

# Śruti

NOVEMBER 1983

RS.5

south indian classical music and dance monthly



**In Retrospect: Tamil Isai Movement**

**Tiruveezhimizhalai Brothers**

**Interview: V.P. Dhananjayan**

**Profile: D.K. Pattammal (Part 2)**

It's with a sense of gratification at the warm reception given to the inaugural issue of SRUTI that we have prepared our second offering.

The lead group of articles this time focusses on what has come to be called Tamil Isai. The principal article (p.4), researched and written by Anandhi Ramachandran, provides a retrospective analysis of the genesis and the controversial initial years of the **Tamil Isai Movement**, while a companion piece (p.8) by her offers a balance sheet of sorts on **Tamil Isai Sangam**, the institution set up to implement the movement's goals. The hymns composed by Tamil saints, known as Tevaram, form an important part of the musical heritage of the Tamils and a report on the interview conducted by Muthumeenakshi with an official of the Dharmapuram Adheenam Mutt throws considerable light on the hoary tradition of hymn-singing (p. 12). Rounding out the group is a **Sruti Report** (p. 11) on what prominent musicians have to say on Tamil compositions and what our chief has to say on whether the proponents of Tamil Isai and their opponents have served the listening public. The latter's analysis is presented in the first edition of an opinion column on music, which we call **Bull's Eye**. (p. 15); it will be a more or less regular feature. A companion column on dance is also envisaged.

Giants have trodden the Carnatic earth, offering music sublime. We have plans to publish special articles about them from time to time. In this issue. Contributing Editor T. Sankaran offers a word portrait of the **(Old) Boys of Tiruveezhimizhalai** (p. 18). His article is accompanied by an account of the talks our chief had with them on the changes that have taken place in nagaswaram playing (p.21).

We carry in this issue, of course, the second part of Gowri Ramnarayan's fascinating profile of D. K. Pattammal (p.26). You can see for yourself that our vivacious Assistant Editor has drawn Pattammal out on such interesting subjects as her study of Dikshitar kritis from an eminent lawyer and jurist; her relationship with her husband Iswaran; the musicians who were her contemporaries; and the younger generation of musicians. Gowri has similarly drawn much out of bharratanatyam dancer V.P. Dhananjayan, as witness the report of her interview with him (p.35)

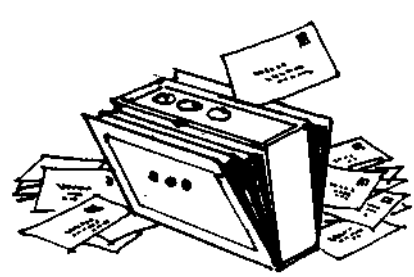
Also on dance in this issue is a brief article by V.R. Devika on **Arayar Sevai**, a unique kind of devotional service offered in three temples to the accompaniment of dance movements, and an interview-based report on Usha Narayanan, A **Dancer And Her Quest For Peace**, who finds peace in developing an art form based on Arayar Sevai (pp. 16-17).

M. Krishnan is with us again, this time offering yet another amusing yarn spun around an old incident (we think we might call his series Incidentally) and illustrated with a whimsical pen. Turn to "**Music Hath Charms....**" (p.44).

This time we present not a dancer's choice, but the editors' choice as the **photo feature in the centre-spread** (as well as on the back-cover). Those of you who missed SRUTI's inaugural function can obtain vicarious pleasure by peeping in. Photographs are by the Waran Bros.

**Sruti Box** is another new feature we introduce this time, consisting of a selection of letters sent to us, perforce edited.

And on that note, I'll sign off.



# Sruti Box

## Potentially Most Popular

You are a team which seems all devoted and in pursuit of excellence. You have well-spelled out goals (as stated in the 'Last Page'), and you wish to offer such reading material which is written in popular style but always written in good taste. SRUTI has the potentiality of becoming in India the most popular music and dance magazine in English and I wish it a grand success.

R.C. Mehta  
Editor, Journal of the Indian Musicological Society, Baroda

## Superb

I went through the first issue of SRUTI. It is simply nice and tuneful. The matter, language and the presentation are superb. While enclosing Ravikiran's annual subscription, I wish the magazine and the responsible team a great success.

N. Narasimhan  
Madras

## A Prayer

I pray to Mother Goddess Meenakshi that SRUTI may stay aligned to true pitch always.

M.P.N. Sethuraman  
Madurai

## Congratulations!

Please accept my congratulations.

G. Kasturi  
Editor, The Hindu, Madras

## Kudos for Bold Step

Kudos to you for your bold step in bringing out a magazine exclusively devoted to the cause of South Indian classical music and dance. I am very much pleased with the get up of the magazine. The articles on DKP and Master Srinivas are highly informative and it is heartening to know that you have plans to present many more articles on the same line.

R.S. Pyati  
Bellary

## Indispensable

Hearty congratulations on SRUTI's 'Arangetram'! As the tambura is indispensable to the artiste, may SRUTI be indispensable to the 'rasikan'!

Mukundan S. Chettiyappa  
Bangalore

## Corrections Provided

Dr. Sarojini Parameswaran's well-researched article on Mandolin Srinivas in your inaugural issue (October 1983) is well-written and, therefore, very readable. Permit me, however, to point out a couple of factual errors.

That Brij Bhushan Kabra might have adapted the guitar "in certain respects" may perhaps be true, but *he certainly was not the first* to play Hindustani classical music on the guitar. Way back in the 1940 - 1960s, the late S. Hazara Singh and his contemporary, Van Shipley used to give solo Hindustani music performances on the electric Hawaiian guitar, both in public as well as over the Bombay station of All India Radio. While Hazara Singh almost exclusively played classical ragas (alap, jod and gat), Van Shipley also played popular film tunes. These facts would surely be corroborated by All India Radio, Bombay and The Gramophone Company of India (His Master's Voice).

S. Hazara Singh, died sometime in the 'sixties - unhonoured, unsung and, worse, unremembered!

One other fact your writer appears to have missed out is that probably the first Indian to have truly "adapted" (i.e. modified) the Western mandolin to suit the Indian *gayaki* style of playing (by replacing the double wire strings with spaced-out single strings to obtain greater facility in rendering "gamaks" and "meends") is Sajjad Husein Qureshi (otherwise famous as the film music director "Sajjad"). Again, Oureshi was the only Indian I know of who played Hindustani classical ragas in the *gayaki* style on the modified Western mandolin nearly thirty years ago - till Mandolin Srinivas came along! There might have been others before him!

Shishir Kaushik  
Former Music Critic - Times of India, Bombay  
& Free Press Journal, Bombay

# News & Notes

## Inauguration

**SRUTI** launched at lovely ceremony in Madras, 16 October (see centre-spread)

## Globetrotters

**Usha Raghavan** (*nee* Ramaswamy) on a dance tour of Europe, following performance at the International Yoga Conference in Switzerland and teaching assignment for Mandapa in Paris. About twenty-five performances in all, including dates in various cities of France, over three-month period.

**Ratna (Papa) Kumar** dancing her way from the U.S., with stop-overs in Europe, arriving in Madras in time for the December music and dance festival season.

**T.V. Gopalakrishnan** (percussion and vocal) off to Europe with brothers Vasan (mridangam) and Ramani (violin) and disciple Kadri Gopalnath (saxophone), for a string of dates, including an appearance at the world music festival in Berlin. Ensemble joining western musicians, particularly jazzmen, in creating fusion of music of East and West.

**Madurai T.N. Seshagopalan** (vocal) off to Singapore and possibly Malaysia, with S.D. Sridhar (violin). Main concert at consecration ceremony of Murugan temple on the island, with Karaikudi Krishnamurthi providing percussion support.

## Competition Success

Some results of year-end competitions organized by Tamil Isai Sangam: Rani Seethai Memorial Prize for Nagaswaram to **Mambalam M.K.S. Siva**; Rani Seethai Memorial Prize for Tevaram Singing to **T.S. Dandapani Oduvar** of the Dharmapuram Adheenam Mutt School; and V. Palaniswamy Naidu Memorial Prize for Bharatanatyam to Kumari N. **Sreelatha** (Sailaja), disciple of K.J. Sarasa. Sreelatha also learning Kuchipudi since 1980, at Vempati Chinna Satyam's Kuchipudi Arts Academy in Madras.

*Sreelatha*

## Honours

**D.K. Pattammal** felicitated on completion of fifty years as concert singer at ceremony organized by SRUTI (see centre-spread).

**T.N. Krishnan** given Chowdiah Memorial award for best violinist in the country, 14 November in Bangalore.

**A.S. Sivanidrapa** of Mysore given Chowdiah Memorial award for best violinist in the state, same date.

## Whistler

**K. Siva Prasad** in full length recital in Madras, 24 October, whistling a happy tune and many more in South Indian Classical music style.

## Revival of Art Form

**Shanti Koothu**, an art form prominent about ten centuries ago, revived and presented for the first time in South India, in Madras on 14 October, by R. Venkateswaran, former Central Government official associated with the stage for 40 plus years. Shanti Koothu, derived from temple ritual and philosophic in content, enacted alone by Venkateswaran, with Rukmini Subramaniam and Dandapani Oduvar providing music. Theme drawn from Ramayana, Periapuranam, Skandapuram, Tyagaraja's compositions and other sources, mainly in Sanskrit and Tamil.

## New Enterprise

Second cassette produced by **Sruthi**, a new enterprise devoted to classical music, in market with G. Uma and R.G. Gita singing Devi Kritis.



## New Dance-Drama

**Nava-Dyuti**, a dance-drama based on the theme of "The Dawn of a New Era", with lyrics from verses of Kalidasa, Desika and Rg Veda (in Sanskrit), Purandara Dasa (in Kannada) and Divya Prabandham, Rama Natakam and Bharati (in Tamil), presented in San Francisco, 1 October.

## Arangetram

**G. Srimathy**, daughter of Mr. & Mrs. P.R. Govidan, 19 October; **y. Sudha**, daughter of Mr. & Mrs. R.V. Subramanian, 19 October; **Vijayanti**, daughter of Mr. & Mrs. P. Vijayaraghavan, 31 October; **Nrittika Lakshmi**, daughter of Mr. & Mrs. E. Kuppaswamy, 9 November; and **Sudha**, daughter of Mr. & Mrs. S. Narayanan, 17 November, all disciples of Sudharani Raghupathi at Sree Bharatalaya, all in Madras.

**Nivedita Krishnamurthy**, initially trained at Darpana Academy of Performing Arts, Ahmedabad and lately a disciple of Jayalakshmi Narayan at the Academy of Bharatanatyam in Hyderabad, 30 October.

**Srividya**, daughter of Mr. & Mrs. K. Viswanathan and disciple of Kanaka Srinivasan, 24 October in Madras.

## Appointment

**T.K. Govinda Rao**, vocalist and leading disciple of late Musiri Subramania Iyer, appointed new Chief Producer of Carnatic Music at All India Radio, New Delhi, replacing Madirimangalam Ramachandran.

# The Tamil Isai Movement: A Battle Of Words

The Tamil Isai movement hit the world of South Indian classical music in the early nineteen forties like a clap of thunder. The "lightning" before the thunder was provided by Sir Annamalai Chettiar, then Raja of Chettinad. The Raja, who was known for his philanthropy and generosity, donated a tidy sum of money to the Annamalai University for the propagation and composition of Tamil songs to be sung in classical music concerts. More significantly he convened a conference to focus attention on the need for promoting Tamil songs. At this conference held at Chidambaram in 1941, the musicians were to sing only Tamil compositions.

It was a historic conference sparking as it did a controversy which raged in the world of South Indian music for some five years. The furore was started by a resolution it passed, reading as follows: *Musicians in Tamilnad are urged to sing Tarhilsongs at the commencement and conclusion of concerts. Organisers of concerts are requested to ensure that songs are mainly in Tamil.*

The backdrop to this resolution was the fact that, in the Tamilnad of the twenties and thirties, there was a total disregard for its cultural heritage. Written Tamil was in the hands of pundits who made comprehension impossible for the common man. Witnessing Bharatanatyari was looked down upon and classical music was the exclusive domain of a select few. When the average Tamil looked round for identity and roots, he found that the English language dominated politics and literature, while Telugu and Sanskrit were pervasive in music and dance.

In the wake of the independence movement, patriotism began to sway the hearts of Indians, and Tamils were no exception. The Swadesi movement gave a new impetus to regional languages. The time was ripe for a popular awakening with respect to literature and the arts.

The first person to talk about Tamil Isai was the great poet Subramania Bharati. 'Rasikamani' T.K. Chidambaranatha Mudaliar (TKC), aesthete par excellence and a great patron of the arts and Tamil poetry, took up the refrain from Bharati and he it was who called for those songs to be sung at concerts whose meanings could be understood and *bhava* appreciated. He was also responsible for bringing about a cultural awakening among the younger people and instilling in them a love for South Indian music and dance and Tamil poetry. 'Kalki' Krishnamurthi, editor of the Tamil Weekly 'Kalki' who struck a long and fruitful partnership with C. Rajagopalachari, TKC and T. Sadasivan was largely influenced by TKC on matters pertaining to the Tamil language. He had previously been quite happy listening to



Raja Sir Annamalai Chettiar

the kritis of Tyagaraja and Dikshitar in four-hour-long concerts, enjoying the music without paying attention to the sahitya. He realised the importance of the meaning of songs only through his acquaintance with TKC who would go to concerts in a happy frame of mind and return frustrated because the sanity as were all in Telugu or Sanskrit. Kalki came to agree with TKC's view that more and more Tamil people would listen to good music only if Tamil songs were sung in concerts. Congressman S. Satyamurthi was another who held the same view. "I feel that the duration of a concert should be 2<sup>1</sup> hours and more than half the songs sung must be in Tamil." he said. TKC and Kalki became the most successful propagandists of Tamil Isai. Another prominent protagonist was R.K. Shanmukham Chettiar.

There were many patrons of classical music in Chettinad where musicians were often invited to sing at houses, especially during weddings and festivals. In a typical Chettinad home of the time, possibly the palace of the Raja himself, with beautifully caned teak doors and marble floors, silk-clad and heavily bejewelled ladies, and men impeccably dressed in spotless mulmul dhoties and turbans, assembled to hear famous Camatic musicians, perhaps Ariyakudi Ramanuja Ayyangar, Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavathar, Musiri Subramania Iyer or Chittoor Subramania Pillai. True to the pattern obtaining then, the concert would consist mainly of the kritis of Tyagaraja and include those of Syama Sastri and Dikshitar. all in Telugu or Sanskrit.

"On such occasions," recalls Raja Sir Muthiah Chettiar. Vice President of the Tamil Isai Sangam. "people used to listen to concerts nodding their heads for the first two hours and three quarters without understanding anything: the last fifteen minutes, consisting of short pieces in



Kalki, TKC and Rajaji

Tamil, provided music which could be understood and enjoyed." It was this kind of situation which led to the view first advanced by Sir Annamalai Chettiar that in order music may be understood and enjoyed by the ordinary Tamil folk, music concerts should offer a fare that included a large number of Tamil compositions. The prevalent concert pattern appeared to him and several others as diminishing, if not depriving, the Tamil people of their right to enjoy classical music.

The sponsors of the Chidambaram conference perhaps thought that they were only making a simple demand but members of the Establishment headquartered in Mylapore raised their voices in screams and shouts as if what arose out of Chidambaram was a ghost or more

likely the devil himself. They saw the Tamil Isai resolution as a threat to the existing order. The *Hindu*, the newspaper, giving a reasoned explication of views, came out with a leader in its issue of 2 September 1941. It read in part as follows:

*It is one thing to wish to encourage the composition of great music in Tamil; those who give a fillip to this wholly laudable object by instituting prizes, holding competitions, and so on, will be doing a needed and valuable public service. But it is as futile as it is dangerous to try to effect this by laying a ban on the singing of songs composed in other tongues. There is no room for protection in music. Those who think that composition in Tamil will be stimulated by compelling singers to sing only Tamil pieces little understand the*

*way in which the creative imagination, whether in music or in any other art, functions... We should go hopelessly wrong if we tried to impose on creative artists our view of what is fit and proper... When the time comes, singers will sing in Tamil from an inner compulsion even as the linnets sing, and not because the box-office or self-constituted custodians of Tamil autonomy demand it. Meanwhile, it would be an unpardonable spiritual and aesthetic impoverishment to deny the music-loving public its right to have the best compositions in South Indian music, in whatever language they might be found, rendered by the most accomplished singers and players for its benefit. There is a very real danger that if this movement, which seems largely to be actuated by*

## KALKI ON THE CHIDAMBARAM CONFERENCE

The late R. Krishnamurthi, renowned Tamil writer and founder — editor of the weekly KALKI, and himself known by that name, attended the conference after he received a letter from T.K. Chidambaramanatha Mudaliar in which the latter wrote: "Ariyakudi has sung mostly Tamil songs. Chembai is going to sing Tamil songs. Why are you at Madras instead of witnessing this marvel?" Kalki turned up at the conference and reported to his readers thus:

"We were taken to the University campus. From one room came the sweet strains of (the raga) Bhoopalam. From another you could hear a tambura being tuned and from a third room the sound of a mridangam.

"The concerts are to begin at eight a.m. and go on till nine p.m., we were told. *Is everyone singing Tamil songs*, I asked my host. *Of course they sing in Tamil! Well, maybe sometimes you can't recognise the language, but shouldn't you have some*

*faith when they tell you it's Tamil?* was the reply. For the past two days only Tamil songs have been sung. A number of kritis are repeated; *Chidambaram ena manam kanindida*. alone we have heard seven times. I am sure some other 'uruppadis' were also sung.

"What about the audience? There are more than 700 students in the audience. Enthusiasm runs very high. The vidwans are at a slight disadvantage, what with the listeners ordering them to sing songs of their choice. Yesterday Chembai handled it beautifully. When the audience began to clap, he too clapped his hands.

"Is anyone unhappy about all these Tamil concerts? The answer is in the negative, to my relief."

(Describing the concert of Budalur Krishnamurthi Sastrigal, Kalki reminded the reader of the usual jibes aimed at Tamil Isai: "Was the flute played in Tamil? Did they fiddle and play the mridangam

in Tamil? and so on and continued his report.) Now to my consternation this gentleman came to play the gottuvadyam in Tamil. Sastrigal began a kriti in the raga khamas in his clear ringing voice. He sang two or three high class Tamil songs, pronouncing them clearly before playing them on the vadyam."

According to Kalki the conference was a great success. There were many achievements. The first one was the cooperation given by many musicians, Secondly the movement itself gained in importance through the meet. Thirdly it was proved that even if a concert consisted entirely of Tamil songs, the rasikas would enjoy it. The fourth achievement was to obtain a complete list of all the Tamil composers from Dr. U.V. Swaminatha Iyer.

"We have by no means completed the good work. The conference is only a beginning," he concluded.

*considerations which have little to do with art, is allowed to spread unchecked, it may lead to a further debasement of popular taste which is, though one is sorry to say it, none too elevated as it is. It is to artists who care for the integrity of their art and to the enlightened public that cares for quality to set their faces resolutely against the intrusion of narrow-minded chauvinism into an art which is universal in its appeal.*

It was apparent that because some of the Tamil Isai protagonists owed allegiance to the Justice party with its communal leanings, the Tamil Isai movement itself was seen by the *Hindu* — and those for whom it spoke — as being mischievous, as something that ought to be exorcised forthwith. However, for men like Kalki and TKC, Rajaji and Sadasivam, Tamil Isai was an extension of their love of the language and an expression of patriotism, and they were perplexed and angered by the Establishment's reaction which they perhaps also saw as being reactionary. All these had important roles to play alongside of Raja Sir Annamalai Chettiar and R.K. Shanmukham Chettiar who later served as Finance Minister in the Nehru cabinet, articulating the feelings of the proponents of change, while T.T. Krishnamachari and T.L. Venkatrama Iyer were prominent among the cognoscenti of the Madras Music Academy who stood for the *status quo*. The former was later to become Finance Minister of independent India and the latter was a music scholar who taught Dikshitar kritis to leading musicians even while serving as a lawyer and later on as a judge.

The Music Academy passed a resolution to counter the Tamil Isai demand, and it added fuel to the flaming fire. It read, in part:

*This conference of the Music Academy, Madras is emphatically of the opinion that it should be the aim of all musicians and lovers of music to preserve and maintain the highest standard of classical Carnatic music and that no consideration of language should be imparted so as to lower or impair that standard.*

There was debate on the draft resolution, some urging moderation and others recommending firmness. E. Krishna Iyer, an expert on music and dance, felt that the Tamil Isai movement was a direct reaction to the lack of sufficient encour-

agement accorded till then to Tamil songs, while Dr. Srinivasaraghavan, equally adept at music and medicine, argued that no such sin had been committed in the past and that therefore there was no need for expiation as suggested by Krishna Iyer. Mudicondan Venkatrama Iyer pointed out that music in its highest form did not require the help of language. Its essence was *nada* (pure sound). (In a different meeting T.T. Krishnamachari said that "music was a wordless search for beauty in sound.") The moderates were ignored and the resolution was adopted with only one dissenting voice, that of Krishna Iyer.

A popular Establishment view was that the very phrase "Tamil Isai" was wrong and that there could be no such thing as "Tamil" music. Music was music regardless of the language of the lyrics. If Tamil compositions were not given importance, it was because not enough classical kritis of high quality had been composed in Tamil. More than once it was argued that the inclusion of greater number of Tamil songs would lower the quality of Carnatic music. T.L. Venkatrama Iyer, while addressing a meeting at Mylapore, said there was a scarcity of compositions in Tamil "which could lay claim to the same technical and aesthetic perfection as the compositions" of Tyagaraja, Dikshitar and Syama Sastri. He advanced the view that the many Tamil songs of Arunachala Kavi and Bharati were valued mainly for their emotional appeal. To the proponents of Tamil Isai, these statements were like adding insult to injury. They in turn advanced the view that, as part of the cultural renaissance during the time of the four Saivite saints and later the Vaishnavite saints, 'pann' (perhaps meaning the same as melodic mode or raga) had been used to enhance the beauty of songs in praise of the Lord. Sambandar's compositions were musical and there was musical worship in Vaishnavite tradition. The Tamil language itself had been divided into *iyal*, *isai* and *natakam* two thousand years before; thus music had been identified as separate from dramatics. The 'paripadal' (of the Sangam period) was actually sung in panns such as *Palai Yazh*, *Pura neermai* and *Gandharam*. Some of the panns actually had Sanskrit names. During the time of the Saivite saints, the words (*Sahitya*) gained importance and were used to kindle *bhakti* in the hearts of worshippers..

Tamil Isai proponents also cited a statement made in his autobiography by the Grand Old Man of Tamil, Dr. U.V. Swaminatha Iyer, that thousands of Tamil kritis composed by gifted men and women well versed in both *sangita* and *sahitya* had been in vogue but had disappeared due to neglect. According to him, he had heard these compositions himself and they were suitably composed to bring out the subtle nuances of Carnatic music.

As months passed by, the movement gained political undertones and words like Aryan and Dravidian were freely bandied about, in order to stress the importance of Tamil kritis as against Telugu or Sanskrit compositions. A letter by one P.C. Sitaraman published in the *Hindu* on 10 September 1941 captured in essence the fears of traditional music-lovers, while Kalki's rejoinders to similar utterances tried to scuttle such fears. Sitaraman claimed, rightly, that "Carnatic music is a common ground for songs from all South Indian languages and no one language can claim monopoly to it." His letter went on to refer to those inhabitants of the then Madras Presidency who spoke Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada and so on who would be discriminated against if public music concerts were to be modified in the manner resolved upon at the Chidambaram conference. "It is the primary duty of every true lover of art to free this glorious and great art from the menace of communalism and narrow slogans," the letter continued. This writer reflected the general opinion of the Establishment while referring to Musiri Subramania Iyer's claim that "there is not a sufficient number of compositions in Tamil to expound the art in all its perfection and purity" and asserting that "any attempt to exclude the songs in other languages will be a regrettable perversion."

Kalki in one of his frequent articles on the subject, argued that the singing of a larger number of Tamil songs would not impair or eliminate the immortal and blessed compositions of Tyagaraja and Dikshitar. Musicians had been singing their kritis for generations and had acquired depth and finesse in rendering them. The kritis had gained wide acceptance. Like Kalki, Raja Sir Annamalai Chettiar too had great respect for the Musical Trinity, especially Tyagaraja, as exemplified by his speech at the Sri

Tyaga Brahma Mahotsava Sabha at Mylapore. Of Tyagaraja he said: "To this great saint, all our adoration is due. None excel him, only a few come near him and it is but fitting that this Sabha should do its best for the memory of the great Rama bhakta."

The irony of it all was that the battle raged even while the protagonists of the Tamil Isai movement were ostensibly in no way prejudiced against compositions in other languages and quite a few on the other side of the fence agreed that Tamil compositions should be encouraged and popularised.

The musicians themselves reacted in different ways. Several musicians were giving a place to Tamil compositions which was anything but denigrating. The fact that really did not get adequately emphasized on either side was that unless a song was set to music with notations and all, musicians just could not learn and present them.

Among the musicians, "Tiger" Varadachariar was sympathetic to the movement and he echoed the views of Kalki; to him the object of the movement was simply to give Tamil audiences the best appreciation of Tamil music. "It may tend to the enrichment of Tamil, but if it also helps the enrichment of music, it shall be welcome." According to "Tiger", there had been a revival of music in previous years as shown in the production of many Tamil compositions by Papanasam Sivan, T. Lakshmana Pillai, T.R. Viswanatha Sastri, Nilakanta Sivan, Ghanam Krishna Iyer, Koteeswara Iyer and so on. "If this spirit of renaissance is to be given the benefit of adventitious aid as well, why should any lover of music demur?" he asked.

Ariyakudi Ramajuna Iyengar was not opposed to the encouragement of Tamil compositions, but objected to being compelled to sing only Tamil songs. In his view, true music could have no preference or partiality for Telugu, Tamil or any other language. He did not agree that the Tamil language had in any way suffered as a result of the prevalent practices in kutcheries. He and some other musicians had for many years been singing Tamil compositions in their kutcheries even in the part preceding the pallavi.

Papanasam Sivan, a veteran composer of Tamil kritis, scored an interesting point

over the chauvinists by stating that if an agitation was raised that there should be only Tamil songs, he would ask those persons (the agitators) not to teach English to their children, but confine themselves to Tamil. Interestingly, this argument provides a preview of the arguments that would in later years swirl about the question of the language of education.

Sir Norman Strathie, Adviser to the Governor of Madras, put it succinctly when speaking at a music festival organised by the Mylai Sangita Sabha. He deemed the language controversy as rather unfortunate and unnecessary. In England they had good music in German and Italian as well as in English. The composer expressed himself best in his own language and acceptance depended on the audience. There was no question of any patriotism.

The Chidambaram Conference was followed by several more at Tiruchi, Devakottai, Madras and so on. Raja Sir Annamalai Chettiar's sixtieth birthday celebrations at the Annamalai University became part of the Tamil Isai movement, and M.S. Subbulakshmi gave a recital in which she sang Tamil songs. In fact M.S. and T. Sadasivam, partners in life as well as in this enterprise, gave great support to the movement. Even though performing at the Music Academy was considered most prestigious for every musician, M.S. was willing to give up that honour at a crucial time in her career as a concert musician to stand by her conviction. She sang mostly Tamil songs from beginning to end in her concerts during that period.

Meanwhile, the attack on the movement spread to the periphery as well. In places like Bellary and Mysore, meetings were convened to condemn the attempt to Tamilise Carnatic concerts.

The ding-dong battle of words continued in an excited manner. At a Dikshitar Day celebration, N. Raghunathan, Assistant Editor of the *Hindu*, observed that to raise irrelevant issues, such as Aryan or Dravidian, Tamil or Telugu in the sphere of music was to import wilful barriers to aesthetic enjoyment. Dikshitar or Tyagaraja had employed vocabularies much of which was familiar to the Tamils by long usage. "In music, the words of the sahitya are merely scaffolding," he asserted. Addressing this point, Raja Sir Annamalai Chettiar said, perhaps for the

umpteenth time: "I am not talking of the comparatively small number of men and women who may have a cultivated taste for music. I am thinking of the more numerous persons who have had no training in the art. I love music. Even wordless elaborations please me, but I feel specially thrilled when I listen to Tamil songs sung with feeling and fervour...." Within the establishment camp, a similar sentiment was expressed by Dwaram Venkatasami Naidu in his presidential address at the Music Academy while receiving the title of Sangita Kalanidhi. "If *sahitya* is not necessary, then where is the place for kriti in music? If there is a place for kriti in music, the meaning must be understood. For those who do not know Telugu or Tamil, compositions in those languages are merely sound."

The Tamil Isai Sangam was started in 1943 when the controversy was at its peak. TKC presided over the inauguration and expressed his happiness at the growing popularity of Tamil kritis. He stressed that it was not enough if Tamil songs were sung; they should convey the *bhava* inherent in the ancient musical form of Tamil culture. The emotion was that of the sahitya and not of the raga. Rajaji who spoke on this occasion reminded the audience that Tyagaraja sang in Telugu because it was his mother tongue. This should be a lesson to Tamils," he said. Their souls and their God would listen to them only if they sang in their mother tongue. He added, however, that musicians should not be left to do as they pleased. It was the duty of the public to help them sing in Tamil. The next year saw the beginning of the acceptance of the Tamil Isai movement. Dr. R. M. Alagappa Chettiar, in his inaugural address at the Music Academy conference in December 1944, summed up the whole controversy and pleaded for sympathy and understanding for the movement. He welcomed the organisations seeking to encourage songs in Tamil because they stimulated the urge to create and reflected the desire of the many to hear songs in their mother tongue. "Ultimately", said he, "the repertory of the art will be enriched by the volume of new songs that have been composed and rendered. As long as the movement follows the form and methods handed down by tradition, it has to be welcomed. In the long run it cannot but

# The Tamil Isai Sangam At Forty:

**S**RUTI asked Sri M.A. Chidambaram, Secretary of the Tamil Isai Sangam, to describe the activities of the Sangam and its future. He talked to us at length and the Sangam office provided additional material.

The Tamil Isai Sangam will be forty years old in December 1983. Set up mainly to encourage the composition and propagation of Tamil songs to be sung in Carnatic music concerts, the Sangam has been doing valuable work, conducting research into the fourteen centuries old tradition of Tevaram singing in temples, offering music education through its colleges, and helping the preservation of old manuscripts and musical instruments, among other things.

Among the varied services rendered by the Sangam is the propagation of Tamil kritis in Carnatic ragas. This end has been achieved reasonably well both due to the Sangam's efforts and other factors, and Tamil songs have become an integral part of public concerts, whether or not performed under the auspices of the Tamil Isai Sangam.

The Sangam has published the kritis of composers such as Tiger Varadachariar and Ponniah Pillai, as well as some books

copied from the Saraswati Mahal Library of Tanjavur. *Tamil Isai Padalgal*, which is out of print now, includes many Tamil kritis and padams. All the books are published with meticulous care, printed on good paper, bound well and attractively got up.

Research is an important activity. Sri R.K. Shanmukham Chetty, one of the principal figures of the Tamil Isai movement, was responsible for the early meetings of the Tamil Isai Research Committee. Oduvars, the men who for centuries have been singing Tevaram in temples, were invited to participate in and sing at these 'pann' research meetings which were attended by eminent musicians, musicologists, poets and Tamil scholars, including Prof. P. Sambamoorthi who was the backbone of these meetings, M.P.P. Thooran, T.N.Swaminatha PULai and M.M. Dandapani Desikar.

The outcome of this research is very valuable and interesting. It has identified the equivalent ragas of the twenty-three ancient panns in use today. It has thrown some light on the ancient music of Tamilnadu which has been mentioned by Adiyarkku Nallar, the commentator on the great epic *Silappadikaram*. Word for word proceedings of this research have been recorded and published by the Sangam. They reveal how carefully the research work has been conducted and truthfully recorded.

The Sangam also established a *Tamil Isai Kalluri* or music school in 1944. Many students have studied Carnatic music there and classes are conducted for teaching Tevaram. Meenakshisundaram Pillai and K.P. Krishnamoorti Pillai were successive principals in the early years. Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar served as honorary principal for a few years, even as Nagaswara Vidwan Veeruswami Pillai and Palghat Mani Iyer did later. The *Isai Selvam* (junior) and *Isai Mani* (senior) titles are awarded to successful students. Mostly, Tamil songs are taught. A few foreign students have also studied in this

school. Sirkazhi Govindarajan and Tiruppamburam T.S. Shanmugasundaram, the latter now the principal of the Madurai College, are products of the *Tamil Isai Kalluri*.

Many annual competitions are arranged by the Tamil Isai Sangam. Sri T. Sankaran, Director of Music, organises these competitions with great enthusiasm for young musicians and dancers, as well as for Tevaram singers.

A tambura in the name of Rajaji has been presented every year to the winner of the Gopalakrishna Bharati kriti competition since 1948. Some of the recipients of the tambura are R. Vedavalli, Sulochana Pattabhiraman, Sirkazhi Govindarajan, Suguna Purushottam and Sudha Ragunathan (nee Venkataraman).

The Oduvars don't all look favourably upon women singing Tevarams and so they have been confounded by women winning the Tevaram competition prizes three years in a row. As if this were not enough, last year a Vaishnavite musician won the first prize for Tevaram singing, confounding them further.

A Bharati songs competition also has been conducted for the past three years. As a sponsor of the temple arts, the Sangam has been conducting dance and nagaswaram competitions too. There is a separate competition conducted for singing Tamil padavarnams and padams. Tevaram concerts are conducted every year during the music festival; admission to these concerts is free. The prize for most of these competitions is Rs 1000. The library houses a number of books on music and dance. Students and research scholars have free access to the library. One more important activity of the Tamil Isai Sangam is the collection of rare musical instruments', classified as concert instruments, temple instruments, folk instruments and rare instruments. The instruments are maintained very well in the Vadyalaya, and can be played on, that is, if anyone knows how to do so!



M.A. Chidambaram

# A Balance Sheet

The Tamil Isai Sangam serves the cause of Tamil dance-drama also. Every year a new Kuravanji or a new dance-drama has been staged during the music festival. One of them was *Sarabhendra Bhoopala Kuravanji*, performed for the first time outside Tanjavur. It was choreographed and produced by T. Balasaraswati in 1950; many young dancers of the day took part in it Pandanallur Jayalakshmi staged this Kuravanji the year before, under the able guidance of Meenakshisundaram Pillai. Some other dance dramas worth mentioning here are *Meenakshi Kalyanam* by Padma Subramaniam, *Manicka Vachakar* by Kamala (Laxman) Narayan and *Azhwargal Kanda Kannan* by Kalanidhi Narayanan.

The Sangam usually confers the honorific of *Isai Perarignar* on either a musician or dancer or a nattuvanar each year, during the annual festival.

Forty years of service to the cause of Tamil and music is no mean achievement and that too in the midst of much opposition. But, what now? What is the future? Is the Sangam likely to become just another sabha? The research on pannas has come to an end. Music books have been published. Tamil songs have become part of the mainstream of South Indian classical music. Is there anything else that remains to be done?

"Oh yes!" says Chidambaram, answering the last question. He has many ideas to develop the Tamil Isai Sangam in various ways that will be useful to students, performers and rasikas.

"We have collected rare Tamil songs from the Tiruveezhimizhalai Brothers, which are going to be published soon. We are also considering the establishment of a new school for training oduvars under the aegis of the Sangam. Alternately, we may provide support to an existing school.

"There is another plan to expand the library and the Vadyalaya and establish a research centre. More books will be acquired and more instruments are to be collected.

"We have a portrait gallery of all those who have helped the Tamil Isai movement. That will be expanded.

"There is already a Tamil Isai College at Madurai. There are evening classes conducted at Devakottai, Karaikudi, Coimbatore and Raja Annamalaipuram in Madras. We have further plans to extend these evening Tamil Isai classes to other towns like Salem.

"We want to ensure that Tevaram is sung in the proper manner in all temples. We also send oduvars to foreign countries like Malaysia, Singapore and Sri Lanka to sing in temples there.

"The Sangeet Natak Academy has recognised all this work and gives a grant for the college. The Tamilnadu Government also gives us a grant.

"We send, absolutely free of cost, the research papers that are published by us to all the leading libraries in the world."

"Now that the Tevaram research is over, what are you going to do?" we ask.

"Is there an end to research in music? We'll continue the research and our other activities," says Sri Chidambaram.

ANANDHI RAMACHANDRAN



Raja Sir Muthiah Chettiar

join the mainstream. The value of its contribution will be decided by time. The only caution that has to be given to the votaries of the movement is that they should keep true to tradition." This speech was applauded by the *Hindu* as well as by R.K. Shanmukham Chetty and Kalki from the opposite side.

Tamil Isai did eventually join the mainstream but for many years some senior musicians did not sing at the yearly music festivals conducted by the Sangam. When eventually Ariyakudi sang at the Sangam, he agreed to do so on his own terms, that is, by beginning his concert with a Telugu varnam. Raja Sir Muthiah Chettiar graciously agreed to this. Today he recalls with nostalgia: "They all came and sang at our Sangam. They sang Tamil songs. We were very happy. The Sangam honoured Sri Ramanuja Iyengar by conferring on him the Isai Perarignar title. Later Musiri and Semmangudi were also similarly honoured."

G.N. Balasubramaniam, Palghat Mani Iyer, Rajamanickam Pillai and Palani Subramania Pillai were others featured in the early years of the Sangam. While complimenting GNB and his accompanists on their concerts at the Sangam, Kalki referring to the view of some that Tamil pieces were material only for tukkada or short, minor items in the concert, wrote: "If there was anything lacking in this concert it was only time. GNB did not have the time to sing tukkadas after the pallavi." A classical Tamil concert without even tukkadas! Madurai Mani and Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavathar as well as D. K. Pattammal, K.B. Sundarambal, Dandapani Desikar and Chittoor Subramania Pillai were among the others who performed at the Sangam in its early years.

Today, the singing of Tamil songs is a routine feature of Carnatic music concerts, especially in areas where Tamils predominate. The thunder has rolled away and the subject of Tamil Isai, once so potently emotional, sparks as much passion as a discussion of the weather.

You want more Tamil songs? Well, you can have more songs in Kannada, Malayalam and Hipdi as well. Even if the musician who sings does not know any of these languages and "murders" the sahitya in the process of serving your special interest.

ANANDHI RAMACHANDRAN

# ON TAMIL ISAI: A SRUTI REPORT MUSICIANS ON TAMIL ISAI

## Semmagudi Srinivasa Iyer

"I will tell you about an incident. I gave a concert in Kanadukathan, at a wedding in the house of a relative of the Raja of Chettinad. He was seated close to the dais. Before I started singing, he requested me to sing as many songs in Tamil as possible, which I did. After the concert, the Raja expressed his appreciation and observed: *If songs are rendered in Tamil, both the content of the song and its musical excellence can be appreciated, is that not so?*

At another concert in Kandanur, some elders requested that I should sing only Tamil songs. I pointed out to them while I was willing to comply with their request, I didn't know that many Tamil songs. I also promised that when I gave a concert again in that place, I would sing only Tamil songs. They were very happy. That evening my programme had mainly Tamil kritis.

After I returned to Trivandrum, the Raja of Chettinad wrote a letter expressing his delight about the Kandanur concert, appreciating my effort to give prominence to Tamil songs. I did not know many kritis in Tamil, but I have always been singing Bharatiyar songs.

The stalwarts of our musical field used to sing Tamil kritis even about fifty years ago. Konerirajapuram Vaidyanatha Iyer used to sing *Muthukumarayane* in Sankarabharanam. It was usually the main kriti, sung with niraval and kalpanasvara elaborations. People enjoyed it very much.

Ariyakudi used to sing the kritis of Koteeswara Iyer and Arunachala Kavi. He set to music many Tamil songs. Muthiah Bhagavathar also sang Tamil songs. Musiri Subramania Iyer sang Tamil kritis with great feeling.

The songs of Kavi Kunjara Bharati, Mahavaidyanatha Iyer's elder brother Ramaswami Sivan, Neelakanta Sivan and Gopalakrishna Bharati were in vogue even before the Tamil Isai Movement made its appearance. Based on Neelakanta Sivan's kritis, Papanasam Sivan composed Tamil kritis. Ghanam Krishna Iyer's and Subbarama Iyer's padams were also sung. But I don't sing padams."

## M. Balamuralikrishna:

In a kriti, the lyrics and the music must go together. Through the song, *bhava* must be conveyed. When the *sahitya* and the melody are composed by the same person, the *bhava* or the emotion of the song rings out clearly. When one person gives the lyric and another sets it to music, it does not always work out. In the Tamil kritis that are sung now, the *bhava* aspect is lacking. I compose Tamil songs and sing them in my concerts. My wife helps me with the proper Tamil words. My desire is to see that Tamil kritis get the same prominence as the kritis of Tyagaraja. I am trying, step by step, to help achieve this.

## D.K. Pattammal

I have been singing Tamil songs since childhood. My father taught me the songs of Subramania Bharati. I had a good memory and I used to sing with gusto the songs that described the argument between an Indian and a British Officer. At that time I did not know the political implications. So, it didn't occur to me to be afraid. Later on, for the film *Tyaga Bhoomi*, I sang many Tamil songs like *Bharata Punya Bhoomi*.

I do not believe that the standard of a concert is lowered by including Tamil kritis, even if the entire concert consists of them. I have been singing Tamil kritis in my concerts and always had a very good response. When I went to Sri Lanka I could sense the joy of the audience when I sang Tamil kritis. There, all my programmes more or less consisted of only Tamil kritis. I have given performances in which I sang only Tamil songs, not only in Sri Lanka and at the Tamil Isai Sangam. I have sung only Arunagirinathar's Tiruppugazh songs in a concert. Thiruppamburam Swaminatha Pillai told me that this was possible. In Tiruchi, there was a festival connected with Sri Arunagirinathar. My recital consisting of the saint's songs only turned out well. After all it is the musician who puts life into any song. I hate singing Tiruppavai as the main song in some concerts.

I don't have a special preference for any particular Tamil composer's songs. There are very beautiful kritis by Papanasam Sivan, Arunachala Kavi, Muthuthandavar, Suddhananda Bharati and a score of other composers. I also usually sing a viruttam and minor Tamil songs at the end of the concert.

I find that the viruttam, with beautiful Tamil words, invariably moves me. Sometimes I can't sing the next line. Arutappa, Divya Prabandhan Tiruvachakam and Pattinathar's verses all elevate the musician and the listener.

## T. Balasaraswati

For a musician who had mastered the singing of pallavi, anything else was *sillarai uruppadi* or 'miscellaneous items'. The musician's bean was always in singing the pallavi and he wanted to prove his worth. In fact, for a long time, nagaswara vidwans didn't have many uruppadis in their repertoire.

T.K.C was the person responsible for creating a greater awareness about *sahitya*. I have done abhinaya for Tamil padam and even Bharatiyar's songs. It was the viruttam that I enjoyed most. When my mother Jayamma sang a viruttam, it stirred my soul; its philosophical content always inspired me. A viruttam like *Varadirundal* with *vatsalya rasa* was always well received by the audience because they understood the meaning.

## Madurai Somasundaram

Feeling is very important in music. Outside Madras, in all the cities and towns (of Tamil Nadu), there is genuine appreciation of Tamil kritis. When I sing in festivals, people ask me to sing Tamil songs about Lord Murruga and Devi.

Tamil Isai has been responsible for bringing about a healthy trend in Carnatic music. By the efforts of Tamil Isai Sangam, many new and old kritis are sung in concerts.

It is natural for a Tamilian to want to listen to Tamil kritis. When I sing in Bangalore, the audience listens happily for a while and then they ask: *Please sing a Dasar noma*. Sometime in Tamimadu, someone asks for a Tyagaraja kriti. It is a wonderful situation. We must adjust and accommodate to the needs of the rasikas also.

I have composed about five hundred Tamil kritis.

## M.D. Ramanalhan

Do you know I have composed a few kritis in Tamil in ragas like Atana, Hussrmi and Sahara?

My gorawasther Yinripa Jaftbe Miisk Colege at unnamalai University, and he supported the Tamil Isai Movement. He felt that there should be more compositions in Tamil for *imr-Hji-uiauke t.Abhvasagana*). So he composed many excellent geetams and varnams for the benefit of music students.

It has been said that the Tamil Isai movement was started due to a racial bias, but I don't think it is true. The Raja of Chettinad was very broad-minded. All great vidwans were honoured by Raja Sr Amaohti Chettiar. Araiamarai Iyer had the good fortune of being helped by eminent scholars in their own fields in those days. Sri K.A. Neelakanta Sastri, Dr.U.V. T.Timhiithi Iyer. Rt. Hon. Srinivasa Sastri, Sir C. P. Ramaswamy Iyer and Sri Sabesa Iyer were associated with the University in one way or the other.

## T.V. Sankaraitaravanam

Sri Madam MJB Iyer included Tamil kritis in his concerts. He had very great regard for Tamil composers. He liked to please his audience. When he sang *Tiruvadi charanam* and *Kirtu kuzhi* in Khamboji the listeners were thrilled. *Karrvearre* in Madhyamavathi was rendered so impressively by him that even the Mysore audience listened to it with avid interest. Every year he went to Chettinad. He was greatly admired by all music lovers, all over the south. He was a patriot at heart and always wore khadi. *Manjima rrumi mozhi vazhi* was a paaavi he sang in those days and the *■■>* is used to listen enthralled.

## B. Rajam Iyer

I have not sung at the Tamil Isai Sangam; they haven't asked me. I include Tamil kritis in my concerts. The kritis of the Trinity must be sung in concerts, but Tamil kritis add variety to them. Arunachala Kavi's Ramanataka kritis have their own beauty. I sing the compositions of Sivan often, like *Kana kann kodu vendum*. At the Music Academy, I sang *Unnai bhajikka varam ta* in Begada.

My guru Sri Ariyakudi was singing Tamil songs in concerts long before the Tamil Isai movement was started. *Natamadi tirinda* in Khamboji by Papavinasa Mudaliar, *Kali teera* in Todi by Koteeswara Iyer, and the Bhairavi padam *Inimel avarukkum* were popularised by my guru. He also sang the Mohanam kriti *En palli kondeerayya*, *Andarama soundaryam* in Kedaragowlai and *Yaw ivar yaro* in Bhairavi. Actually he enjoyed singing the Ramanataka songs very much since he was a Vaishnavite. He set to music the Ramayana kriti *Ennakkunintpadam* in ragamalika. In fact his earliest record was *Kartikeya gangeya* in Todi by Sivan. If anyone has done service to Tamil Isai, my master has.

Initially he did not agree to sing at the Tamil Isai Sangam only because of his conviction that no one should dictate to a musician as to what he should sing. He always sang the varnam in Telugu and it was his way of setting pace to an evening's concert and he did not like to be told that he should start with a Tamil composition. When the Sangam relaxed the rules, he sang in Tamil Isai with great enthusiasm.

Once he gave a very fine concert at a Bharati festival. As the main kriti, he took up *Sri Subramanyaya namaste*. Sri C. Subramaniam was present at this concert. My guru looked at him, pointed to a cutout of Bharatiyar that was there and then raised his hands towards the sky while singing the opening words of the kriti. All those who were present had broad smiles on their faces.

## Vlani Krishnaswami

I was a young girl when the Tamil Isai movement was started and I must say that it created an awareness in me. Till then I didn't even think of the language issue.

Tamil songs are as much a part of a concert as any other songs. As long as a kriti lends itself to the pattern of concert singing and contains meaningful words, it is a good kriti. There is no question of neglecting any particular aspect of music. We are the losers if we do. In \ aishnava *sampradaya*, great importance is given to Divya Prabandham. When the deity is taken around in a procession, those who sing *pusurams* lead the procession. The figure of Lord Vishnu is always in the middle and the • *edaparayanam* group comes behind the Lord.

Srivaishnava acharyas explain it thus: the Lord is so pleased with the sweetness of the Prabandham, he goes after it, while the vedas come behind in search of His feet.

Tamil is as sweet as any other language and it thrills me when I sing Tamil kritis.

## Maharajapuram Santhanam

When I was teaching in Yazhpanam in Sri Lanka, I gave many concerts in which I sang only Tamil kritis. All those concerts invariably gave me great satisfaction. For a musician the kritis of Tyagaraja, Dikshitar and Syama Sastri are like a treasure-trove. Surely one enjoys singing them. That does not mean a musician cannot render songs in other languages as well.

Recently I sang at the Purasavakkam Arts Academy. The programme consisted only of Tamil songs, composed by Gopalakrishna Bharati, Papanasam Si van, Arunachala Kavi and others. For me it was astonishing how the three hours of the concert passed so quickly. The President of the sabha congratulated me on this performance. There is indeed scope in Tamil songs. Kritis composed by Sivan have emotional as well as musical content. The effect that is created when Tyagaraja's *Dasarath* is sung is evoked when *Kartikeya* is rendered as well. When Srimathi M.S. Subbulakshmi sings *Saravana bhava guhane* by Sivan, I am sure the enjoyment of the rasika is definitely not less than when he or she listens to *Ramakatha sudha*.

When a (Tamil-speaking) musician renders a Tamil composition, he experiences *svanubhava* as he understands the meaning. It is my experience that singing Tamil kritis gives me an emotional satisfaction. When I sing *Ennai katharulvadu* in Hemavathi, I become too emotional to continue. My father who rendered Tyagaraja kritis in a unique manner also used to sing Tamil kritis. In his repertoire were the kritis of Sivan and Arunachala Kavi. His favourite was *Ramanai kannarakkandale* in Mohanam.

## T. Brinda

In our family everyone sang Tamil kritis and padams. My grandmother Dhanammal used to sing Subbarama Iyer's beautiful padams. *Ini enna pechirikkudi* in Sahana, the famous Begada padam *Yarukkagilum bhayama*, *Tanakkutane tona venum* in Sankarabharanam and *Ittanai tulambaramai...* were heard again and again in our family. Dhanammal also sang Tamil viruttams in her own special style. Tayumanaswami's viruttams with their philosophical ideas were rendered by her with clarity and feeling and they moved the listeners.

From my guru, Sri Naina Pillai of Kanchipuram, I learnt the kritis of Ramaswami Sivan,

numerous Tiruppugazh songs, and Tevaram songs in ancient pannas. I particularly like singing Syama Sastri's *Tarunam idamma* in Gowhpanu and *Sri Kamakshi* in Vasanta, both in Tamil.

The theoretical part of music and research have come into vogue only recently. When I was a young girl, nobody talked about singing; they simply sang. There was *lakshya gnanam* and the music was mellifluous and fulfilling. There is no doubt that our Bhairavi, Kurinji, Nilambari and Mohanam were ancient pannas. These ragas were sung in Tamil Nadu with *lakshya gnanam* alone.

## Manakkal Rangarajan

It is not correct to say that there aren't enough kritis in Tamil; there is indeed a variety of songs. But it is very important for a musician to learn as many kritis as possible by the Musical Trinity. The structure of the kriti and rendition are very important and a musician can sing any kriti and add lustre to it if he has mastered the kritis of these three greatest of composers.

I have given concerts at the Tamil Isai Sangam long ago with Chowdiah and Rajamanickam Pillai as violinists. The audience always responded beautifully.

It has been said that Tamil words are not suitable for singing. Let me tell you something. In Kerala, the late K.B. Sundarambal was very popular. I know that sometimes she sang for six hours. She sang only Tamil songs. The listeners were ninetyfive percent Malayalis and it was quite obvious that they enjoyed her music. Nobody thought that the Tamil words were harsh on the ears. Even those who do not know Tamil will enjoy Tamil songs.

The Tamil Isai Sangam has perhaps helped to spread the singing of Tamil kritis. Its best service was to encourage vidvans to sing Tamil songs and it also paid them liberally. The Sangam also treated the musicians with high regard, which speaks for the culture of its leaders.

## Bhaaga undi kaadha?

At a concert in Vijayawada, Balamuralikrishna was, as is his wont, singing mainly his own compositions in Telugu, with a couple of Tyagaraja and Dikshitar kritis thrown in. Then he started a Tamil song, *Oru nal poduma*. A loud murmur rippled across the crowd. Balamurali stopped singing abruptly and, replacing song with speech, said: "Why do you grumble when I start a Tamil composition which is as good as a Telugu kriti? Is it not so?... For that matter, how many of you understand a Tyagaraja kriti? At least, when I sing a Tamil song, those who know Tamil enjoy the music as well as the sahitya...." The audience fell silent and the vidvan resumed his s'ng'ng-

# Oduvars:

## A Hoary Tradition of Hymn-Singing

*The works of four great saints provide a strong underpinning to Saivite religion in South India. These saints were: Tirugnanasambandar, Tirunavukkarasar, Sundarar and Manickavachakar. The first three composed the great hymnal work in Tamil known as Tevaram.' The Tevaram is considered the Tamil equivalent of the Vedas, even as the Vedas propounded in Sanskrit were once called Tevaram.*

*To learn more about Tevaram-singing and the hymnodists called Oduvar, Assistant Editor Muthumeenakshi went to the Dharmapuram Adheenam Mutt, situated near Mayiladuthurai (known previously as Mayuram or Mayavaram). There she met and talked with Sri R. Velayuda Oduvar, a venerable and wise gentleman who is the head of the Tevaram school run by the Mutt. She was introduced by Sri Vi. Sa. Guruswamy Desikar, Principal of the Tamil College there, to Srilasri Gurumahasannidhanam who spoke to her briefly on Tevaram and and later on had his comments prepared as a statement for publication by SRUTI (see box). His Holiness instructed Sri Velayuda Oduvar to answer Srimathi Muthumeenakshi's questions in detail. Excerpts from the question and answer session which followed, translated from chaste Tamil by V. Rukmini, are reproduced below.*

**MUTHUMEENAKSHI: How long has Tevaram singing been in vogue?**

**VELAYUDA ODUVAR:** Tevaram has been sung from the time of Sundarar or about one hundred years after the time of Tirugnanasambandar and Tirunavukkarasar. That is what the researchers say. Stone inscriptions in the Chola country show that Rajaraja Chola I introduced Tevaram singing in temples. He appointed forty-eight hymnodists to serve as oduvars at the Brihadeeswarar temple in Tanjavur, and also two drummers to play *mattalam* with them.

**Is Tevaram sung in all temples?**

Tevaram is being sung in most of the (Saivite) temples (in Tanjavur district). Only in the less affluent temples it is not sung.

**Are the Tevaram songs in praise of Siva only or do they praise other God manifestations also?**

Most of the songs are in praise of Siva. Even those songs addressed to other deities praise Siva indirectly.

**At what times of the day is Tirumurai sung in the temple?**

Usually, it is sung during *abhishekam* of the presiding deity. Following *pooja* and *deepa aradhanai*, one song from each of the Twelve Tirumurai are sung in some temples. Sometimes Tirumurai is sung as *panchapuranam* which is relatively short. It is usually sung during the evening worship. In the olden days, oduvars were poorly paid and therefore they sang Tevaram during the evening service only. As their remuneration improved, they sang during the morning, noon and evening services. At festal time, they also sang on the street with accompaniments.

**Are raga and tala used in Tevaram singing?**

Of course, raga and tala are used; this has been the practice all along. Nagaswara vidwan Tiruveezhimizhalai

Subramania Pillai, speaking at a pann research meeting, has said that even the raga should be sung or played with tala and that he never did play a raga without tala. He actually demonstrated this to us. I feel that even if you sing a song without tala, there has to be a rhythmic pulse (*nadai*) to it. In training oduvars, we emphasize this. We teach hymns with difficult talas.

**In ancient times, did they use instrumental music to accompany Tevaram singing?**

Yes, they did. It is believed Tiruneelakanta Yazhpanar played the *yazh* for Sambandar. Nowadays, violin and mridangam are used.

**What were the instruments used in the olden days, besides the *yazh*?**

Muzhavu (drum) and kuzhal (flute) were used besides the *yazh* (lute). In temples, the *yazh* alone was used. Now, for the last forty to forty-five years, Tevaram is also sung in chorus, like the Vedas.

**Who assisted the growth and spread of Tevaram singing?**

The people of Chettinad did. They were instrumental in spreading it to Singapore and Malaysia as well, and the oduvars acquired fame in those places. Indeed, in the temples in Malaysia and Singapore, worship is not conducted without Tirumurai.

The singing of Tevaram in the traditional manner, employing day-time pann or melodies night-time melodies and 'common' melodies appropriate both to day and night, was a practice maintained in the mutts. This tradition was followed and encouraged in the schools set up to train oduvars. In these places, the hymns were sung usually in the slow tempo only.

**How did the oduvars get their name?**

Only those who sing Tevaram in temples are called oduvar. *Oduthal* in Tamil means speaking or hymn-singing. The muslims also use this term oduvar which is mentioned in Tirumurai itself.

**Are the oduvars paid remuneration?**

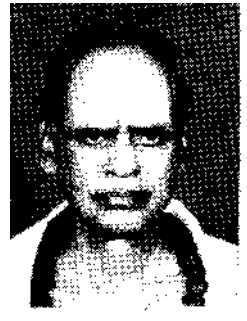
Yes, they were paid even in the days of the kings.

**In what form has this been paid?**

It has been given in the form of land grants and in terms of specific shares of temple *prasadam*.

**What was the usual practice: was an oduvar succeeded by his son or by a student?**

The son or grandson usually did not have the right of succession but in some temples they did, including the right to receive remuneration in terms of land grants and *prasadam*. They could not be deprived of the remuneration; nonetheless some zamindars managed to do so. As a consequence, Tevaram singing in temples began to decline. To arrest this decline and to revive Tevaram singing, a Tevaram school was opened in Chidambaram about a hundred years ago. Twelve students



*Muthumeenakshi and Velayuda Oduvar*

## **Tirumurai Pann Isai**

*Dharmapuram Adheenam Srilasri Gurumahasannidhanam has given the following statement to SRUTI:*

**T**evara Pann Isai is the basis for Tamil Isai. Among the Tevara Tirumurai songs, the leading one is *Mootha. Tirupathikam*, composed by Karaikkal Ammaiyar. The pann of this *Tirupathikam* is called Nattapadai. Tirugnanasambandar, Tirunavakkarasar and Sundarar followed the footsteps of Karaikkal Ammaiyar and they composed Tevaram songs in the same pattern.

We know that Tirugnanasambandar lived in the seventh century after Christ. Karaikkal Ammaiyar lived before him. So we can surely say that Tevaram was in vogue long before Venkatamakhi or the Musical Trinity were born.

Tevaram songs had only pallavi and anupallavi initially. As time went on, charanam was also added to them. It is believed that the Tevaram songs were set to music by a woman, a descendant of Tiruneelakanta Yazhpanar. The word Tevaram itself means "devotional songs". These songs should be popularised by sangita vidwans. These songs should be sung and promoted by them.

were trained each year. Of these, a few turned out to be outstanding hymnodists.

Can anybody from any caste or community become an oduvar?

Yes, anybody can, except he should be a vegetarian and should take *deeksha* (or certain vows). The four sons of the Sivacharya here are enrolled as students in our Oduvar School.

Why do women not sing Tevaram? Have they been prohibited from serving as hymnodists?

They have not been prohibited; in fact, it was a woman who set Tevaram to music. Traditionally, however, a particular group of persons have sung Tevaram and none else. Women got married when they were very young and they became so involved in their families that they couldn't devote time to hymn-singing. There has actually been no taboo.

Are there still oduvars who sing in the traditional manner?

I think the old style is almost extinct. Oduvars today use completely different melodic modes. They have changed the rhythmic structure also and they sing in different *kalapramanam* or tempo. I think it is all right if they employ double speed (that is, sing in the second *kala*), but what they do is just speed up the tempo without regard to *kalapramanam*.

I believe that in the Tevaram school, student-oduvars are given special training to prepare them to sing Tevaram in the traditional manner. Is that so?

Yes, the students in our school are properly trained and when they graduate, they sing in temples in the traditional manner and they train others to do so.

When you teach Tevaram, do you teach Tamil also along with it?

We take students who have passed V Standard in Tamil and we give them further tuition in Tamil language.

What are the qualifications needed to enrol in your school?

We take students between the age of ten and twelve. As far as educational qualifications are concerned, they should know to read and write. The students should finish their course at the age of seventeen.

Do you teach the meaning of the songs?

We give enough explanation of the songs. Some students of this school have become good poets and some have become professors. For example, the present principal of the Tamil College, Guruswamy, did his S.S.L.C. after his training in this school. Since then he has received the B.A. degree, as well as the M.A. degree.

I believe you have been in this field for about 53 years. How many oduvars have you trained and can you mention those who have achieved fame as hymnodists?

I have trained about two hundred oduvars. Of these, only a hundred or so have attended the course all the five years. Some of them sirig in our temples and some have gone abroad. Among those who have achieved fame are Dharmapuram Swaminathan, Sirkazhi Tirugnanasambandar, Tiruchi Muthukandaswami and Gnanaprakasam, all serving as hymnodists in our own country, and Muthukumaraswamy in Malaysia and Ganapathy Desikan in Singapore. There are some others who sing equally well but they lack good voices and a natural aptitude.

How many Tevaram schools like yours are there now?

There used to be more than a hundred schools like this one, but now there are only ten schools which are doing well. Even though we have good buildings and adequate finances for these schools, not many students attend them. I am so sorry about it.

Tevaram songs are sung in different melodies by different oduvars. Why?

Such differences are quite common now. Following changes in singing styles as well as in life-styles in general, many oduvars seem to wish to use their musical imagination to please the public and earn monetary rewards. They sing Tevaram in film tunes and the lay public seems pleased with it.

What do you think should be done to improve Tevaram singing?

This can't be done by the private institutions by themselves. Even though we have a secular State, The Government should assist. Those who are appointed to serve as oduvars after appropriate training should be given remuneration comparable to what an M.A. is given; and they should get all the perquisites that government officials get. If the oduvars are properly taken care of this way, they will be able to sing with great devotion.

I feel that the temples where Tevaram is sung have flourished.



## *Bull's Eye*

*An Opinion Column on Music*

### HINDSIGHT

**A** retrospective analysis of the controversy centred on the Tamil Isai movement suggests that what took place was rather in the nature of shadow-boxing, the sparring groups by and large dancing around the basic issue. That issue was whether it was not important to understand the meaning of a composition to appreciate it and the music it embodied fully. There are those who argued — and still do — that the sahitya has no significance, that it is merely the scaffolding on which to build the musical content. And there are those who argue — and still do — the opposite. They can argue with each other until one side runs out of melody and the other runs short of words. Not just a sense of moderation but also commonsense suggests that, while music can be appreciated on its own, when a sahitya is sung, the understanding of the meaning of the lyrics can heighten our appreciation of the composition in all its aspects.

In essence, this was the sum and substance of the Tamil Isai movement. But this was not what its protagonists proclaimed. What they said was that the musicians should sing a predominant number of songs in any concert in Tamil so that the Tamils would not have their right to musical enjoyment diminished by the rendering of compositions in Telugu or Sanskrit. For the Tamils, they said, compositions in other languages were merely sound. Sangita Kalamidhi Dwaram Venkataswamy Naidu, a Telugu who emphasized the importance of sahitya, carried the position a step further and said that for those who did not know Telugu or Tamil, compositions in those languages were merely sound. The point had to be made and he made it. If the Tamils felt that compositions sung in concerts in Tamilnadu should be in Tamil so that they could understand them and

appreciate them, then equally the songs should be in Telugu for the Telugus, in Malayalam for the Keralites, in Kannada for the sons and daughters of the Karnataka soil and so on, so that they could each understand and appreciate them. If nobody argued then that Carnatic music compositions should be in some sort of musical Esperanto, it was possibly because the two sides concerned were too caught up in the rhetoric of the battle of words to give adequate thought to the central issue.

In the multi-lingual society that we live in, linguistic chauvinism makes little sense, especially in regard to music. The typical music audience in a metropolitan city is multi-lingual, and the musician cannot be commanded to sing only Tamil songs in Madras, or only Kannada songs in Bangalore, any more than he should be asked to sing Carnatic songs in Punjabi or Urdu in Delhi or Lucknow. Any musician who has audience appreciation and Mammon on mind — and who does not? — will make sure that he sings compositions which please the audience, even though he does not necessarily have to water down the quality of his music to achieve this end. In the field of music anyway, the decisions on what to sing should be left to the inner compulsions of the performers and the forces of the market place rather than to State or even private monopolies of wisdom or power. It is interesting to note that Syama Sastri and Patnam Subramania Iyer, both Tamils, composed mainly in Telugu, probably because, in the aftermath of the Vijayanagar empire, the dominant language of cultural communication in those days was Telugu. Moreover the proponents of Tamil Isai did not stop to think that if the Tamils were purveyed only Tamil compositions, they would be missing out on the great musical literature

of Tyagaraja, Dikshitar, Syama Sastri and others who composed in other languages. What they should have really done is, on the one hand, to promote a greater awareness of Tamil compositions, underwrite new Tamil compositions and encourage musicians to sing or perform compositions in Tamil — all of which they did eventually; and on the other hand, to undertake by themselves or in co-operation with others the preparation of programme notes or other such instruments giving the synopses of sahityas that would enable Tamils to enjoy songs not only in popular Tamil but also in ancient poetic Tamil, Telugu, Sanskrit, Malayalam and any other language which might be Greek and Latin to them. As a Tamil who has difficulty in understanding ancient classic Tamil poetry, who can read and write Sanskrit fluently but hardly understand it, who has little knowledge of Kannada, Malayalam or Hindi. I feel that my capacity to enjoy compositions in these languages is diminished because the Tamil Isai Sangam has done nothing to help me understand the meaning of songs in any of them.

Nor has the Music Academy served us any better. Those who opposed the Tamil Isai movement were guilty of over-reaction and missed the essence of the issue.

In the great debate, it is clear now, heat distorted the light, as anyone with a smattering of physics knows it can.

**Some forty year after the initial clap of thunder was heard, the rasika — whether he be a Tamil, Telugu, Kannadiga or Keralite — is still waiting for the Sangams and Academies to do something concrete to enable him to understand the sahityas of musical compositions so that he can enjoy Canatic music better.**

N. PATTABHIRAMAN

# A Dancer And Her Quest For Peace



## *Arayar Sevai*

Today, more and more religious works or hymns in praise of gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon are being rendered musical with or without rhythm, for popular consumption. Records and cassette tapes are being released one after another, offering musical renditions of slokas. While Tevaram songs have long been broadcast on the radio and slokas have for many years had a place in kutcheries, there certainly has been a rise in the curve of supply of recitative verses sung as music. Arayar Sevai is an exception to all this only in that an essentially religious ritual has found an expression in dance as well as music. The basis for Arayar Sevai is Divya Prabandham, a book of some 4000 hymns in Tamil in praise of Vishnu. It may be said that Divya Prabandham is to Tamil-speaking Vaishnavites what Tevaram is to Tamil-speaking Saivites. The verses of Divya Prabandham, called pasuram, were composed

Usha Narayanan is an unusual dancer Her dance is inspired and informed by Arayar Sevai, a unique type of ritualistic worship in some vaishnavite temples. She didn't start out this way. In fact, although she showed talent in dancing and singing even as a child, she never nursed ambitions of becoming a serious performer. There was much music in her mother's family and interest in music and dance, and coaching in both, continued for Usha through school, but she rarely went to rentals, as she lived mostly in cantonments and military quarters, far from the city a consequence of her father's job in Defence Accounts

Usha named at the young age of fifteen and her lessons in dance and music continued. "Because I enjoyed dance and music I took my lessons seriously as I had earlier, but no thoughts

of a career in dance crossed my mind I earned music from Sri L.T. Raghavachari who was a very sincere teacher." Great misfortune befell Usha who lost two of her three children under tragic circumstances. Shock and grief overwhelmed her and she was filled with a deep need to obtain answers to basic questions pertaining to life and death. Self-realisation and a need to come to terms with life became imperative. "But I was still in a state of shock and didn't know what to do," she told us. "That is when my husband advised me to take up dancing seriously. After all dance is a

be different saints – or Alvars – who lived at different times. Revered in this connection are Nammahar, his disciple Madhurakavi, and Nathamuni. The latter is said to have composed music for the pasuram with the help of his nephews and to have emphasized the importance of singing the hymns in the temple. The hymn-singing gathered. Over time, some elements of dance also, leading eventually to what is today described as Arayar Sevai. Arayar Sevai means service or worship offered by Arayar. The service, according to T.S. Parthasarathy, a retired railway official who is a distinguished music scholar and also Secretary of the Madras Music Academy, is only a ritual of worship and not an art form. It takes place only in front of the presiding deity of the temple and today only at temples in three places: Srivilliputtur, Srirangam and Alwar Tirunagari (near Tirunelveli). The word Arayar describes those men who perform this'

kind of yoga or therapy."

Usha then learnt bharatanatyam from Nana Kasar, a disciple of Parvati Kumar whose guru was Chockalingam Pillai. She received a scholarship (to learn bharatanatyam) and, after five years of rigorous training, became a performing artiste. "But all the time I used to tell my guruthat I was in search of answers to my questions," she told us. "That quest made me read all the books available on our dance.",

Usha wanted to discover whether dance was the means to an end or an end in itself. She learnt that, according to the sastras, *devotion* to the supreme is the final goal and dance is a means to achieve this final goal, although one can also dance for one's own pleasure and one's own satisfaction; but when one does that, it amounts to going inward rather than opening out.

Usha then tried to depict the emotion of bhakti in the traditional bharatanatyam mode and was yet deeply unsatisfied. To her it seemed everything— karma, the cycle of birth and rebirth, sin — was portrayed as *dukkha* or unhappiness. There was something missing. "How do you show *antaryamitvam* (God's omnipresence)?" Bharatanatyam did not provide the answer. "I found I was doing injustice to dancing. I was not satisfied. A page from *Natyasastra* seemed missing". Once again Mr. Narayanan showed the way. He was the one who suggested that Usha make a study of the ritual of Divya Prabandham sung in temples. She took his advice and what followed made all the difference. Watching the Arayars was

service. The nomenclature is reported to have been bestowed on them by Alagiya Manavalar, a chieftain or king well-versed in music, who also provided them with silk upper garments and special turbans.

The singing of Divya Prabandham verses is accompanied by dance movements in Arayar Sevai offered at Srivilliputtur and Srirangam only; at Alwar Tirunagari, there is only singing. While at the latter place the pasuram is sung throughout the year, at the former two places, there is hymnody only during certain religious festivals like the *Pagal Pattu Utsavam*.

According to Sri Velukudy Varadacharya, a reputed scholar and teacher of Visishtadvaita an *i* Vaishnavite religious lore, a typical session of service conducted by the Arayar lasts about an hour and is often combined with a discussion (*yyakarana*) of the hymns sung. The pasuram are sung by a group of Arayars in chorus, and the dance movements are rendered by a different

a mystical experience; she watched them dance and it cleared so many of her doubts. Divya prabandham was the answer, the dance in the temple was the answer She was filled with peace. She said to herself: "Now my life is complete. Today if I have to leave this place, I have no attachment to anything material!"

When we asked Usha what was the difference between bharatanatyam and Arayar Sevai, she explained it by illustrating it with one of her own experiences. "At the Indian Council of Cultural Relations, I was asked to do both bharatanatyam and Arayar Sevai. I entered the stage and first performed Arayar Sevai, the truly devotional part of my dance, I concentrated hard and the audience watched in rapt attention. Then I followed it with bharatanatyam which I did effortlessly. I slipped from the higher worship to the lower, secular dance. But in another programme I did the reverse, performing bharatanatyam first. When I tried to follow with Sevai, I suffocated. I couldn't reach that higher plane. I realised Arayar Sevai is a direct communion with God; you forget your surroundings."

Usha has made a keen study of the tradition of Arayar Sevai and she is continuing it. The Arayars usually do not easily part with their knowledge but have shared much with Usha because of her great devotion and piety. In the opinion of some, she has brought out into light an unknown form of ritualistic worship and is developing it into an art form. She has collected enough material to write a research paper, which she has in fact done, but she has not submitted it to any university. Once SangeetNatak Akademi

Arayar. A father may sing and the son dance, or vice versa; when an Arayar feels like it, he stops his dancing to give a discourse on the pasuram being sung. *Pallu patu* or folk songs also sometimes find a place in Arayar Sevai, but there is no dancing to them.

The dance part of Arayar Sevai emphasizes abhinaya-like movements and is enacted to verses that portray the nayaka-nayika bhava. The rhythm is kept with bell-type of instrument; no ankle bells are worn. The dance does not have any *nritta* element, though there is stamping of feet, of the right foot chiefly. The dancer keeps moving forward and backward. He does not move his neck or his eyes; his hand movements are restrained and subtle. There is no *araimandi* or the half-squatting posture as in bharatanatyam, a fact which would lead some to declare that this is no dance at all. But there is a profuse use of hand gestures which incidentally are different from those indicated



offered her a fellowship to carry out documentation work in this area but Usha lost interest when she was asked to obtain certification from the Arayars themselves that she was taught the art by them.

Will she teach anyone who is willing to learn Arayar Sevai from her? Usha's reply to this question underscores her philosophy, her whole approach to dance. "I#ill, if the student comes to me in the true spirit of devotion and wants to learn this dance for the same reasons as I did. Not to make a career of it, but for reasons of bhakti. I will be only too happy to pass on my knowledge to anybody who has the same attitude as I have."

V. RAMNARAYAN with  
S. MUTHUMEENAKSHI

in *Natyasastra*.

During the service, the Arayar wear a cone-like headgear and also a colourful upper garment which is wrapped around their waist, on top of white dhoti. Before an Arayar is allowed to perform, reportedly he has to undergo training for fifteen years. All arayars are men; women are forbidden to take up this activity.

Arayar Sevai is said to be similar to the ritual of worship practiced in Vaishnavite temples in Manipur. Interestingly, the Manipuri word for music is *kai*.

Arayar Sevai may have remained largely unknown to the public if dancer Usha Narayanan of New Delhi had not made a study of it and adapted it for presentation on the secular stage. Like Kuchipudi, which was also essentially a religious rite before it became popular as one of the types of South Indian classical dance, Arayar Sevai may be on the way to becoming an art form.

# The (Old) Boys of Tiruveezhimizhalai



The triumverate of this *OriginalBoys Company* — Subramanian, Natarajasundaram and Kalyanasundaram — are the sons of Swaminatha Pillai, a well-known teacher of nagaswaram. The nagaswaram brotherhood is not necessarily one of blood kinship, but in this particular instance blood is thicker than water. Subramania Pillai, born in 1893, started his novitiate as a flautist and his younger brother Natarajasundaram Pillai had his early training as a vocalist, but they could not easily wriggle out of the nagaswaram tradition. Father Swaminatha Pillai and maternal uncle — Nagore Subbiah Pillai were steeped in the tradition that permeated every village in the Tanjavur district. Subramania Pillai's father-in-law was the celebrated maestro Semponnarkoil Ramaswami Pillai. It would be next to impossible to analyse this geneological tree which has its root or branch in every one of the Tanjavur villages.

In those years, the Tiruppamburam Brothers, Natarajasundaram-Pillai and Sivasubramania Pillai, overshadowed the entire profession by their tradition and impressive repertoire. Tiruppamburam Natarajasundaram Pillai, the fiddle maestro ThirukodikavaJ Krishna Iyer, and Veena Dhanammal were inheritors of the Dikshitar *sampradaya* as the pupils of Sathanoor Panchanada Iyer. The Tiruppamburam Brothers were pioneers in playing nagaswaram duets, the Dikshitar kritis standing them in good stead.

No love was lost between the two neighbouring families but Tiruveezhimizhalai Swaminatha Pillai left no stone unturned to take a leaf from the Tiruppamburam novelty of two pipers sounding like one man on the strength of their vocal rendering of the music to be piped. *Sahityupushti* is the rockbed of this *sampradaya*.

The Tiruveezhimizhalai Boys (*Payyanganal*) as they were then called had

ON THE COVER: Photo by Pat Raman of a mural painting on the ceiling of the Siva temple in Konerirajapuram in Tanjavur district. The nagaswara vidwan portrayed is Mannargudi Chinna Pakkiri. The tavil vidwan is Ammapettai Pakkiri Pillai.

necessarily to widen their repertoire of songs, while their family heritage was a stronghold of improvisation and elaboration of raga, pallavi, *rakti*, *tnallari* and other ritual aspects of nagaswaram music. Konerirajapuram Vaidyanatha Iyer, the *laya* wizard was a top-ranking vocalist of those days, and the 'Boys' took him by the forelock to enter his gurukulam. Kanchipuram Nayana (Subramania) Pillai was a junior contemporary of Vaidyanatha Iyer and Nayana Pillai's repertoire of the compositions of Syama Sastri and Tvagaraja and Arunagirinathar has hardly been surpassed even now. He was also the pioneer in singing long-drawn pallavis in complicated talas and elaborating swara *korvais* on combinations embedded in rhythm! The Brothers could ill afford to stay put at Kanchipuram to learn from Nayana Pillai, jeopardising their profession, but their youngest brother Kalyanasundaram became a pupil of Nayana Pillai as a 'classmate' of Chittoor Subramania Pillai so that the peripatetic Brothers could share the loot. Kalyanasundaram transmitted to his older brothers what he learnt at Kanchipuram, a very ingenious arrangement indeed. The Brothers have recorded for various gramophone companies several kritis from Nayana Pillai's repertoire, the most well-known among them being the Sankarabharanam piece *Swararagasudha*.

Kalyanasundaram was the *de jure* brother of the 'Boys' but the *de facto* brother was the tavil wizard Needamangalam Meenakshisundaram Pillai. Rasikas never tired of listening to the Tvagaraja kriti *Chetulara sringaramu*, the sahitya of which resounded on the ta\ il as a novel and welcome innovation. After years of team work in the troupe, Meenakshisundaram set up 'independent practice' and the Brothers foreswore pFa\ ing *Chetulara* as well as another Tvagaraja composition *Koniyadi*. No Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark!

Subramania Pillai started his career as "second fiddle" in the nagaswaram band led by his father-in-law Semponnarkoil Ramaswami Pillai who, from his *laya* stronghold, was a terror to fellow professionals. The son-in-law had perforce to equip himself suitably to hold his head up. In due course the Brothers had necessarily to face such senior contemporaries as Chidambaram Vaidyanatha Pillai, another *laya* celebrity. From time to time, the Brothers shared a common platform with Vaidyanatha Pillai; police protection was sought on several occasions when rival 'fans' took sides and also the law into their own hands. Possessed of refreshing candour, the Brothers are not ashamed to admit the eminence of Vaidyanatha Pillai, for never once had they equalled him in the delineation of ragas like *Husseini*; they were always lengths behind him in elaborating kalpana swaras for seemingly simple but elusive pieces like *Netrandi nerathile* or *Azhagulla durai ivan yaradP*. Dubious means to browbeat such eminence were not uncommon in a profession that has rigorous conventions. A drawn contest was more than half the battle won, for never did they at any time dream of registering a victory over the colossus.

The Brothers in their long career have had to face the music liberally and figuratively of the all-time greats of nagaswaram and also cross swords with tavil wizards from the days of Ammapettai Pakkiri Pillai, Vazhuvoor Muthuveeru Pillai, Needamangalam Meenakshisundaram Pillai and Iluppoor Panchapakesa Pillai or Panchami. No wonder the Brothers were respected by eminent vidwans like Fiddle Govindaswami Pillai, Kanchipuram Nayana Pillai and Konnakkole Pakkiri Pillai and also by later stalwarts like Sangita Kalanidhi Semmangudi and Mudicondan.

Devout worshippers of Sri Tvagaraja, both the brothers were Secretaries of the



Subramania Pillai honoured as Isai Perarignar in 1974



*Needamangakm Meenakshisundaram Pillai*

Sabha celebrating the Annual Festival at Tiruvayyaru. They were also Congressmen and served as members of several local bodies like the District Board and Municipal Council.

Subramania Pillai was the first ever nagaswara vidwan to be decorated as Sahgita Kalanidhi by the Music Academy, and as Rasika Sikamani by the Indian Fine Arts Society. Both are Isai Perarignars of the Tamil Isai Sahgam and winners of the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award. It is difficult to consider them as two different entities so far as their art is concerned, though they are two separate individuals. Natarajasundaram Pillai (b. 1896) is a Member of the Tamil Nadu Iyal Isai Nataka Manram and several university bodies as Examiner and Adviser. The Brothers have trained several disciples as nagaswara vidwans, chief among them being the new duo Tiruveezhimizhalai Govindaraja Pillai and Dakshinamurthi Pillai, sons of

Subramania Pillai. They are chips of the old block, needless to add.

The nonagenarians are understandably ante-deluvian in their demeanour. They still sport their pigtailed on their balding scalps and can be identified in any crowd as nagaswara vidwans on their toes for their *sevugam*, that is, service to their Maker and the Muse. Their loyalty to the traditional, shrill *timiri* (nagaswaram never floundered in favour of the latter-day *bari*, the low pitch of which is irreconcilable with the sampradaya of the 'Boys'.

Boys they originally were, and Boys they continue to be with undiminished and unimpaired vitality of vidwat. It was a sight to see Natarajasundaram Pillai pillion-riding on the scooter behind his grandson Dr. Subbiah racing to the inauguration of SRUTI on Vijayadasami Day. Punctuality for him has the same significance as precision in rhythm. Who can forget the 'boy' Sangita Kalanidhi of

sixty-odd years demonstrating pallavis in 8, 16, 32, and 64 kalai at the gathering of experts at the Music Academy? In the eyes of the fond rasika, they are the Boys of Tiruveezhimizhalai and will continue to be so like *Mappillai Swami*, their Patron Saint at Tiruveezhimizhalai.

Subramania Pillai together with his brother still nurses an old "grievance" against his father-in-law whose jealous guardianship of protocol let down the son-in-law in a team contest: Ramaswami Pillai had his pound of flesh initiating a marathon round of Bhairavi. The Boys 'also ran' but the veteran was strung to the quick to see them out-Heroding him. Son-in-law or no son-in-law, he arrogated to himself a second helping of Bhairavi instead of moving forward to the pallavi. That was a Caesar and when comes another such with that vintage Bhairavi! It was the son-in-law's privilege to be beaten with big stick!!

T. SANK ARAN



# Gone Down The Pipe

**N**agaswaram music has gone down the pipe. This is the verdict of the 90-year old pied piper of Tiruveezhimizhalai, A.R.S. Subramania Pillai.

I am travelling in Tanjavur district with Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, Anandhi Ramachandran and third man Sundaram who is at the wheel. We go to several places, visit many a temple. I gain a vivid impression of the strong links that existed in the past between the temples and art and culture, links that seem rather fragile today.

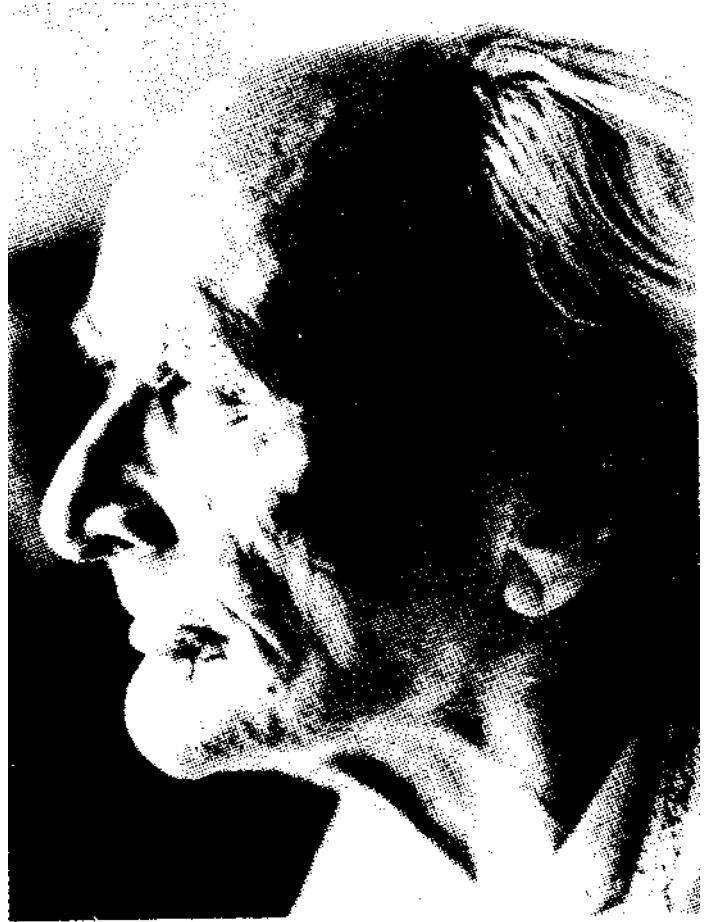
One of the places we stop at is Tiruveezhimizhalai where there is a grand temple for Veezhinathar, an aspect of Siva. It is late in the evening. I make inquiries about the whereabouts of Sri Subramania Pillai and then find my way to his house. I speak to his grandson Raghunathan and make an appointment to visit with the grand old man the next day at noon. I explain that I want to talk to him about music in his life and times.

We arrive the next day, a bit late. It is hot and not a little enervating and I suggest to Srinivasa Iyer that he rest a while after the sumptuous lunch we have had. He insists on accompanying us, saying he knows Subramania Pillai well and he would like to come and say 'hello' to him.

The house in which Subramania Pillai lives is two-storeyed and looks large in comparison to other houses in the village but the village itself does not appear as well off as some of the other villages around. The front hall is quite spacious but empty. There is a door to the interior of the house but it is closed, and the window on the separating wall doesn't throw much light inside. On the left is another room and that's where Subramania Pillai is ensconced. He is seated on a cot, and there are a couple of other chairs and a bench around. Subramania Pillai's two sons join us, more chairs are brought in and we are all comfortably seated.

Srinivasa Iyer and Subramania Pillai exchange warm greetings. Pillai tells Semmangudi about one Swaminatha Kavirayar and goes on to sing a song composed by him in ragamalika. He is frail, his voice falters and he is not quite able to hold the tune. But it is not pity he evokes; rather it is admiration for his effort. He has a fine chiselled face, a visage that impresses by its noble lines. It is a photographer's dream and later on I take a few pictures.

Semmangudi starts the conversation by observing that the Tiruveezhimizhalai Brothers were pioneers in rendering kritis correctly on the nagaswaram and went to great lengths to learn them properly.



**\\ henever there was a marriage in the village, it was only the "Hoys" who played the nagaswaram for the occasion. I can say that if children in the several houses are doing well today, it is only because of the "Boys".**

Semmangudi also recalls the days, rather the nights, when, with a piece of cloth on his head to protect him from dew, he would listen enraptured to nagaswaram vidwans playing hour upon hour on the streets around the temple.

**When the procession of the temple deity began at the gopuravasal (gate with the tower), the deepa aradhanai would be offered. At that moment, all the nagaswara vidwans would play together and even a confirmed atheist would be overcome with the emotional upsurge**



created by bhakti. The utsavar or processional deity would be carried along the four main streets around the temple. When we would enter the South Street, starting from the Sannidhi and crossing the corner where the temple chariot or car was stationed, the vidwans would render the raga alapana. This would go on-till we reached the North Street. Then, until the procession reached the beginning of East Street, pallavi would be played. This would be followed by ragamalika and a couple of Tiruppugazh songs. By then it would be five or six o' clock in the morning. How great were those experiences. Those were the days....

Semmangudi asks Pillai if he remembers a wedding at the house of Tiruvaduthurai Rajarathnam Pillai.

I sang first. Then you two played. Pakkiri Pillai and Meenakshisundaram Pillai played the tavil. What fantastic music you offered!...

Do you know that Rajarathnam Pillai always asked me to sing at Weddings in his family. He used to say. I was the kid from Iyah's house and could sing Well.

Iyah's house meant, of course, the house of Tirukkodikaval Krishna Iyer, the violin virtuoso who was Srinivasa Iyer's maternal uncle Rajarathnam studied with him.

I want to get an estimate of the Tiruveezhimizhalai Brothers vis-s-vis Rajarathnam Pillai and so I ask Subramania Pillai himself whether it would be correct to say that the Brothers were as great in rendering sahitayas as TNR was known to be in raga alapana.

Semmangudi cuts in quickly.

The Brothers could render both raga and kriti with facility. Both (raga and kriti) would be just right. Rajarathnam of course excelled in rendering ragas and there would be all kinds of shadings in them. He gave rein to his manodharma. He was like a deep ocean; whatever he played would sound pleasing.

I ask Subramania Pillai when his last performance was. He ponders a little, makes a few slow calculations and then says that it must have been twenty-five ago. Then he goes on to describe how he started learning music when he was about eight years old.

Our father Swaminatha Pillai acquainted me and my younger brother Natarajasundaram with knowledge of swara even before we learned to talk. He would make us listen to the chiming of the temple bells and, using its pitch as sa, would teach us the swara. He taught us the kritis of Iyaval (Tyagaraja) and also engaged a teacher to teach us Telugu. Father was a great nagaswara vidwan. Several persons had learnt to play the pipe from him and had later on become big shots. My father taught us varnams, kritis and so on.

Besides, we learnt music from Umayalpuram Doraiswamy Iyer and Konerirajapuram Vaidyanatha Iyer. Since we knew the meaning of the compositions (in Telugu), we learnt to render the song with clarity, with correct enunciation, without splitting aksharas (syllables) incorrectly. I learnt to play the flute and Natarajasundaram learned singing. I gave a flute recital when I was fifteen or sixteen. I could learn to play flute from my father because there is no great difference between the two instruments in their structure but only in the method of handling them.

Semmangudi comments on the prowess of Swaminatha Pillai as a teacher of music. Teaching is a special art, he says, and Swaminatha Pillai was great in that art.

Subramania Pillai was married early, as was the practice in those days. It was his father-in-law, the great nagaswaram vidwan Semponnarkoil Ramaswami Pillai who, after hearing young Subramaniam play on the flute and the nagaswaram, asked him to take up the pipe. Subramania Pillai didn't hesitate and started studying with Ramaswami Pillai himself.

I gave up the flute and started performing on the nagaswaram along with my brother Natarajasundaram. We were the first to perform as a pair; there were no others who did that before our time.

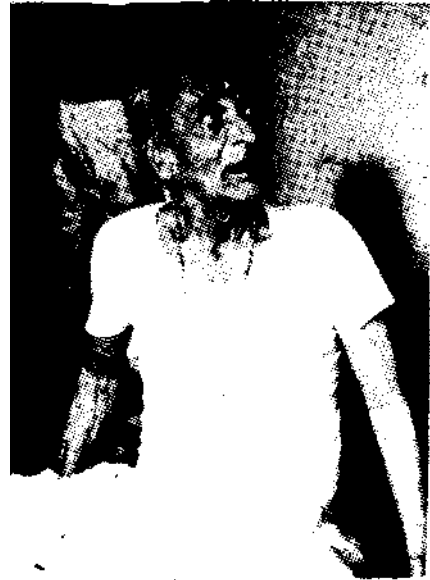
Later on he mentions that the Tiruppamburam Brothers had played as a duo before the Tiruveezhimizhalai

Brothers, but emphasizes that most of the nagaswaram greats of that era played 'singles'. Only after the Brothers made their debut and their mark as twin-pipers, he avers, did others start playing 'doubles'. And he is not happy about the quality of music piped by those who followed him and his brother.

My brother and I studied our lessons together. Others who followed us learnt differently perhaps. They did not learn vocalizing the aksharas or syllables of the songs and did not properly learn the techniques to play the sahitaya without blemish. Therefore, their music suffered.

Subramania Pillai continues:

In those days people were interested in expanding their learning. They would continue to study and would practise a lot. Nowadays, no sooner the novitiates learn some music, they begin to give performances with what little they know. In our times, young musicians would listen to and watch how the elder vidwans played and then would seek to present the ragas and pallavis in the same manner. It is all gone now, gone....



I ask: is there no prospect then that jaun vidwans would appear in the future?

Srinivasa Iyer exclaims: 'Who can say!' We don't know what treasure is buried where.

The sons of Pillai continue on.

When Srinivasa Iyer sings, he elaborates the raga step by step. Nowadays performances are not given that way. A raga is begun, then sung in the higher and lower octaves and finished in fifteen or twenty minutes. There is no time to elaborate the raga.

Subramania Pillai is proud of his achievements, the many honours and titles he has received. He has reasons to be.

In 1926, S. Srinivasa Iyengar organized a cultural programme for the meeting of the Congress in Madras; we gave the recital on the opening day. In the first thirty years of its existence, the Music Academy did not honour any nagaswara vidwan. I was the first to be honoured. It was in 1956. A year or so before that, Mudkondan Venkatarama Iyer, the great pallavi expert, rendered a 32-kalai chauka pallavi. Chittoor Subramania Pillai was presiding over the Academy's conference and he responded with a 16-kalai chauka pallavi. This challenged me and I prepared a whole year and gave a demonstration of a pallavi in 64-kalai chauka. And that in eight kalas too. Tributes were paid to me, that I had done what had been considered impossible, what no one else had done.

Pillaival recalls other feats and also the atmosphere of keen competition that prevailed when he and his brother were on the spiral staircase of arohana in their music career. He remembers an incident which took place during a festival at the temple in Needamangalam.

Madurai Ponnuswamy Pillai had the first turn and played a magnificent 108-tala pallavi. He must have prepared it carefully and only someone who had prepared as well could hope to match him, let alone outperform him. But lo and behold, my maternal uncle Nagore Subbiah Pillai played a similar pallavi just like that. Sometime later, there was a wedding at the house of nagaswara vidwan Tiruvanaikkaval Marudamuthu. The Madurai Ponnuswamy team was one of the 'melams' engaged. We were the other pair. We had prepared a pallavi

in 108 talas. We were warming up to challenge the other pair but our host, perhaps sensing what was coming up, asked us to please honour him by dropping the challenging pallavi in 108 talas. Perforce we played an ordinary pallavi and so did the other party.

He pauses and then offers some advice to musicians aspiring to achieving fame.

I was able to achieve titles and honours only because of my preoccupation with music, my untiring efforts and hard work. Young musicians of today should work similarly, pay proper attention, acquire knowledge of the musical notes first, then learn to sing or vocalize varnams and kritis, and perform without breaking the golden rules. It is wrong for nagaswaram players to play without properly learning the enunciation of the songs. I appeal to them to learn to enunciate the sahityas correctly and to play properly. If they go about it the right way, honours and titles will come rushing to them. I speak from experience."

And so he does.

## Tut, Tut, Tut.

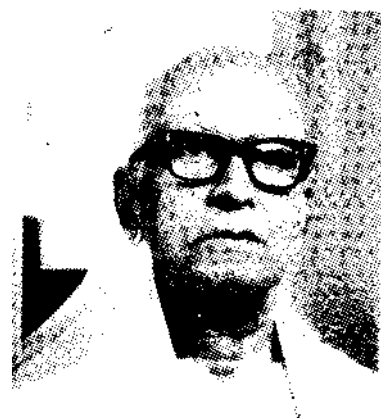
The Tiruveezhimizhalai Brothers have always been known as a pair. I have heard them play together, but I have talked only to Subramania Pillai. It does not seem quite right. So I seek out the younger brother of the two, 87-year old Natarajasundaram Pillai, in Madras and pick up the conversation where I had left it earlier in Tiruveezhimizhalai.

Natarajasundaram Pillai explains what happens when a nagaswaram player does not pay proper attention to thuthukaram.

In the charanam of Sangita gnanamu the phrase nyaya anyayamu occurs. In nagaswaram, this should be rendered as thoo thoo, thoo thoo. But if rendered as thoo thoo thoo, thoo thoo thoo it sounds like anyaya nyayamu, the opposite of what Tyagaraja wrote. Such aksharalobham or syllabic violation can be avoided if the songs are learnt with attention to the aksharas and if the proper techniques are used in playing nagaswaram.

I ask him to explain the techniques, and he does.

Thuthukaram is effected by the use of the tongue. The tongue is what makes it possible to produce long and short sounds. In veena playing, the equivalent of thuthukaram, is achieved by employing different meetu. Swaras are played with the fingers (viraladi), without using the tongue. Hukaram is the production of sounds like boo, boo, boo by using the throat. Finally, there is thannakaram, in which hoo and thoo are alternated, throat and tongue are



both used. The last is helpful in playing tanam. The interest in learning these techniques properly is not there today.

Natarajasundaram Pillai regrets the fact that contemporary nagaswaram players performing in temples tend to ignore time-honoured traditions in the selection of ragas and play cinema tunes. The listening public seems to prefer the latter!

Does nagaswaram playing over a long period of time affect the health? No, he says.

On the contrary, we nagaswaram players live long, it seems to me. My brother and I have been playing for a long time. We are both nonagenarians. Another brother is only four years younger than me. In earlier times, great nagaswara vidwans lived long lives.

Among the nagaswara vidwans you have heard, can you name those you consider outstanding?

I would say: Chidambaram Vaidyanatha Pillai, Semponnarkoil Govindaswamy Pillai and Dakshinamurthi Pillai (sons of Ponnuswamy Pillai), Keeranur Chinnathambi Pillai Brothers and (*he pauses*) Rajarathnam Pillai.

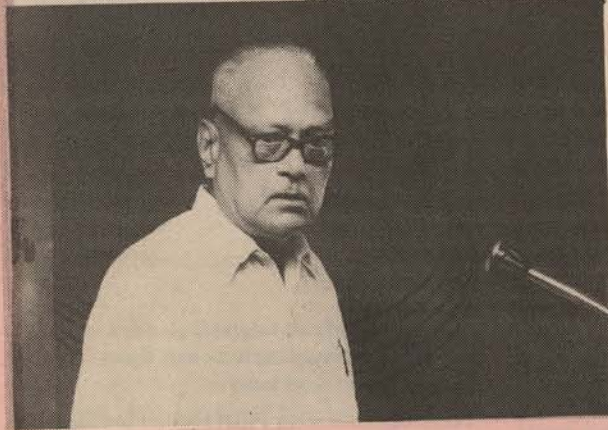
By the way, the junior Pillaival asks, turning the tables on us:

Why is it that sabhas and other music organizations ask nagaswara vidwans to provide mangala isai but hardly ever give them a chance to give a proper recital?

It is a good question. Something must be left unanswered in an interview.

N. PATTABHI RAMAN





It is the morning of Vijayadasami, sixteenth day of October. The place: the Kasturi Srinivasan building at the Madras Music Academy. The occasion: ceremonies to mark the release of the inaugural issue of SRUTI and the golden jubilee of Sangita Kalanidhi D.K. Pattammal's concert career.

Nagaswara vidwan P.K. Madurai plays *mangala isai* in the foyer. The invitees wend their way up to the auditorium and are received by the staff of SRUTI with welcoming smiles, sandal paste and sugar candy. A lovely floral display spells SRUTI and there are more flowers strung and hung above the doors.

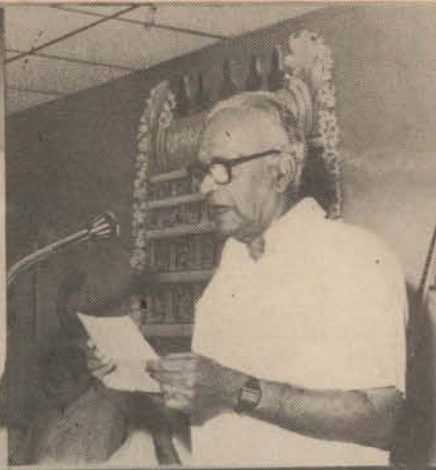
The ceremonies begin earlier than scheduled and move on briskly. The kalapramanam or tempo is just right, perhaps influenced by Pattammal's presence. The auditorium is packed wall-to-wall, overflowing in fact into the lobby and the foyer downstairs and even to the grounds. Many are unable to get into the building, let alone the auditorium. Those inside are expectant and exude palpable goodwill.

Following a brief welcome by publisher Sundaresan, sweet-voiced Sudha (Venkataraman) Ragunathan and party render four kritis in concert fashion in praise of Vinayaka, Saraswathi, Nataraja and Lakshmi.

Invocation over, T.T. Vasu, President of the Music Academy, extols the arrival of SRUTI in the midst of "tabloids specializing in strip-tease journalism, with pop music tugging at the lower vital instincts of man and films dripping blood and sex... everything to smother pursuits that ennoble, elevate and chasten." SRUTI, he hopes, will neutralize the unadulterated poison and serve a higher purpose. T.S. Parthasarathy, music scholar and Secretary of the Academy, describes the publication of a monthly devoted exclusively to classical music and dance as a bold venture. Vidushi R. Vedavalli calls SRUTI the musicians' friend.

All the while, Pattammal and her husband Isvaran, seated on the dais, are never out of focus. For more than fifty years, DKP has sung in a way to confirm beyond doubt





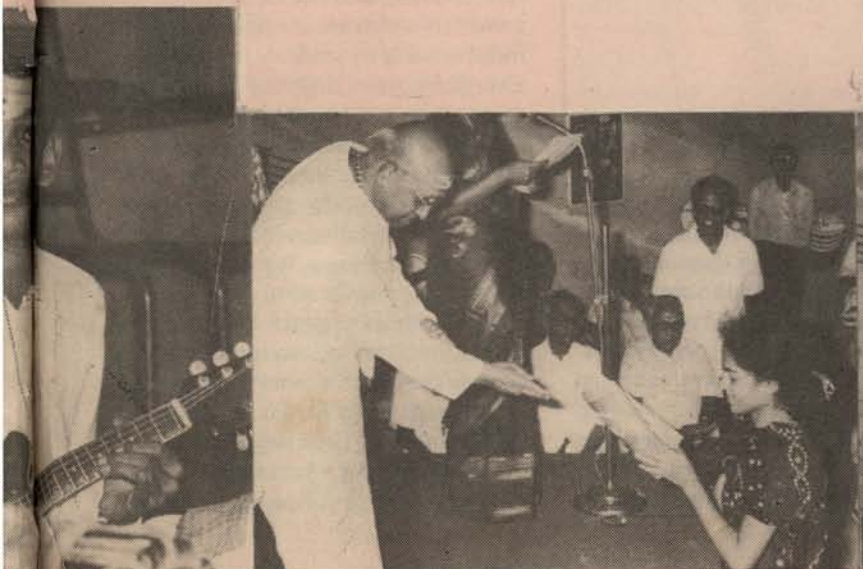
that her music is unalloyed gold. And now speaker after speaker describes her virtues, felicitates her on her accomplishments.

Vasu notes that, in Pattammal's case, unusually *vidya* and *vinaya* are happy co-tenants. Semmangudi Srinivas Iyer calls her a model for all aspiring musicians and Vedavalli says Pattammal it was who gave courage and confidence to women singers to sing pallavi in the face of disapproval by male gurus and colleagues. T. Sankaran of Tamil Isai Sangam and Natarajasundaram Pillai of the famous Tiruveezhimizhalai nagaswaram duo both emphasize Pattammal's perseverance in learning and presenting pallavis even while the tradition was waning. Rukmini Devi of Kalakshetra recalls how almost every music stalwart had words of praise for Pattammal even in her younger years. And then she presents a gold shawl (*ponnadai*) to Pattammal on behalf of SRUTI. DKP says a deeply-felt "thank you" and predicts a successful future for SRUTI.

Who's SRUTI for? There is no question that everyone present — and that includes many a notable figure from the world of music, dance and culture in general — feels it is for everyone interested in or participating in music and dance. That point is made quite clear by a novel feature: at the request of SRUTI's sponsors, doyen Semmangudi presents first copies of the magazine to some twenty men and women who represent the rasikas, music and dance performers, scholars, teachers, students, the media and the trade, but first he buys himself a copy and urges everyone to support SRUTI by buying it. The message comes through beautifully: SRUTI is for all who care for, participate in and enjoy South Indian classical music and dance.

The ceremonies are over ahead of schedule, but the sparkling occasion sparkles brighter still as Mandolin Srinivas and party provide *sampradaya* music, he and violinist T. Rukmani both playing on instruments of foreign heritage.

Excellence, tradition and innovation are all highlighted throughout, signalling SRUTI's goals.



# Trailblazing Traditionalist - Part 2



Following the first successful performance of Pattammal in Madras in 1933, her father felt encouraged to move the family's residence from Kanchipuram to the big city. As Pattammal tells it, this provided ample opportunities for learning as well as for recitals. "Our financial situation was even at this time none too comfortable and hence we could not afford to learn from the great vidwans of our time. Their disciples were, however, more

approachable and that is how I became the student of Sri Vaidyanathan, a disciple of Sri Ariyakudi Ramanuja Ayyangar, and of Sri Krishnaswamy Ayyangar, who had learnt from Naina Pillai himself. For the most part I learnt varnams, especially *ata tala* varnams and kritis. From Sri Krishnaswamy Ayyangar I learnt songs moulded in the Naina Pillai style. Circumstances prevented me from learning continuously and for a lengthy

period under the guidance of any single guru. My ever increasing number of public concerts required practice and travelling which became very time-consuming. But these learning sessions, brief though they were, helped to increase my repertoire."

For a long time, Muthuswami Dikshitar's compositions were considered mainly as food for pedants and scholars only; the slow majestic tempo of his kritis, and the inordinate length of some of them, contributed to the general impression that they were not lively enough for cutcherr presentation. Prior to Pattammal's arrival on the scene, only a few of Dikshitar's kritis were well-known and sung on the stage and even then not very often. Pattammal explains how she came to acquire a large repertoire of Dikshitar songs.

"I have always loved Dikshitar's kritis. The person who fulfilled my desire to learn many of his compositions was Sri T.L. Venkatrama Iyer, the well-known lawyer who later became a judge. Sri Ambi Dikshitar had introduced me to him earlier and he had been impressed by my singing. Once I settled down in Madras, he himself volunteered to teach me. I would go to his house, accompanied by my husband. He would be seated in a chair, I would sit on the floor on a mat. He would teach me in the traditional fashion and after the lesson I would write down the music with notation. In this manner, I learnt over two hundred of Dikshitar's kritis, including songs almost unknown then. In those days we did not have learning aids like tapes and tape recorders which are considered almost indispensable by students of today.

Everything was a challenge to our powers of memory. But I honestly feel that not having had these electronic gadgets was a tremendous advantage. What we learnt from our gurus orally, we had to practice repeatedly, literally hundreds of times, to retain in the mind. We were therefore all the more conscientious and attentive while learning and practising. One tends to lose that terrific concentration and become careless to a certain measure now. Today, with the help of tapes, students learn something like a song a day: ten days later they forget everything. How can one learn through tapes, or for that

matter, even with mere notation on paper? If at all I learnt through books in the days when I had no facilities to learn from a guru, it was always the songs that I had heard frequently, either in live concerts or in gramophone records. In music, hearing and listening are more important. Only then can melody and lyric become an inseparable part of our being...."

"I see another alarming development today," she continues "Musicians sing and give recitals with books or music sheets propped up in front of them. If I hold a book in front of me, I will forget everything. How can you sing when attention is focussed on *words* on a paper? Music is a matter of the soul. The words, inseparable from the melody, should become a part of one's being before they can be recreated and re-presented in the art form. For light music or film music where the words are not saturated with the soul power of the composer or surrounded by the aura of the spiritual and aesthetic power of the musicians who have sung them repeatedly, such a practice may be all right. Once the recording is over, you can throw the lyric away. But for singing the *kritis* of our great composers which must become a part of our repertoire of an entire lifetime, such a habit can only be inimical." Pattammal's unshakeable view is that words and music came in a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings for Dikshitar and Tyagaraja and we must appreciate this fact by not separating the two.

Lalitha, her daughter-in-law, interrupts to praise DKP's memory. "Amma's memory for songs is phenomenal. Even those which she learnt as a child she retains intact in her mind with all the melodic variations. Though sometimes she says that she has forgotten, once she begins to sing the piece, it emerges complete down to the minutest detail." And Pattammal adds: "Yes, and that is because I did not use tapes to learn them but used my mind to record, and felt their beauty in my heart..."

While on the subject of *sahitya*, she goes on to voice some of her deeply felt convictions on proper enunciation. "Let us take the case of a Telugu-speaking man speaking in English at a public function. He usually gives away his linguistic background by accenting the wrong syllables and sometimes even non-existent ones. He says. *That is goodoo. This is wrongoo.* A man from Karnataka speaking in Tamil is easily



T. L. Venkatrama Iyer

identified because he says *bandi* instead of *vandi*. What is our reaction? We tend to laugh at them, we find their accent and pronunciation funny. Now take a Tamil-speaking Carnatic musician singing «. Tyagaraja's or Syama Sastri's compositions in Telugu or Purandaradasa's songs in Kannada. If he mispronounces the words, won't the Telugu or Kannadiga listeners laugh at him? Perhaps they will even get angry at this murder of spiritually uplifting *sahitya*. Sometimes totally opposite or even obscene meanings are the result of wrong enunciations. I feel that we must at least take the trouble to guard against such transgressions. I am very sensitive to ridicule but, more than that, I have too much respect for our composers to even dare to sing a song without ascertaining the correct pronunciation, as well as the correct manner of rendering *sahitya* correctly. My greatest regret is my incomplete knowledge of Sanskrit and Telugu. I still bemoan the fact that my father who paid so much attention to my musical education did not think this knowledge was necessary. I feel more and more that we must know both these languages to enjoy singing the compositions of our great *vaggeyakaras* and convey their *bhava* fully to the listener. I do my best to overcome my handicap. When I learn a song in Telugu, Sanskrit or Kannada. I make it a point to study and understand the meaning. My father made this a habit with me and he made sure I developed a deep respect for correct pronunciation of the slokas he taught me. He was wont to say: *'Even a small mistake can assume monstrous proportions. If you sing Pratasmarami Lalitam vadanaravindam Bimbhadharam prithula mouktika sobhinasam as*

*sobhinasam, the resultant meaning would be sacrilegious. Our great saints have sung beautiful songs. We must show our devotion to them by pronouncing the words correctly.'*"

It is not an uncommon view that *sahitya* (the lyric) is riot so important in our music, that the syllables of words become elements of sound which contribute to the total musical effect and that words must be subordinated to the music of which they are the mere vehicles. We ask Pattammal to comment and she responds, shrugging her shoulders to suggest that perhaps it is a pointless discussion. "When we think of Sri Tyagaraja's *kritis*, how can we ever hold this opinion? Did he not use music as a vehicle for conveying the meaning of his lyrics? Meaning and music go together. They have the indivisible relationship of the body and the soul, each valueless without the other but invaluable in combination. One thing I am sure of. Unless we sing the song with a complete understanding of its meaning, we cannot convey any emotion through it. Unless we ourselves are moved by the beauty of the song, which means by its meaning as well as its melody, we cannot move our listeners, we cannot touch their hearts. Mere exposition of raga without *kriti* rendition cannot have as profound an impact as when we do both or even just sing the *kritis*." In a way, her singing of Tamil songs (of Papanasam Sivan, Muthuthandavar, Arunachala Kavi and so on, and of course the power-packed poems of Subramania Bharati) is indicative of her beliefs concerning the importance of *sahitya*.

This leads the conversation on to Pattammal's participation in the Tamil Isai Movement. She says that, as far as she was concerned, she had been singing Tamil songs right from the beginning of her career, long before the Tamil Isai movement was launched. She had been responsible for the popularisation of many Tamil songs, especially those of Papanasam Sivan. She had been inspired to add some of them to her repertoire because Ariyakudi had shown they could be rendered beautifully. *Annai Janaki Vandale* in Sankarabharanam was one such. No external impetus was needed. As she explains it, her love of her mother tongue prompted her to give a special place to Tamil songs right from childhood. "I don't need to reiterate through mere words that I believe in the singing of Tamil songs as part of the main items of a concert. I have demonstrated this belief

throughout my career. I have also sung Tiruppugazh and other Tamil devotional lyrics as important pieces in my concerts. In fact, I once gave a recital at the Arunagirinathar festival in Tiruchi consisting entirely of Tiruppugazh songs from beginning to end, singing them in various ragas with detailed raga rendering, niraval and kalpana svaras. It is not such an incredible feat as you seem to think, it is quite possible and it can be as successful as any other recital if it is properly planned.... As I grow older, I seem also to grow more and more emotionally overwhelmed when I sing songs with deep philosophical meaning. Sometimes tears spill out uncontrollably when I sing songs like *Petra tai tanai* which is an *arutpa* of Sri Ramalingaswami. That is the power of music and poetry in an exalting combination...."

We fall into silence for some time. Pattammal herself breaks into speech again. "Nowadays, in spite of technical excellence and improvement in rendering *sahitya*, I have noticed a common complaint. Bearing in mind the fact that music has not degenerated but is alive and making progress in the hands of the younger musicians, we still hear a lot of people saying that something is lacking in the music of the younger vidwans. Why, someone recently asked me *Why are there no great new musicians with the charisma of stalwarts like M.S., MLVandyoul* There seems to be the feeling that, despite the growth and spread of artistic ability and aesthetic response, there are no musicians of stature today as in the past. I too was discussing this point at home, this very morning! Why this technical excellence has not fostered soulful splendour is something that I cannot properly analyse. But two reasons strike me as pertinent. You must have read what I said about *gurukula* training, in the speech I made at the Music Academy when I was honoured as a Sangita Kalanidhi." (Pattammal had said on that occasion that, even though it had not been possible for a woman of her background to resort to *gurukulavasa* or in-residence training in a guru's home, she did believe that there was nothing to equal the choice by the students of the guru and the guru's choice of student and his teaching.)

"Perhaps such *gurukula* training is not possible in this age," she continues. "But along with its disappearance, it seems to me that *guru-bhakti* or devotion to the guru, which is a special characteristic of



our Indian culture (as is devotion towards 'god, parents and husband) has also diminished. Love, which is the basis of such devotion, is also not an operant force in our lives today. Everywhere selfishness is on the increase which is antithetical to such a concept of total devotion. Hence the disciple is not able to absorb the spiritual power of music which a guru alone, not a textbook notation or tape recorder, can impart. Devotion to the guru, as well as commitment to the art, is essential to the development of the musician."

"Another thing that we notice today," Pattammal goes on, "is the fact that we cannot perceive much significant difference between the styles of various musicians, except for differences in voice and technique. In our time, vocalists such as Ariyakudi, Musiri, Semmangudi, Chembai, GNB, Alathur Brothers and



Mani Iyer, each sang differently. There was Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar, with his golden voice reverberating across the hall with purity, maintaining an attractive tempo all the time, whose musical resonance and inimitable sense of humour infected the audience with enthusiasm from beginning to end. There was Musiri with his slow tempo and emotion-charged raga rendition; the beauty of his *chauka kala* (slow tempo) niraval was incomparable. Do you know singing in a slow tempo is a tremendous achievement? In Madurai Mani Iyer we found unique combinations *oijanda* and *dattu svaraprayogas*; his forte was highly imaginative svara combinations. Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer was justly famous for his ability to mesmerize his listeners with his musical magic. He had extraordinary imagination coupled with a lovely voice. When he sang Mohanam, Arabhior Bagheshri with slight Hindustani touches, he used to receive thunderous cheers. GNB had a great following, hero-worshipping his briga style; clarity in incredible speed was his special trait. Mudikondan Venkatarama Iyer, a pallavi singer *par excellence*, possessed the unique ability to sing the *Simhanandana* pallavi and the ten types of tanam. He was quite aptly revered as a vidwan with theoretical (*lakshana*) as well as practical (*lakshya*) knowledge of Carnatic musk. Sri Ramanuja Ayyangar is revered by all of us as the author of the architectonics of the modern day concert. He was adept in the handling of the madhyamakala or medium tempo. He taught us how to structure recitals and texture pur singing. I don't have to speak of Sri Semmangudi's originality since you have had the pleasure of listening to him yourself."

Pattammal now adjusts her sari and turns her attention to musicians of her own sex. "Take M.S. Subbulakshmi, for example. She has developed her own original style; there is a restraint in everything she attempts, be it the delineation of a raga, or the rendering of kriti or svara. Her golden voice is of course a gift from the gods: it can capture and enrapture every one. Vasanthakumari has great imagination, especially in singing ragas. If we think of purity of style, or expertise in handling a padam or javali, we find Brinda and Mukta unsurpassed. These colleagues of mine are in the forefront of the musical world because they had their own original individual style, what we call *bani*."

She reverts at this point to her analysis of the new generation of singers. "Among the singers of today, there is no one that we can condemn as incapable. Several sing extremely well, and many have studied musicology as well. Some are fond of experimentation too. Yes, I approve of some of this, like the singing of vivadi ragas — if done skilfully and melodiously, restricted to one or two items in a concert, it can be an exciting new adventure. Yet, it seems to me that not one of them can be singled out as extraordinary."

"One thing I can say," she continues. "If we try to acquire fame or honour, wealth or possessions through music, if our attitude is geared towards a conquest of foreign countries through music, we cannot even achieve the excellence which is the true hallmark of greatness. Our music is not only a fine art (*kala*), but is also a science (*sastra*). I have mentioned that it not only gives delight to the ear and the mind but is full of science and technical perfection which dimensions have been developed in Indian music more than in any other kind of musical system. Inheritors of this divine and invaluable asset, we can absorb its greatness as much as ability permits and devotion determines. If we surrender ourselves unconditionally to art, Saraswati will reward us beyond measure. Dedication without selfish desire will accomplish all those materialistic ends without any straining or effort on our part. Art will never disappoint us in any way. One lifetime is not enough even to learn all the kritis of our great composers. What variety we find in them! Take all the kritis in Todi — each will differ from others in some way, some even in the note on which they begin —

some in *daivata*, others in *nishada* and a few rare ones even in *madhyama*, like *Mayura natham*. When there is so much variety and colour, why should presentation descend to monotony? The fault of present day musicians can be easily corrected. How is an original style to be developed? After all it is this attribute that determines greatness. Each *sadhaka* or practitioner of music must first of all recognise his plus points but more importantly understand his weakness and limitations. After all if we say that, unless there is some virtue in his music, a musician cannot come to the fore, it is equally true that if he does not understand his weakness he cannot overcome it. Some can sing only in slow tempo, others excel in scintillating speed. Some have a voice with a natural *briga* in it, others have a flat voice, some even have a nasal intonation. Intelligence is recognition of our assets and liabilities. Unrestrained vocal gymnastics will only result in perversion.... We must practise assiduously. Even to this day, I practise for two hours in the morning, I don't do this as a form of worship or *puja* (ritual); it is practice pure and simple. My father used to make me sing from four to six every morning. How helpful do I find this habit! As a woman with family responsibilities and social obligations, how can I find time for undisturbed practice during the day? Besides,, practising for two hours in the morning is equal to a four-hour session in the evening. We must also hear lots of music, all kinds of music without prejudice. All tempos and styles must be appreciated. Music thrives on all the nine rasas and all aspects of sruti and laya. But until we learn

discrimination, we must listen only to good classical music. Tastes may differ but appeal to the listener is possible only if we musicians ourselves really enjoy the music that we make."

Pattammal is, however, optimistic about the future of Carnatic music. She says, "I am absolutely confident that our great music will never decline. Someone will come up in the future with a meteoric suddenness and splendour. In the meanwhile it is our duty to preserve the purity of our art." These and other observations of hers suggest that while Pattammal stands as a pillar of tradition in the eyes of the public, she is receptive to new ideas, that her vision is unrestricted by preconceived notions or prejudices, and that she accepts and meets challenges in a modern spirit. It is clear that this very open-mindedness, balanced by her uncompromising adherence to the essence of tradition, has been her strength, responsible for her greatness.

"I love all music, all kinds and varieties," she says, confirming this assessment. "I enjoy listening to Hindustani classical music, light music, even jazz. You are not going to believe this, but I enjoy Western opera music also, with all the peculiarity and strangeness with which it strikes the Indian ear. I feel that we must be unbiased and learn to appreciate all kinds of musical idioms, relish the good in each. But there is one thing that I am very clear about in my own mind. In my music, in my concerts, I follow the inflexible rule of never allowing even the slightest admixture of anything that is not strictly within the frontiers of Carnatic music. Such a mixture of styles does not



DKP with brother DKJ, T. Rukmini (violin) and Sivakumar (mridangam)



she mentions any of her teachers. This happens again when she recalls an incident. "Even though I have not had the good fortune of receiving continuous instruction from a guru, some wonderful men have taught me. One of the most unforgettable incidents in my life is connected with one of them, Sri T.L. Venkatrama Iyer, who used to say often that I was like a daughter to him."

"He was so proud of Patta that he could never sit still when she sang on the stage," interjects Jayaraman laughingly. "He would move restlessly and fidget, especially when she sang the Dikshitar kritis which he had taught her. He was so convinced of her merit that he used to say over and over again, *You must be awarded the title of Sangita Kalanidhi soon, or, when are you going to receive this title? I am longing to see you honoured by the Music Academy.*" Pattammal takes up where she left. "I was at last awarded this title, the one most prized by Carnatic music vidwans, in January 1971. Words cannot describe Sri T.L. Venkatrama Iyer's joy, his satisfaction and pride. But to our great sorrow, he became very sick in December. He was lying ill in his house on the day of the award ceremony. As I uttered his name in my presidential address, I lost all control of myself and broke down. I believe the audience was also moved to tears. I later learnt that, at about this time, he said to his wife, *My first daughter, Patta, must be receiving the title now.* He was finding joy in visualising the scene. And I went to his bedside with the title to receive his blessings and he said: *I refused to die till I saw you with the title. Now lean go happily. I give you all my blessings. May you lead a long and joyous life, achieving all your desires.* The very next day he passed away. His wife told me later: *He fought death to remain alive for a few hours longer only to fulfil his ambition of seeing you as Sangita Kalanidhi.*" Grieving deeply, in spite of the passage of years, Pattammal stops here. She cannot go on.

In order to take her mind off the sorrow, we toss a provocative question at her. Why did Palghat Mani Iyer elect to play for her even though he had refused to accompany any female singer before? Was it because he had become her *sambandhi*, her son Sivakumar's father-in-law? Pattammal is quick to deny this suggestion, but without getting angry. "I don't blame you for asking this question, for a lot of people have misunderstood this matter. Neither I nor my husband ever spoke to



Mani Iyer about the possibility of his accompanying me. How could we? It was a well-known fact that Mani Iyer did not play mridangam for women. Lalitha's marriage to my son was in April. Apparently, in December Mani Iyer made his decision to accompany me. But, the news that he was to play in my concert and that too at the Music Academy reached me in only a roundabout way. The Academy people rang up and informed me that Sri Mani Iyer had informed them that he would play for me and for someone else (Alathur or Semmangudi) that year. My husband and I were dumbstruck by this unexpected development. In fact I became terribly worried and tense over the whole thing. When he came to our house a couple of days later, I asked him: *Why have you done this unexpected thing? This will give rise to unwelcome gossip; people will say that you are doing it to please your sambandhi. All these years you have refrained from accompanying women. I don't want your reputation to be sullied in any way or become the object of ridicule.* Mani Iyer was a person given to direct speech. He answered me pithily: *Don't I have a free will and a thinking mind? I am going to play for you and that is because I have made up my mind to do so. Who is to question or criticize me?* So that was that.... I considered it one of the greatest honours that fortune had bestowed on me. I was worried that this *Abhinava Nandi* might pose me problems in handling rhythm, but it was a foolish fear. I found everything easier because of his supportive playing."

"Oh, I must tell you about some other great good fortunes that have come my

make for harmony but is an exhibition of bad taste and poor judgement. Mind you, I only apply this rule to my own style of singing, I am not commenting on or criticising others for such experiments. But let me give my view of such attempts through an image. They resemble, I think, an orthodox *sumangali* wearing a silk saree in the traditional South Indian manner and also a diamond nose ring, but at the same time sporting a western hairstyle. Somehow the two don't mix. I don't oppose innovation but only incongruity or vulgarity in the name of innovation." She smiles as she finished. Experiments and adaptations within the framework of tradition she not only welcomes but has carried out herself right from the start of her career. The initiative she took in singing Tamil compositions in the first half of the concert itself; the courage she showed in singing pallavi elaborately; the importance she gave to laya in her concerts; the interest and willingness she showed in learning, performing and popularising the then obscure compositions of Dikshitar— these are the examples that come readily to mind. Also, ahead of many others, she set to tune and sang many of the songs of Subramania Bharati. This she did when the British rulers had passed laws against the expression of nationalist sentiment in any form. "I sang Bharatiyar's songs," She admits candidly, "because I loved them. My father had taught me many and had inculcated in me a love of Bharati's songs. I was however too young to know their full political import or the risks of breaking the British ban." *Gurubhakti* is an outstanding trait of Pattammal and this surfaces everytime

way in life," DKP says, excited now. "I have sung for important functions at the homes and in the presence of great musicians. I may mention my singing the sixtieth birthday celebrations of Maharajapuram Visvanatha Iyer, Veeruswamy Pillai and T.N. Swamiriatha Pillai and at the marriage of Kakkayi, Rajaratnam Pillai's nephew. Also, one incident involving none other than Ariyakudi still remains fresh in my mind and is a source of deep joy. At a function organized at Sastri Hall in Mylapore for the release of Dr. S. Ramanathan's edition of Tyagaraja's *Prahlada Bhakti Vijayam*, Alathur, M.S. and I sang some kritis. I sang *Ettijamamithi'm* Varali. Ariyakudi was so deeply affected that he asked me and Jayaraman (who had accompanied me) to go to his house the next day and sing the song for him again. He was visibly moved and blessed us with tears in his eyes." The very name Ayyangar brings a

tone of reverence and admiration to her voice. Sensing this, we ask her to tell us more about this giant of a musician and she responds with alacrity. "I have always had profound respect for Ayyangar's style which was most innovative but still within the boundaries of tradition. I was fortunate to have learnt from his disciple at least for sometime. Apart from that, I learnt many of the songs he had put his own stamp on by listening to his concerts, mostly on the radio. *Yaro Ivar Yaro*, a Ramanataka Kriti that I, sing, was popularised by him. Once, in Calcutta, I had the unique privilege of having Ayyangar, the Alathur Brothers, Rajamanickam Pillai and Palghat Mani Iyer in the audience .... I am singing many of the songs which bear his stamp.

He is listening to them keenly and enjoying them before my eyes. It is one of the most memorable moments of my life."

She slips into the present tense in her excitement.

Lalitha narrates at this point a tale she had heard in her father's house. It seems Sri Vaidyanathan (Ayyangar's disciple who had taught Pattammal for a time) once announced in his guru's presence that he had taught Pattammal practically everything she knew, kritis and pallavis included. The guru was enraged, and with a spanking look shouted at him: "How dare you boast in this manner and in my presence too! If Pattammal were to sing like you do, could she have acquired such a name for herself? Who will ask her to give concerts? If once again you ever dare to boast in this manner, I will knock your teeth in!".

The achievements of Pattammal have been remarkable indeed and it is no Surprise she won Sri Ariyakudi's approval.

It is undeniably a great feat that she has

## VYJAYANTHIMALA: I CAN'T GET A BETTER GURU

*At SRUTI we were intrigued to learn that Srimathi Vyjayanthimala Bali, the famous riharanatyam dancer and erstwhile filmstar, was learning Camatic music from D.K.P. She willingly answered our questions about her guru in the field of music.*

Pattammal Mami's (aunt's) name has been a household word in our family. My grandmother A as a great admirer of DKP's style and used to declare: *If you want pure traditional music in must listen to Pattammal*. I guess this influenced me to seek Pattamma Mami's guidance in music. I have always been keen on music and have wanted to take up singing seriously, but lack of time due to other commitments and activities has been a barrier. But now I have taken it up and want to go on learning in a proper way. And I know that I can never get a better guru than Pattammal Mami. She is a marvellous teacher. She has been mostly associated with *nattuvanars* and I feel that they don't teach freely, but always hold something back from the student. But Mami's approach to teaching is a total giving of all that she knows. Learning from her gives me great strength to sing.

What are you learning from Pattammal?

I have learnt a few kritis from her, I want to learn everything, not only kritis, and learn all aspects of music thoroughly. It is not that I am at performing on the stage. I want to learn for my own pleasure, to increase my own knowledge, and more than anything else, I am strongly motivated by a desire to be Mami's disciple.

Can you tell us a little more about the DKP teacher?

She is so informal and affectionate, never

didactic or authoritarian in tone or manner. And I think that she is the embodiment of patience, always willing to teach tirelessly, as many times as she thinks necessary. She is a very famous person and a very busy person at that. Nonetheless, she gives complete and thorough attention to the student, without ever betraying a trace of annoyance. In my case, our lessons get interrupted because both of us have our performances and much travelling to do. But when we get together, she teaches for hours, getting completely lost in it. Her classes are not time-bound workshops where each student gets taught for an allotted time only.

You have contrasted DKP's generosity with the *nattuvanars*' practice of not giving fully. Can you explain further?

I have always been interested in bringing out and reviving old art forms. To do that, I need the help of the *nattuvanars* who belong to the great schools of tradition, such as Pandanallur and Tanjavur. When I ask my *nattuvanars*, *Will you please teach me this or that aspect of dance*, they never agree immediately or even wholeheartedly. They dilly-dally with a *We will see or next time or later*. If I express a desire to learn an old varnam, (not even the whole, only the *teermanams*, because if need arises I can choreograph the rest of the varnam myself), they never oblige, never teach freely what they know. With luck one can learn a small part of the abundant tradition which

they possess. Take Kittappa Pillai who is an invaluable treasure-trove of the Tanjavur tradition. Learning from him is extremely difficult. I keep imploring him to train somebody before the art becomes extinct, but perhaps such people are not interested in keeping their art alive. With all these experiences, coming to Pattammal Mami who shares her art so freely is a marvellous experience.



sung at the Music Academy for over forty-six years now without a break. The Tamil Isai Sangam has not been so regular in calling her. According to D.K. Jayaraman, he once asked Kalki the secret behind Tamil Isai Sangam's "neglect" of his sister, and Rajaji, who was close by, said: "If the Sangam does not arrange Pattammal's concert, it is the Sangam's loss, for Pattammal herself is Tamil Isai personified."

Pattammal has not kept count of the number of recitals she has given over the years. "I cannot tell you the exact number," she says. "Never have I had a terribly crowded programme but equally never has there been a long fallow period. Except for the first year of my married life, not a single month has passed without concert. I do remember that during one month I gave twentyseven recitals. Tinniyam Venkatrama Iyer was my accompanist then. He came to my house in the middle of that month and told my husband: *I am sending my disciple for the next few recitals as I have developed blisters on my hand and cannot play anymore. But Pattammal has been singing without any hoarseness or break in her voice. She is extraordinary indeed!*" Pattammal reminds us that all these recitals were four hours long.

Pattammal has sung in the various countries of Europe and the United States. Among these concerts in foreign places, she considers her participation at the prestigious Berlin Festival a great honour. She does relish all the fame that has come her way due to the feats she has accomplished, the titles she has won and the honours she has received, but even more what she cherishes are memories which reveal warmth of human feelings. "I count among my blessings the goodwill of a large number of people. For instance. Srimathi Shanmukhavadi (M.S. Subbulakshmi's mother), showed great affection and goodwill towards me. Once when some one asked her to suggest a musician to sing at a wedding in Bodinayakanur. Shanmukhavadi insisted I should be asked. How can I ever forget it?"

Perhaps what Pattammal cherishes most is her marriage of forty-three years to Sri R. Iswaran. She says, with quiet emphasis: "Over and above every other piece of good luck, I consider my marriage to the right person the greatest boon God has bestowed upon me. My life would have taken an entirely different direction and not such a fulfilling one at that but for my



husband's support and co-operation."

"I got married in 1940 to Sri Iswaran." she explains, "I knew him from our childhood days as he and his family lived across the street from me at Kanchipuram. It was an arranged marriage. People have written about his recognition of my singing ability and how he gave up his job to help me advance in my chosen career. This is perfectly true. He was at Pollachi Municipal Electricity Department till the end of 1942. Then we came to Madras and he worked for CPWD as Subordinate Officer in charge of the Red Hills and Cholavaram installations. In 1944 he gave up this post in order to further my career. How can I forget that? And he has always been an unfailing source of understanding and encouragement. He takes great interest in my adding to my repertoire: He helps me plan my concerts: I draw up

the programme and he suggests improvements. Sometimes he asks me to sing one raga instead of another because he thinks it would go down well with the audience. I immediately and unquestioningly accept the change— as if his suggestions are commands! Do you know why? If I go against his choice, he will not raise the roof or utter one word of reproof. But if I seek his help again he will turn aside with the question. *Why are you asking me? You did not take my advice before, did you?* What can I do then? But right from the very beginning. I have given him implicit obedience in all things. My first concern is for him, my first thought is of him. Only then do I think about even the music that is my life's breath. Can you imagine the problems of a housewife with family commitments, obligations and other responsibilities who has to also somehow manage to find adequate time for practice and public performances! Thank God my father trained me to practise early in the morning before the daily round of household duties and chores begin. But I never grudged these commitments. My most cherished ambition was to be loved as a

dutiful daughter-in-law, a loving wife and a good mother. I did not want to neglect my role as a home maker to shine in the art world. Well, I believe. I have managed both aspects of my life tolerably well until now.... Because of my involvement with my family, I have become interested in the things they do. That is how I have become a tennis fan and a cricket enthusiast.... I really enjoy serving my husband in every way. He is a gourmet who likes his *tiffin* morning and evening with pungent, tasty side-dishes. Even though we have a cook, I make certain dishes myself, for instance *musala dosa* with a special vegetable filling which is his favourite. I don't entrust its preparation to anyone else; I roast it to a fine, all round crispness myself. I don't do this as a chore. I feel it is the pleasant duty of a housewife to put her husband before everything else."

But what if the husband is not always co-operative or reasonable? She answers readily: "I will tell you something. Where there is real affection and respect, we must forget such things as irrational behaviour or non-co-operation. My husband used to be a regular moviegoer before our marriage. After 1940 he refused absolutely to see movies. He did not exactly prevent me from going but how could I go without him. even with my own brothers? It is just not done. While I had sung songs in a few films like *Naam Iruvar*, *Ramarajyam* and *Vazhkai*, mostly Bharati's songs like *Vidudalai*, *Vetri ettu dikkum*, *Aduvome pallu paduvome*, he didn't take me to see even these films! I had to be content with listening to the records. The film *Meera* was showing at a theatre in Nungambakkam where we lived at that time. It ran for thirty days. I was simply dying to see it especially since MSS had the lead role in it. My husband acted as though he was totally unaware of it all. Worse was yet to come. Our house was full of relatives. All of them booked tickets to see the film on the last day. They did their utmost to persuade me to join them. My mother-in-law was also going but she took pity on me and asked them to leave me alone. My husband had gone as usual to play tennis that evening. The entire household left to see *Meera*. I was the only person left at home. My husband returned from the club, saw the empty house and asked nonchalantly: *Why did you not go with them?. You wanted to see the movie too, didn't you?'* I smiled at him and said: *Don't you know me yet?'* *Didyotthonestly*

think that I would do anything against your wishes and go out without you? He did not utter one word of appreciation or praise then. But if I had gone with the others, it would have been an infringement of his unwritten rules. It would have remained forever embedded in his memory. So I avoided such confrontations totally by giving in every time." So you never saw Meera? We ask. "I did," she replies, her face creased with daughter. "I saw it recently on TV!" She had to wait for decades to gratify a small desire! Now-a-days Pattammal's children insist that she go to the cinema with them and that is how she gets to see some movies occasionally.

"I will tell you of another instance that illustrates his nature," Pattammal continues. "My mother had invited me to participate in a religious function at her house in Kanchipuram in connection with my brother Ranganathan's wedding. On the day before the function, I reminded my husband that we should be attending the function. Silence was his only answer. You can imagine my feelings, my anxieties. But I could not voice them. The next day dawned. My younger brother Nagarajan came to our place at day-break. One look at me apparently told him how the matter stood. In my husband's presence Nagarajan said to me: *I am going by the first bus to Kanchipuram. I wish I could take you with me but how can I?* Turning to my husband he added: *Even now it is not too late, come soon, both of you,* and with a quick look backward he took off. I became a bundle of nerves. Suddenly, around 8-30 in the morning, my husband said, *Lunch is at Kanchipuram for both of us. We can reach it before the scheduled time of 10-30. Get ready and into the car! Why are you making a needless fuss?* I rushed out to the car and we made it by the skin of our teeth. My mother was a great lady, most considerate and understanding. She did not utter one word, or throw one look of reproach at me. *Go and bathe quickly Patta; lunch is ready to be served,* was all she said. Hurriedly, I took the traditional oil bath and participated in the function." We ask in the midst of the laughter provoked by this narrative, why Pattammal didn't go with her brother. She replies if she had done that, her husband would have never forgiven her. "He would never let me go anywhere by myself, not even to my mother's house. I had to return in two months' time even after childbirth, all importuning and

remonstrances by my mother fell on deaf ears.

"I must let out a secret," she says a little later, giggling like a school girl. "He too has never left me and gone away at any time. Once his friend Subbaraman planned to go to Tirunelveli by car. He and some others insisted that my husband should accompany them on this fun trip! My husband said to me: *Well, they are pressing me to go. What do you say? Can you stay alone for two or three days by yourself?*" Alone is without the husband. We understand that the mother-in-law and the kids were at home at that time! "I didn't know what to say," says Pattammal, "I was that terribly upset. How could I manage without him! I wouldn't even know how to answer a letter. In the meanwhile Subbaraman shouted playfully



SRUTlasked Smt. T. Rikmani talk about her experience as an awampantk on the violin to Smt. t, K, Pattammal. Hurt's what she said?

Perfect rhythmic control, purity of vociferous rendition including correct pronunciation, depth of emotional content—all these things combine in Pattairtrrtfil's singing and make the accompanist's task one of pure joy. Her imaginative handling of raga makes playing for her a great experience. There are no flourishes in her raga rendition, but she maintains the integrity of the raga. Such raga elaboration can serve as a point of reference. The violin can follow her lead blindly and know that the raga's true form will be brought out. Flawless rendition of raga is another asset in her tradition. To me, every concert of hers is a class where I can add to my knowledge..

from outside. *Why, is your wife refusing permission?* This worried me more as I didn't want others to get the impression that my husband was henpecked or tied to my apron-strings. Understanding my predicament my husband said: *Don't bother about my friend's teasing. You make up your mind.* Finally, he decided to make the journey. He left, I was restless the whole day. The house was full of people but I felt alone. At night, I couldn't even get to sleep for fear of what might happen to him. My mother-in-law teased me about it and asked me not to be silly, but to relax and go to sleep. The hours dragged on. Suddenly, late at night, I heard the call *Patta! Patta!* and a knock on the door. I rushed downstairs, switched on the light and opened the door. And there he was! My husband had not been able to stay away from me. He had left his friends midway, had got into a train at Chingleput and returned home on the same day."

Sri Jayaraman explains that sister Pattammal is so unworldly and has been so sheltered and protected by Sri Iswaran that to this day she does not know the way to or even the difference between the Egmore and Central Stations in Madras. Mambalam and Mylapore are all one to her. All the travelling and other arrangements, acceptance and refusal of concerts, and all pecuniary matters are taken care of by her husband and she is content that it should be so. "If my father was responsible for laying the foundation for my career," she says in conclusion, "my husband it is who has helped me to complete fifty years as a performer successfully."

Thus Pattammal, who sports the distinguished title of Sangita Kalanidhi and numerous others, leads the life of an ordinary housewife, most of the time doing chores, listening to the radio, watching TV at times and teaching students including her own grand daughters. She is a very fond and proud grandparent. Recently a Tamil weekly asked one of her grand daughters to comment upon her famous grandmother. The child said spontaneously that no one was to consider her grandmother as an ordinary person. Then punning upon DKP's name, she added, "Pattammal is not ordinary pattu (silk). She is authentic Kanchipuram silk."

We say "Amen".

(This is the last part of a two-part article)

GOWRI RAMNARAYAN

# Talent Showcase

We draw attention to promising young musicians and dancers in this space.

**Srividya Natarajan** Bharatanatyam dancer. Disciple of K.P. Kittappa Pillai. Arangetram in 1979. First Prize in inter-school dance competition in Bangalore. Trained in Carnatic music.

**Shoba Natarajan** Bharatanatyam and kuchipudi dancer. First tutored by Kamala, now by Swamimalai Rajaratnam. Studying kuchipudi with Vempati Chinna Satyam, as Government of India scholar.

**Aruna (Sampath Kumar)** Bharatanatyam dancer. Student of Vanaja Narayanan. Arangetram in 1981.



*Srividya*

*Shoba*



*Aruna*

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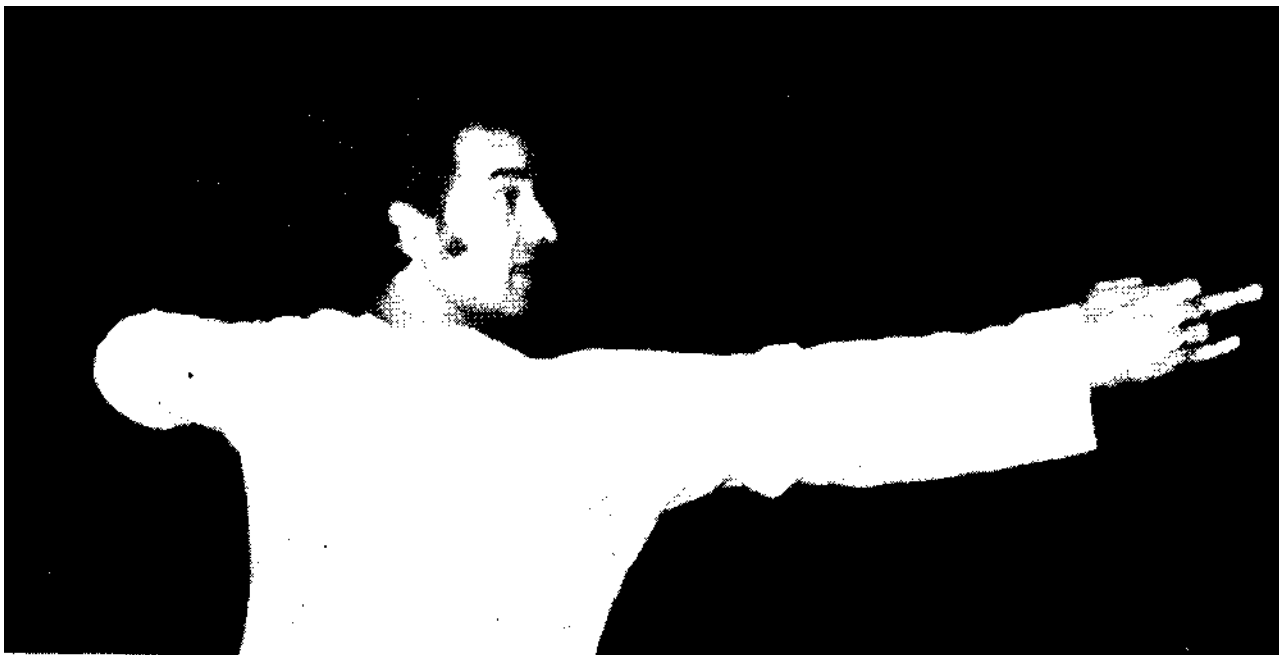
# Interview: V.P. Dhananjayan

*Bharatanatyam dancer V. P. Dhananjayan will be honoured by the Sri Krishna Gana Sabha in Madras during its forthcoming Natyakala conference and annual festival. Assistant Editor Gown Ramnarayan talked with him in this connection and filed this report.*

V.P. and Shanta Dhananjayan, husband and wife, are both products of Kalakshetra. Dhananjayan's entry into the Kalakshetra fold was unusual. He was one among eight children of a poor school teacher. The family lived at Keloth, a village in North Kerala. One day, their father came home with an unknown visitor. The visitor gazed at all the children, subjecting them to his attentive scrutiny and appraisal. Suddenly he pointed his finger at little Dhananjayan, a gangling adolescent just turned thirteen. "That one," he said. The wondering children were then informed that the visitor was none other than Chandu Panicker, a great kathakali dancer who was also a teacher at Kalakshetra, and that Dhananjayan was the lucky one chosen to be trained in both kathakali and bharatanatyam at that famous art centre. Dhananjayan himself was thrilled beyond measure. The distant city beckoned to him with the mysterious fascination of the unknown, promising a myriad adventure. That moment of choice was the crucial moment which decided Dhananjayan's destiny: coming to Madras and being awarded scholarships throughout his period of learning;

consistently distinguishing himself as a student; becoming a teacher at the same institution; and being exposed to an entirely new world of culture and colour. Under the guidance of Guru Chandu Panicker, he became a good kathakali exponent. The creative genius of Rukmini Devi transformed the backwoods boy into an accomplished and sophisticated bharatanatyam dancer who could fire the imagination of the spectators by his dynamic stage presence.

Dhananjayan's debt to Kalakshetra does not end there. The institution further enabled him to meet pretty, ebullient Shanta, a dancer of great promise. Shanta herself came to Kalakshetra at the tender age of seven as a full-time student. Her well-to-do parents lived in Kuala Lumpur and their ambition was to see their daughter develop into a talented danseuse. Dhananjayan and Shanta often played lead roles together in Kalakshetra productions, the most famous roles being those of Rama and Sita. The ideal on-stage training was followed by the flowering of romance in real life and the two eventually got married. In 1969 they decided to leave Kalakshetra and set up their own school of dance, Bharata Kalanjali. Initially it was uphill work all the way with unexpected boulders tumbling into their chosen track. Dhananjayan was forced to take up a clerical post to make ends meet. Then arrived their two children, Sanjay and Satyajit, which meant economic strain as well as parental joy





Photographs by Mani/Raman

for the young couple. These hardships boosted their self-confidence and tenacity, enriched their relationship, and strengthened their sense of togetherness. *We are what we are, together*, is their joint refrain.

Walking into Bharata Kalanjali is a heart-warming experience. V.P. and Shanta live in a comfortable home and adjacent to it is a thatched cottage-like studio-cum-classroom. Both the buildings fit snugly into the small palm-fringed compound, with trees and shrubs greening in all the available space. The sounds of singing and the rhythm-beats waft down from the first floor where part of the terrace has been converted into a classroom by the simple expedient of adding a sloping thatch roof. The studio at the back, where rehearsals are going on, echoes the tinkling of

anklets interspersed with voices raised to instruct and correct. We pause to take in the atmosphere, which at once seems serious and relaxed, before going in to meet the Dhananjayans. Inside the home, we find Shanta Dhananjayan discussing matters concerning rehearsals with her students turned colleagues. Looking at their light, cheerful faces and the coffee mugs on the table, we wonder if we have barged into a party. From the bedroom comes the tap-tap of a typewriter: we learn it is V.P. Dhananjayan himself discharging office and administrative work of the academy.

Presently, V.P. comes out. his office chores completed, and welcomes us with a ready smile, in an engaging informal manner. Our discussion begins.

## The award is for me but we both share the honour

**GOWRI RAMNARAYAN:** We hear that you are to be honoured this year by Sri Krishna Gana Sabha and receive the title *Nritya Choodamani*. Congratulations! You must be very happy.

**V.P. DHANANJAYAN:** Frankly speaking, Shanta and I are not enamoured of titles and awards. We are not extraordinarily jubilant about this one. If we reject or take no interest in receiving such awards, people are liable to misunderstand our action as indicative of arrogance or conceit. We accept this as a public recognition of our work.

You and your wife Shanta are acclaimed as a duo, you have always danced together. Yet Sri Krishna Gana Sabha is honouring only you and not Shanta. How do you react to this?

I very strongly feel that we are what we are today only because of our strong sense of togetherness. There is no Shanta without Dhananjayan and no Dhananjayan without Shanta. Knowing this, many friends and rasikas have asked why I don't reject this title as it leaves Shanta out of the picture. But Shanta's immediate reaction to this news was one of pure joy. She feels that whether the title is given to me or to her is immaterial. But I am a little perturbed; for, whatever our personal feelings and reactions may be, in the eyes of the public, it would be more suitable if both of us are honoured at the same time. It is not as though she is not worthy of this honour. If I deserve it, she does too! However, we must also bear in mind that not only Sri Krishna Gana Sabha but other institutions too follow the practice of choosing only one person to be honoured every year. Even in the case of Brinda and Mukta, the Music Academy honoured only one, the eldest. In any

case, as far as we are concerned. Shanta has not been neglected; through me the Sabha recognises her also.

Would you have reacted in the same manner if Shanta had been honoured instead of you?

Yes, certainly. As you know we share everything together. If Shanta had been chosen, as a matter of fact. I would have been happier than I am now. At first I wanted to suggest that she should be honoured and not me, but since we are husband and wife, the question of seniority comes in. This *Nritya Choodamani* title is the first significant recognition by a Sabha of our achievements in the world of *bharatanatyam*.

Do you think that obtaining this title will have any influence on your further development as an artist?

So far we have been working dedicatedly, sincerely and successfully without aspiring for any title or honour. But titles, honours and other manifestations of public recognition will make us feel more obliged to give our best and work harder, achieve more.

Are you being honoured as a performer or as a teacher who has trained students successfully?

The letter of confirmation from Sri Krishna Gana Sabha says the award is "for your contribution to *nritya*." I take this to mean recognition of my work in solo dancing, theatre, choreography, teaching, everything. *Nritya* combines all these in its comprehensive meaning. But since gurus and *nattuvanars* have not been awarded this title unless they were performing dancers too, I think the title is more for Dhananjayan the dance performer.



## A male dancer need not be effeminate

Many dancers attract crowds by their feminine charm and beauty. You don't have that advantage 'rare bird', a male in the world of bharatanatyam which is unquestionably dominated by the 'fairer' sex?

It has been a challenge to me. When I contemplated leaving Kalakshetra, I wrote to a government official saying / *would like to establish myself as a solo dancer, can you help me?* Pat came the answer that male dancers could not hope for success in bharatanatyam, so I had better stick to Kalakshetra and continue as a group dancer. I was most surprised by this reaction and it fired me with a desire to prove him wrong and I vowed that, come what may, I would establish myself as a male dancer. There have been precedents for this phenomenon: Uday Shankar and Ramgopal. But Uday Shankar did not confine himself to pure bharatanatyam and Ramgopal's success

as mainly in foreign countries... Well, I am proud to say that I have established myself as a male dancer in a field dominated by women. This success is probably due to my approach. People think that male dancers are effeminate and with reason too. The few males in this field -sed to imitate the manner and style of the women dancers. I retain my masculine manner on stage. People appreciate my choreography in dance-dramas where I remain a male performing a male dancer's part. The items that I depict in solo or duo performances are also chosen both care to be appropriate material for a male to handle. My performances therefore effeminate.

In what way do you differ from women dancers in choice of items and manner of presentation? Does suitability for masculine interpretation mean that you eschew numbers which portray nayaka-nayika bhava completely?

I can handle *nayaka-nayika bhava* when necessity arises. When I want to interpret the feelings of a young maiden, I can certainly do it. But I prefer to take songs like *Ananda natamidum paadam* which have a devotional and not sringara base. This particular number calls for the vigorous tandava type of dancing, rather than the languorous *lasya* style which is more appropriate for women to handle. If I take up an *ashtapadi*, I always choose one in which a male's feelings for his beloved need to be portrayed, for example, Krishna's love for Radha as in *Charushile priye*. These differences pertaining to my masculine approach can be better understood when demonstrated. For instance, we can differentiate between the standing postures of a girl (with a bend and curve to her body) and a man (who should adopt an erect, upright stance). A woman trips and sways delicately when she walks, but a man strides with vigour and strength. Or let us take the typical bharatanatyam posture that calls for hands on the waist. A woman's hand is folded backwards, fingers pointing backwards, but a man's hands are held straight and he grips the waist with his fingers pointing forward. In abhinaya the difference is crystal clear. A man's delineation of *sringara* should be frank and bold. A woman is filled with a coyness in these situations. When I need to depict a young girl on stage, I do it like a

male enacting the role of a woman (as women dancers enact the roles of men in some items, notably in *sanchari bhava*). But when I do a man's part, I must do it like a man.

Like Birju Maharaj who can transform himself from a striding warrior into a coy maiden and again into a naughty child caught in 'mischief...

Yes. And also like Vedantam Satyanarayana. Offstage he is a man but on stage he can be Satyabhama personified. That histrionic ability should be a part of the male dancer's art.

But Satyanarayana's impersonation of Bhamā involves his dressing up for the role in a saree like a woman. But you don't adopt a woman's attire to depict a nayika's emotion.

That's true. And usually when I do bharatanatyam I depict only male characters and often the piety and devotion of spiritually-oriented characters and, as in Nandanar's story, the low-caste man's yearning for union with God.

Have you given solo performances?

Yes, some people specifically ask for them because male solo dancers are a rarity and perhaps also because they wish to test my ability in this unusual endeavour.

Has there been a tradition of male dancers giving solo performances of bharatanatyam in the past?

The first man to give solo recitals in Bharatanatyam was Ramgopal, the disciple of Chockalingam Pillai. But the Hindu pantheon is full of gods who are associated with dancing. There is Nataraja whose dynamic dance is the cause of all energy in the cosmos. Then there is the figure of the Nartana Ganapati. Krishna vanquishes Kaliya and dances on his head as a sign of triumph. In legends and epics, we find that heroic characters like Arjuna and demonic ones like Ravana are described as great dancers, but there seems to be no historical tradition of male performers of bharatanatyam art. So we may say that though there have been many male dancers performing other forms of classical and folk dance (Kathak, Kathakali, Kuchipudi, Yakshagana, Terukoothu) there have been no male bharatanatyam performers.

Sri Chandrasekhar who received the Natya Choodamani title last year is also a bharatanatyam soloist. And he too is a Kalakshetra student like you.

In fact I would say that Kalakshetra has pioneered in training male dancers to dance with masculine strength and vigour, without the gestural and postural effeminacy generally associated with male dancers.

But I think that such a style was evolved more for the purpose of training men as dancers and actors to enact the roles of males in the Kalakshetra dance dramas. Don't you agree?

Yes, that is so. Kalakshetra has given us the training to adopt a manly style. I cannot say that it encourages solo performances of male dancers.



For that matter there has been no encouragement of female solo dancers in Kalakshetra, at least not in the sense you mean. The accent there has not been individual solo performances, but on co-operative ventures involving groups in dance on dramas.... Have your solo performances been successful?

I have given two solo performances in Madras, at Krishna Gana Sabha and at Narada Gana Sabha. I have given some outside the city too.

People sometimes want a change from the usual fare of woman dancers! Apart from the charm of novelty, these performances have evoked genuine appreciation. Perhaps this favourable response is also due to the fact that I avoid seductive *sringaru* which the critics talk about as being synonymous with bharatanatyam. Mine is an approach in which bhakti is the dominant force. I consider *sringara* itself to be an aspect of the all-embracing bhakti. Nandanar Charitam which adopts this approach is devoid of vulgarity and obscenity and has been a great success.

## Bharatanatyam is an art to be depicted by a single person

Is Nandanar Charitam a dance - drama?

Previously I used to take certain songs from this famous Nandanar Charitam song sequence, like *Varugalamo ayya*, and perform them on page. Recently I have made this into a small dance — drama (of 45 minutes' duration) but all the different characters and incidents are portrayed only by me. A narrative connection binds the several episodes into an artistic unity.

What about regular items performed solo, such as varnams? What guides your choice?

I take bhakti-oriented themes even here. There are two padavarnams which I perform often. One is on Krishna: *Nimme ne nera namminanu re* by Turayur Rajagopala Sarma in Atana; the other is *Ramanivena raksshakula* in Karaharapriya, on Rama. Both offer so much scope for dance that I perform them for over an hour each and people have expressed astonishment over the fact that a 'mere' male can hold his own on stage performing a varnam for that long! The sancharibhavas of each bring out the stories of Krishna and Rama.

*But* is it not tradition that sancharibhavas, particularly in varnam, should bring out the delicate nuances of feelings and not be used for dramatic portrayals of incidents and stories?

Such an opinion is prevalent but it is not correct. Bharatanatyam is best described as *ekaharya lasya angani*, which means that it is an art in which various characters and situations, the several nayaka-nayaka aspects included, are depicted through a single person dressed in a particular manner throughout the recital. In a bharatanatyam performance we see that each song portrays different types of people (the eight nayikas and four nayakas included) and deals with their bhavas (emotions) and sanchari bhavas (feelings connected to the emotions) aroused by various situations and circumstances. Sometimes contradictory as well as different themes and sentiments appear in the same piece. The dancer depicts all these characters, situations and their emotional reactions skillfully through abhinaya but he or she does not change her attire in order to portray different characters. In *Sandanar Charitam*, as I have choreographed, the whole story of Nandan is depicted without a change of costume. Bharatanatyam itself > as a genre comes under this subhead of natya called *eka aharya lasya angam*. We find this true of kathakali too where there exists the

practice of one person with one type of attire (*eka aharya*) portraying different characters and themes.

You have not fully answered the question. I have always understood that sancharibhava is the suggestive handling of the subtle shades of feeling-complexes connected to a basic emotion or bhava. This, as I understand it, does not involve dramatisation of whole incidents, scenes and episodes.

I agree with this theory to the extent of subscribing to the view that the dramatising of incidents should be suggestively portrayed. *Natyadharmi*, which is the classically refined and systematically stylized presentation, should predominate, not *lokadharmi* which uses the realism and naturalism of the spoken drama. Such a descent into the obviously realistic is banal and does not go with the natya pattern. Though if you ask me why, I have no answer. If you want to follow the right royal highway of classicism, then you should follow certain norms; the norms should prevail even in presenting sancharibhava. For instance the battle between Rama and Ravana should not be presented with a raucous din of background music and blinding flashes of lighting focussed on the warring pair. The fight should not be a realistic wrestling bout. Rather through suggestive stylized movements using the *natyadharmi* technique, the whole incident must be subtly, briefly depicted to enable the audience to experience the rasa inherent in the situation. I myself have choreographed such sequences with brief suggestive characterisations which convey the basic idea to the people without descending to the cinematic fireworks of the *lokadharmi* manner.

Have you received as much appreciation for your solo performances as for your dance - dramas or duo performances with Shanta?

Not that my solo dance has not been appreciated but still people prefer to have Shanta with me. They like a pair on stage nowadays. Some specify that they are rather tired of seeing many solo performances, both by men and women, and would like to see both of us perform together for a change.

Is this because people appreciate the 'feminine relief provided by Shanta or is it because people like variety and change?

Definitely a duo makes for more variety and this is enjoyable. As far as we are concerned, the quality of art and the manner of presentation count in winning true appreciation.



## My dance dramas are different from Kalakshetra's

### How many dance - dramas have you produced?

In the ten years since leaving Kalakshetra, I have choreographed about ten dance productions. One is *Radha Madhavam* which is my presentation of *Gita Govindam*.

### But hasn't Kalakshetra produced Gita Govindam? I remember Shanta as a very winsome Radha in it.

Yes. But mine is completely different. The ragas used and the presentation are all different... Then I have produced *Rama Natakam* with the Tamil songs of Arunachala Kavi. *Valli Tirumanam* in Tamil has also been very successful, though in the initial stages I thought that people might not like it because of its chaste classicism. *Rama Natakam*, despite being the oft repeated story of Rama, has found a very appreciative audience. In this I have attempted some experimental choreography. I haven't used elaborate settings, costumes, jewelry, make-up etc. Characterisation is only through performance. But people's interest in and knowledge of art are growing and increasing and they have supported this venture.

### Has anybody else done this sort of thing before you?

No. This production has been successful without grand costumes and settings because of the suggestive imaginative presentation. I have used only the link scenes from this epic, the connecting links which nevertheless tell the whole story within 2 1/2 hours of performance. One reason for its success is perhaps this novel choreographic experiment.

### Who choreographs your productions?

Both Shanta and I are responsible jointly for the choreography. We produced *Nandanar Charitam* together, and also *Sanghamitra* that was televised recently. Besides, I have organised a very colourful variety programme consisting of all the folk and classical dances of India called *Aikya Bharatam*. For the Government of Tamil Nadu, I produced the *Cultural Panorama of Tamil Nadu*. This includes all the folk and classical arts of Tamil Nadu: vina and nagaswaram as well as karagam, poikkal kuthirai and kavadi. I must mention that for all these productions I have received no help from anybody. I have done it all on my own with the meagre financial resources at my disposal, and I'm far from being a rich man. These productions are all produced not-for-profit, but we don't even get enough returns to cover the costs.

### That's what we feel about SRUTI at this stage!

People always bargain you know. They want the best but they don't want to pay for the best. We are forced to compromise sometimes because of the exigencies of the situation.

### Have you thought of getting industrialists to sponsor your productions?

We have not only thought of it but have approached several, but hardly anybody comes forward in the South tojielp artists. Fortunately, artists do get a lot of support and backing in the North. Many of the industrialists of North India, like the Tatas, encourage art in many ways. They

donate generously for cultural causes and build good theatres. They give grants-in-aid to artists to produce cultural programmes. For example, the D.C.M. group finances the Sriram Kala Kendra in Delhi but in the South even a paltry sum of Rs. 250/- to Rs. 500/- for a (souvenir) advertisement is not easily obtainable. Though in the South we claim that we are the protectors and guardians of culture and art, our industrialists and our philanthropists do not come forward with the idea of financing an institution or an art production. Now it is possible that many of these industrialists of the North who give aid to professional artists to produce, take their cuts or commissions or whatever but at least there is someone to finance them initially. Even if I want to produce something with moderation as my watchword I need about twentyfive thousand rupees. I don't have that kind of money! No artist has! There are many government schemes to provide grants for such purposes, but they are always given to people with influence. Nepotism is involved or such grants come with arbitrary stipulations which are not acceptable. Why must artists sacrifice their creativity for their whims?

### Has such a grant come your way or are you speaking from hearsay?

No, no, from my own experience. I was given an advance grant for a project with the stipulation that the production should be in Tamil. I have choreographed many Tamil productions but the one (that I was working on at that time was *Sanghamirra* in Sanskrit. The Iyal Isai Nataka Manram wanted that to be translated into Tamil. This did not suit me, so I returned the grant.

### Did you return the grant because of the problems involved in translating a Sanskrit play into Tamil or because...?

I don't like my hands forced in any way. I have produced programmes in all languages, in Tamil, in Telugu and so on, and I have even used the Hindi bhajans of Tulsidas for my *Sita Swayamvaram*. I am a Malayali but I admire and respect all languages. Perhaps the government people got the impression that I was anti-Tamil or something like that, not knowing that I had produced many dance — dramas in Tamil. And the grant was not even a big amount, only ten percent of what I would have had to spend on the whole

### Talking about dance - drama, we know that this novel form emerged out of Rukmini Devi's creative spirit. In what way do your dance dramas differ from hers? What is the innovation you have introduced to this genre?

The inspiration for any dance - drama definitely springs from the Kalakshetra influence, as Rukmini Devi has trained both of us. But my approach is very different from hers, especially in the usage of musical instruments and choreographical methods. I don't use bharatanatyam *adavus* straightaway as they are, but modify them according to the needs of the situation.

### You mean a mixing of bharatanatyam and kathakali steps?



No, Kalakshetra productions are completely classical.

**When the Kurathi (gypsy) appears, her movements and even her attire cannot be called purely classical; the folk element predominates. Why, even in the completely classical Ramayana, a folk dance is introduced in the sequence featuring Guhan and his followers.**

But. Amma (Rukmini Devi) does not use the folk style much. Well, the presentational methods do differ. You know for instance, in the Ramayana I have depicted the billowing of the waves through the movements of the dancers swaying and moving rather than through the use of mudras, the usual abhinaya way of narrating and describing things.

**Such a suggestive technique of depicting the ocean has been employed by Rukmini Devi in one of the scenes of the Ramayana when Hanuman crosses the ocean to Lanka.**

No, no, not at all. I don't mix the two styles, but I use free movements.

**What do you mean by free movements?**

Free movements are the *adavus* created to suit the situation, not using only the *adavus* that have been taught. A free combination of *adavus*...

**But that cannot be called innovative because such novel combinations of *adavus* is the special feature of the Kalakshetra dance - dramas. Rukmini Devi creates all things anew by combining the traditional *adavus* and *mudras* in an original manner.**

Well, I suppose our productions are also more or less the same as the Kalakshetra dance - dramas. But only people who see both can point out the difference and such people *have* told me that ours vary greatly from the Kalakshetra creations.

**Well, a lot of people have asked this question. Both Kalakshetra and Bharata Kalanjali produce dance dramas, so it is natural for people to be curious about whether you are imitating your alma mater's style or you are modifying it or creating your own.**

I can only repeat that our dance — dramas are completely different in style and methods of presentation. For instance, in **Valli Tirumanam** we have used lots of folk movement.

**But, in the Kalakshetra productions too, especially in the Kuravanjis, there is a lot of folksy flavouring.**

Is that so? I haven't seen it. But we must admit that Kalakshetra and Srimathi Rukmini Devi have influenced every single person on the contemporary stage, whether one accepts it or not. I feel that the general standard of dancing has improved a great deal due to the reason that even dancers who are not associated with Kalakshetra streamline their style in the Kalakshetra *bani*. Kalakshetra thus serves as a model and ideal point of reference for the younger generation of dancers.

## Kalakshetra is a model for the younger generation

**But generally there is the complaint that dancers tend to neglect or lack that dexterity of footwork which defines the punctilious accuracy of the Kalakshetra trained artist....**

But that's wrong, you know. Today many of the younger dancers have that deftness and they pride themselves on that scrupulous accuracy which we associate with Kalakshetra. Sometimes young dancers are so good in this respect that one cannot differentiate between the Kalakshetra product and the performer who has not been trained by Kalakshetra. Some critics have noted this and they traduce the whole trend as ungraceful, for, as you are no doubt aware, there is great prejudice against the precision and perfection of the Kalakshetra style.

**Oh, yes, they have a word for it too. They call it the "brittle style" of dancing. Well, let me go on then to present day trends in bharatanatyam. More people are dancing on stage than ever before. You are a dancer of stature and we would welcome your comments on the contemporary state of bharatanatyam.**

As for the standard, I can definitely say that it has improved immensely from what it was in the past. Today's dancers take their work very seriously. They are dedicated and sincere, truly involved in what they are doing. Motivated by the spirit of enquiry, they want to know the subtle nuances and the intricacies of the art, unlike the dancers of, say, 30 years ago who danced just like that without knowing what they were doing.

**Yes, I have heard that in the past, implicit obedience to the guru and total, unquestioning acceptance of what was taught were considered virtues. Was that true of you too in your student days?**

That is the Kalakshetra tradition, but it is changing everywhere. Along with such a demand for obedience, Kalakshetra also introduced the vigorous training course which has influenced even outsiders very greatly and has thus been instrumental in raising the general standard. **And Kalakshetra also emphasized the need for the learning of the theoretical as well as the practical aspects of dance. This has perhaps led to an increase in the spirit of enquiry and desire for an in - depth knowledge of the art.**

The study of theory has no doubt influenced dancers but, more important, it is the understanding of the technique of dancing that has changed their entire vision and attitude. Whether you do an alarippu or a padam, surely you must know what you are doing. There have been instances of a padam having been taught in a totally wrong manner, not only with wrong sahitya but the wrong expressions and gestures for the sahitya, that is, without any connection between the mudras and the meaning. In such cases, if you asked the dancer why she was doing something so devoid of sense, she would say that this was how my master taught it, as if that fact sanctified the error. The master would asseverate that even if it were erroneous the "error" had been handed down from generation to generation in the hallowed family tradition and had been sanctified



by usage. To tamper with such tradition was considered blasphemy. But now there has been a drastic change of attitude. Even children know the meaning of the items they learn and they are taught, or they demand to be taught, the why's and how's. And if they are not convinced by the teacher's explanations, they go to other scholars and teachers for clarification. This is a very healthy sign of progress and so among the younger generation we have some very good dancers.

### **But quantity does not make for quality, does it?**

I agree it does not. Though the number of students learning bharatanatyam is a large one, not all who are learning are going to become great dancers. But it is a very good thing for so many to be learning the art. Potentially, it creates a good audience with a better understanding of the art and a greater capacity and taste for responsive appreciation of the art for the future. Even if only five percent go on to become good dancers, the other ninety-five percent of the present day students will become an appreciative and enlightened audience for dance and, believe me, we need an informed audience more than anything else. By teaching so many students, we impart to them an understanding of and a love for our classical dance and we create a widespread interest in tradition and culture. For ninety-five percent the learning is a pastime, but for the remaining five percent, or perhaps only two percent, it becomes a demanding career.

**Today's bharatanatyam dancers may be absolutely devoted to their art as you say. But is it possible for them to concentrate wholeheartedly on the art when many of them pursue other interests and develop other avocations at the same time? In the midst of such frenetic activity, can one give the complete attention that dancing demands?**

This a sore point with me too. The only complaint that I make about the younger generation is that many of them are trying to be Jacks of too many trades. Some say they have to do other things because they are not getting enough financial support or they cry about lack of sufficient opportunities to perform on stage. Those who keep on grouching like this are those who are trying to have their cake and eat it too. They work at something other than dancing and yet want to become professional dancers. Unless they dedicate themselves to ONE

goal and sacrifice all else to it willingly, unless they are prepared for the arduous period of the initial struggles (and believe me, it is a struggle), they cannot establish themselves in this field.

### **You are saying that dancing is a full-time career.**

Yes, there is no doubt about it. A person who wants to attain success and status as a professional in this field must exclude all else from her vision. Today those who are at the top are people who are dedicated *only* to dancing. Trying to balance midstream on two boats with one leg on each is disastrous. Such people should not grudge the success achieved by those who have completely given themselves to bharatanatyam.

**In the past, bharatanatyam had a favourable cultural background and aesthetic atmosphere to flourish in. Do you consider a family background of this sort important for achieving success?**

Today the up and coming dancers are mostly those who do not come from a family of dancers. They pursue the art out of their own interest in and love for this tradition.

**But when we take an overall bird's eye view of bharatanatyam, we find only a few following the dictates of tradition and adopting a classical style. Many perform items which are an admixture of styles.**

Not all do this. Only some. As two sides to a coin, good and bad elements exist simultaneously everywhere, at all times. Even in the past, there were the purist dancers at the temples and the dancers of a lower order entertaining the masses. Each catered to a different type of audience. At present too, there are those who are very highly educated and interested in classical forms of art, and the mediocre sort who want variety and excitement. Further down, we have the *hoipolloi*, the masses, who want immediate and momentary pleasure that arises from a realistic and even exaggerated presentation as in cinemas. The *Natyasastra* postulates three classes among the audience: *Uthama*, *madhyama* and *adhama*. It speaks of educating the illiterate, elevating the educated and entertaining the enlightened ones. So you see we have always had three classes of performers and corresponding types of audiences.

## **The condition of dance today is satisfactory**

**So you are generally satisfied with the conditions in the dance field today. You don't fear decay and deterioration?**

There is absolutely no deterioration. There is innovation, lots of it. There is a revival of obsolete forms and aspects of the art. And there are additions to the repertoire. All these are signs of growth and development. People welcome such novelty and improvement, though critics condemn them as deviations from classical tradition. According to me, tradition is a flowing river, like the Ganga. The name remains the same though the water changes every moment. What we call tradition is what is handed down to us by our fathers. To our fathers it

was that which was handed down by their fathers and so on. Thus tradition has been flowing from ancient times through successive generations of men. What we do today will become the tradition for our children. So tradition always means change and movement. For instance, when Kalakshetra was started, it was the herald of a renaissance, but now Kalakshetra has become part of tradition. We cannot take something that existed at a particular moment in the past, say two hundred years ago and say: "This is the absolute and immutable tradition" and lay it down as the standard for all times. Tradition encompasses *change*, it does not imply *stasis*.

**Do you think this change is always improvement?**

Today in Bharatanatyam it is improvement. Everything has its cyclical movement and culture and art are no exceptions to this rule. Bharatanatyam had reached the nadir of decadence when Rukmini Devi injected new life into it and since then it has been moving towards its zenith of splendour and greatness. Probably hundreds of years later the wheel of change may cause the art's downward movement to decay, but again there will be recovery and renaissance and restoration.

**Do you honestly believe that the dancers of today, that is, those who have taken Bharatanatyam seriously as a career possess the mental discipline of the dancers of the past?**

Most of the top dancers have it. I think.

**Then to what do you ascribe the lack of deftness and dexterity in footwork which is evident even in the case of our top dancers? Why, even at Kalakshetra, your alma mater, one can detect the lack of practice which is the basis of discipline.**

Well, it is difficult to answer this question, because I see validity in the remarks. During a visit to the U.S., I was flying and I happened to glance at an inflight magazine. In it, a travel writer posed a question: *Indian art is said to be very great but the top class Indian dancer whom I saw did not dance but walked through the stage. How is it that she is so famous?*

**You do admit then that all the improvements that we applaud pertain to abhinaya and that nritta has been largely neglected?**

Yes, even among top class dancers, nritta is sadly neglected. I really don't know why this is so. Probably, as you say, they lack inner discipline. Unless there is somebody, a senior or guru, available constantly to correct and guide the dancer during practice sessions, it is difficult to maintain the perfection of footwork that dance needs. And once you become a celebrity, you tend to neglect all these finer points which you must attend to and polish up in practice. Also, as you grow older, there is a decrease in energy and stamina.

**This doesn't happen in ballet, does it? Even a sixty-year old ballet dancer does his turns perfectly. The slightest infraction of timing, the slightest lessening of quality and he is booted out of the ballet company. Isn't that so?**

Exactly. That is why this travel writer I mentioned has criticised Indian dance! "A celebrated Indian dancer can walk through the stage without dancing and still be a popular and esteemed artist," says he! What I say is, whether you are a celebrity or not, you require regular practice sessions under the vigilant guidance of a guru. Even one's students can perform this role of a monitor. Having been trained by Rukmini Devi, we take practice most seriously and we have the added advantage of being a duo who can correct one another (at times we are at loggerheads over such mutual correction!) This has certainly helped us to maintain our standard and it is regrettable that many of our senior colleagues lack this discipline.

**Will such senior dancers be able to instill discipline in their students if they lack it themselves?**

Some may succeed, others may fail.... Today the dancers who insist on discipline in nritta as well as abhinaya are all Kalakshetra products. It is a renaissance, one may even say a revolution, that has been brought about by Rukmini Devi and Kalakshetra.

**What kind of a future do you envisage for your students, for Bharata Kalanjali?**

Bharata Kalanjali is a registered institution run by the two of us. Frankly I wanted it to remain confined to a small group of students. When people come with a serious mind I always tell them to go to Kalakshetra where there are better facilities and discipline of course. We maintain discipline but our teaching approach is quite different from Kalakshetra's. Our institution is growing and sometimes, I feel it is growing too fast, probably due to our approach, our attitude which is friendly and informal and not so institutionalized; because of this, we are also able to establish a better rapport with our students.

**Are you able to give equal attention to all your students? As much as you got from your teachers at Kalakshetra.**

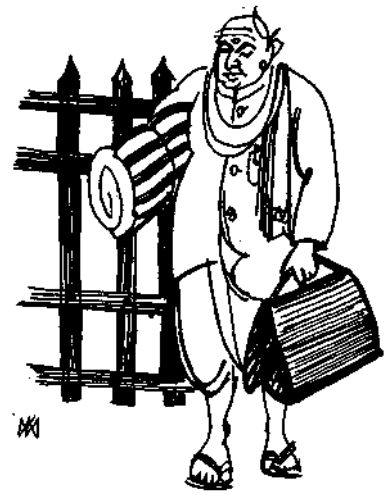
No. The first two groups of students were trained by us directly and we were able to give them a great deal of attention. We are not able to give so much personal attention to our students today, since we are very busy slogging over choreography and rehearsals. But we make it a point to give as much attention as we can to all our students. Fortunately we have got assistance now; many of our senior students are teaching here. We always take the seniors' classes ourselves.

**Do you think a performing artiste gives as much attention to students as a teacher who does not perform?**

That depends upon the artiste and his attitude towards teaching, not all non-performers make wonderful gurus. I assert confidently that Shanta and I are good gurus. We have been able to turn rocks into sculptures. We are willing to accept even those students who are turned down by all others and we make them into good dancers too. We don't pick and choose the best. Well, I must also tell you that our aim is not only training dancers but the larger one of inculcating the spirit of culture and the spirit of art into each one who comes to us with us.



# "Music Hath Charms...."



In the mid-forties, I was the Political Secretary of a Princely State in the Deccan, and as part of the ultra-official obligations of my office, had to get the material for a State anthem (given to me) metamorphosed into faultless Sanskrit verse and then set to music in staff-notation, so that our band could play it.

I recalled that a few months earlier I had obliged Dr. V. Raghavan with a Tamil literary source he needed, and if I could recall this, so could he. However, I did not write straightaway to him — we Political Secretaries in the old princely States did not go about things with such crude directness; we were diplomatic. So, I wrote to a relative in Madras to convey the message to Dr. Raghavan that if he would render the bit of English prose sent into strongly rhythmic Sanskrit verse, I would be eternally grateful to him. I also requested the services of a sound sangita vidwan who could go over to our State for two days at our expense, and for a suitable remuneration set the verse to a tune and teach it to our bandmaster. In due course I learnt that Kalidasa Nilakanta Iyer of the Teachers College of the Madras Music Academy would be arriving with Dr. Raghavan's Sanskrit verse.

I do not have a syllable of Sanskrit, as the cliché goes, and so could have no real appreciation of the verse, and I know nothing of staff-notation, but these things did not worry me — no doubt Raghavan and Nilakanta Iyer would take care of all that. But obviously the vidwan was a Brahmin and almost certainly an orthodox Brahmin at that. There were no Brahmin cooks at the palace and though I myself was (and am) a Brahmin and a vegetarian,

my resourceful cook, old Sita Bai, was a Mahratta. There were Brahmins among the natives, but they did not employ cooks and the few I knew had no place for a stranger in their modest homes. How then was I to provide suitable sustenance to the vidwan for the brief period of his visit? The Forest Officer was the obvious choice. Like me, he was also from outside the State, being from Mysore, and a Brahmin, and unlike me he had an imported Brahmin cook.

Meeting him casually the day before the vidwan was due, I asked the Forest Officer if he could suggest some way out of the impasse — perhaps he knew some poor Brahmin who could supply the meals at my house for a consideration. He was shocked at my suggestion. He would have me know that he was deeply interested in Carnatic music, and would consider it an honour to be the host of such a distinguished vidwan. It was unthinkable that anyone else should have the honour — not even I. He would have the spare room in his cottage dusted and made ready for the vidwan at once, and order his cook to lay in supplies for a feast worthy of the occasion — unfortunately, in this god-forsaken place the ingredients needed for *mandige* and other choice delicacies were not available, but he would see to it that an adequate feast was provided. But of course I too should grace each meal with my presence. Hastily excusing myself from the prospective feast, I told him I would first discuss the anthem with the vidwan, and later bring him over to the F.O.'s house for dinner.

Meeting Nilakanta Iyer at the railway station eleven miles away, I realised at once that I need not have had any

apprehension. Very fair and looking absolutely fresh after the long train journey, he was the soul of urbane simplicity. His luggage consisted only of a bed-roll and a handbag, and his cream silk button-up coat and pleated *angavastram* complemented the neat little silver-grey tuft of hair or *kudurni*. On the way home he recited Dr. Raghavan's verse to me and explained it — all that I understood was that it did seem related to the English text I had provided and was admirably rhythmic and scanned perfectly. Delicately I indicated to him that our band was not specially accomplished and that something elementary by way of a musical setting for the anthem would be appropriate. He smiled beatifically and assured me that he had taken care of this aspect of the matter.

In my house, after a repast of milk and bananas, he sang the piece to me. He had set the verse in three ragas, Hamsadhvani, Kuntalavarali and Vasanta, with no *brigas* or glides but to a simple, straight, truly captivating tune. Afterwards we spent hours talking — he was a gifted raconteur with a refined wit and a quite formidable mastery of Carnatic music. At eight o'clock I took him across the road to the Forest Officer's house, introduced him, and came back to my house-cum-office, after telling him I would take him to the palace after breakfast to meet the Raja and sing the anthem, and later for a two hour session with the bandmaster, before taking him to the station to catch the afternoon train to Madras via GTL.

I had to attend to a specially difficult file, and after a late dinner, shifted to the airiness of my little compound, and relaxed

## M. Krishnan

in an easy chair. Shortly after ten in the night, my hound, besides me on the ground, came out with a throaty growl, and a moment later I heard the latch of the gate click. Ordering the dog to stay put, I went to the gate and found Kalidasa Nilakanta Iyer at it, complete with bed-roll and handbag. He beckoned me into the house swiftly and silently, and seemed under the influence of some potent emotion. Only after we were safely inside the hall with the door bolted did he speak.

"Listen," he said, "I like it here. Let me stay here. After all, I am leaving tomorrow afternoon, let me stay here till then. And don't bother about my lunch—milk and fruits will be quite sufficient, and perhaps in the morning you can get some *aval*."

Taken aback by this, I asked him what had happened—surely the Forest Officer, who had taken such pains over the dinner.... No, no, he assured me, it was nothing like that, the dinner had been a regular feast, and the F.O. was hospitality itself. But he would prefer to stay at my house. He recited a Sanskrit adage and explained it: in peril, a Brahmin could relax his orthodoxy a bit.

after much tactful questioning did I the truth. "He sings!", Nilakanta I informed me in the hushed tones of one who has just had a close call. He had had to listen to the Forest Officer's recitation of no less than three kritis, and had escaped only by assuring his host that if he did not return to sleep under my roof, I would take offence and, moreover, that he had some pressing details to talk over with me before it was time for bed.



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