

Issai Mazhalai – the youth revolution

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Issai Mazhalai was launched this month a decade ago.

The man is a bundle of energy. He is unconventional, thinks on his feet, takes quick-fire decisions and is idea-driven; some of his ideas are convention turned on its head. He is also computer-savvy, fun-loving, generous to a fault and, what is more, he relates to people across generations. He is none other than 'Abaswaram' Ramjhi, the man behind Issai Mazhalai.

Why did Ramjhi call his group Issai Mazhalai? Mazhalai is the Tamil word for baby talk or prattle. The idea behind the name is that it is a group of children (sub-adults to be exact) engaged in the performance of music. 'Issai' for the obvious 'Isai' (meaning music) is Ramjhi's maverick spelling! Numerology? We do not know. Again, the kids are not always kids. The youngest is around five and the oldest is 21! We do not associate a twenty-one-year old with 'mazhalai' but this is about the outer age limit, as around this time, they are retired from the troupe. Many are musically mature enough to satisfy a connoisseur with chaste fare. As they grow older and gain experience, their music only improves.

Issai Mazhalai identifies a large number of talented youngsters rather than a Ravikiran here and a Shrinivas there. Ramjhi has the special ability of spotting a talented child and giving him or her repeated opportunities to

perform, all the time interacting with the child's guru and parents. Had there been such identification in the earlier generation, there would have been more Malis and Ravikirans. This is not to suggest that all the children in the Issai Mazhalai group are prodigies – most are talented and a few exceedingly so. Even today, most guru-s do feel that a student is not good or mature enough to perform on stage, unless he or she has had at least eight to ten years of training. The argument cannot be brushed aside. However, if a specially talented child can be spotted and the guru persuaded to impart intensive coaching and concert opportunities follow as incentives, stars can be created very early in life. This is what Ramjhi does successfully.

The talent search requires interaction with a large number of schools, parents, chance reports of a youngster at a family function, listening to prayer songs by children preceding a main event, and referrals by parents who feel their children are special in music. Parents can easily believe their wards possess exceptional talent and this is where Ramjhi's objectivity takes over. His is a one man HR unit. It is entirely up to him to select or reject a child but he does it in a way that does not ruffle any one's feathers. In allotting concerts too, he takes decisions himself and does it equitably as far as possible. So far, none has questioned his judgement or impartiality.

In a group like this (he has about 60 in the Carnatic music wing) all cannot be of the same quality. A

small percentage does not measure up or show signs of improvement and, over time, drop out if not weeded out. The majority however fall in the 'good' to 'excellent' categories.

Ramjhi started in 1969 as a drummer in his Western pop music group which, in his characteristic style he named 'Frustrations Amalgamated' and for about six years, he conducted regular shows in Chennai and elsewhere in India. In the All India Beat contest in 1972 held at the Shanmukhananda Hall in Bombay, the group won five prizes. Within a few years, the music scene changed and what was euphemistically called 'light music' (a misnomer, as it was very heavy on the ear drums), an amalgam of popular Indian film songs became the rage. As there were established names in this field, Ramjhi christened his music troupe as 'Abaswaram' and inaugurated it on 'All Fools' Day' – 1st April 1976. Aspirin and ear-plugs were distributed among the audience, jokes and 'one-liners' accompanied the songs. The public and media immediately took notice! 'Abaswaram' had a dream run for 23 years with about 2500 shows across 11 countries.

Around the birth of the new millennium, Ramjhi grew tired of the routine and endless travelling and dreamt of a new venture. He took up a contract as 'Senior Consultant – Programming' in Raj TV and, in this capacity, produced a number of music shows. It was then that he noticed the keen involvement of the children participating in the shows.



Issai Mazhalai troupe

In the intervals between shootings, they went to a corner and rehearsed their parts, and when in doubt, sought the help of elders to improve their skills. All this while the smug elders were either smoking, chewing betel leaves or gossiping. He decided then to form a music group made up exclusively of children.

A talent hunt started in city schools and about 60 children were shortlisted and put on regular training for a month. Ultimately 14 made the grade and Issai Mazhalai was officially launched on 14th May 2000. The children were in the age group of four to twelve and sang mostly film music. Devotional music was also included to a lesser extent. Till then,

playback singers like M.S. Rajeswari and S. Janaki used to croon songs for children in films but the advent of Issai Mazhalai changed all that. Apart from playback singing in films, this group has also performed about 400 concerts of film and devotional music, including one in the Raj Bhavan on 15th October 2004 that was highly appreciated by the music-minded President Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam.

Ever restless, Ramjhi turned his attention to Carnatic music in 2001. All the children in the film music troupe had a background in Carnatic music and new members also joined the group. Besides vocal music, Ramjhi also built up a database of children skilled in playing instruments such as the

violin, veena, flute, keyboard, mridanga and ghata. Jaya TV telecast a set of twelve concerts – ten vocal, one veena and one keyboard – under the banner 'Baala Bruhman'. Organisers R. Yagnaraman of Sri Krishna Gana Sabha and Mrs. YGP of Bharat Kalachar were so enthusiastic that both of them gave slots in their December series and other programmes. Ramjhi says that Krishna Gana Sabha made a block booking of 20 concerts and soon, other sabha-s also caught on, not only in Chennai, but in other cities too.

The day after the film music wing presented a programme at Rashtrapati Bhavan, the Carnatic wing followed suit and the President was so pleased, especially after

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hearing the children sing the Tyagaraja Pancharatna kriti *Endaro mahanubhavulu*, that he spent time with each child talking about their aspirations and signed autographs for them.

The Issai Mazhalai Carnatic wing performs in sabha-s under its own banner, 'Bala Bruhmam' and 'Bala Kalasagaram'. The group also performs at weddings and temple functions. Ramjhi ensures that opportunities are equitably distributed, but where family circumstances warrant special consideration, individual children get an edge and no one has ever accused him of impropriety. Apart from sabha-s, there are regular sponsors like ITC and Madras Cements. Not only is the Carnatic music wing self sufficient financially, the participating artists earn a reasonable fee too. The biggest advantage for the young performers is the visibility they gain early in their career and positive reviews by critics.

Over the years, the group has acquired members in Chennai as well as other cities in India and a

few in foreign countries too; the last mentioned usually perform during their visits to India during summer vacations and the December Season. Occasionally, there is an opportunity of a visit abroad for a few members. Ramjhi also arranges special summer camps for specific projects like pallavi singing, with senior vidwans like J. Venkataraman, Madurai G.S. Mani and Srimushnam Raja Rao participating. He has also set up a few schools with hand-picked music teachers to provide sustained training to youngsters.

Ramjhi insists that members of the troupe attend one another's concerts to the best extent possible. He has instituted prizes for this purpose. To an extent, this ensures a captive audience.

Among the Issai Mazhalai youngsters who have already come into the regular concert circuit, including senior slots, are Vidya Kalyanaraman, Bharat Sundar and R. Raghavendra (vocal), K.P. Nandini and M. Rajiv (violin) and B. Srivatsan and N.C. Bharadwaj (mridanga). Other fast rising artists include Erode

Anantharaman, Abhilash, Dharini, Brindha Manickavasakan, S. Adityanarayanan and K.P. Nandini (vocalists), Vittal Rangan, Shyam, Parur Ananthakrishnan, Koushik Sivaramakrishnan (violin), Harish Kumar, Rajna Swaminathan, Akshay Ram, L. Subramanian and Aswini (mridanga), Visveswar (flute) and S. Krishna (ghata).

Will Issai Mazhalai's Carnatic wing survive over time? At least for the next five to ten years, there should be no cause for concern. But with the proliferation of sabha-s and other formal and informal organisations, many youngsters, not part of Issai Mazhalai do get concert opportunities. If this tendency increases, Issai Mazhalai could lose its importance. Further, the infrastructure and organisational skills are concentrated in one man – Ramjhi, who is not getting any younger. But Ramjhi, ever the opportunist and survivor, will surely come out with a winning idea at that point of time!

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