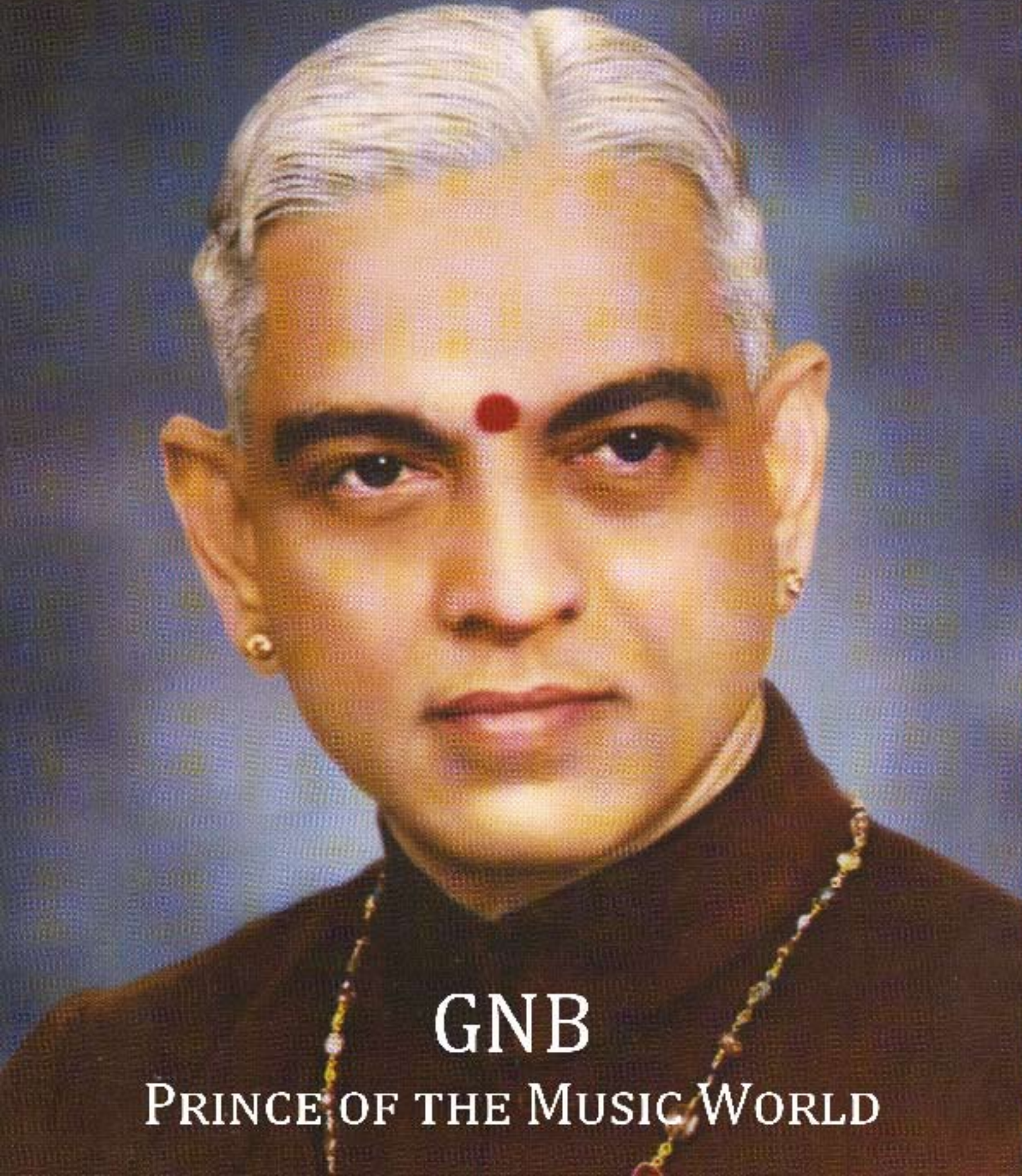


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**GNB**  
**PRINCE OF THE MUSIC WORLD**

# GNB: Prince of the Music World

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# Contents

1	From talkies to Tanjavur	04
2	A star is born	08
3	Pole star in Triplicane	10
4	Growing up at the sabha	12
5	Debut	15
6	His gurus	19
7	Recorded for posterity	23
8	From Narada to Udayanan	26
9	Sangita Kalanidhi	30
10	The GNB bani	34
11	Vaggeyakara	42
12	Slings and arrows	45
13	Friends	48
14	Prince of music	52
15	The all rounder	55

# 1

## From talkies to Tanjavur

“Are you crazy?” asked a member of the Anjaneya Temple Festival Committee. “Is there a shortage of musicians here? There are so many even between Kumbakonam and Pudukottai. For ten rupees, we can listen to Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer or Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar all night long. Has the prestige of Tanjavur fallen so low that we need to import a singer from the talkies from Madras?”

Tanneertotti Venkatarama Iyer was not easily defeated. “Mahalingam Pillaival!” he retorted. “I have been pleading with you for two years now. I drink the same Kaveri water you drink. Perhaps my smattering of knowledge of music has kept me in the committee all these years, menial though my task may be. Let’s invite him just once.” Venkatarama Iyer was rudely interrupted by his colleagues on the committee.

“I too have seen your hero’s film,” one member taunted Venkatarama Iyer. “We are used to seeing a hirsute Narada singing Narayana’s praise on screen. Your B.A. Honours Narada was so different – clean-shaven, wearing the tambura like a decoration. Didn’t he make such a fool of himself singing *Kotinadulu Dhanushkotilo*, not even aware that the composer of the song was Narada’s sishya Tyagaraja! And you have been at it for two years, recommending his music! If his concert flops tomorrow, won’t all of Tanjavur laugh at our committee?”

Mahalingam Pillai felt sorry for Venkatarama Iyer, who was visibly upset. “We have enough money for eight concerts this year”, he said. “One poor concert can’t do any harm. Nor is Venkatarama Iyer someone who’d lightly recommend a new musician. Instead of listening to the same old music, why don’t we try out a new voice? What do you say, Vaidyanatha Iyerval?”

“I am not against inviting a new musician,” Vaidyanatha Iyer replied. “Didn’t my sishya Palghat Mani take the world by storm when barely 15? Still, let’s not forget that the Boat Mail ticket alone will cost us Rs. 4 3/4 if we bring this man from Madras.”

Tanneertotti Venkatarama Iyer exploded. “I have built a water tank and employ two men to quench the thirst of street cattle. If the Boat Mail train fare is the problem, I’ll gladly take care of it. I’ll put it down to ten extra days of wages for watering the cattle!”



“What do you see in that cacophony?”

“I have no time for discussions with you when you speak with such a forked tongue about music you have never heard,” Venkatarama Iyer told Vaidyanatha Iyer. “Mahalingam Pillaival, let me request you one last time. Can we or can we not invite Mani for a concert?”

“Iyerval! Please go home in peace. We’ll arrange Mani’s concert just as you wish.” Mahalingam Pillai was firm in his decision in the face of all the opposition.

For all the general discontent, Mahalingam Pillai was heartened by the obvious satisfaction in Venkatarama Iyer’s expression. His happiness was however short-lived.

“You think a concert at the Naalukaal Mandapam is child’s play?” one of the critics said. Any musician will be nervous about performing at Tanjavur. Even giants of our music yearn for our nods of approval from the top steps of the Venkatesa Perumal temple, treating it as the ultimate triumph of their lives. And you insist on allowing a film singer to perform here?”

Mahalingam Pillai gave a sagacious reply. “I’ll invite Mudicondan Venkatarama Iyer to suit your taste. As for Mani, do you believe I am in favour of his concert? Tanneertotti Venkatarama Iyer has done so much for the town and the festival over the years. He’s been making this request for the last two years. Why don’t we yield to his request and let the upstart have his day? Let’s concentrate on our thousand problems in the meantime.”

Finally money was sent to Madras and the date of the concert fixed. By the time the festival ‘notices’ were being printed, accompanists were vying with one another to perform along with Ariyakudi, Musiri and other big draws. Not one of them was willing to accompany the ‘talkie vidwan’ being imported from Madras.

When he was asked about it, Vaidyanatha Iyer said, “Yes, it was I who forbade my disciples from playing for him. Murthy may be young but he already has a good reputation. Why should he accompany half baked bhagavatars?”

Mahalingam Pillai took issue with him. “Iyerval, it doesn’t behove you to use words like half baked. I hear even the advertisement for the talkie describes him as the Hutchins Plate Bhagavata.”

“What did I say wrong?” Tanjavur Vaidyanatha Iyer’s reply was red hot. “You are a vidwan, too. Tell me now, did your talkie vidwan ever learn music through gurukulavasam? You know better than I the calibre of someone who has learnt through ‘hearsay’ and teachers from the cinema field. I won’t let any student of mine accompany this so-called vidwan.”

As no accompanist came forward to take part in the Balasubramaniam concert, Mahalingam Pillai prevailed upon his disciple Natarajasundaram Pillai (mridangam) and a certain Padmanabha Saralaya (violin) to agree to support the young vidwan in the festival.

The festival started and the concerts went off smoothly. The day after Mudicondan Venkatarama Iyer’s kutcheri was scheduled the “Hutchins Plate fame, B.A. Honours vidwan’s.” All the brave critics who lampooned him were there in full strength at the Venkatesa Perumal temple. Forgotten were their taunts of dire warning such as “I won’t allow the concert”, “I won’t be seen dead at the kutcheri,” and “Is he bringing Krishnamurthy who sang a duet with him in the movies?”

Some boasted: “I’ve been listening to music since the days of Poochi Srinivasa Iyengar. Let me see what this new kid on the block can offer.” Others sharpened their ears to spot flaws in the concert and damn the singer once and for all. “We’ll shake our heads violently and exile him from Tanjavur for good.” Some were less malicious. They decided to see for themselves how charismatic the actor was,

music be damned. Others wanted to check out the college graduate city slicker. Be all that as it might, the concert hall was filled to the brim half an hour before start.

Tanneertotti Venkatrama Iyer entered the hall with a grim expression on his face. The 'talkie singer' saluted the audience and ascended the stage. The handsome 25-year-old had a light complexion, a sharp, aquiline nose, long fingers, and slightly protruding ears. His diamond ear studs sparkled and glittered, and he wore a *javvadu pottu* on his forehead. He was not unaware of the happenings around him. He had been feeling quite upset, as if someone had wrung his heart, after Venkatarama Iyer filled him in that afternoon with the details of his recent struggles. His mind dwelt for a moment on his home atmosphere. He thought of all the vidwans who had waited for his father Narayanaswami Iyer's approval.

He remembered the time when his father had been secretary of Parthasarathy Sangeeta Sabha. The boy had walked around as if he owned the place. He recalled the praise and encouragement he received from the likes of Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar, Palladam Sanjeeva Rao and the Right Hon. Srinivasa Sastry. He, who had known nothing but compliments and applause from his friends and vidwans during unexpected singing opportunities, found this stern welcome from the Kaveri-fed Tanjavur delta unpalatable.

"What is the connection between my B.A. and the Bhairavi I am going to sing?" he asked himself. "Has anyone so far pointed out what I did wrong by singing in the talkies? Was it my fault that I sang a Tyagaraja kriti as Narada? Haven't they heard *Amma ravamma* in the opening scene of *Sri Valli*, sung to facilitate a grand entrance? Was father right after all? Maybe I should have studied law as he advised me. Then musicians would have stood respectfully before me. Even now, I can go back to Madras, rejecting this Tanjavur and the remuneration offered to me. But then, won't it be a rejection of all that I have stood for all these years? Won't it be a denial of all my arguments and quarrels with my father?"

"Didn't I dream of singing at Tiruvaiyaru this year after achieving success here? I must go ahead, come what may." Mani set his own mind at rest. "I am not singing for the audience. I came here to pay my homage to Tyagaraja. I may not even get a chance to sing at Tiruvaiyaru. So, let me treat this concert as my tribute to Tyagaraja. Whatever follows will be his doing". The sudden mental clarity made him smile, winning over at least some in the audience.

He smiled at his accompanists and launched into the varnam, aligning himself to a 4½ kattai sruti and meditating on Tyagaraja. A mild buzz began to pervade the steps of the Venkatesa Perumal temple, as the varnam in the middle tempo started its majestic march.

"It's a good voice all right, but any child can sing a varnam", said a self-styled critic on the steps. "Kalpita music may be easy pickings, but isn't kalpana music more important?"

One king among rasika-s who had sworn not to attend the concert contributed his two pennies' worth at the end of three brisk madhyama-kala compositions. "No doubt his style resembles the Ariyakudi bani, but he's yet to do a raga alapana."

The buzz intensified as the gentle hint of a raga unfolded.

"What ho! He seems to be taking up Madhyamavati!"

"Damn! What's the dhaivata doing in Madhyamavati? Didn't you notice the initial '*sa-ni-dha-ma*'?"

"Must be a slip. Didn't I strongly oppose this concert in the first place?"

"Oy, his singing indicates clarity. You can consistently hear the nishada in the arohanam and

dhaivata in the avarohanam. No one can make the same mistake everytime. I have even heard a Tyagaraja kriti in the raga swaroota he outlined in the beginning, though I can't remember its name."

Even as the experts on the steps were desperately trying to identify the raga, the young man was giving them glimpses of his creative genius with his exposition of Andolika raga, with its different swara combinations on the ascending and descending scales and other vakra usages. Effortlessly bridging swara-s in the madhya, mandra and tara sthayis, he gave voice to hitherto unheard variations through his super fast brigas.

The doubters were now silenced. They were already eagerly looking forward to the musician's next offering.

His swara essays for the kriti *Ragasudha rasa* stunned the audience. "Look at the infinite variety of the swara-s with which he comes back to the eduppu each time," said one rasika. Swara showers rained down on the audience in great variety: *ma ri sa ri ma raga sudha / sa ni sa ri ma raga sudha / pa ni sa ri ma raga sudha* and so on.

The young man took up Kambhoji as his main raga for the concert. When, staying on the raga's gandhara and panchama, he unfurled many beautiful swara clusters, the crowd's appreciation was audible. 'Bhesh' and 'sabhash' reverberated around the hall. The singer was now losing himself in his music. Swara by swara, he traversed the vistas of Kambhoji. He indulged in long karvais in the mandra sthayi, introducing brigas gradually, exploring the far corners and crevices of the raga at lightning speed, touching the madhyama and panchama of the tara sthayi and even did the unprecedented, reaching the dhaivata and nishada of the higher octave.

You had to give it to him! Tanjavur Vaidyanatha Iyer was indeed a true artist. He got up from the temple steps and sped towards the stage. Following in his footsteps, the overwhelmed group of listeners on the steps went towards the stage and sat close to it, drowned by the ocean of the evening's music.

Tanneertotti Venkatarama Iyer's proud expression said it all. A whole group of experts dropped their heads, ashamed of their reluctance to pay ten rupees for such music. Some aspirants were overcome by anxiety for their future. How would they make it in the field when such great talent had to face so many obstacles? Other locals were eager to engage the vidwan for a few more concerts in Tanjavur before he returned to Madras.

The young man had just been launched on a hugely successful career. In the years to come, he was to ride the crest of triumph but also hit troughs of despair. He courageously battled many a turbulent wave, swimming against the strongest currents. Years after his death, his music continues to amaze musicians and rasika-s alike with its virtuosity and charisma. He was Gudalur Narayanaswami Balasubramaniam. GNB.



# 2

## A star is born

Gudalur is a small town close to Terazhundur, some 19 kilometres from Mayavaram. According to GNB's brother Balakrishnan, "Five girls followed Anna. I came next. All of us were born at Gudalur, but I only remember a single day there, as father moved to Triplicane after Anna was born. Both father and mother, who were related to each other, were from Gudalur. My mother's brother lived in Gudalur, so it meant Amma went to that town everytime she had a baby for her confinement. Our family deity was the Sasta of Ananda Tandavapuram near Mayavaram that Anna referred to in his composition in Todi as *mamakuleswaram Sastaram...*"

GNB's father Narayanaswami Iyer spent his childhood days at Gudalur and Tiruvidaimarudur. Later, he went to Kumbakonam for his undergraduate studies and earned a B.A. degree. Armed with a certificate from the Teachers College at Saidapet, Chennai, he went back to Kumbakonam, where he was a schoolteacher for a few years.

Narayanaswami Iyer came to know many musicians and listen to their music while at Kumbakonam. Violin maestro Tirukodikaval Krishna Iyer, pioneering flautist Sarabha Sastri, and Tirumarugal Natesan who polished the nagaswaram music of Rajaratnam Pillai, were among them. Though we do not know if Narayanaswami Iyer formally learnt the art, his deep scholarship in music is clearly evident in the articles he wrote for the *Journal* of the Music Academy and his participation in the debates and discussions in the sadas.

During the 1931 Academy deliberations, for instance, he expressed his views to great effect on the arohana of the raga Vasanta, the parent raga of Lalita, and the attributes of Reetigaula, rubbing shoulders with such giants as Muthiah Bhagavatar, Palladam Sanjeeva Rao and Mysore Doreswamy Iyengar, establishing his deep knowledge of music.

Writing in *Ananda Vikatan* (December 1942) under the heading *Pattamum Pattum* GNB said: "My father had keen musical awareness; he was a ripe scholar who listened to all the leading musicians of the day. He knew their styles and mannerisms backwards and could mimic them, which he did for me." We learn that father and son sang together at the Music Academy from its special release to commemorate GNB's 75th birthday.

GNB was born on 6th January 1910 after Narayanaswami Iyer married Visalakshi, a relative. He was their first-born. A few years earlier, Iyer had moved to Chennai, where he stayed at Sivaraman Street, Triplicane and taught mathematics at nearby Hindu High School.



Narayanaswami Iyer was also the secretary of Sri Parthasarathy Swami Sabha, which had been started in 1900. The position gave him the chance to get to know such vidwans as Karur Chinnaswami Iyer, Konerirajapuram Vaidyanatha Iyer and Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar. His home was where most of the visiting vidwans stayed while performing at the sabha.

Besides music, Narayanaswami Iyer was also proficient in the English language. When he was not discussing music with Sanjeeva Rao or Chinnaswami Iyer, he was talking literature with 'silver-tongued orator' V.S. Srinivasa Sastry or famed librarian S.R. Ranganathan at home. According to GNB's brother Balakrishnan, Narayanaswami Iyer pointed out some mistakes in the Oxford dictionary, which the publishers acknowledged.

Another string to Narayanaswami's bow was astrology, at which he was quite adept. American author Robert Kanigel says in *The Man who knew Infinity*, that the mother of mathematician Ramanujan, the hero of the book, showed the boy's horoscope to Narayanaswami Iyer who forecast international fame and premature death for him.

GNB was always ready to learn songs from varied sources all his life, but at the peak of his career tended to forget entire songs from the earliest years. He then invariably turned to his mother Visalakshi who had considerable singing ability as well as a strong memory for the compositions in his repertoire. Balakrishnan remembered that *Sakti Deviye* in Shanmukhapriya was one such song Visalakshi recollected for GNB.

Balasubramaniam is the name of the Tamil god Murugan, son of Siva. One explanation for the deviation from tradition that the first son be named after his paternal grandfather (Venkataraman, in GNB's case) was provided by Vamanan in *Cinema Express*. The parents, childless for some eight years, had vowed to present a bell to the local temple and hence the diminutive name Mani by which GNB was known in the family. He was born on Visakha, the birth star of Murugan or Balasubramaniam.



## Pole star in Triplicane

# 3

Cries of “Once more!” reverberated around the auditorium.

“Carry on with the play,” Narayanaswami Iyer said.

“How can we? The audience is demanding encores from Mani.”

“You can’t heed all that. It’s getting late. Continue the play.”

“Don’t be so adamant. Mani sang such a delightful Tarangini. Let’s give them an encore.”

“He has already done an encore. How many do they want? If he stretches *Maaye* once more, the crowd will decide to stretch its legs as well.”

“I’d like to listen to it myself one more time,” said the director of the play, a teacher.

“What earthly relevance has this song to Dhruva’s story? I only agreed to its inclusion because Mani’s deep voice sounded good in the opening scene. When do we go into the story if we keep repeating the song?”

“We could have had an encore in all this time.”

“All right, have it your own way. But just this once.”

“Sure, sir. Mani! Hurry up! Sing that song again.” The teacher was ecstatic now.

The raga Tarangini filled the hall again in the 6.5 kattai voice of the eleven-year-old singer.

All of Triplicane was abuzz with news of this event at the Hindu High School the next day, remembered Balakrishnan, GNB’s brother.

Triplicane boasted two schools in the 1800s. Tamil students went to the Dravida Pathasala and Telugus to the Hindu Andhra Balura Pathasala. Both schools were financed by an annual fund collected from the residents of Triplicane. In time, with both populations increasing substantially, confusion prevailed over the allocation of the money to the two schools. Efforts begun in 1858 and strenuously undertaken over the next couple of years culminated in the merger of the two schools as the Triplicane Andhra Dravida Balura Pathasala on Big Street in 1860. By 1868, it became the Triplicane Balura Pathasala.

M.A. Singarachariar was the headmaster of the new school. Those were troubled times, and he spent his own money to manage the school. By 1870, he raised it to the matriculation level and by 1873 added English style instruction. It was now famous as the Triplicane Anglo Vernacular High School. Once the school decided to acquire surrounding land and expand its space, the additional funds required were provided by the magnanimous building contractor Namperumal Chetty. Governor Sir Arthur Havelock inaugurated the new building of The Hindu High School in March 1897.

The twentieth century heralded the appointment of V.S. Srinivasa Sastry as the headmaster of the school. One of the foremost of his successors was P.A. Subramania Iyer. Serving the school for 22 years as headmaster, he took it to great heights. In 1908 came G.V. Narayanaswami Iyer, the new maths teacher.

The Hindu High School website ([www.hinduhighschool.com](http://www.hinduhighschool.com)) quotes a 1940s tribute that sings Narayanaswami Iyer's praises. According to it, Iyer could have chosen a lucrative government job but chose to be a teacher. He was a pleasant conversationalist and sang at school functions, dispelling the notion that teachers only taught. "He is responsible for many teachers of our school turning out to be good singers. Narayanaswami Iyer's portrait that adorns the Singarachariar Hall is a testament to his hard work, dedication and loyalty of 33 years," says the tribute.

GNB grew up in a music-charged atmosphere, with musicians constantly seeking out Narayanaswami Iyer's company, and importance given to music at school as a result of his efforts. It was crucial to his growing interest in music. His boyhood friend Calcutta S. Krishnamurti said, "On my frequent visits to his house, we eavesdropped on many musical debates, losing track of time."

GNB was totally overpowered by the music in the air in his growing years. He paid little attention to his academic studies when he was in the First Form. Poochi Iyengar, Konerirajapuram Vaidyanatha Iyer, and Fiddle Govindaswamy Pillai were among the heroes of the many stories Narayanaswami Iyer told his son. Still, he did not fail to reprimand him for his neglect of his studies. As he was the only child of the family for the first eight years of his life, it was no surprise that his mother Visalakshi supported him in such matters. "He need not study and you need not beat him,' she would tell her husband as she took GNB away protectively, according to a story by *Nadam* in *Kalaimagal* of May 1965.

In such circumstances, it was no surprise that GNB sang fearlessly. He was constantly singing at a sruti of 6.5 kattai. During the nine evenings of the Navaratri festival, Visalakshi dressed him up nicely for him to visit friends and relatives to sing before the kolu display of dolls in their homes – sometimes unasked! Not all the women were able to appreciate GNB's singing, for all its beauty. "Oh God, Mani won't go away without singing. Mani, you'd better sing and get it over with," one of them said.

When Visalakshi heard this, she told Mani, "Why do you need to sing at other people's homes? We'll have our own display of dolls from now on. Sing to your heart's content." This is how the *kolu* made its first appearance in the Narayanaswami Iyer household, a tradition that has continued to the present day.



# 4

## Growing up at the sabha

*One of the oldest sabha-s of Tamil Nadu, the Sri Parthasarathi Swami Sabha of Triplicane was established in 1901. It conducted concerts at the Hindu High School in the early period. A few years after he started teaching mathematics there, G.V. Narayanaswami Iyer became the secretary of the sabha. As a consequence, Mani was seen at every concert of the sabha.*

*Writing in Ananda Vikatan in 1942, GNB said, "I used to bask in the reflected glory of being the son of the honorary secretary of the sabha. I attended all the concerts in my 'honorary' capacity. I acquired much musical knowledge by osmosis in my childhood." In the same story, GNB describes scenes such as the one that follows.*

"Narayanaswami Iyer, we're all so lucky!" Chinnaswami Iyer exclaimed. "How would we get to listen to such concerts without your Parthasarathi Swami Sabha?"

"Isn't that why he was made secretary of the sabha?" said Palladam Sanjeeva Rao. "At Kumbakonam, the man had all the leading vidwans in his grip. Otherwise, how could we listen to Mudicondan and Ariyakudi at Triplicane? There was a time concerts were held only in the princely states. If that had continued, listening to music would have been a distant dream for us."

"You know, Rayarval, that so many great vidwans have performed at the Triplicane Parthasarathi Swami Sabha. They all sang for the common people," Narayanaswami Iyer replied.

Tiruvaiyaru Sabhesa Iyer said, "My guru Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer too sang here to a capacity crowd."

The group had found its hot topic for the day. They would now launch into a threadbare discussion of Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer's music. Everyday this informal debating society met at Narayanaswami Iyer's home. He, Sabhesa Iyer, Sanjeeva Rao, Madurai Subramania Iyer and Karur Chinnaswami Iyer talked music for hours together, losing all sense of time. The boy Mani stood near the door and listened attentively to all the discussions. That too was a daily event.

"How right you are, Sabhesa Iyer!" said Narayanaswami Iyer. "If we had vidwans like Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer in our midst, we'd have been forced to close our sabha."

The group burst into laughter. Sabhesa Iyer recalled an incident as if he were explaining what everyone knew. "Before my guru's days, there were no tickets for concerts. Sabha-s came into being

during his time, but he insisted his concerts should be free, as he charged no fee himself. Once, the Tondaimandalam Sabha sold tickets for his kutcheri without his knowledge. He only came to know about it when he saw some people returning disappointed because they could not afford the tickets. He insisted on the concert being cancelled and the money being refunded. To assuage the disappointed audience, he promised to sing at the Parthasarathi Swami temple next evening.”

Sabhesa Iyer became emotional as he continued his story. “A sea of people invaded the temple for the concert on the morrow. Three days of music ensued. The Tondaimandalam sabha had agreed on an honorarium of Rs. 50 for the team that included Tirukodikaval Krishna Iyer on the violin and Tukaram Rao on the mridangam. The audience contributed Rs. 75 after three days of music.” Sabhesa Iyer’s voice choked as he recalled the occasion. “Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer donated the whole amount to Parthasarathi Perumal and Lord Nataraja of the local temple.”

“I have heard many praise the kalpana swara-s he sang in Hamsadhwani,” Narayanaswami Iyer said.

Mani interrupted him. “Appa, I can sing kalpana swara-s for Hamsadhwani.”

“Keep quiet,” Narayanaswami Iyer said. “Don’t be an upstart and butt in when elders are talking.”

“Iyerval, don’t be harsh on the child.” Turning to Mani, Sabhesa Iyer said, “Come here, Mani. Do you know Hamsadhwani?”

‘Oh, yes. Moreover, I heard the raga in yesterday’s concert.’

“Can you sing it for us?”

“Sabhesa Iyer! Don’t encourage him. He’s talking through his hat!”

“Come on! Let’s listen to him. Keep your bullying for your school. Child, go ahead and sing.”

*Pa-ga-ri-ni-ri ga-pa-ni-pa-ga-ri riga-pa-ni Paa ri-ga-pa-nee paa-paani-sa-ni-pa-ga-ri ni-pa-saa-sa-ni-pa ni-pa-sa-ga-ree-ri-ni-pa-ga-ri...*

Mani went on, doing swaraprastara for four avarta-s.

Chinnaswami Iyer shouted an enthusiastic “bheshh!” The group was stunned. Narayanaswami Iyer was both embarrassed and proud.

Sabhesa told him, “Iyerval! Give the lad proper music lessons. He sings amazingly well for his age. Forget his school education!”

GNB wrote an article entitled “My first concert”—according to *Sruti* magazine in 1984 and a GNB biography published next year. In the article, he said among other things:



“From the day I was born, I lived in an atmosphere drenched in music and this helped me to nurture, develop and sustain my ardour for music. Opportunities were available in plenty during this period. I learnt to sing raga-s like Sahana, Chenchuritti, Begada and Saveri faultlessly. I also learnt many kriti-s just by listening to them sung by senior vidwans. Without any basic training, I acquired swara gyana thanks to the blessings of elders and savants. Whenever I listened to good music, I could visualise it in the imagery of swara-s. What my ears heard, I picturised in my mind’s eye in swara forms.”

Learning his repertoire of some 30 kriti-s strictly by ear, Mani rendered such compositions as *Sujana jeevana*, *Ksheerasagara sayana*, and *Nagumomu* to perfection, whenever musicians like Karur Chinnaswami Iyer asked him to sing for them. There were numerous volunteers to teach him music systematically. Narayanaswami Iyer it was who eventually started lessons for him, when he realised his son’s enthusiasm for music. Later, he arranged for Mani to learn music from Karur Chinnaswami Iyer and violin vidwan Madurai Subramania Iyer – a descendant of Tyagaraja –who was a co-tenant in the same residential premises.

Mani also frequented the home of the flute genius Palladam Sanjeeva Rao to absorb lessons from him as he played the instrument. Thanks to his quick grasp and a voice that did his bidding, he was able to reproduce the musical outpourings of the flute instantly and practise all its nuances.

GNB continued to listen with great concentration to the conversations at the ‘round table’ that regularly met at Karur Chinnaswami Iyer’s home. It included the likes of Sabhesa Iyer, Budalur Krishnamurthi Sastrigal and Palladam Sanjeeva Rao. Every now and then, he amazed the group with his spontaneous singing. Once, he overheard the experts state that it was impossible to render a particular song in the third speed. Unable to contain his eagerness, he said: “It can be sung in the third speed. Shall I demonstrate it for you?” going on to do just that. GNB’s son Rajasekhar proudly narrates this anecdote.

No doubt impressed by his son’s talent and dedication, Narayanaswami Iyer still wanted him to focus on his school education and kept stressing that. He wanted Mani to pursue music as a pastime, for the good of his own soul rather than as a career. It did not promise a stable source of income. He dreamt of the prospect of his son attaining an English education and qualifying for the bar, following in the footsteps of the legal luminaries of the day.

Man proposes and God disposes. Kapaleeswarar of Mylai had other ideas for GNB.



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as Vocalist and Composer

An analysis based on an exhaustive presentation  
by a Study Group  
Organised by The Sruti Foundation in December 1992

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# 5

## Debut

*Darini telusukonti Tripurasundari.* Mani's voice was racing at lightning speed, filling the house.

"Mani! Haven't I told you not to sing at breakneck speed?" Narayanaswami Iyer launched his invariable lament. "Every new sangati for 'Sundari' should create a mind picture of the goddess bedecked in a different new way and taken in procession. Your singing speed is akin to redecorating Ambal before we have had the time to appreciate the beauty of her ornamentation the first time around."

"Didn't the nagaswara vidwan play at the same speed last night?"

"The instrument has its own tempo. It can't suit the voice. Never mind. Come straight from school to the sabha to attend Iyengar's concert."

This conversation took place in 1926. Ariyakudi had come to Triplicane to sing at a wedding at the residence of Ranganatham Chettiar, the proprietor of Sri Venkateswara Printing Press. Narayanaswami Iyer had used the opportunity to arrange a concert at his sabha.



Recalling the concert years later, GNB said, "I had seen Iyengarval several times in the past, but this was his first concert I was listening to. I heard him many times later, but that first concert left a lasting, indelible impression on me." This was reported in the Tamil magazine *Amuda Surabhi* in 1965.

ML Vasanthakumari once likened an Ariyakudi concert to a supermarket. Just as a store offers a variety of products to satisfy every customer, his kutcheris satisfied the many expectations of a whole range of music lovers. His fare included everything rasikas could ask for — varnams, Tyagaraja kritis, rakti ragas, bhakti-soaked lyrics, Sanskrit songs, Alwar pasurams, javalis, and more. It was but natural that Ariyakudi's music made such a deep impression on young Mani.

"Can music get any better? What grand singing! Not a dull moment in the concert! Great pathantara! Superb energy!" Long after the concert, Mani was floating on air.

Ariyakudi stayed on at Narayanaswami Iyer's home for a few days after the concert. The host began his usual lament the

moment Mani started his singing practice. “Iyengarval, he won’t listen to my repeated pleas. Keeps running away with his high-speed singing. Please advise him.”

“Come here, Mani. Let’s listen to you,” said Ariyakudi.

Mani burst forth in a shower of lightning fast brigas.

“Iyerval! Is this the music you have been constantly faulting? His speed is a quality natural to youth. He will quieten down as he grows older and mellows. From his singing, it is obvious he has a bright future as a musician.”

“Iyengarval’s endorsement removed my father’s anxiety,” GNB recalled later. “My runaway music was untamed for quite a while more. As I listened to more and more Ariyakudi concerts, my music grew in maturity. That’s why I regard him as my manasika guru even today.”

As Mani’s passion for music grew, Narayanaswami Iyer was constantly worried that he would neglect his education. Mani passed his intermediate when 17, and joined BA Honours at the Madras Christian College to please his father. Though there is some mention of his having gone to Presidency College, it has been confirmed that he graduated from Christian with a BA Honours.

Mani was really going to college under duress from his father. His heart was in music. To his relief, Annamalai University, founded by Rajah Sir Annamalai Chettiar, opened that year. Sabhesa Iyer who headed the music college of the university recommended that Mani be sent to Annamalai, where he could pursue his music and do his academic studies side by side. He knew Narayanaswami Iyer well; he was also aware of Mani’s musical talent.

Narayanaswami Iyer acceded to this suggestion and Mani duly went to the temple town of Chidambaram, where the university was located. A few days into his sojourn there, he had a chance to sing in the presence of Annamalai Chettiar. “He was so pleased with my singing, he gifted me a silver plate, filling it with silver coins as well,” reminisced GNB. “I consider that a significant milestone in my music career, but I had to return to Madras, owing to some problems.”

While at Madras Christian College, Mani continued to practise music and attending concerts. His practice routine consisted of his singing to the mridangam accompaniment of his friend Pudukottai Rajamani.

The most unexpected cancellation of a scheduled Carnatic music concert led to a crucial turning point in young Mani’s life. No one could have guessed such a turn of events.

1928. It was the day of Musiri Subramania Iyer’s concert at the Vasantotsavam of the Kapaliswarar temple at Mylapore.

“What’s all the buzz there?” asked AK Ramachandra Iyer.

“Musiri is unwell. He can’t sing today. How do we break the news to this huge audience?”

“Can’t we get some other musician to perform in his place?”

The committee member seemed anxious. “How can we find a last minute replacement?”

Madurai Subramania Iyer arrived there just then.

Ramachandra Iyer pounced on him. “Subramania Iyerval! What a godsend you are! Musiri is not well and it





seems he won't be able to sing. Do you know who can take his place? Or can you play today? I'll arrange for an instrument."

"Where can we find a substitute at such short notice?" Subramania Iyer mulled over the problem. "OK, why don't we invite Hindu High School teacher GVN's son Mani? He learns music from me. Outstanding talent."

A relieved Ramachandra Iyer dashed to Triplicane, happy to find someone, anyone, to perform that evening.

"Narayanaswami Iyerval!" he said. "Please send your son to the sabha at once."

"Who's performing today? Are you inviting Mani to attend the concert without inviting me?"

"Iyerval! We are asking him to sing, not listen."

"What! Ever since he sang before Rajah Sir, he's already been going around announcing his intention to become a singer, dismissing his B.A. as a way of biding his time. Once you put him on the concert stage, there'll be no holding him."

"GVN, Sir. Please help us. We must hold the concert today. The crowds have already gathered there. We're counting on your generosity."

On the horns of a dilemma, Narayanaswami Iyer summoned Mani.

"Mani, he's come to invite you to perform."

"A kutcheri? Where?" Mani was very surprised.

"At the Kapali temple," said Subramania Iyer. "Musiri's concert has been called off. The audience is waiting."

"Me in place of Musiri! Is this a joke? He is such a great artist. Do you think the audience will listen to me in his place and go back contented?"

Madurai Subramania Iyer was not one to give up. He knew which button to press for what result.

"Mani, you eat, drink and live Ariyakudi's music. Do you know how your hero got to be the great star he is today? A concert at Tirupparankunram ten years ago turned his life upside down. Those were the days of Madurai Pushpavanam's eminence. The whole town would turn up for his concerts. One such concert of his was arranged by Pudukottai Dakshinamurthi Pillai, a great devotee of Lord Muruga, as part of a festival he conducted at Tirupparankunram. Unfortunately, Pushpavanam fell ill on the day of the concert. Spotting Ariyakudi in the audience, Dakshinamurthi Pillai requested him to fill in for Pushpavanam. Do you think Iyengar hesitated like you? He ascended the stage confidently and started singing. He was accompanied by Malaikottai Govindaswamy Pillai on the violin and Pudukottai Dakshinamurthi Pillai on the mridangam. The constant demand for Iyengar's concerts had its beginnings that day. Today he is the king of Carnatic music." (This story is told in Ellarvi's book, *Ariyakudi*.)

Mani completely got over his initial diffidence. He agreed to the concert, encouraged by the similarity of the events in his idol's life and his own.

Mani went on stage and paid his respects to the audience in the traditional manner. He then meditated on Kapaliswarar, the Mylapore deity, and paid his obeisance to his guru Subramania Iyer.



Music or academics?

COURTESY: VIKATAN PUBLICATIONS

He smiled at his practice partner Pudukottai Rajamani. When he looked at the crowd, waves of thoughts arose in Mani's mind. He was still trembling when he started the varnam, but overcame his stagefright once his voice began to traverse the nooks and corners, the highs and lows of the varnam. He plunged into the music.

KS Muthuraman heard that concert. This is how he recalled his memories of the performance: "I knew Mani well. I only heard of the Kapali temple concert by accident, but I rushed to the temple. With his fair complexion, sharp nose, glittering earrings and tilakam on his forehead, he resembled Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer in his youth. His voice filled the whole temple and mesmerised the audience. Effortlessly traversing three octaves, he offered a garland of swaras in three speeds. Following the varnam with *Vatapi Ganaṭatim bhaje*, he essayed an expansive Pantuvarali alapana. His Bhairavi (*Chintaiyamam*) and Athana (*Irangayenil*) were the highlights of the concert. I can state firmly that this concert was the foundation for Mani's development into a great sangeeta vidwan."

In contemporary cricket, Sachin Tendulkar's fans thank Navjot Sidhu for missing a match through a strained neck, and unexpectedly giving a chance for Tendulkar to open the innings for the first time in a one-day international. Sachin made 83 in 49 deliveries that day as a first step towards super stardom as the world's best batsman. It will be no exaggeration to equate Musiri's illness that paved the way for GNB's concert debut with Navjot Sidhu's stiff neck.



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# 6

## His Gurus

For all that music was in GNB's genes, he owed his proficiency in the art to a number of Dronas or manasika gurus. He was an Ekalavya to more than one great master, just as Drona in the *Mahabharata* had numerous disciples direct (like Arjuna) as well as indirect (like Ekalavya); only the roles were reversed in the case of GNB. "Who are my "teachers" in music? It is easier to name those who were not," GNB said in an article once. Many were the great musicians who influenced and catalysed him in his pursuit of musical excellence.

### Karur Chinnaswami Iyer

Chinnaswami Iyer was a descendant of Tyagaraja. His two brothers were the well known Devudu Brothers, Venkata Subbiah or Pedda Devudu and Krishniah or Chinna Devudu. GNB often heard the violin playing of neighbour Chinnaswami Iyer, who encouraged the lad to sing, impressed by his natural enthusiasm and voice. As GNB grew older, Iyer made him sing a raga a day and taught him new variations at the appropriate time.



### Madurai Subramania Iyer

Madurai Subramania Iyer was perhaps the only guru from whom GNB had direct lessons thereafter. A student of Chinnaswami Iyer, he was a co-tenant of GVN. The famous vocalist-painter S Rajam recalls his generosity. "Madurai Subramania Iyer was a professor at Chidambaram. He played the violin, but was a wonderful singer as well. He was very fond of youngsters. I learnt quite a lot from him, including the song, *Talli ninnu*. If you sang well in a concert, he came looking for you the next day to congratulate you. Such large-heartedness was so common then."

The very mention of GNB's name brings memories of his lightning-fast brigas. The surprise when Rajam made the statement that GNB imbibed the briga style from Subramania Iyer, was explained by the discovery of GNB's own disclosure of this detail in an article entitled *Pattamum Paattum* in *Ananda Vikatan* as early as 1942. He said: "I learnt musical nuances from Subramania Iyer in my youth. He could play the violin beautifully, adhering to tradition. He also had a voice capable of speed. As part of my training, he would execute alapana and ask me to render it in the corresponding swaras. He took me to his concerts, where I kept the tala to his singing."

## Tiger Varadachariar

After he had his early lessons from Subramania Iyer and gained musical knowledge through listening to a number of concerts, GNB also performed on the concert platform on a few occasions, gaining approval as an emerging musician. He then enrolled in a diploma course in music at Madras University. Varadachariar's physique, stage presence and mannerisms on stage earned him the sobriquet of Tiger, but his letterhead went one step ahead and said 'Tiger Lion Varadachariar'!



Soolamangalam Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar once said, "Tiger could explore rare, difficult-to-render ragas and delight the audience with swaraprastara every bit as elaborate as if they were ghana ragas. For all his virtuosity, he mixed freely with people without the slightest trace of arrogance. His appointment as principal of the music college of Madras University was a true recognition of his musical prowess."

GNB said: "Tiger taught me with great affection. In a typical lesson, he started singing a kriti and asked me to join him. After that we exchanged swaras. I clearly recall the way we sang swaras alternately for the Kalyani kriti *Biranavaralichi*." Sometimes GNB deputised in the classroom for Tiger when he had to go out.

Writing in GNB's 75th anniversary souvenir, KS Muthuraman, a long-time friend and associate of GNB, said that he was present at a GNB concert at TV Subba Rao's home, when Tiger waxed lyrical over his singing. He said, "A zari angavastram has to be worn liker a fan over the shoulder to reveal its true beauty. Mani's rendering of *Marukelara* is akin to that."

Disciple Trichur V Ramachandran remembered that even at the height of his fame, GNB would treat friends and students to impromptu demonstrations of Tiger's style of singing. "One afternoon I visited GN Sir. It was a concert day. He gave us samples of Tiger's Todi, and moved by his memories of the master, started weeping. At the concert that evening, he sang Todi not in his usual style, but in the Tiger mould, using his characteristics. It was a marvellous Todi."

## Harikesanallur Muthiah Bhagavatar

S Rajam has stated that GNB included a great deal of Muthiah Bhagavatar's stylistics in his music, adding that it was hardly surprising. "Do you think Carnatic music could have evolved to its present form without the lead Bhagavatar provided on how to develop sangatis, or do raga alapana, niraval and swaraprastara? He was a great source for all of us. GNB learnt the art of discovering new ragas or giving new shape to old ragas from listening to Muthiah Bhagavatar. He also drew inspiration from Bhagavatar's regal demeanour and clothes sense." Rajam became emotional as he made the comparison.



Muthiah Bhagavatar was so moved by GNB's expansive treatment of his kriti *Sarasamukhi* in Gaudmalhar that he gifted one of his tamburas to him. It was the Bharata of his four tamburas named after the four brothers of the *Ramayana*. "I gift this to you", said Muthiah Bhagavatar, "because your bhakti towards music is like Bharata's devotion to Rama."



## Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar

“Why would anyone take the bylanes to reach godhead when he has before him the royal highway of Rama bhakti?” asked Tyagaraja. Most leading Carnatic musicians think along similar lines about their art: Why should we seek the narrow streets to succeed as concert musicians, when we have the grand Ariyakudi paddhati to follow?”

What was the typical Ariyakudi concert like? The first song of his concert was invariably a varnam. This was followed by one of the Pancharatna kritis, chosen for its vigour. By now his voice would have warmed up. This was followed by prati madhyama ragas like Pantuvarali and Poorvikalyani, which would receive expansive treatment from Ariyakudi. He next took up a raga for fairly elaborate alapana, niraval and kalpana swaras.

After a quick durita kala composition, he would launch the main raga with detailed alapana, niraval and kalpana swara treatment, to be followed by the tani avartanam. Time permitting, Ariyakudi did a ragam-tanam-pallavi next. The final session of the concert included ragas like Behag, Khamas and Sindhubhairavi. A ragamalika vruttam – including ragas like Nattaikurinji, Mohanam, Kapi and Sindhubhairavi – invariably led to a tillana. The concert lasted three to three-and-a-half hours. Its structure depended on the venue, the condition of his voice, the day of the week, and the disposition of the audience. Ariyakudi was unparalleled in designing a concert based on all these factors.

In a tribute entitled *The Hero as a Musician*, GNB described Ariyakudi as the architect of Carnatic music. “His music is to Carnatic music what the *Gita* is to Indian philosophy – its quintessence eternal and elemental truths and values which stand for all time,” he said. He shaped his concerts around his guru’s paddhati, embellishing it with changes that suited his voice.

Even after achieving fame as a vidwan, GNB continued to attend Ariyakudi’s concerts, often sitting behind him on the concert stage with the tambura. He could not stand criticism of Ariyakudi’s music. “He would erupt in Iyengar’s defence, not resting until he proved the superiority of his music, even if it meant hours of argument,” his disciple ML Vasanthakumari once said.

## Tiruvavaduturai Rajaratnam Pillai

Back then, nagaswara music was the only source of elaborate raga alapana, thanks largely to the need for hours-long expansion of a single raga during all-night processions of the temple deities. As a result, nagaswara vidwans made raga alapana their own, as it were.

Rajaratnam Pillai was the very monarch of nagaswara artists. Every swara he played was a thing of sheer beauty, no matter how fast he played.

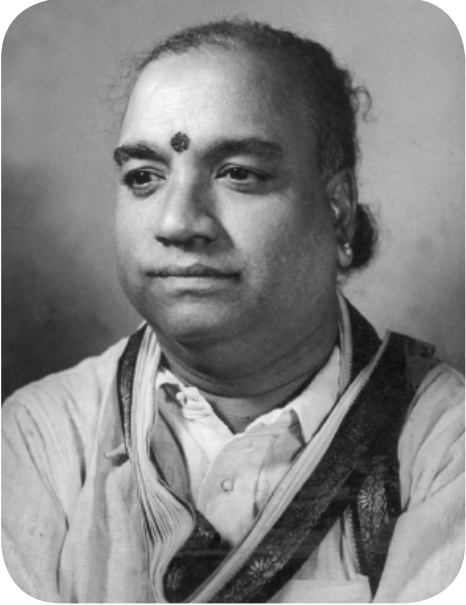
No vocalist before GNB tried to replicate Rajaratnam’s thorough delineation of a raga, exploring its every nook and cranny and circling every swara with his express fast brigas. GNB proved that it could be done. Endowed with a voice that enabled him to reproduce pretty much anything by way of



song, he followed the Rajaratnam bani of raga alapana and brought out the sangatis of the pipe in his voice.

In time, Rajaratnam became a fan of GNB. Once after he heard a Shanmukhapriya from GNB, he declared: "Only I should play this raga and Ayya (GNB) should sing it. No other chap should touch it." When GNB sang at a wedding in the Rajaratnam family, the nagaswara vidwan who was known as the emperor of Todi, delighted in asking GNB to sing Todi for him.

GNB's brother Balakrishnan remembers how GNB took care of Rajaratnam in his final years by finding him a house near his own at Adyar. "He deputed me to stop by and look up Rajaratnam Pillai on my way to work every morning."



## Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer

The Maharajapuram bani was characterised by the ability to add something fresh to every raga every time. It was creativity at its best, never settling for repetitive, monotonous music. When Viswanatha Iyer received the award Sangeeta Bhoopati, the critic *Karnatakam* (one of Kalki's nom de plumes) wrote: "Sri Maharajapuram was one of those who made all of Tamil country music-mad. You could find his unique stamp on any raga or kriti he rendered. As a result, his music was always a feast for the intellect. But music that solely depends on sweetness of voice tends to lose its sheen the moment there is the slightest loss in the quality of the voice. Sri Viswanatha Iyer's music was different. It is his amazing imagination that continues to add lustre to his concerts."

Maharajapuram loved GNB. At GNB's sister's wedding concert, he sang a Todi kriti in a briga-rich style, strewing several new sangatis. To a stunned GNB, he said, "All these are your assets. This is my offering to you."

KS Muthuraman recalled in an article: "Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer sat in the front row during my son's wedding reception, listening to GNB's concert. GNB sang a beautiful, elaborate Kapi in the ragamalika. When I complimented GNB after the concert, he said, "When I saw Maharajapuram in the first row, I remembered the Kapi he used to sing. If what I sang was as good as his interpretation of the raga, I consider it his gift to me."

GNB mined the riches of Ariyakudi's planning and his brisk tempo, Rajaratnam Pillai's method of raga alapana and other prime examples of the manodharma of the greats of the time like Maharajapuram, Tiger and Muthiah Bhagavatar, and applied them in developing his unique bani appropriate for his voice.



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## 7

## Recorded for posterity

Let's go on a journey to the past. To 1940. We find GNB in his room, lost in thought, with a copy of a Tyagaraja kriti in his hand. Let's follow his chain of thought without disturbing him.

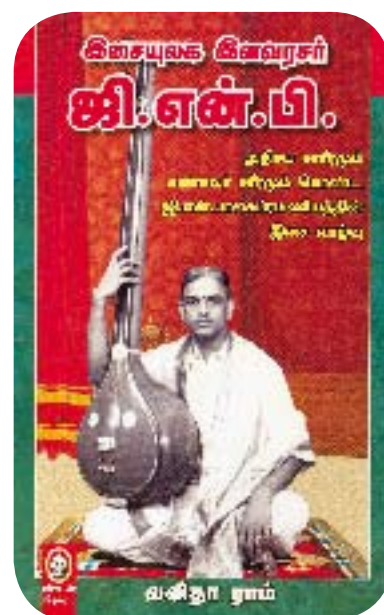
What does the pallavi of the song say? It draws your attention to the dwarapalaka shouting the name of Vasudeva. Surely, the guard called out in a high-pitched voice? Doesn't it mean that Tyagarajaswami must have opened the song in the tara sthayi? How do we know that the present form of the song is faithful to the way Tyagaraja composed it? Many musicians start the song in the madhya sthayi panchama and render it with emphasis on the madhya sthayi. True, Kalyani oozes beauty regardless of the sthayi or swara adopted as its base, but doesn't each song merit a distinctive treatment?

Let's imagine GNB's thought process: "How can the singing reflect the enthusiasm of the shouting guard if it doesn't start the name of Vasudeva on the tara sthayi shadja? Take the sentence '*Vasudeva, he shouted*'. Ideally, we must articulate the name Vasudeva at the tara shadja, then come down to the madhya sthayi to reflect the narrator's voice, before going back to the tara shadja to express the word 'shouted' appropriately. Doesn't this express the song best? Why don't I try modifying the pallavi in this manner?"

Now let's see how GNB unearths this rare kriti and hones it to concert readiness at a time when other Kalyani gems rule the roost: *Etavunara, Kamalamba bhajare, Talli ninnu and Nidhi chala sukhama*.

Starting with *Sa-sa sa-ni-dha-pa-ma*, the pallavi gradually takes new shape. GNB targets the word 'vedalina' to bring out the essential beauty of the raga with a swirling *g-n-d-p-m*. The anupallavi describes devas like Indra offering puja to Vasudeva. The impression of numerous pujas on the line 'poojitudai' by these worshippers at the top shadja, the middle nishada and the tara sthayi rishabha is created by the blossoming sangatis.

In the charanam, GNB uses the swarakshara 'ni-dha' and shakes the nishada gently in the phrase 'needa veduchunu' and ends the line—that means, "Praise the lord who protects the simple folk with his very beautiful dance"—with gamaka. The sangatis developed for the anupallavi are a perfect fit for the lines that denote singing the





With Rajamanickam Pillai and Palghat Mani Iyer

lord's praise in raga and tala. A brand new kriti in the uttaranga of Kalyani in all its beauty unfolds when GNB sings it in a medium gait depicting the dwarapalaka's steady steps.

We may not be able to prove that GNB researched kritis in this manner while creating sangatis and prayogas for them. There is no doubt however that he sang *Vasudevayani* in exactly the same way. If we study the underlying emotion of the songs he introduced to the concert platform and his rendering of them, it becomes clear that he polished them in such a way that they fully expressed their bhava. The song was issued as a 78-rpm record in 1940. In the eight minutes available, the team achieves the impossible by satisfying listeners with its completeness. It has raga alapana by GNB and the violinist Rajamanickam Pillai and a mridangam tani avartanam by Palghat Mani Iyer—all within the time frame of the record.

GNB's wonderful voice shapes the alapana, starting with the tara sthaya shadja, stressing the uttaranga of Kalyani in keeping with the structure of the song to follow. The alapana in a well-modulated voice and controlled briga usage lasts all of one and a half minutes but images the raga in all its contours. Rajamanickam Pillai has only 30 seconds for his follow-up act, but he is equal to the task. Palghat Mani Iyer then pats the toppi of his mridangam twice. Now *Vasudevayani* from Tyagaraja's *Prahlada Bhakti Vijayam* starts its procession —with its fresh sheen.

Launched with *s-n-p-d-n Vasudevayani*, a brisk kalpana swara essay is followed by a tani avartanam by Palghat Mani Iyer that lasts barely 90 seconds. He plays a few avartas linking the chatusra nadai with threes and fives, and sprinkling a few more popular gumkis with his left hand that seems unrelated to a lightning fast right hand, before concluding his tani with a mora and korvai.

Generations have listened innumerable times to this record. I know a three-year-old who refuses to get into a car unless its music system has *Vasudevayani*. My friends have lost sleep over trying to figure out how a ten-minute record can create the illusion of a whole concert.

Not only did GNB receive an initial royalty of ₹10,000 for the record back in 1940, he continued to earn royalty from it till his last breath, according to his brother Balakrishnan. Prahlada saw the lord everywhere, but GNB spread the name of Prahlada and his message of bhakti everywhere with this record.

We can divide GNB's records, which number over twenty, into three periods. The first lot belong to the early 1930s. These include *Amba naduvi* in Todi, *Sree Subramanyaya namaste* in Kambhoji, *Darini telusukonti* in Suddha Saveri, *Parasakti* in Saveri and *O Jagadamba* in Anandabhairavi. GNB's voice has a sruti of 5-kattai in these records and his singing is distinguished by superfast sangatis and breathtaking brigas. They demonstrate the qualities behind his rapid rise to stardom within a few years.

GNB introduced numerous compositions to the public with his releases during the next phase, we can safely assert. The brigas of the 1930s were still evident in the 1940s despite a drop in his sruti to 2.5 kattai. The records of the decade reflect the greater weight in his music and a musical awareness capable of embellishing beautiful sangatis and nuances.

Many simple songs emerged during this period in expansive ragas like Shanmukhapriya, Kalyani and Hindolam. He popularised several Tamil songs like *Sonnathai seydidu* (Ragamalika), *Kannanai kaanbadeppo* (Ragamalika), *Kaaranam kettu vaadi* (Poorvikalyani), *Kannane en kanavan* (Kalyani) and *Nalla sagunam nokki chelladi* (Shanmukhapriya). Patriotic songs like *Jayati jayati Bharatamata* (Khamas) and *Samarasa bhavana* (Bheemlas) belonged to this period as well. We do not know how these songs were rendered before GNB, but his versions have stood the test of time and musicians still favour his tunes and sangatis.

Though all of GNB's records did well during his heyday, *Vasudevayani*, *Radha sameta Krishna* and *Himagiri tanaye* are all time hits that took him to the pinnacle of fame. A comparison between his 1930s recordings and his 1940s recordings show the difference between fast and superfast singing.

GNB's mature, mellow recordings belong to the 1950s. Examples are *Sadhinchene* (Arabhi), *Samaja vara gamana* (Hindolam) and *Ananda Natesa* (Todi). These suffer in comparison with the records of the previous decade, even though the quality of music is still high. In most of these, GNB's voice is in a sruti of one-kattai. Though his voice is not as good as it was ten years earlier, the brigas continue to flow in his characteristic style. In particular, his Hindolam is now more expressive than in the 1940s and seems more beautifully crafted with swarakshara (*s-m* in the pallavi and *s-m-n g-m-g* in the anupallavi) to reflect the lyrics *Samaja vara gamana*.

"To wonder how songs he popularised were rendered before him is a futile pursuit," declares S Rajam, who has heard stalwarts belonging to many generations. "Their versions have not survived; only GNB's have stood the test of time." I could not agree more with him. Didn't GNB's eight-minute long Kalyani mesmerise me, though I was born 15 years after his death?





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# 8

## From Narada to Udayanan

“Here’s a quiz question for you, kiddo!” said the old man.

“Shoot!” I said in reply.

“*Ela needaya radu* in Athana; *Tondar anjum kaliru* in Kambhoji; *Kotinadulu dhanushkotilo* in Todi; the vruttam *Kannane podum, podum*; Sadasiva Brahmendra’s *Smaravaram varam* and *Sinattavar mudikkum*; *Tullumatha vetkai*, Tiruppugazh”. My old friend went on and on.

“I got it!”

“What do you know?”

“You are listing the songs in a GNB concert, aren’t you?” I proudly answered. “A brisk start with Athana, Yadukulakambhoji as the sub-main raga, followed by Todi as the main raga; vruttam; and finally Tiruppugazh.

“You got it all wrong because you didn’t wait for me to complete the list. You didn’t let me tell you that the national anthem was the last song!”

“I thought the national anthem was only played at the end of a film!”

“Yes, it was a film all right, the first one in which GNB acted. The list of songs reads like a concert programme, doesn’t it?”

“GNB’s entry into the movies must have been helped by advice the Rt. Hon. Srinivasa Sastry gave him once and he implicitly obeyed,” the old man continued. “GNB had the habit of lifting his hand to his face and looking up while singing in the upper register. ‘If you don’t make faces, people can enjoy looking at your handsome face besides listening to your beautiful voice,’ Sastry told him. GNB then practised before a mirror to be able to sing without any physical contortions. His charisma on stage then proved irresistible to filmmakers. One of them cast him in the film *Bhama Vijayam*.

There was no stopping the old man, once he started on the topic of GNB. He would launch a lecture on all his movies.

“Have you heard of ML Tandon who directed Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer in *Bhakta Nandanar*? He was a rare example of an Indian who studied cinematography in Hollywood in those early years. He was the director of *Bhama Vijayam*, too.



G.N.B. as Dushyanta and M.S. as Sakuntalai

G.N. Balasubramaniam, the sangita vidwan of Hutchins gramophone fame. The film cost ₹80,000 but grossed a million rupees.”

“How was G.N.B.’s acting in the film?”

“I am no expert on acting. I’ll tell you about the review Kalki wrote in *Ananda Vikatan* (1934). Kalki made fun of Narada’s appearance in the film and the way Narada and Krishna elaborately render Tyagaraja’s kritis, doing some extensive swaraprastara in the bargain. Later, when Narada visits Satyabhama, one of the gatekeepers speaks Hindustani and the other Telugu!”

“Kalki uses the device of a conversation between an imaginary friend and himself in the review. When the friend wants to know how Narada sang Tyagaraja’s Telugu kriti when he did not know the language, Kalki tells him, ‘The Narada you speak of is not the bearded, unkempt Maharishi Narada, but a modern, clean shaven Narada BA (Hons.), with his tambura stylishly strung across his shoulder. ‘Narada, I presume,’ a doubtful Krishna asks him when he first meets him. I still remember Kalki’s sarcasm.”

“I am sure G.N.B. the actor was an obvious butt of critics’ humour, with his BA (Hons.) and his concert music.”

“They didn’t stop with poking fun at him. Many refused to accompany him in concerts because he was a talkie actor. Wasn’t it T.M. Thyagarajan—at G.N.B.’s 81st birth anniversary celebrations—who told the story of his wonderful Andolika and Kambhoji at Tanjavur, earning encomiums from stalwarts like Tanjavur Vaidyanatha Iyer?”

“Which was his next film after *Bhama Vijayam*?”

“He played Narada again in Premier Cinetone’s 1937 offering *Sati Anusuya*, but received top billing this time. He sets an impossible task for the three heavenly deities Lakshmi, Saraswati and Parvati, and when they profess their inability to perform them, he goes to the Trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Siva with the canard that their wives are not chaste enough, that they are no match to earthling Anusuya. The Trinity then go forth to earth to test Anusuya’s chastity—only to fail in their mission! The film did not fare very well.”

“How were the songs in the film? How many songs did G.N.B. sing?”

“The film had 37 songs in all, nine of them by G.N.B. With L.Nanjappa Chettiar writing the songs, music director vidwan Govindaraju set them to tune. There were two songs in Bheemlas, *Mahadeva*

*deva* and *Ksheerabdi sayana*, a couple of ragamalika vrittams in Shanmukhapriya, Begada, Sahana, Kanada and Kambhoji, *Padmasana veda Bharati sameta* in Kedaram, and a song in Kapi, if I remember right. In one scene, Anusuya turns the Trinity into babies and Narada sings a lullaby for them.”

“When was *Sakuntalai* released?”

“The superhit was released in 1940. After MS Subbulakshmi starred in *Seva Sadanam*, her guardian Sadasivam who later married her started a film company, Chandraprabha Cinetones. *Sakuntalai* was the first film it produced. Papanasam Sivan and SV Venkataraman were in charge of the music. TG Raghavachari wrote the dialogues. You expressed surprise at Tandon directing a Tamil film. This one was made by an American.”

“I know, Ellis R Dungan. That was a fascinating story—how he came to India with Tandon, who planned to start a studio. Once Dungan discovered that that was not to be, he used all his Hollywood technical expertise in directing several Tamil hits like *Sati Leelavati*, *Ambikapati*, *Sakuntalai*, *Meera*, and *Mantrikumari*.”

“Not bad, you seem to have some knowledge! GNB had only four songs in *Sakuntalai*, two of them duets. *Manamohananga anange* was in Mand, while *Premaiyil yavum maranthome* was in Desh. The 78 rpm records of these songs were very popular, but my favourite song in the movie was GNB’s vuttam in Kambhoji.”

“Is it true that Tiruvidaimarudur Veerusami Pillai used to go to the theatre everyday, watch till the song ended and then leave?”

“Absolutely! It was incomparable Kambhoji. Only GNB could bring out the beauty of Kambhoji fully in a vuttam that lasted exactly one minute and 51 seconds.”

My old friend started singing the song. Then he went into a graphic account of the song, full of where he started and ended which line to what effect, how he gave expression to the song through briga sangatis, how he reached the tara shadja, flashed across to the madhya shadja in a second, and traversed the *arohana* and *avarohana* of Kambhoji in another second, before returning to the tara shadja. He went on in a similar strain of ecstasy recalling how GNB sang the next portion of the song, starting with the tara gandhara, then the madhyama to reach a soulful climax in the tara panchama.

The old man continued in the same vein as he spoke of the way GNB sang the final line *Nan mayangiya vinthaiye*. “He sang it, not for Dushyanta, but for all those in love with his own Kambhoji. So many have sung the raga wonderfully; why, GNB himself has explored it for more than an hour in many concerts, but this two-minute Kambhoji is unequalled.” The old man was overwhelmed by emotion.

I quickly changed the subject. “Which was GNB’s fourth song in the film?” I asked him, lest he went on forever singing the praises of the Kambhoji vuttam.

“It was *Sringara rasavalliye* in Kuntalavarali,” he said. “Just when the anupallavi comes alive, there’s a metallic background noise, and a voice that goes, ‘Sorry, I just dropped a utensil while drinking water.’ To make matters worse, you also hear a cat.”



“I’ve heard *Sakuntalai* was a bitter experience for GNB.”

“True. He did not know he would get to sing only four songs; nor did he get the billing he deserved, coming in tenth or 11th in the credits. He was not given leading man status. Be that as it may, the film was worth watching many times just for the Kambhoji vruttam.”

“Ok sir, don’t start off on your Kambhoji refrain again. Tell me about other GNB films.”

“Two of his films came out in 1946. In *Rukmangada*, PA Periyannayagi acted as Narada. Despite its lukewarm reception at the box office, it was screened every year on Ekadasi day, as it was about Vaikuntha Ekadasi.”

“Unfortunately, no print of the film is available today, despite that.”

“The film *Udayanan Vasavadatta* was GNB’s next. Bhagavata was to play his role at first.”

“Who was Bhagavata?”

“Don’t tell me you don’t know that? In the movies, Bhagavata meant MK Tyagaraja Bhagavata, just as Tyagaraja was known as Iyer, Ariyakudi was Iyengar, and GNB was Saar in music.”

“I didn’t know GNB was known as Saar.”

“He was of course GNB to the listening public, but among musicians, he was Saar, after the way youngsters like Lalgudi Jayaraman and TN Krishnan addressed him.”

“What happened to Bhagavata that GNB had to replace him in *Udayanan*?”

“He was all set to act in the film, the songs had been recorded and shooting had begun, when he was arrested in the Lakshmikanta murder case. GNB became the hero of the film, which had Vasundhara Devi, Vyjayanthimala’s mother, as the heroine. It was produced by Ramanathan Chettiar, and included TR Raghunath in the cast. The whole state was abuzz with news of Bhagavata going to prison, and the film bombed at the box office. GNB learnt to play the veena for this film.”

“So, GNB did only five films in 12 years?”

“That was not his career, was it? His life’s ambition was to achieve glory as a musician. As S Rajam once said, it wasn’t easy for a musician like GNB to sing film songs. You had to sing to someone’s instruction. You had to sing in identical fashion through a hundred retakes. A creative musician like GNB is always throbbing with new ideas, new sangatis, each time. All that was not feasible in cinema. This was perhaps one of the reasons why GNB did not do more films.”

“OK sir, you listen to the Kambhoji vruttam one more time, going precisely to the 38th minute of the *Sakuntalai* VCD, and then go to sleep. Good night.” I left.

GNB’s was truly a wonderful impact. Those who have heard him live never tire of talking about him. Those who have only listened to his music never tire of listening to these stories either.





# Sangita Kalanidhi

1938

**THE MUSIC ACADEMY, MADRAS—MUSIC CONFERENCE, 1938.**

**Sunday, 2nd January, 1938. 4-30 p. m. to 7-30 p. m.**

**MUSIC**  
BY

G. N. BALASUBRAMANIAM AIYAR	....	Vocal
TIRUVIALANGADU SUNDARESA AIYAR	....	Violin
MADRAS VENU NAICKER	....	Mridangam

**PROGRAMME\***

1. Varanam	Mohanam	Adi	Rammed Srinivasa Aiyangar
2. Sarasirobasana	Nata	..	Peliyar Duraiswami Aiyar
3. Palukarademira	Devamanoberi	..	Mysore Vasudevachar
4. Maha Gauspatim	Thodi	Rupaka	Muthuswami Dikshitar
5. Yochata	Darbar	Adi	Tyagaraja
6. Brovavayasa	Manji	Ohapu	Syama Eastri
7. Inbannteu	Gundakriya	Adi	Tyagaraja
8. Rammaktha	Kadhyamavati	..	..
9. Dirmarga	Ranjani	Rupaka	..

**RAGA ALAPANA: SHANMUKHATHRIYA**

**Miscellaneous**  
**MANGALAM**

(\*Subject to alterations).

1938-ம் ஆண்டு ஜனவரி 2-ம் தேதி ராசியிழைக் கிழமை மாலை 4-30 மணி முதல் 7-30 மணி வரை

வந்திகைக் கச்சேரி.

G. N. பாலசுப்ரமணிய அய்யர்	—	பாட்டு
திருவாலங்காடு சுந்தரேச அய்யர்	—	விடில்
சென்னை வேணுநாயக்கர்	—	மீருதக்கம்.

**கச்சேரி விவரம் \***

1. வானம்	மோதனம்	ஆதி	சாயுதபுரம் சீனிவாச அய்யங்கார்
2. ஸாஸிரோசனம்	சாடம்	ஆதி	புலியூர் துரைசுவாமி அய்யர்
3. பழகவதிதமிரா	தேவமனோபரி	..	வைணவியர் வாலுத்தேவாசார்
4. நயாசகலாபதிம்	தோடி	ரூபகம்	முத்துசுவாமி திக்ஷிதர்
5. யோசனா	தாபரி	ஆதி	தியாகராஜர்
6. பீசகலவயம்மா	மாசூரி	சாபு	சியாமசாஸ்திரி
7. இந்திரா	குண்டகரிய	ஆதி	தியாகராஜர்
8. சாயகசா	மத்யமாவதி	..	..
9. துர்மாரி	சஞ்சுதி	ரூபகம்	..

நாகசுலாபரி: ஆண்டுகம்பிய  
இதரவகைகள்.  
மங்களம்.  
(\* எயிப்பிசெத பாடல்கள்குட்பட்டது)

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**DAVEY CHIMANLAL & Co.,**  
Diamond Merchants, 89, Mint Street, P. T. MADRAS.

“The Music Academy draws more visitors to its canteen than its concerts. Those who want to show off their zari veshtis and silk sarees outnumber genuine music lovers.” My friend was unstoppable in his attack on the Academy. “The place is so full of restrictions – a musician has to stop his concert in exactly two and a half hours; he must provide an advance list of songs he’s going to perform, so on and so forth.”

“Stop spewing venom on the Academy,” I told him. “It has been responsible for so many good deeds,” I continued, but he was not to be assuaged.

“Tell me one good thing the Academy has done.”

I knew him well; I knew what would silence him.

“Wasn’t the Academy responsible for the wonderful artist GNB taking to music full time?” I said.

My friend was silenced.

Yes, it was the encouragement the Academy gave in 1928 that drew GNB fully into music. S Rajam was a witness. He said, “I took part in the Music Academy competition in 1928. GNB too participated. When I returned home, my father asked me, “Who won the prize?” I told him a certain Balasubramaniam, a son of a Hindu High School teacher, had been the winner. I won the prize for the next three years. I did not realise then what a star Balasubramaniam was to be in future.”

‘Writing in a 1942 issue of *Ananda Vikatan*, GNB said, “I took part in the annual competition of the Music Academy and won a gold medal. The success enhanced my enthusiasm for music.” Doesn’t this prove my assertion to my friend? But for the Academy, GNB would have perhaps gone to Law College and become a lawyer.’

Though GNB went to college for his BA (Hons.), he continued to pursue music, performing at every opportunity. When the time came for him to choose between a legal career and music, his friends and his father’s friends cleared his confusion and persuaded him to take up a career in music. As a result, he became fully involved in music.

While GNB performed whenever the chance came his way, his concert at Tanjavur after he acted in the film *Bhama Vijayam* in 1934 made people sit up and take notice of him.

By 1937, GNB seemed to have arrived as a vocalist worthy of being placed alongside giants like Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar, Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer, Musiri Subramania Iyer, Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer and Madurai Mani Iyer. At least that is the impression you get when you browse through *Ananda Vikatan Kalanjiam*. This is what *Karnatakam*’s review said in June of that year:

Last Sunday I heard a rare concert at Gokhale Hall. I call it a rare concert because

1. The musician was a BA Honours.
2. He was an actor in Tamil talkies.
3. The concert started at 3 o’clock, during rahu kalam.
4. It was a successful concert despite all this.

Kalki went on to say, “His voice has life. It is a grand voice that fills the hall. Modulations roll off it effortlessly. He has obviously trained very hard.”

In another review a month later, he mentions a friend who wants to know the culprit responsible for his not listening to GNB’s music earlier.

Kalki’s response is that his friend has lost nothing by not listening to GNB earlier. “Those who saw him in the talkies would never have expected him to become such a first rate singer. His voice was thin and weak then. He just scattered swaras around as if he were trying to get rid of them. There is a wonderful change in his voice now. Rumour has it that he was ill for a long time, and that the illness changed his voice. If that is true, then many of us will be eager to fall ill.”

The review says that the concert was on behalf of the Music Academy. His Kalyani and Kambhoji were incredible, it adds: “*Brovavamma* in Manji and a Tamil padam in Huseni were extraordinary.” The review was obviously accurate, because GNB sang in the prime slot that season at the Academy.



No other concert of a Carnatic musician can equal one at the Music Academy. No award can compare with the Sangita Kalanidhi. GNB’s very first kutcheri at the Academy was a main concert.

Kalki says in his review in *Ananda Vikatan* in January 1938 that it was a brave act on the part of the Committee to blood the youngster in the senior slot. He also says that if they did not do that they would be no different from other sabhas with an eye solely on collections.

Mahamahopadhyaya UV Swaminatha Iyer was among the audience for that big ticket GNB concert with top class

accompaniment in the form of Tiruvalangadu Sundaresa Iyer on the violin and Madras Venu Naicker on the mridangam. *Tamil Thatha* not only complimented GNB but also advised him to sing more Tamil songs in his concerts.

The article likens the atmosphere during the kutchcheris on the last day of the Academy festival to *sesha homa* – a ritual after a wedding when most of the wedding guests are gone and residual materials are used in *yagna* – but praises GNB's concert that day.

## Resume here

The Academy's archives reveal a very interesting song list of the concert. Even though it was his debut at the Academy, GNB had included rare ragas of the day like *Devamanohari*, *Gundakriya* and *Ranjani*. (It cannot be ruled out that GNB might have changed his announced programme on stage, as he was wont to do, based on the situation and his mood).

If the reader is wondering at *Ranjani* being described as a rare raga, it was so regarded those days. According to the critic Subbudu, "Musicians did not sing *Ranjani* those days, in deference to a theory that the rendering of it caused leprosy. The *prati madhyama* of the raga virtually rides piggyback on *gandhara*. Those without fluid voices did not dare to approach it and gurus avoided the trouble of teaching its intricacies. This is when GNB arrived on the horizon and looked around, practised such ragas with passion and propagated them among the *rasikas*."

It is not difficult to gauge the standard of his music in his Academy concerts of the period by perusing the names of some of his accompanists in his first six years at the venue: Tiruvalangadu Sundaresa Iyer, Papa Venkataramiah, Kumbakonam Rajamanickam Pillai and Mysore T Chowdiah, testimony to both his great talent and the encouragement he received from magnanimous seniors.

Many leading musicians refused to perform at the first conference of the Tamil Isai Sangam in 1943, but GNB sang there, while at the same time maintaining his good reputation at the Academy. He also paved the way for several *vidwans* to participate at both places in successive years thereafter. In a review entitled "Three concerts," Kalki described GNB's decision to perform at the Tamil Isai conference as evidence of his broadmindedness and his respect for the Tamil people.

An *Ananda Vikatan* profile in 1946 paid tributes to GNB's popularity by claiming that more people went away from the Music Academy failing to get tickets than attended the concert.

Sangita Kalanidhi DK Pattammal recalled that GNB's name resounded everywhere for some 15 years. The number of prospective bridegrooms demanding a GNB concert at their weddings was constantly on the rise, she said. An *Ananda Vikatan* joke had Siva worrying about his son Ganesa's



refusal to get married and Parvati replying, "He insists on GNB's concert at his wedding and GNB has no free dates." GNB was the first *vidwan* to earn four-digit remuneration at a time a fee of a hundred rupees was rare among other musicians. He was eclectic in his acceptance of such concert engagements—his fame had crossed barriers of caste and creed. Wedding concerts in Muslim families, or the families of *beedi* merchants and film actors were not uncommon.

It is harder to hold on to fame than achieve it. GNB's fame continued to grow as he tried out innovations all the time, determined not to stagnate in the name of tradition. It was not

difficult to captivate the lay listener with the magic of his voice, but satisfying the connoisseur was quite another matter. His brother Balakrishnan explained: “Every year Anna brought to the stage at least two compositions which were not in vogue, one to be presented at the Music Academy and the other to be unfurled at the Navaratri mandapam at Trivandrum.” He introduced several novelties like ragas outside the realm of familiarity, new prayogas in raga alapana, new kritis, and niraval and swara exploration at unusual places in the songs. Among the several instances of praise he received from peers and scholars, I relate three here.

The first occasion was a concert at the Jagannatha Bhakta Sabha in 1946. He sang an elaborate raga alapana in Saveri, followed it with an expansive tanam and concluded with a pallavi expressive of the emotion of the raga. Professor P Sambamoorthy was so moved that he was rendered speechless, when he went on stage. “I cannot speak now,” he said, “I am not in this world but in another, nada-filled planet.” At a concert next day by another vidwan, he said: “I apologise for my inability to speak yesterday. Truth can be told anywhere. If I explain yesterday’s Saveri, it will be most useful to rasikas and students of music.”

Ellarvi describes a 1951 concert at the Tyagaraja aradhana at Tiruvaiyaru: “It was a time when GNB’s concerts were the rage everywhere. At Tiruvaiyaru, when his turn came, he forgot himself, forgot the surroundings, forgot the whole world, once he and his accompanists settled down. He became one with his music. The audience reached a uniform verdict of ‘wonderful’ after applauding the songs wholeheartedly. Ariyakudi had affectionate words of praise for a respectful GNB after the concert. “Mani, you sang so well. It was real music,” he said.

*Ananda Vikatan* was all praise for GNB’s 1957 Music Academy concert. “It is no mean feat to earn applause at the Academy. GNB’s concert can truly be described as an “applause kutcheri”. Vidwans like Sanjeeva Rao, Chembai, Semmangudi and Tiruveezhimizhalai Subramania Pillai marvelled at GNB’s singing and showered applause. Every raga in the ragamalika that was a part of the Simhendramadhyamam raga-tanam-pallavi drew a tremendous ovation.”

GNB, whose career was kickstarted by the gold medal he received at the Academy, was honoured with the Sangita Kalanidhi award in 1958. The Music Academy honoured itself by honouring him.

Sangita Kalanidhi GNB with eminent personalities like JC Mathur ICS, E Krishna Iyer, Dr. V Raghavan, Devakottai Narayana Iyengar, Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, Mudicondan Venkatarama Iyer, C Saraswati Bai, Budalur Krishnamurthy Sastrigal, MD Ramanathan, BV Raman, BV Lakshman, Alathur Srinivasan, Titte Krishna Iyengar, B Rajam Iyer, TV Rajagopalan, Iswaran, CK Venkatanarasimhan and others



COURTESY: NANDINI RAMANI



# 10

## The GNB bani

The first thing we remember about GNB is his superb voice. Even towards the end of his life when he was enfeebled by illness, his voice could comfortably traverse two octaves, starting with the panchama in the mandra sthayi and reaching the panchama in the tara sthayi. That, in his halcyon days, he could easily reach the tara sthayi dhaivata or nishada is demonstrated by recordings of some of his concerts.

His voice had weight, timbre and a reach that enabled him to explore the raga at will. It retained its freshness at the end of a four-hour concert. His brigas—however fast he sang, whether in the ascent or descent, whether indulging in vakra or varja prayogas—never strayed from the raga. Each note retained its purity.

GNB's voice was strong enough for it to stand out even in the pre-microphone era. Calcutta Krishnamurti, who heard him in his youth, says: "His sruti was mostly between 1.5 and 2.5 kattai, but came down to one in his last years. Altogether eschewing singing in a false voice, he gave importance to akara singing."

### His approach to concerts

GNB made it his mission in concerts to bring out the various dimensions of ragas. Besides alapana, he employed kritis, niraval, swaraprastara and tanam as tools in raga expression. It was hardly surprising that a typical GNB concert was in the Ariyakudi mould, for was Iyengar not his manasika guru? If Ariyakudi was the grammarian of Carnatic music, GNB is best described as the poet who imbibed his grammar to give it a form acclaimed by one and all.

### Start of the concert

When we examine the lists of songs furnished by GNB to the Music Academy, we can conclude that he started his concert with a varnam 60% of the time, with Adi tala varnams like *Ninnukori* (Mohanam), *Evani bodha* (Abhogi) and *Inta chala* (Begada) the most frequent. He did not follow the practice of starting a varnam slow and moving on to the middle tempo, preferring to maintain the middle tempo from beginning to



end. He sometimes embellished the varnam with kalpana swaras following the chittaswaras. He also started the occasional concert with a brisk kriti like *Yochana* (Darbar), *Makelara vicharamu* (Ravichandrika), or *Swaminatha paripalaya* (Nata) in place of a varnam. He commenced yet other concerts with rakti raga compositions like *Ee vasudha neevanti*.



The GNB concert came to life with the very first item, no matter if it was a varnam or any of these kritis. His currently available concert recordings are living testimony to that.

## Ragas

GNB sang major, minor and middle level ragas in his concerts.

Among the major ragas, he gave full expression to ragas like Kalyani, Todi, Bhairavi, Shanmukhapriya, Sankarabharanam—through the many aspects of alapana, tanam, niraval and swaraprastara—as the main or sub-main ragas, though he did sing tukkadas in Kalyani and Shanmukhapriya and a tillana in Sankarabharanam. Though he did not often render Kharaharapriya, he once sang the raga for over an hour at the Perambur Sangita Sabha, as recalled by Lalgudi Jayaraman who accompanied him in the concert.

Though the middle category ragas are well known, it is not always easy to take them up as the main ragas and treat them elaborately. Examples of GNB's abundant manodharma are his varied treatment of ragas like Devamanohari, Saveri, Anandabhairavi, Nattaikurinji, Reetigaulai, and Sahana in ragam-tanam-pallavi. Such ragas as Hamsadhvani, Chakravakam, Pantuvarali, Harikambhoji and Abhogi occur rather early in his concerts. They are characterised by short, four-minute alapanas, madhyama kala kritis full of fast sangatis, and brisk niraval and swaraprastara. He seems to reserve ragas like Amritavarshini, Suddhasaveri, Yadukulakambhoji, Khamas, Hindolam, Kanada and Athana for fairly elaborate treatment in the middle part of his concerts.

GNB employed ragas like Saranga and Bilahari at the beginning of the concert or in the fast paced songs before the main raga. His ragamalika slokas at the tailend of the concert often featured Hamsanandi, Sindhubhairavi, Ranjani, Suddha Dhanyasi, Ahiri, Nayaki and the like. He is said to have made wide use of Mohanam in the 1940s, though only *Sree Ramamani* in that raga has survived in his recordings today. His fans greeted the advent of Mohanam in his concerts with the coded message, "Bradman has arrived," according to a GNB 75<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary tribute.

Among the minor ragas, he seems to have found Malavi, Chenchukambhoji, Jaganmohini, Darbar, Poornachandrika, Veeravasantam and Bhairavam suited to rapid rendering, though he also explored Malavi and Chenchukambhoji in great detail.

To GNB goes the credit of introducing to the concert platform rare ragas such as Gaudmalhar and Kapinarayani. He had the gift to internalise the essence of minor or rare ragas and express them in small capsules or larger doses. Kannada, Kadanakutoohalam, Salagabhairavi, Gavati, Hamirkalyani and Sindhubhairavi are among the ragas he featured in ragamalika swaras or slokas.

## Kritis

GNB likened a Carnatic music concert without kritis to a south Indian meal without rice or a north Indian one without wheat. He introduced a great number of hitherto unknown kritis to

the concert trail. *Vinayaka ninnuvina* (Hamsadhwani), *Durmarga* (Ranjani), *Vasudevayani* (Kalyani), *Tamadamen* (Todi), *Eti yochanalu* (Kiranavali), *Sarasa samadana* (Kapinarayani) and *Kari kalabha mukham* (Saveri) are examples.

The great composer Mysore Vasudevachar is said to have hailed GNB's rendering of his kriti *Brocheva* in Khamas as an unrecognizable daughter surprising her father with her stunning transformation in bridal ware. Muthiah Bhagavatar and Papanasam Sivan have also been credited with similar paeans of praise for the way GNB handled their creations.

GNB also brought out several new dimensions of well known kritis in familiar ragas. In Kalyani for instance, he gave new form to songs like *Etavunara*, *Pahimam*, *Vasudevayani*, *Nidhi chala sukham*, *Kamalambam bhajare*, *Biranavaralichi*, *Nee mahima tarama*, *E varamadugudura*, *Kannane en kanavan*, *Nijadasa*, *Sivakameswarim* and *Entuko nee manasa*. According to his top disciple ML Vasanthakumari, he noted down new kritis from anyone, even the man in the street. G Kittappa, who administered the Tiruvaiyaru Tyagaraja festival for years, related this story to highlight GNB's vast repertoire. "Down with high fever, GNB was a doubtful starter for the national programme in 1964, but the day before the concert, he gave his sishya a list of 138 Tyagaraja kritis and asked him to choose the songs he must sing on the morrow."

Some songs GNB unearthed from old songbooks were later made their own by other musicians. He brought to the stage kritis like *Sarasa sama dana* and *Sarasamukhi*, but these came to be known as Madurai Mani specials. S Rajam praises GNB's efforts to infuse kritis like *Kari kalabha mukham* with life by opening the kriti with swaraksharas like ga-ri in the tara sthayi. Those were the days, he says, when singers were afraid to break away from the way their teachers taught them. GNB had the courage to introduce many new songs, which have outlived him and achieved permanence.

Rajam's claim is supported by other musicians and scholars. In his book on Tyagaraja kritis, he has included GNB's rendering of *Vasudevayani* as its 'popular version'. Renowned for his pathantara, TK Jayaraman admits his modification of Sivan's *Tamadamen* after listening to GNB's rendering of the song.

GNB added several new sangatis to famous songs to suit his voice. *Darini telusukonti*, *Ma Ramanan*, *Samaja vara gamana* and *Manasa etulo* are examples. He also innovated to enhance the music of his accompanists, as he did in the 1940s, when his concerts with Palghat Mani Iyer's mridangam accompaniment benefited from their combined artistry. If his rapid-fire briga sangatis demonstrated his vocal richness, his unexpected swara prayogas showed his genius. His original chittaswaras in songs like *Sobhillu*, *Vara raga laya*, *Ee vasudha* and *Telisi Rama* are huge hits still being sung.

In his Music Academy speech in his Sangita Kalanidhi year, GNB stressed the importance he gave madhyama kala kritis in his concerts. He said, "The madhya kala or medium speed seems to be the best for both the lay and the learned listeners." Referring to a description of Hanuman's speech in the Valmiki *Ramayana* to drive home his point, he cited the predominance of madhyama kala in Tyagaraja's compositions.

His preference for madhyama kala notwithstanding, there is a view that he sang at a faster pace than his peers. The Sruti Foundation GNB workshop in November 1992 put this theory to rest by proving that some of his song renditions are slower than those of Ariyakudi, KV Narayanaswamy, Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar and TN Seshagopalan. The workshop's





*Radha sameta, Chintai arindu vadi* and *Nalla sagunam nokki chelladi*. He also sang Tiruppugazh selections. Only *Davalaroopa* has survived in recordings, though we are informed by *Ananda Vikatan* (1937) that he essayed such verses as *Akaramum ahi* in his youth.

His rendering of kritis is largely a model of appropriate splitting of words and phrases and clear enunciation. In one of his reviews published in 1937, Kalki Krishnamurti praised his correct treatment of the line *Adaikkalam enru adiyen*. There were also instances when he slipped, as in the compositions *Manasuloni* and *Marukelara*.

GNB generally tended to discover a song, polish it, popularise it among the listening public and then move on to a new discovery. In the 1940s for instance, he gained immense recognition through his offerings of *Etavunara* and *Vasudevayani*, only to switch to other Kalyani raga creations in the next decade. Had he not recorded *Vasudevayani* in the 1940s, we would have been left to rue its absence the way we miss evergreen songs like *Nannu palimpa, Etavunara* and *Tatvameruga*.

## Alapana

Raga alapana could be said to be GNB's forte. He clearly demonstrated the ragaswarupa straightaway—no confusion between Purvikalyani and Pantuvarali—even before displaying the arohana and avarohana of the raga fully. He painted a clear picture of the raga with certain key phrases, developed it flash by little flash, made the raga interesting and entire, whether the alapana lasted ten or fifty minutes. His raga alapana was of two kinds—the first preceded kritis while the other, far more elaborate form prefaced ragam-tanam-pallavi.

In GNB's music, the flow of the kriti dictated the flow of the alapana, ensuring the distinctiveness of the alapana for each kriti, different from the alapana for any other kriti. Examples would be the alapanas he did for *Marakatavalli* and *Sri Subramanyaya namaste* in *Kambhoji*.

The structure of *Marakatavalli* highlights the beauty of the uttaranga of *Kambhoji*, its pallavi starting with the madhya sthayi madhyama and soaring upwards. GNB's alapana before this kriti follows the same pattern. For example, the alapana starts with the madhya sthayi panchama and goes straight up from the opening gambit, deploying the madhya sthayi dhaivata and tara sthayi shadja as the nyasa swaras.

In the case of *Sri Subramanyaya namaste*, Dikshitar has managed to embellish it with the beauties of both the uttaranga and poorvanga of *Kambhoji*. The first pidi of GNB for his alapana prefixing this kriti resembles the prayoga of 'namaste' in the lyric. From that point, he progresses through a few phrases to the tara sthayi shadja. The descent is lit by a shower of brigas in the nagaswara bani as he expands on the spaces between the shadja and madhyama in the madhya sthayi, with the gandhara anchoring the alapana. Briga is the hallmark of the rest of the alapana as GNB travels from there to the madhya sthayi dhaivata, gradually reaches its next stop at the tara sthayi gandhara, flashes down to madhya sthayi and back to the tara sthayi, reaching the panchama there and finally completes the alapana in the madhya sthayi.

findings stated that the illusion of greater speed was created by the tempo he created and the bustling 'viruviruppu' of his style. That he refrained from excessive karvai could have been another contributory factor.

GNB's tukkadas after his ragam-tanam-pallavi were great crowd favourites. Such songs popularised by him included *Dikku teriyada kaattil, Sonnadai seithida, Kaaranam kettu vaadi,*

Each of these alapanas lasts about ten minutes. There are similarities and differences between them, but it doesn't mean the alapana for one of the kritis does not differ from concert to concert, as we can see from recordings.

Ragam-tanam-pallavi was a vital part of a typical GNB concert. He evolved a unique raga alapana style specific to RTP. Its three-tiered structure was described as the sopana paddhati or the staircase structure by TS Vedagiri. In the first part, GNB gave a brief outline of the raga in minutes with a few brushstrokes as it were.

This phase of the alapana generally lasted 4 to 7 minutes, while the next phase depended on the raga chosen. Starting with the madhya sthayi shadja, he would progress swara by swara in the central part of the alapana to the panchama alapana (Shanmukhapriya) or dhaivata (Kambhoji). He hinted at the central swara of the next part of the alapana while concluding the second stage.

Continuing where he left off, he then explored the raga in the tara sthayi. While elaborating the raga close to the tara sthayi shadja, he excluded some swaras to indulge in varja essays. His tara sthayi expositions surprise us with the ease with which he showered brigas after touching the tara sthayi shadja, considering that we base these observations on the evidence of recordings of his music in his last seven years. Most of these concerts were after he began to suffer from heart disease and he reaches heights just when we start wondering if he can go beyond the shadja after his disciple has led him to it with karvai. Voice undimmed after attaining the tara sthayi, he gradually reaches the panchama, and in some concerts even dhaivata and nishada in the tara sthayi, stunning the audience.

After his tara sthayi exploits, GNB completes the alapana with a big flourish, after displaying all the contours of the raga with his unique brigas.

How did he hold the attention of the audience while rendering a raga for an hour? Even while singing for several minutes around a single place, he managed to offer variety in the combinations of adjacent swaras, making it interesting to the listener. In this, his akara suddham and briga voice were great allies. He would start by giving many pauses at the beginning of such treatment and reducing them as the alapana lengthened. The main reason for the success of his alapana was his refusal to indulge in durita sangatis at every opportunity just to display his briga virtuosity.

In his Sangita Kalanidhi acceptance speech he stressed this aspect. "It has been found in experience that a judicious and clever juxtaposition and mixture of madhya and druta speeds in raga improvisations hold the attention of big audiences more than singing them in compartmental, single speeds," he said.

There was nothing mechanical in GNB's swara-by-swara expansion of ragas; it was not a case of analytical exploration at the cost of aesthetic expression. When moving from one swara to the next, he purveyed prayogas between those swaras and the neighbouring swarasthanas. Never did he walk up and down the staircase desultorily, so to speak.



What is more, he inserted several new prayogas in alapana. He sometimes indulged in graha bheda to suggest shades of a different raga. The intention was not to present the other raga but to heighten the beauty of the initial raga for the listener's ears through the contrast.

He handled rare ragas like Malavi and Chenchukambhoji with the same expansiveness that he treated ragas like Kalyani and Kambhoji. Lalgudi Jayaraman aptly described his raga alapana with the words, "GNB extended the frontiers of ragas by bringing beauty, novelty and freshness."

GNB also used ragas as vehicles for the rendering of slokas. He broke away from the convention that favoured eschewing typical alapana syllables or lengthening the words of the sloka in alapana. He invariably sang a line of the verse and went on to do alapana. In his typically humorous style, Kalki once wrote of GNB's raga alapana: "Singers usually treat the words of the sahitya as coatstands to hang the raga on. Sriraman Balasubramaniam doesn't do that. He goes around searching all over the wall for a place to hang his shirt while giving the coatstand a wide berth. He utters the word once and then leaves it suspended in space, while going about his raga exploration."



## Niraval

GNB invariably did niraval on a whole line of verse, unlike some other musicians who would take up only a part of a line for treatment. He did not shorten even long lines like *Tapatraya harana nipuna tatvopadesa kartre*. He did not always rely on the convenience of vowels—as in the case of *agama nigama* in *Nannu brova*—in the verse for niraval. He was expert at bringing out the raga bhava in relatively consonant-filled verses as well, as in the case of the line *kalilo matala nerchukoni kantalanu tanayula brochudai* in *Nenarunchinanu* in the raga Malavi. GNB also often did niraval on aptly chosen lines, which were however different from those traditionally purveyed. Examples are his choice of the line *Tapatraya harana nipuna*, rather than the usual *Vasavadi sakala deva vanditaya*. His use of the first two syllables ta and pa as swaraksharas (dha pa) was his trademark that listeners grew to anticipate. Likewise his deviations from standard practice in kritis like *Nidhi chala sukham*, and *Meenakshi memudam* proclaimed his creative genius.

## Kalpana swaras

Always intent on expressing the raga swarupa in his kalpana swaras, GNB was a master of *poruttam* or compatibility of the swara and kriti syllables, as in *Bhama mani* in *Rama katha suta*, where the bha is the panchama swara. Violinist Lalgudi Jayaraman once stated that he learnt the art of *poruttam* from GNB.

GNB also indulged in swara prastara at different, even tangential places, as in *Swaminatha paripalaya*, in which he chose the line *Parvati sukumara*, displaced three aksharas from the samam. He was also adept at reaching the same place through divergent routes as in reaching tapatraya in the following ways in Subrahmanyaya namaste:

Ma-ga-pa-ni / ni-dha-dha-pa-ma-ga-pa / ni-dha-ga—gaa-ma-pa / ni-dha-ma-pa-ni / sa-ri-ga-ma-pa / pa-dha-ri-sa-ni / ga-ma-pa-sa—pa-dha-sa / pa-dha-ri-sa-ni / ma-pa-dha-ni / gaa-ma-pa-ni / sa-ga-ma-pa-ni / ga-ma-pa-dha-ni / and ma-pa-ni-dha-pa tapatraya.

GNB's kalpana swara rendition provides excellent clues to his ability to offer a wide range of combinations springing from a central idea in raga alapana. Another innovation of his was to join swaraksharas to the point of swara prastara. His meaningful phrases ma-dha- *manasu* in the kriti *Manasu nilpa* and Sa-ma- *veda* in *Samajavaragamana* are illustrative of this practice of his. "Inspired by these innovations, kalpana in kalpana swarams has grown further these days," said TR Subrahmanyam in the GNB 75<sup>th</sup> birthday commemoration volume.

GNB sang kalpana swara in two speeds for many kritis. He maintained the exact speed of each kalam, i.e., he maintained the higher kalam at exactly twice the speed of the lower kalam, not allowing any incorrect speeding or slowing, a common failing in many musicians. He was also known to alter a line and sing swaras for it as in *Nenarunchinanu*. His way of rendering it brought out the raga lakshana of Malavi clearly, strictly adhering to its grammar, unlike some others.

GNB's swara singing was mostly of the sarva laghu kind. He indulged in laya intricacies like gati bheda only on rare occasions. From currently available recordings, we can see that he sang kalpana swara for both the eduppu as well as the arudhi in some pallavis like *Dasaratha bala Ramachandrayya* and kritis like *Brovavamma*.

## Tanam

GNB invariably performed tanam in the middle tempo or madhyama kala pramana in the middle octave or madhya sthayi. The tanam samples available on recordings range between the madhya sthayi shadja and the tara sthayi shadja. The tanam usually concludes with usages like alapana.

Most of the time, GNB showered brigas starting at the tara sthayi shadja and descending to the madhya sthayi shadja with a huge flourish, before concluding the tanam. His tanam following *Pahimam* in Kalyani in a recording of a Navaratri mandapam concert in Trivandrum is unaccompanied by the mridanga, contrary to the tradition there, though we have accounts of his following the practice at other times.

## Pallavi

GNB sang a wide variety of pallavis. In addition to oft-sung ragas, he did pallavis in ragas like Devamanohari, Andolika and Sahana, not in popular use for pallavis in his era. Most of the GNB pallavis we hear today are based on Adi tala, while a few are set in talas like tisra tripata. His pallavis are constructed variously on different rhythm cycles as 4-kalai, 2-kalai and one-kalai. The pallavi could start before or after the samam. Most of his pallavis are in the chatusra or tisra gatis.

The lines of the pallavi are also interestingly varied—examples are lines from the kriti *Sankari sankuru Chandramukhi*, containing raga names as in *Iti manchi samayamu Devamanohari*, and in one instance, a pallavi in Todi, whose lines resemble the sollukattus of a tillana.

GNB did not explore anulomam and pratilomam, while he performed niraval in the pallavi in two speeds. An exception was his 4-kalai Kalyani pallavi *Un darisanam kidaikkumo Nataraja dayanidhe*. He was also known to sing pallavis in ragas different from their original ragas. Calcutta Krishnamurti supported this claim at the Sruti Foundation workshop by citing the example of the Kambhoji pallavi *Parimala rangapate mampahi*, which he rendered in Bhairavi.

## Gamaka

There is a school of thought that GNB's singing lacked gamaka, thanks to his reputation as a briga wizard and speed merchant. A deeper study of his music proves this theory wrong. Out of the ten gamakas that have survived to date only kampita has survived, and there's ample evidence of it in GNB's music, though it is true that he did not linger on the gamakas around a swara, restricting the oscillations to one or two. His Sahana, Saveri, Yadukula Kambhoji and Nattaikurinji are standing examples of gamaka-rich ragas he handled expertly. There was no instance of his Todi sounding like Sindhubhairavi, which would be the result if Todi were sung without gamaka. He treated kampita in moderation because of his conviction that excessive gamaka ruined the aesthetics of a raga.

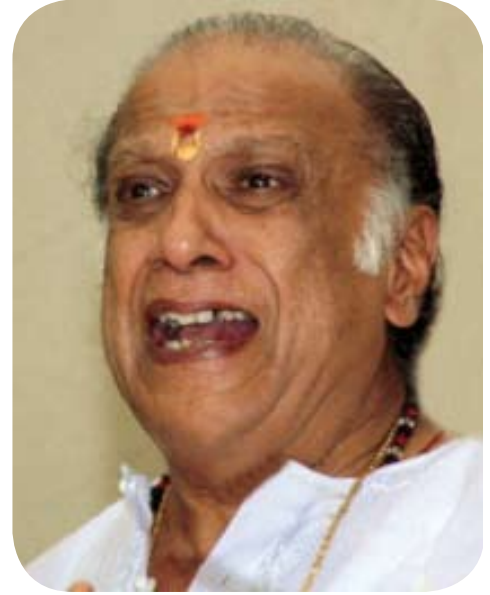
Quite apart from kampita, GNB indulged in gamakas like orikkai, nokku and jaru in his alapana. He was probably more prolific in jaru than any other musician. His alapana included both ascending



and descending jarus, as in Begada (descending) and Saveri (ascending). This was highlighted in an article *GNB: Gamakas No Bar* by MV Ramana and VN Muthukumar, and during the Sruti workshop, when Dr. Pattabhi Raman played GNB's Saveri alapana and said, "Let the listeners decide whether this alapana has bhava and gamaka."

## Sruti

Many critics accuse GNB of lack of sruti alignment. When we listen to his concerts in the late 1950s and in the 1960s, we do find his voice going off key sometimes, especially while approaching the tara sthayi. But it is also true that for every GNB concert with sruti lapses can be found five concerts with perfect sruti alignment. It is an indubitable fact that GNB had sruti awareness. Proof can be found in his mastery and precision of ragas, no matter how fast he sang, no matter how numerous his varja prayogas. Those who listened to him in his youth maintain that he had no Sruti alignment problem then. S Rajam says, "You can't sing in the tara sthayi as easily after the age of 50 and heart disease as you did at 30; you don't have the lung power."



While GNB did tend to sing off key when not in the best of health, it is not true that finding sruti perfection was a futile search for him.

## Brigas

Brigas came naturally to GNB, who used them to great advantage in raga alapana, and captivated audiences with his unique gift in this aspect of music. But there was more to his music than his briga prowess. A singer without a briga-oriented voice can still follow the GNB bani, which was known for its intellectual approach.

What were the various attributes of the GNB bani? These were: a conviction that it is the objective of a concert to bring out raga bhava; using gamakas in moderation and the use of suddha swaras wherever feasible and creating several new prayogas; maintaining the madhyama kala as the pulse of the concert; and to depart from the norm to introduce newness in the rendering of kritis, sangatis, raga alapana, niraval and swaraprastara in an aesthetic, cerebral manner. All this can be accomplished with or without briga.

An analysis of the dimensions of GNB's concert oeuvre throws up exceptions to each finding in some concerts. In a concert in which he was accompanied by Nellai Mani and Nellai Devarajan, for instance, he has sung a single-part raga alapana prefacing ragam-tanam-pallavi, unlike his standard practice of a three-part alapana. Similarly there are certainly some exceptions in the matter of anulomam- pratilomam and his usual sarvalaghu style of swaraprastara.

Tamil author Adavan said in a short story: Traditions and laws are part of an artist's equipment in the early years of his art. He follows them to create his first offerings. After that, he gradually invests the art with new colours and shapes. This is how the arts grow, acquiring new life and new light. The frontiers of art expand. Art is not a train on a single path. It is a rare force that crashes through paths, surging forth ignited and incandescent." An apt description of GNB and his bani.



# 11

## Vaggeyakara

Great composers who are also top concert musicians are a rare breed. Today, lyrics and tunes are often composed by different people and the songs are popularised by yet others in concert. A true vaggeyakara and performing vocalist, GNB shared his distinction with such greats as Mahavaidyanatha Sivan, Patnam Subramania Iyer, Poochi Srinivasa Iyengar, and Harikesanallur Muthiah Bhagavatar.

The first lot of GNB compositions was published as Ganabhaskara Manimalai in 1956, the second in 1971 and the third part in 2005. According to several reports, he composed some 250 kritis, but only 7 varnams, one tillana and 73 kritis have been published. While a letter GNB wrote to Swadesamitran editor Neelam in 1948 indicates that he had composed as many as 50 songs even then, his disciple ML Vasanthakumari stated once that he did the bulk of his composing in the 1950s. In his foreword to the Ganabhaskara Manimalai (1956), Mysore Vasudevachar said that GNB had composed over 100 songs on his ishta devata Rajarajeswari alone. According to his disciple Trichur V Ramachandran, who played a key role in the publication of the second and third volumes of his compositions, there were available at least 20 more compositions without swara notations. Though more than half of GNB's compositions have been lost, those that have survived proclaim his creative genius.

Prof Sambamoorthi described GNB's compositions as reflecting his extensive cutcheri experience and keen understanding of listeners' tastes. They are a blend of aesthetics and manodharma backed by his concert experience. They are in either rare ragas or rare forms in known ragas. GNB called them his musical dreams.

GNB composed in Tamil, Telugu and Sanskrit, his songs mostly expressing the bhakti rasa. The impact of the great vaggeyakaras Tyagaraja, Dikshitar, Papanasam Sivan and Patnam Subramania Iyer on his compositions was unmistakable. An example of this influence can be seen in the anupallavi of the Bahudari kriti *Unnadiye tunai*. The line *Ponnaiyum porulaiyum tedi chinnattanamadaindu chittam miha vadi* is reminiscent of the anupallavi of Sivan's Kuntalavarali kriti *Unnait tudikka: Ponnait tudittu madappoovaiyariyum tudittu, chinnattanamadaindu chittamum kalangidamal*. In his essay *Sahitya in kritis*, GNB said, "Dikshitar's kritis are detached and impersonal descriptions and stotras of the Hindu pantheon, while those of Tyagaraja are records of his personal and emotional experience of God."

GNB's own kritis owe allegiance to both kinds of composition. It cannot be said that all his compositions in the first person reflect his personal feelings and experiences. His songs have been praised more for their musicality than their sahitya bhava. Yet he did not compose songs with absurd lyrics. Making sure that the lyrics did not distort the structure of the song, he employed a variety of

prasa and swarakshara. “GNB was a great musician, but I have greater regard for him as a composer,” said S Rajam.

GNB composed varnams in rare ragas like Gavati, Andolika and Kadanakutoohalam as well as such common ragas not known for varnam repertoires as Hindolam, Varali, Ranjani or Yadukulakambhoji. With the exception of the Yadukulakambhoji varnam in Ata tala, all his varnams are set in Adi tala.

The Ranjani raga varnam *Amboruha* is in vogue today. With its many beautiful embellishments, GNB’s Kadanakutoohalam varnam is different from Patnam Subramania Iyer’s Raghuvamsa sudha in the same raga, which gives the impression of having been composed for instrumental music, with shades of influence of Western music. Vocalist Vijayalakshmi Subramaniam has praised the beauty and melody of GNB’s Mohana Krishna in this raga in an article.

Most of GNB’s compositions are in madhyama kala, facilitating easy handling by the majority of singers. *Marivere gati*, popularized by DK Jayaraman, *Samana rahite*, favoured by TV Sankaranarayanan, *Kamalacharane*, often played by Mandolin U Shrinivas and *Saraswati namostute* made famous by TN Seshagopalan are recordings that demonstrate this facet of his music.

Most of GNB’s compositions in major ragas manage to bring out hitherto unheralded dimensions of the ragas. For example, the Kanada raga songs popular in GNB’s time like *Sukhi evvaro*, *Mamava sada*, and *Sri Narada* all open in the lower sthayi. GNB’s *Paramukhamela namma* starts with the tara sthayi to give shape to the raga’s novel dimensions. *Brovabarama* and *Sadananda tandavam* in Bahudari start on the madhya sthayi panchama. GNB’s *Unnadiye gati* opens with the tara sthayi shadjama and assumes a unique form, with its unusual eduppu.

Remarkable is the avarohanam of Hamsanadam – s n d n p m r s. The findings of the Sruti Foundation’s seminar established that the structure of GNB’s kritis resemble Patnam Subramania Iyer’s. GNB’s Simhendramadhyamam kriti *Porumaiyai izhanden* has swaras developing one after



another in the anupallavi just as in Subramania Iyer’s composition *Aparadhamula*. His compositions in Malavi, Chenchukambhoji, Narayani, Kadanakutoohalam, Saraswati, Ranjani, Devamanohari, Nalinakanti and Purnachandrika can be regarded as welcome additions to the Carnatic repertoire. According to S Rajam, it is no exaggeration to state that GNB created beautiful compositions more expressive of the raga structure than the songs prevalent in his time. GNB’s *Marivera gati* is weightier than *Nenarunchinanu*—which is not to devalue *Nenarunchinanu*. In fact, without *Nenarunchi*, there would have been no *Marivera gati*. GNB used his learnings as his framework and polished it further in his own work.

*Ranjani Niranjani* in Ranjani, and *Saraswati namostute* in Saraswati are songs you often hear during Navaratri. In addition to these, to GNB’s credit goes the composition of songs in such ragas as *Veenadhari* or *Sarangatarangini*, found only in books.

Like Harikesanallur Muthiah Bhagavatar, GNB also created new ragas like Amritabehag and Sivasakti, in which he composed songs. Sivasakti, a janya raga of Kharaharapriya, conforms to the Sri Chakra. As four swaras denote Siva and five Sakti in the nine faces of the Sri Chakra, Veena Balachander joked that with four swaras in the arohanam of the raga symbolizing Siva and five swaras in the avarohana Sakti, the raga was GNB's acknowledgement of womanpower in the world. GNB composed two kritis *Srichakra raja* and *Vinutapalini* in this raga, while his *Kamalacharane* in Amritabehag is still sung in concerts.

We have seen that swaraksharas are a special feature of GNB's compositions. Examples are the way he has begun compositions like *Nee padame gati*, *Sadapalaya* and *Pada bhajana*. Many of his songs carry the name of the ragas in which they are composed. Jhanta prayogas in his kritis in Saveri and Devamanohari are his speciality too, as is the use of such devices as kopucha yati in the chittaswaras he has composed for some of his songs.

Not only did GNB compose in many ragas, he also featured a variety of talas in his creations—Adi, Rupakam, Tisra ekam, Misra jhampa and Khanda tripata. The vilamba kala kriti *Parama kripa sagari* is an exception to his general preference for the madhyama kala. According to Calcutta Krishnamurthi, all ten gamakas are part of *Mamakuleswaram*, GNB's composition in Todi that resembles a Dikshitar kriti. Remarkably for someone who indulged in sruti bheda or graha bheda in his performances, GNB did not include it in his compositions.

Legend has it that Mysore Sadasiva Rao, the composer of hundreds of songs who never sang them in his own concert, once requested Ariyakudi to propagate them. Ariyakudi's response was instant and telling: "Ask Mani. Your songs will become popular in a single day if he sings them in his concerts."

GNB did not try to promote his own songs through his kutchcheris. He believed that they would stand the test of time if they had life in them. The one exception is *Parama kripa sagari* which he sang in a concert at the insistence of a friend, says Trichur V Ramachandran. Die-hard fan Sivaramakrishnan recalls an AIR concert in which GNB sang his own compositions for over an hour. GNB's disciple ML Vasanthakumari was responsible for the success and long life of some of these songs. Her LP *Guru Vandanam* was a runaway hit. Later, other musicians from the GNB musical lineage like S Kalyanaraman, Ramachandran and Sudha Ragunathan have kept these songs alive. Non-disciples like OS Thyagarajan, TM Krishna and S Sowmya too have contributed to the continuance of the legacy.

DK Pattammal recalled that many of GNB's songs were not recognized as his creations as he did not incorporate his signature in them. According to one of his brothers, the name *Vimarsanananda* in the kriti *Kamalacharane* was his mudra.

GNB once said of Oottukadu Venkata Kavi that he belonged to a tradition of bhaktas who sang only of the lord, hence did not introduce himself in his songs. GNB too belonged to the same tradition of self-effacement.

Prof. Sambamoorthi said, "Portions of his (GNB's) compositions are studded with gems of technical beauty." He can well be described as a *sangita sahitya nipunakresa*, words by which he once described Tyagaraja. S Rajam appealed to the next generation of musicians to perpetuate GNB's kritis, rather than speak about him. The GNB Foundation and many famous vidwans seem to be engaged in such a mission.



# 12

## Slings and arrows

In his Sangita Kalanidhi acceptance speech, GNB said, “All cultural progress has been due to pioneers of new ideas and expressions, though at their own times, they were called rebels.” True to his statement, he was himself first considered a rebel, but later accepted as a pioneer of his time. When he started his musical career, the consensus was that his career would be short-lived, what with his lack of formal training under the gurukula system and his dependence on an extraordinary voice and ability to sing at lightning speed.

GNB’s fame grew as he kept introducing innovations and offering attractive features of music to the listening public. He became the musician laureate of the Ettayapuram and Travancore principalities in the 1940s. An article by G Kittappa gave an interesting picture of his growth. He said, “The audience at a 1942-43 concert at Kali Studios, Calcutta, by GNB, TN Krishnan, Palghat Mani and Alangudi shouted out demands for a repeat performance—not an encore but a fresh concert altogether—after a brilliant tani following Kambhoji raga alapana and the kriti *Ma Janaki*. The honorarium for the cutcheri was ten thousand rupees! When the musicians returned to their room after the concert, the sabha officials swooped down on GNB and made him agree to a second concert in a few days’ time.”

The adverse campaigns against the ‘talkies bhagavatar’ did no damage to his fame. GNB fan Krishnamurti was fond of saying that “the letters GNB became analogous to VRS (voluntary retirement scheme) for many artistes.” Some envious critics dubbed his innovations foreign music, outside the scope of Carnatic music or modern music originating from his BA Honours degree. The same yardstick did not seem to apply to educated vidwans like Musiri or Tiger. When GNB introduced sruti bheda

or modal shifting of the tonic in his concerts, many opponents used an article by his father GV Narayanaswami in the Journal of the Music Academy to attack him. GVN had said:

“A few of the present day musicians want to show off their skill by presenting intellectual feats in the raga alapana resorting to what is called sruti bheda. If an expert in music indulges for a few minutes in this kind of jugglery for the sake of introducing novelty, it will take root in the minds of the hearers who will mistake the husk for the grain.”



The experts committee of the Music Academy, however, had the last word on the subject. After fiery arguments, the president of the academy TV Subba Rao ruled that sruti bheda was a legitimate practice.

GNB claimed in a subsequent article that Tyagaraja had used graha bheda in a composition of his. He said: "In the kriti in the raga Bhairavam beginning with the words *Maryadagadaiya*, while Tyagaraja observes that Rama had a reputation of favouring his own men in preference to strangers, the great composer very deftly introduces graha bheda in this portion of the music of the kriti. To indicate the difference between the followers and strangers, Tyagaraja has introduced through an alien scale, seeming though, in thorough contrast to the original one." In time, graha bheda came to be accepted and used by many, even finding a place in university curricula.

GNB's self-effacing nature, his refusal to seek concert opportunities or awards, and his trusting nature helped his antagonists.

His disciple ML Vasanthakumari said of his music at his 81<sup>st</sup> birth anniversary celebrations: "There are two kinds of music. The first consists of perfecting and polishing songs by continuous hard work and the second is to plunge into new paths like a flash flood. The second method is fraught with risks. Is that enough reason to condemn adventure? Do such initiatives not expand the frontiers of music?"

There was a crowd waiting for GNB to slip in his forays of musical adventure. Vidwans and critics joined hands in the 1950s in this task of vilifying him. GNB approached each of his concerts with nervousness, like an examination. Yesterday's pass was yesterday's. I must pass anew today," was his philosophy. Rivals sometimes resorted to planting their men in the front row to make disapproving faces to hint at poor music. "He sometimes wondered if it was worth singing before some of these conspirators," said MLV.

GNB's sishya TS Balasubramaniam once said in a speech that GNB gave his best concerts at places like Tazhaiyuttu, Kadaiyam, Bombay or Calcutta. "He was very restrained in Madras concerts."

According to friend and critic BVK Sastri, GNB was fearful of the possibility of negative reviews leading to reduced concert opportunities, for all his brave new ideas in music.

GNB's deep respect for the music of Hindustani vocalist Bade Ghulam Ali Khan caused him grave embarrassment, when he prostrated before the ustad moved by the grandeur of his concert at the Parthasarathi Swami Sabha in Triplicane in full view of the audience on 9 January 1954. Many took GNB to task for this display of what the critics saw as lack of self-respect in a leading Carnatic musician. The well-known Subbudu launched a scathing attack, but blamed Kalki, Semmangudi, Musiri and Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer as the instigators of the attack.

A grand gesture to pay homage to a great musician's art was thus maligned and reduced to the level of cheap gossip by jealous rivals. GNB had the magnanimity to appreciate good music in anyone, and did not regret falling at Bade Ghulam's feet as a mark of respect for his great music, but he was very hurt by the accusations.

The bad publicity was even said to be responsible for the denial of the post of principal of the Madras University to GNB.

Soon, rumours flew that GNB had lost the ability to sing, while his briga music was accused of lack of bhava.



MLV lamented such baseless criticism. “Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer of yore sang at great speed and Ramanathapuram Srinivasa Iyengar earned the sobriquet Poochi for his rapid-fire singing,” she said on his 81<sup>st</sup> birth anniversary. “Yet, even 20 years after his death, critics slam GNB for his briga music.”

At the same event, MLV said: “When he accepted the post of principal of the Swati Tirunal College of Music, I went to see him off at the railway station and he said he did not want even his dead body to set foot in Madras again. He was that bitter.”



GNB with some of his disciples and Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, R Ranganathan and Palghat Mani Iyer at the farewell function organised by Sri Krishna Gana Sabha in Chennai (1964).

None of GNB’s progeny took to music as a career, probably because of his disillusionment with his career. “He was firm...that none of us should take to music as a career,” his eldest son Duraiswamy said. “He used to describe the music world as a jungle.”

GNB’s second sister Lakshmi learnt music from him. She said, “I learnt many songs from him. He taught the pallavi of a song one day and the anupallavi the next day. I told Anna I liked the song ‘Sadbhakti’ in Anandabhairavi that I heard from a girl at a wedding oonjal at Tiruvidaimarudur. He taught me the song immediately. Lakshmi, who sang the song beautifully for the author decades later, did not pursue the art. Only Rajeswari, who attended an AIR audition with GNB’s knowledge, became a radio artiste.

Battered by so many hostile waves, and sometimes disheartened by them, GNB still enjoyed a huge fan following. When he left Chennai for Trivandrum in 1964, the Sri Krishna Gana Sabha gave him a fitting farewell, with the celebrations committee comprising the likes of Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer, Palghat Mani Iyer, Budalur Krishnamurti Sastrigal and Musiri Subramania Iyer, and headed by Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer. It was an unprecedented honour. His education, the intellect it shaped and the confidence it gave him enabled GNB to withstand adversity with courage.



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# 13

## Friends

CK Venkatanarasimhan, 'Babu Sir' to everyone, and Palghat Mani Iyer come readily to mind whenever there is mention of GNB's friends. A criminal lawyer by profession, Babu Sir went to concerts more often than the court. Rajamanickam Pillai once wrote that GNB and Babu Sir were bound to be seen together at any high quality concert. In the same article, he called Babu Sir a great friend of musicians and a strong supporter and guide of GNB, indispensable to his musical growth.

"Babu came home everyday," said Balakrishnan. "Anna too went to his Palathope house frequently. They also spoke for hours on the phone. Babu Sir's shrill voice came loudly over the phone. Anna teased him by saying, 'Don't shout so much Babu. You can be heard without the help of the phone.' Anna bought two of everything, with Babu Sir in mind. He consulted him on all matters." When HMV approached him to record his music in 1946, GNB left the entire choice of songs to be recorded to Babu Sir.

According to MLV, Babu Sir and GNB fought all the time on some issue or other. Just when you thought they were about to split as friends, they were back to their old warm ways with each other.

Many in the know acknowledged Babu Sir's steadfast support of GNB in all his battles against opposition and his genuine interest in his welfare that made him speak his mind fearlessly even when he did not agree with GNB.

The friendship between GNB and Palghat Mani Iyer was interesting. The story of their intimate friendship for many years followed by a complete break-up and their return to friendship after a few years reads like an exciting novel. Mani Iyer's son TS Rajaraman's recall of his memories of their friendship was clear and interesting. He listed a number of common qualities that bound the two together.

Neither GNB nor Mani Iyer ever believed he had accomplished anything great in his life. They both had the self-confidence to perform their tasks but believed that no task of theirs was extraordinary. That is why they never gave interviews.

Both steered clear of social bigwigs. "Don't stop in front of a bungalow with a car. Don't approach a bungalow with a car and a dog. Avoid a street with a bungalow with a dog and diamond necklaces," Palghat Mani Iyer was fond of saying. GNB played a prominent role in assuaging the feelings of vidwans who protested against the Music Academy's decision to field an MS concert for its building fund. He explained that the Academy was right in choosing the biggest draw among musicians to raise funds.

While many musicians including those who opposed the concert waited to meet chief guest Jawaharlal Nehru after the performance, he desisted. "Where were you? I searched everywhere for you," Babu Sir chided him. His reply was simple and direct: "I felt no need to shake Nehru's hands after the concert, so I left."

Both Mani Iyer and GNB were strict in the matter of their concert remuneration, but paid no attention to the money once it was paid. They rarely knew who had custody of it once it was received. They left their wallets constantly with their disciples. Both had to instantly act on their impulses. Babu Sir was the only person with any control over them. True love could make them do anything, but they dropped people ruthlessly, once they hurt them. Both loved pens, cars and clothes. GNB just had to drive a newly acquired car straight to Palghat Mani Iyer's house. And Mani Iyer had to exchange his old car for a new one the same day. Legend had it that P Orr and Sons, Khadi Gramodyog Bhavan and Mahalingam and Sons (the car salesmen) owed their success to GNB and Mani Iyer. Both stubbornly went after things considered difficult to acquire or expensive. Both travelled first class everywhere. They hated the idea of a third person entering the four-passenger railway bogey the two of them occupied. The journeys were occasions for learning or polishing kritis and exchanging musical ideas. Both had the greatest respect for Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar and his music. Their disciples came to the forefront even during the peak of their own careers.

Rajaraman said, "My father meticulously maintained a cutcheri diary. We have several notebooks of such entries. The 1940s and 50s are dominated by GNB concerts, some ten to 15 of them every month. The fees vary from Rs. 125 to thousands of rupees. The audiences loved Mani Iyer's flawless accompaniment of GNB's singing, especially his anticipation. GNB too sang some sangatis and kritis in anticipation of Mani Iyer's responses to them just to show him in a good light."

Palghat Mani Iyer's elder son Rajamani related this story of how they lost their way once on a visit to Bombay to illustrate their friendship: "They lost their way after an early morning outing for a haircut. Father said to GN Sir, 'Look at us. People may adore us but how naïve we are, how impractical. We can't even find our way home.' GN Sir immediately assured him that sooner or later someone would recognise them and guide them home. That is exactly what happened." The story was published in Dinamani Kadir in December 2005.



According to Rajaraman, the duo frequently communicated through their eyes on the concert stage. 'Niraval next or swaraprastara without niraval today? Will he continue kalpana swara for four more avartanas? All this, I could read from his eyes,' Mani Iyer frequently told him. 'Eye contact between singer and percussionist is vital for the success of a concert.'

Rajamani was once scheduled to accompany GNB in the presence of the Paramacharya of Kanchi at a Tanjavur concert. Mani Iyer reassured his nervous son about to accompany a star like GNB for the first time that GNB would be supportive. 'As Paramacharya is attending, he'll sing these songs,' he said, listing a few kritis. GNB actually sang them at the concert.

The split occurred in 1950. What were the reasons? Rajaraman said that neither GNB nor Mani Iyer ever spoke about the reason for the

break-up. They never breached their unwritten code of ethics. They did not malign each other ever. "At least GNB once said to Venkatanarasimhan," Rajaraman continued: 'Babu! Mani Iyer is not the same person any more,' but my father never spoke about it," said Rajaraman.

Despite the best efforts of Babu Sir and Ananda Lodge Kittappa, their two close friends, the two no longer performed together. Rajaraman recalled an occasion when GNB reportedly told the organisers of the Trivandrum Navaratri concert series that they could arrange any mridangam accompanist other than Mani Iyer for his concert. This was at a time when both GNB and Mani Iyer were state musicians at the Travancore court. "When Babu Sir heard about this, he lost his temper. 'Have you taken leave of your senses?' he asked GNB. 'Shouldn't you have left the choice of accompanist to the royal family, who showed you the courtesy of consulting you? Can't you see that Mani Iyer is from Palghat, a part of the Travancore state? What will they think of you?' GNB replied that he wrote what he felt. 'You can't do as you please when you receive a monthly honorarium from the state,' Babu Sir told him. GNB's immediate reaction was to resign his post."

Rajaraman recalls Babu Sir told him, 'He gave up a regular income as he was angry with me.' GNB's family, however, remembered GNB forgoing the Travancore commitment because it interfered with his puja at home during Navaratri.

Rajaraman continued: "Even during those days, GNB asked young Palghat Raghu to accompany him on the mridanga. 'I may not want Mani Iyer, but I want his style of playing,' he told Raghu. Raghu told me this many times. Both GNB and Mani Iyer were helpless without Babu Sir. Whenever they met at Babu Sir's place they exchanged pleasantries formally."

In 1958, after a gap of eight years, Babu Sir arranged a concert involving both of them at RR Sabha. Babu Sir somehow persuaded both of them to perform together again.

The crowd was unprecedented. GNB and Mani Iyer hardly spoke to each other when they met on stage and sat down to align their sruti. The concert was going very well, some ninety minutes into it, when a listener asked for the kriti *Vara raga laya* to be rendered. The Chenchukambhoji kriti had been a grand success on many occasions in the past in their concerts, but GNB had not sung it since the split. Now, he launched into it as soon as the request from the audience came. GNB experienced a lapse of memory when he began the chittaswaras after the anupallavi, even though it was his own composition. Mani Iyer came to his rescue by outlining the structure of the chittaswaras on the mridanga. GNB caught on immediately and sang the swaras in the next round, to thunderous applause. After the concert, GNB went to Babu Sir's house and Mani Iyer to Woodlands Hotel.

When GNB related the incident to Babu Sir, he pounced on him. 'Are you not an educated man?' he said. 'How can you confuse your personal issues with your art? When you feel so happy with Mani Iyer's magnanimity, shouldn't you have praised him to his face? What kind of an artist are you if you can't even do that?'

"GNB called Mani Iyer immediately and spoke to him for more than an hour," Rajaraman continued. When we asked him if the friendship was revived, he said, "It was never the same again. The old friendship did not come back."

Nevertheless, but for the fact that GNB and Mani Iyer performed together again for many years, we would never have had the number of recordings of their concerts we actually have access to today. The world should be eternally grateful to Babu Sir for being responsible for preserving on tape the GNB-Mani Iyer partnership in Carnatic music. It is a consolation also to see a smile on GNB's face in a photograph taken while Palghat Mani Iyer was speaking during the GNB felicitations at Sri Krishna Gana Sabha in 1964.



With Rajamanickam Pillai and Palghat Mani Iyer

Palghat Mani Iyer was a more or less permanent fixture in the GNB concerts of the 1940s, while Palani Subramania Pillai played the khanjira in many of those. With Rajamanickam Pillai on the violin, the combination was often advertised in wall posters everywhere as Three Gems and a Pearl. After the 1940s, Palani and Palghat Raghu played the mridangam in most of his concerts. GNB described as Palani's mridangam playing as akin to travelling in a high-class car on a wonderful road. He also called Raghu the apple of his eye, Raghu said during the inauguration of the GNB Foundation. Ramanathapuram CS Murugabhoopathi was a frequent mridangam accompanist at the Music Academy.

Kumbakonam Rajamanickam Pillai, Mysore Chowdiah and Lalgudi Jayaraman were the most frequent violinists to accompany GNB.

According to Rajamanickam Pillai, every accompanist was happy to play for GNB. "He knew how to encourage them, get the best out of them to elevate the concert and share his fame with them," he said. "Whenever I accompanied him, I have been completely satisfied during the concert and the journeys up and down."

Lalgudi Jayaraman said, "The concerts with GNB are rare opportunities for accompanying artists. I am one of many to benefit from such exposure. The scope he provides you to display your prowess and the way he acknowledges your contribution delight and enthuse the eager young accompanist."

Even though several years his senior, Chowdiah was a close friend. He complemented GNB's vocal music by inspiring his creativity with his violin.

Of Chowdiah, GNB said, "In a performance, he has many cards up his sleeve, and in all my experience for the past 27 years and more, not once have any of them let him down." After a Bangalore concert, Chowdiah exclaimed emotionally to the audience: "Who says GNB is not sruti-aligned? Did he slip today at any time? Can anyone sing as he did?"

Other friends of GNB included DV Ramanujam, secretary of the Shanmukhananda Sabha, Bombay, and Tirunelveli KS Vaidyanathan.



# 14

## Prince of music

“GNB only had to take his place on the concert stage, and he transformed the atmosphere,” said Sangita Kalanidhi TN Krishnan, while releasing the third volume of GNB’s compositions. GNB’s presence on stage, with his handsome looks and immaculate clothes sense, was as commanding as his magnificent voice. Speaking on the subject, Palghat Mani Iyer’s son Rajaraman once said, “When I asked my father for permission to attend a GNB concert, he advised me to watch GNB get ready for the programme and sent me to the green room with his assistant. With his striking complexion and wearing a panchakatcham veshti, diamond earrings and fragrant perfumes, he looked like Lord Vishnu incarnate.”

Many people claimed to have arranged for veshti supplies to GNB. Close friend Ananda Lodge Kittappa said, “Whenever Mani and GNB came to Tanjavur, we used to stay together, and bought our wardrobes together. We often bought 50 muslin khadi veshtis from Kakinada and shared them between us.” Writing in the 2003 Dinamani Kadir music special issue, Madana Kannan recalled her father buying veshtis from Manalmedu, a place famous for the product, for GNB. Others too speak of the veshtis they bought for GNB.



Why did GNB need so many veshtis? His son thinks it is because of the way GNB kept talam on his thigh, slapping it thunderously hard. It was loud enough to act as an additional percussion instrument. The thin khadi veshti was hardly equal to such rough treatment. And the prince could hardly go on stage with repaired dhotis, so the constant need to refurbish his collection of veshtis. Legend has it that GNB insisted on his veshtis being washed in the river Kaveri on his travels for concerts. Though he wore silk in his youth, he preferred khadi as he grew older. Four diamond buttons and a gold chain to link them invariably adorned his shirt.

The whole world knew of GNB’s fondness for perfume. According to a 1998 article in Dinamani Kadir, “GNB deserved a doctorate in perfumes. An example of the depth of his knowledge on the subject was his



detailed discussion on the raw materials and nuances of attar manufacture at the famous Abdul Rahim family scent shop at Tanjavur on a visit there. Abdul Rahim was quite amazed by the extent of GNB's knowledge. A fragrance enveloped the entire vicinity of his car when he opened the door of his Chevrolet."

GNB bought not perfume from Rahim, but the ingredients. He had his own recipe for the scent he wore, and it always remained a secret formula, even to his friends, who frequently asked for and took away the "GNB compound."

GNB even prepared his own snuff specially at home. That Ariyakudi was his guru in snuff as well as music was a popular joke. He was known to be a perfectionist in the smallest of tasks. His sister Rajeswari recalled in a Dinamani Kadir article how he once showed her how to mix a cup of Horlicks dissolving the powder properly in water or milk. "He paid close attention to jobs we consider trivial."

He was a modest eater but very particular about what he ate. Every item had to meet his specifications. On top of his large family, many guests ate everyday at his home. At least 30 people regularly dined in the GNB household. Valli Mami, the cook who lived in and became a member of the family, was well known in music circles. Visitors like TN Krishnan and Lalgudi Jayaraman frequently asked Mami what the menu was even as they entered the house. GNB collected recipes from his hosts whenever he enjoyed a good meal and asked for the dishes to be made at home later. According to Ananda Lodge Kittappa, GNB preferred simple food, particularly enjoying bitter gourd curry and sarsaparilla pickle. TR Subramaniam related this story: "GNB once unsuspectingly ate the extremely hot gonkura pickle on an Andhra concert tour. When the host asked him if he liked the food, GNB said, "The food at home makes us salivate in expectation, while the food here brings tears to our eyes."

GNB's daughter said that he did not like to add salt to his food during the meal. "Please taste the food before you serve it to me," he said. He liked to eat in a large silver plate with many compartments for the various items, which he did not like to mix up. "It was difficult to tell what foods he liked and what he did not. Sometimes he ate first what he did not like, and at others what he liked. Mother was often confused whether he was getting rid of food he did not relish or wanted to eat more. On the days of concerts, he liked to eat badam soaked overnight, fried in ghee and with salt and pepper added at lunch. At night, he only drank milk. During the concert, he liked to chew betel with a marble-sized helping of butter."

Balakrishnan remembered how particular GNB was about punctuality. "He never went late to a concert. He often ascended the stage before his accompanists. He went to the railway station an hour before the time of departure. He sent back people who were late for appointments, no matter who they were."

There were occasions when trains waited for GNB! There was this concert at the Railway Institute near the Tanjavur railway station. GNB was accompanied by Tiruvalangadu Sundaresa Iyer and Palghat Mani Iyer. GNB had to catch the Boat Mail to go to Madras for a concert. The train always came at 9.11 p.m. “That evening, GNB had essayed a brilliant Kalyani alapana, following it with *Nidhi chala sukham?* doing an elaborate niraval and swaraprastara, showering a cascade of swaras in the higher speed,” said Tanjavur Kittappa. “In his enthusiasm Sundaresa Iyer egged him on to expand and GNB obliged him. The spellbound rasikas did not want the music to stop, so some of them pleaded with the guard and had the departure of the train stalled by half an hour.”

GNB was such an avid collector of watches that he had a permanent running account with P Orr and Sons. He often bought watches priced at ₹2,000 even in those years, choosing from the latest models brought home at his request. Taken in by wrong recommendations, he sometimes bought inferior watches.

He was equally fond of pens. He enjoyed fixing Parker nibs to ordinary pens and vice versa to fool those who coveted his Parkers, so that he retained the pens that wrote better. “He rarely bought pens in small numbers; sometimes he ordered all the models available,” said Balakrishnan.

“Anna always travelled first class,” he continued. “If the organisers only offered second class train fare, he paid the difference and travelled first class. He hired good cars wherever he went. He bought many cars, too, changing cars frequently. He was a nervous flier and a nervous car passenger who always asked the driver to slow down.”

Long time admirer TS Vedagiri remembered how he once stood on one leg throughout a concert at a packed Gokhale Hall. Another diehard rasika Sivaramakrishnan said he and his colleagues travelled by train from Trivandrum to Madras just to attend a GNB concert at the Music Academy. “The office granted us leave for the purpose, too!”



His matinee idol status led to his appointment as brand ambassador of Philips radio. The company launched its new brand *Maestro* as *Maestro's Maestro*.

Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer used to joke that the flower bazaar would run out of stock on days GNB was performing, because his female admirers bought all the flowers. “He drew as many people who came to see him as those who came to hear him.”

Year after year, “music season special” issues of magazine carry GNB trivia—about his clothes, his pens, his accessories and so on. The reader cannot help marvelling at the number of people who claim to have bought him his favourite Swag, roses, and veshtis.

GNB was variously known as the prince of the music world, the Prince Charming of Carnatic music and a matinee idol. How else do you describe a man who sought the highest quality in all he did, worked hard to attain it, lived the way he liked, earned a fortune and spent a fortune?



# 15

## The all rounder

If he had never been a concert musician, GNB would have been known as a writer, a painter and a devotee of goddess Srividya. He wrote several articles on music during the 1950s. In one of them entitled *Concert Tradition*, he wrote on many topics, starting with musical scales. He described the growth of ragas of the period of the *Sangita Ratnakara*, and went on to give a delightful word picture of the kritis with their origins in the *Gita Govindam* and the changes they underwent over time. He wrote of the support traditional music received from the south Indian princely states and the contemporary concert pattern that divides a performance into the three parts pre-pallavi, pallavi and post-pallavi.

“Ragam-tanam-pallavi is the high watermark of south Indian classical music,” GNB used to say. He was convinced that “our concert tradition has come to stay,” thanks to its “capacity for growth and adaptation through a long period of time.” His article, *Art its dawn, perfection and future role* provides ample evidence of his wide reading. He quotes liberally from John Keats, Roger Fry, Tolstoy, Gladstone and Clive Bell to support his views on the growth of music. He says, “If painting is two-

dimensional, sculpture three, one can say music is four-dimensional having its basis on stone, colour, rhythm and melody.” Comparing the classical and romantic in art, he describes them as “two undecided and embittered sections of opinion regarding the aesthetic process of producing works of arts.” His idea of high art he says is a union of vigour and beauty in parts and exquisite attractiveness and appeal in the whole, when the fresh impulses of romanticism are sculpted with the chisel of classicism.



He compares Tyagaraja’s and Dikshitar’s compositions thus in an article entitled *Sahitya in kritis*: “Tyagaraja was a mystic and a bhakti, while Dikshitar was an intellectual and a gyani. The mystic realises God through his feelings and intuition. For him, God is a living entity, with whom he feels he is in intimate personal contact. For the gyani, on the other hand, God is more a concept and his approach to God is being through logic, learning and the intellect. Hence it is that Dikshitar’s kritis are detached and impersonal

descriptions of stotras of the Hindu pantheon, while those of Tyagaraja are records of his personal and emotional experience of God.”

In another called *The annihilation of art* published in the journal of the Music Academy in 1953, he says: “Everywhere sabhas have sprung up and at various cities colleges have been opened to cater music and musical training to the lay and young aspirants in the art. Nowhere or at no time has there been such a loud clamour for music and artists. Performers, all and sundry, are always in great demand. You find brilliant pretenders, aesthetic noise masters, who lure the public with their cheap but colourful, tawdry wares. This being an age of iconoclasts and communists, respect for age and tradition is gradually dying out. Everything is in an unsteady state of flux. Monetary return is the only criterion or incentive for artistic creativity. The masses have thus been led into lawlessness. All sense of fear and reverence for the glorious traditions of the past is fading away, giving us licentious music with more licentious words. This is nothing short of aesthetic shamelessness, at which our senses of dignity and nobility naturally revolt.” He lambasts those who promote inferior music in the guise of taking music to the masses.

GNB wrote on past masters like Ariyakudi, Maharajapuram, Rajaratnam Pillai and Chowdiah. His writings on Ariyakudi have survived. He also wrote some verses in English. Surprisingly, his poems are simpler than his essays. They are logical constructs of his views.

According to his family, GNB was a good illustrator who could do instant pencil sketches of his companions. His sister Rajeswari wrote in *Dinamani Kadir* in 2001 that many people did not know this facet of GNB. “The scene is till fresh in my mind—he was sketching his pet deer which was standing close to him. Unfortunately, none of his drawings are available today.

Towards the end of his life, GNB devoted time to mantra sastra, tantra sastra and Devi upasana. He worshipped Rajarajeswari after receiving instruction from Tethiyur Subramania Sastrigal, performing a grand daily puja before the panchaloha idol of the goddess he had installed at home. He offered his prayers to a painting of the devi by famous artist Kondiah Raju, naming her *Nada rupa sundari*. He was severe on those responsible for any shortcomings in puja essentials like tulasi or bilva leaves.

In an article in the 2003 music supplement of *Dinamani Kadir*, journalist Mahi related an incident that highlighted GNB’s expert knowledge of tantra sastra. “Ellarvi and I were visiting GNB, when a saffron-clad visitor with a large kumkuma pottu on his forehead came in and handed GNB a copper plate with a Srichakra engraved on it. We could gather from his conversation that he expected a substantial price for the yantra which he was at pains to stress he had brought especially for GNB. GNB showed the yantra to Ellarvi, but the visitor would not take GNB’s no for an answer. GNB then asked his nephew to bring him a magnifying glass. “Swami, this yantra has more triangles than appropriate,” GNB told the visitor, and convinced him by inviting him to view it through the glass.

GNB was no exception to the tragic trend in Carnatic music of those blessed with great voices dying young. Maha Vaidyanatha Sivan, Konerirajapuram Vaidyanatha Iyer, Madurai Pushpavanam and SG Kittappa were some of the others before him to captivate south Indian audiences, only to meet their end prematurely. He was barely 55 when he succumbed to heart disease.



He had six siblings. He married his sister's daughter Sundarambal in 1931, and the couple had ten children. His father Narayanaswamy Iyer's death in 1941 meant that GNB had to shoulder the responsibility of his sisters' marriages and the education of all the children in the family. It was the best period of his career in music, with his concert calendar extremely busy and lucrative, and he was able to lead a very comfortable lifestyle, indulging his penchant for new cars, houses and watches.

His non-stop train travel and packed music calendar led to poor health, perhaps because of constant inhalation of smoke from steam engines and the excessive strain of innumerable concerts.

The President's Award followed the Sangita Kalanidhi in a matter of months. A co-recipient of the honour was his old friend and colleague, violin vidwan Rajamanickam Pillai. While presenting GNB with the award, Dr. S Radhakrishnan, the president of India, expressed his happiness at honouring the son of his old friend GV Narayanaswami Iyer.

Returning home after attending several felicitation functions, GNB was exhausted. Soon afterwards, he suffered a heart attack and had to be hospitalised for nearly two years. His music career came to a grinding halt.

He resumed performing in 1961 with a concert for AIR, emboldened by the encouragement of next-door neighbour Chembai after he sang at his residence one evening. To the delight of his fans, the AIR concert on Vinayaka Chaturthi day served to dispel rumours of GNB's permanent inability to sing again. Bombay's Shanmukhananda Sabha arranged a grand reception for him along with a concert. A note on the concert observes that many rasikas wept on seeing how emaciated GNB looked.

Many concerts followed. GNB went against medical advice in accepting so many concert engagements, as his expensive tastes and family responsibilities gave him no choice. While his voice had lost none of its great quality in the madhya sthayi, it struggled somewhat to traverse the tara sthayi.

His rasikas were used to his explorations in the tara sthayi and his briga showers in that range. They still expected all that from GNB. GNB, on his part, held nothing back, as he wholeheartedly followed his manodharma, oblivious to his health problems. He did not rest until he expressed his rampant ideas in the tara sthayi. A 1965 concert, for instance, went on for four hours. Though the troubles of his voice are evident in Shanmukhapriya, the main raga of this concert even as he approaches the tara sthayi, we can see from the recording that the alapana negotiates the tara sthayi dhaivata, even reaching the ati tara sthayi shadja in a flash.

GNB's friend Vedagiri declares that no one who heard the sangatis in his *Darini telusu konti* in his 1964 Academy concert would believe that the strain of the cutcheri landed him in the sickbed. GNB's concerts of the time performed unmindful of poor health became his nemesis.

General physician Padmanabhan looked up GNB everyday. A famous surgeon of the day, CRR Rao performed heart surgery on him. In an article entitled "Did his fans kill GNB?" his disciple S Kalyanaraman quotes GNB as saying, "My music is only now really mature. Only my physique lacks the strength to present on stage my mature ideas."

A tired body and the jealousies ailing the music community saddened GNB a great deal. He accepted an offer to be the principal of the Swati Tirunal music college in Trivandrum, and left Madras. His concerts continued and he performed at several centres. Reviewing his Delhi concert, Subbudu wrote, "GNB sang literally holding his life in his hands." He sang an incomparable Todi. It was his last concert.

Bedridden after that, GNB sang unaccompanied for an hour at the request of visitors from Ceylon. No one who has heard a recording of the Todi, Hindolam and Kambhoji he sang that day can believe it was a dying man's voice.

Suffering another heart attack in April 1965, GNB was admitted in hospital. On 30 April, he came home to be with his brother who was performing their father's annual ceremony, though himself physically unfit to do the rituals. "He was progressing well, and we expected him to come home in a week, but he died on 1 May," says his brother GN Balakrishnan.

Ellarvi remembers the day. "At eight p.m. on 1<sup>st</sup> May, young and old alike were focused on listening to the AIR bulletin in which TL Venkatarama Iyer, Semmangudi, MLV and I paid our homage to GNB."

We asked the family to comment on the claims made by many that GNB died a pauper. Balakrishnan does not agree. "Yes, he did not leave immovable property for his family, and he had to perform to maintain the family, but he did leave behind substantial assets, and the financial position of the household took care of the growing needs of his five sons and daughters."

Indian Fine Arts has been celebrating an annual GNB Day featuring the reminiscences of his disciples and other musicians influenced by his singing, as well as their concerts highlighting his favourite songs and his own compositions.

A GNB Trust founded by GNB's eldest son Duraiswami celebrated his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday on a grand scale and brought out a souvenir publication on the occasion. At the function held at the Music Academy, a book, "GNB a Biography", with contributions from TS Vedagiri, KS Muthuraman, KS Mahadevan and others was released. Another trust formed by Chinnathambi awards prizes annually in a GNB compositions contest at the Music Academy. The GNB Trust became defunct after Duraiswami's death.

A GNB Foundation was formed on 12 March 2000 by GNB's son, other members of the family and his student Trichur V Ramachandran. In 2005, the foundation brought out a third volume of GNB's kritis in addition to republishing the first two volumes, which had been out of print.

There were those that crowed that the GNB bani was detrimental to health and impractical. They never perhaps realised that GNB's was a Great New Bani that could comfortably be followed.

There are those that believe his music is irrelevant in these changing times. The music of those early years does not appeal to today's audiences. Even they agree that there are many takers for those who sing like GNB, if they sing as well as he did.

Today, the history of Carnatic music is divided into two periods: *Before Sangita Ratnakara* and *After Sangita Ratnakara*. It will surprise noone if centuries from now, people refer to the periods, *Before GNB* and *After GNB*.





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E - BOOK EDITION

GNB

PRINCE OF THE MUSIC WORLD

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