathan, Bombay Jayashree, Priya Sisters, T M Krishna, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Sikkil Gurucharan, Padma Subramanian, Shashank Subrahmanyam, Malladi Brothers, Roja Kannan, Neyveli Santhana Gopalan, Aruna Sairam, Chitra Visweswaran, Dr S Sowmya, Dr Padma Subrahmanyam and S Ve Sekar, among others.

It is at this time that the city's performance venues, also called sabhas, come alive to the ragas of music as vocalists, instrumentalists and dancers invoke gods, goddesses

and saints through ancient compositions.

## History of Margazhi: A throwback to the 1920s


Margazhi is considered an inauspicious month by Hindus. No weddings or celebrations are held during this period. Instead, people undertake meditation and offer prayers. The Margazhi Kutcheri season is held during this month as musical performances are considered a form of prayer and meditation.

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Chennai-based historian and writer V Sriram says the concept of worshipping during the month of Margazhi originated from the Bhagavad Gita as Krishna says that among the months, he is Margazhi. “It has a particularly holy connotation and, during that month, people believe in not conducting anything to do with human interests and devote themselves to spiritual interests.”

The December Kutcheri season, however, had its origin in the 1920s when musicians residing in Chennai (then Madras) decided to dedicate Margazhi to music and prayer. During those days, music was often in the form of devotional offerings, commonly known as nama sangeerthanam or bhajans.

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In 1927, the Congress organised its all-India conference in Madras, and party leader and freedom fighter S Satyamurti decided on a music concert to entertain the delegates. “December was the period when most meetings and conferences would happen in Madras due to its good weather. There was no need for ACs during that period and people would meet outdoors,” Sriram notes.

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Around the same time, there were different exhibitions of musical artefacts, instruments and papers were presented on music, one of which suggested the need for an academy of music in Madras. With the surplus money collected from tickets, the Music Academy (now one of the finest sabhas in Chennai) was established in 1928. From 1929, it was decided that the Academy would conduct a music festival every December.



With the surplus money collected from tickets, The Music Academy (now one of the finest sabhas in Chennai) was established in 1928. (Express archive)

In 1931, the Indian Fine Arts Society was set up and in 1942 the Tamilsai Sangam was established, both of which joined the bandwagon of organisations conducting the Margazhi festival, Sriram adds. "It was sometime during the 1980s that many sabhas, that had existed for a long period of time, also decided to get into the same space."

By the end of the Margazhi month, the focus shifts to the Thyagaraja Music Festival or Thyagaraja Aradhana Festival in Thanjavur, devoted to the renowned music

composer seen as one of the three legendary figures that form the trinity of Carnatic music.

## Significance and evolution of Margazhi festival

When you look back, the season's history is also the story of the modern evolution of the classical art forms of music and dance, including Bharatanatyam.

Maharajapuram S Ganesh Viswanathan, a Carnatic vocalist who hails from the illustrious Maharajapuram lineage of musicians, says, "From my personal experience of having performed widely in the Margazhi festival for well over two decades, I would say that the growth and the reach of this festival have been exponential and unprecedented. Thanks to the advent of online media and the growing presence of Indian music on the global stage, I would say that it is seen as one of the world's biggest music festivals."

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The festival's popularity can be noticed in the rise in the number of sabhas/organisations that have shown interest in conducting the programmes over the years. Pre-pandemic, the official count says that there are around 150 sabhas offering 3,000 concerts in a very short span of just 15 days.

Since it is a performing arts festival, the season has also evolved into featuring a plethora of cultural performances. Artistes hold lectures, discussions and recitals in nama sangeerthanams, harikathas, bhajans, drama recitals, theatre productions, Carnatic music, Hindustani music and classical dance forms such as Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi, Kathak, Mohiniyattam, and instrumental performances and folk art forms in sabhas, temples, cultural institutions, dance and music schools and public spaces throughout the day.

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## Acid test for aspiring musicians

Ganesh says the festival also serves as an acid test for every Carnatic musician. “It is the stage where new musicians get a golden chance to showcase their talent before a very learned global audience. Just like how new actors become superstars overnight with a successful movie release on a weekend, a musician is viewed as a promising talent if he is able to deliver a great concert or a few concerts during the Margazhi festival.”

“It is amazing that such niche art forms have been attracting so many people from across the world for decades now,” Sriram says. More than the performances themselves, it is the academic lectures, discussions and paper presentations by artists that many are attracted to.

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Ganesh feels that it is the acceptance and promotion of young talent that has been one of the key factors behind the festival's constant growth. “An experienced musician would say that the growth of a young musician to stardom has been much faster in the last 10 years. I could say with certainty that a few successful Margazhi seasons can determine the future of an upcoming Carnatic musician these days,” he underlines.

Mahati Kannan, a professional Bharatanatyam dancer and the grand-niece of renowned dancer Dr Padma Subrahmanyam, says the recent increase in the number of alternative venues as performance spaces has created more avenues for young artists. “I feel this has opened up more avenues for aspiring artistes to showcase their talent, and Margazhi being synonymous with the music and dance season here has helped boost such ventures,” she says. Page 8 of 11



A dance show produced by Bharatanatyam dancer Dr Padma Subrahmanyam (Courtesy: K Shyamakrishnan)

An interesting feature to note is the parallel rise of sabha canteens that are as famous as the performances themselves. In December, caterers across the city display a wide variety of south Indian food items. Most sabha canteens serve four meals a day — breakfast, lunch, evening snacks and dinner.

Though the concept of having canteens during concerts began in the mid-1940s, Sriram says the sabha canteens have drawn more crowds to the performances over the last few years. “There are people who have no idea of what is happening inside the auditorium, but they will come to eat the food in the sabhas and leave. But the point is that they are still listening to the music and the canteen is just a doorway to attract a larger crowd.”



While there are hundreds of sabhas in Chennai, the top ones are the Madras Music Academy, the Indian Fine Arts, Tamil Isai Sangam, Sri Krishna Gana Sabha, Naradha Gana Sabha, Mylapore Fine Arts Club, Nungambakkam Fine Arts Academy, Rasika Ranjana Sabha and the Kalakshetra Foundation, among others.

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## Post-pandemic challenges

The Margazhi festival's strength is derived from the rise in artists' participation, audience engagement and community funding. Significantly, NRIs fly down every December with families to attend and perform at the concerts.

Nevertheless, dwindling sponsorships, low remuneration for artists, sabhas cutting down on the number of programmes and, most importantly, the [Covid-19](#) pandemic have been major challenges in organising the festival.

Ganesh says artists face issues, especially if their future is dependent on the festival. "It is not easy as there is fierce competition to get that bit of stardom or sense of achievement after a successful music season. For established artists, it is a race to remain relevant. This festival is very much like an IPL where both young and senior talent compete against each other for coveted positions."

For Sriram, the major issue is how the festival runs on "minuscule budgets". The historian draws a comparison between Carnatic and Hindustani musicians and says the former get less remuneration. Another issue, he points out, is how it runs solely on sponsorship. "The December Season has always survived more on sponsorship than ticket sales. The number of free concerts has increased tremendously in the last few years, and sabhas do not seem to worry about how they will sustain themselves."

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Speaking about the financial aspect, Ganesh explains that it is more of a survival strategy to remain in the concert circuit that matters. "It is believed that a musician who does not get a chance to perform during the season is considered a non-entity in the industry. As musicians, we worry more about the number of fixtures/prime slots that we get than the monetary compensation," he says.

Adding to this, the Carnatic music and dance industry suffered a great deal due to the pandemic. The musicians and artistes are still recovering from a two-year closure of live events and are holding hybrid concerts that include pre-recorded, virtual and in-person events.

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Ganesh says there is a great deal of debate and discussion on how to effectively monetise virtually hosted concerts. “There has been a flourishing trend of newcomers in the industry during the pandemic. But many who see Carnatic music as a full-time career suffered. In fact, some were forced to look for alternative sources of livelihood during the lockdown. Some got forced into a debt trap.” The industry soon realised the potential of the online space, which boosted the global appeal of Carnatic music, he feels.

Before long, artists began to upload their performances on YouTube thereby making it free for all to view. “I am completely against this. If something has to survive, it has to be commercially viable,” says Sriram. He believes that if the remuneration comes down over a period of time, fewer people will take to performing these art forms.

The number of shows and slots allocated to artists have also been on the decline over the last two years. According to experts, Ganesh says, the number of slots in the afternoon and morning have decreased post-pandemic. “I feel this might be a worrying trend for upcoming musicians who might get excluded. Sabha officials also say that the audience patronage for morning and afternoon concerts have been dwindling a lot. They feel it is economically not feasible to host concerts where there are more people on the stage than in the audience,” he adds.

Mahati feels the main issue is the dip in audience strength. “This has been the case for a few years now so a lot of artists are rethinking performance format, duration, themes and the like,” she says.

A section also feels that those hailing from under-represented communities face more challenges. The pandemic has worsened this, making it easier for artists from privileged backgrounds to become stable quicker than the rest.

### **Future of Margazhi festival**

Ganesh is certain that the Margazhi festival will not witness a “doomsday”. “The city of Chennai is the mecca of Carnatic music and we will never allow this festival



to lose its glory. As a musician committed to the art, I will always want the festival to achieve greater heights. The future of Margazhi is very much safe and there are absolutely no signs of it becoming irrelevant,” he stresses.

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Sriram, however, believes the upcoming season will be a deciding year for the festival. “If there are good numbers, the art forms will last longer. But if crowds don’t come, there will be the big question of what will happen next year. Big sabhas like the Music Academy and Tamilisai Sangam do not have to worry since they have years of financial assets to back on. It is the smaller sabhas that will need to ensure survival.”

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