

PICTURES
of melody

Centenary Special

T. BRINDA

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CONCEPT, RESEARCH & TEXT: LAKSHMI DEVNATH

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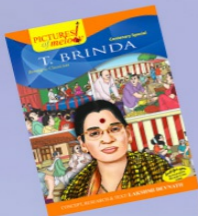
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CONCEPT, RESEARCH & TEXT: LAKSHMI DEVNATH

THE INSPIRING STORY OF A FEISTY MUSICIAN



T. Brinda (1912-1996)

“The presiding deity of our arts is a Goddess. Women have thus not only a right to practise music but also a great responsibility in doing so.”

“My conviction is that if musicians and institutions insist upon presenting only good music, rasikas will naturally take a liking for such music.”

PICTURES of melody

The music of legends satiates the listener even as it kindles a desire to know more about the persona behind the art. Pictures of Melody provides insights into the lives of Carnatic music legends. Theirs are stories that inspire, that celebrate passion and hard work. Theirs are stories that are worth retelling as often as they are retold.

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sa..



ri..



ga..



ma..



pa..



da..



ni..

Tanjavur Brinda — a legend in her lifetime.
Tanjavur Brinda — a legend even today.



She was the seventh-generation musician in a family of exceptional artistry. The ancestry of Brinda traces itself not just to her hometown of Tanjavur but to the royal courts, where her ancestors were greatly honoured as musicians and dancers of rare calibre.

Tanjavur, under the Nayaks and later the Marathas, was a haven for art and culture. The royal court was described as Indira Mandira—the abode of Goddess Lakshmi.



Papammal, the great-great-great-grandmother of Brinda was a respected dancer in the court of the Maratha king Tulaja II.*



*period of reign (1763-1787)

Her daughter Rukmini was also an acclaimed dancer.



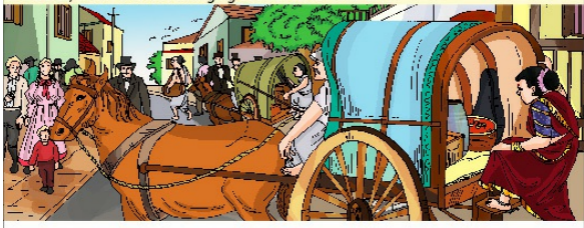
Like mother,
like daughter.

Rukmini's daughter Tanjavur Kamakshi was both a musician and a dancer in the court of King Sarabhoji.* She had trained in music under the famous composer duo, Anai and Ayya.** In addition to performing regularly at the court, she also taught the young princesses.

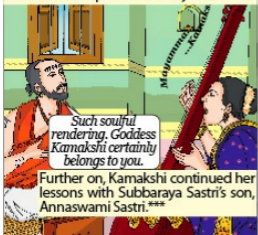


*period of reign (1798-1833)** Anai and Ayya were brothers; their signature or mudra was 'Umadasa'

But when Tanjavur came under the British rule in 1855, it lost its status as a seat of music and dance. Artistes moved out in search of greener pastures. Tanjavur Kamakshi relocated to Madras, which was fast emerging as a center for music.



At Madras, Kamakshi learnt music from the acclaimed composer Subbaraya Sastri.*



*(1803-1862), son of the legendary composer Syama Sastri (1762-1827); **a phrase from Subbaraya Sastri's Todi kriti Nannubrochutaku; ***musician and composer (1827-1900)

Kamakshi's children were very talented. Her son Appakannu was a violinist. Her daughter Sundaram* was blessed with a silvery voice and was tutored by Annaswami Sastri. She was also a gifted dancer.

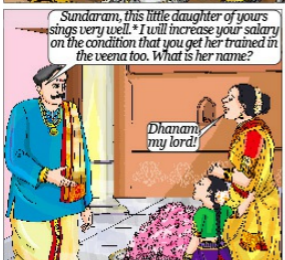


*Kamakshi had only sons. Desiring a daughter, she had adopted Sundaram

Sundaram, however, did not take to the arts as a profession. For a monthly salary of Rs 7/- she worked in the house of a rich Mudaliar, helping in the preparation of the daily pooja.



One day...



*Sundaram had nine children, many of whom grew up to be musicians and dancers

Little Dhanam would become famous as Veena Dhanammal* and attain the stature of an immortal icon in the world of Carnatic music.



*(1867-1938)

She was Brinda's grandmother.

Several years down the line...



Life is worthless unless you listen to this music.

The great composer and singer Mahavaideyanatha Sivan* went into raptures over Dhanammal's music.

*musician and composer (1844-1893)

There was, in fact, not a musician who was not in awe of Dhanam's musicianship.

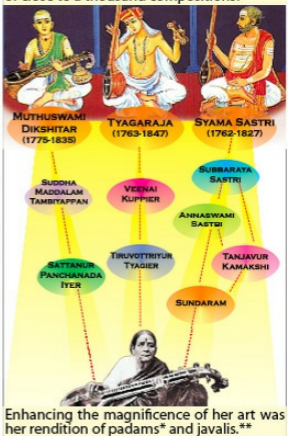


Wah Wah! A priceless Atana! Dhananji, accept this money as my humble offering to your art.

An overwhelmed Ustad Abdul Karim Khan* offered to Dhanammal the money he had earned for his concert earlier that day.

*musician and composer (1844-1893)

Dhanam's music, slow-paced and meditative, was impeccable. She had had the rare privilege of being taught by prime disciples of the three principal composers of Carnatic music. And she had other gurus too. Her repertoire consisted of close to a thousand compositions!



Enhancing the magnificence of her art was her rendition of padams* and javalis.**

*slow-paced compositions;

**lilting compositions; both centre around the theme of love

As a young girl, Dhanam had learnt many a beautiful Telugu padam from Walajapet Baldas Naidu.



Marvelling at her phenomenal grasp, Baldas Naidu had nicknamed her *aggipetta* or matchbox! She had also learnt Tamil padams from the reputed teacher, Padam Ponnuswami.

*raga Mukhari

Dhanam's music cast such a spell over Dharmapuri Subbaraya,* a famed composer of javalis, that he dedicated some of his songs to her.



* (c.1900); ** raga Paras

Another day...



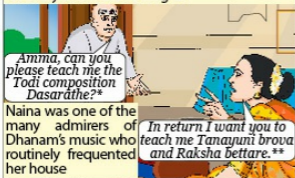
*** raga Senchurutti



*** raga Khamas

And yet another day...

Dhanam never missed an opportunity to enhance her vast repertoire. Her house functioned as a veritable trade-house for songs. Sometimes she struck a hard bargain and demanded two songs for every one that she taught!



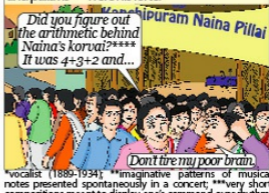
Amma, can you please teach me the Todi composition Dasarathe?*

Naina was one of the many admirers of Dhanam's music who routinely frequented her house

In return I want you to teach me Tanayuni brova and Raksha bettere.**

* composition of Tyagaraja; ** compositions of Tyagaraja in the raga Bhairavi

Kanchipuram Naina Pillai,* as he was popular, was an acknowledged master of music. Mathematically-rich kalpanaswarams** and pallavis*** were his forte.



Did you figure out the arithmetic behind Naina's korvai?**** It was $4+3+2$ and...

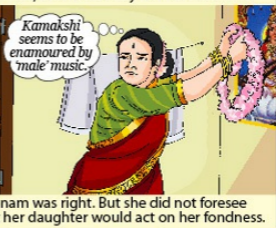
Don't tire my poor brain.

* vocalist (1889-1934); ** imaginative patterns of musical notes presented spontaneously in a concert; *** very short compositions meant to display one's command over rhythm; **** pre-composed swara passages that are affixed to a kalpanaswaram rendition to mark its conclusion

In marked contrast to musicians like Naina, Dhanam preferred not to sing kalpanaswarams and pallavis. She described them as 'masculine' music, best avoided by women musicians.



Weren't the swara patterns in this evening's concert amazing?



Kanakshi seems to be enamoured by 'male' music.

Dhanam was right. But she did not foresee that her daughter would act on her fondness.

A few years later...

Anna, I am enrolling my daughters Brinda and Muktha under Naina. I want them to learn proper cutcheri music from hin — neraval,** suvaram, pallavis...*



Kamakshi, the youngest of Dhanam's four daughters took an unprecedented decision.

*concert **spontaneous elaboration of a particular line from a song

Dhanam cut her daughter short.



Brushing aside Dhanam's sarcasm, Kamakshi went ahead with her decision.

Brinda was the second child of Kamakshi and Soundararaja Iyengar. She was born on November 5, 1912. Muktha was her younger sister. The couple had six children.



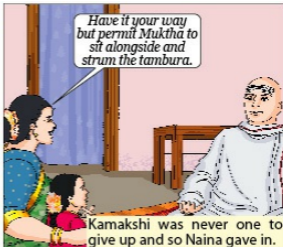
When Brinda was four years old, Kamakshi started teaching her music.



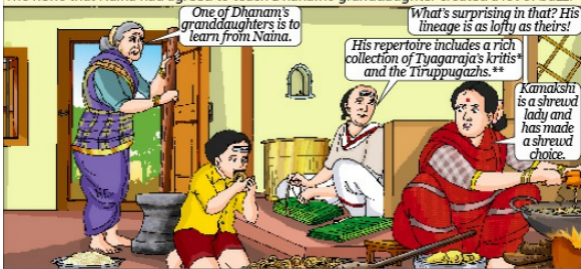
It was this observation that had culminated in Kamakshi's decision.

*composition of Tyagaraja in the raga Kharaharapriya

In the year 1921, at Naina's house in Kanchipuram...



The news that Naina had agreed to teach Dhanam's granddaughter created a lot of buzz.



*compositions; **compositions of Arunagirinathar (c.1450 AD)

The children stayed in Naina's house. Naina's mother Kamakshi not only took care of both of them but also taught them the basic lessons. She herself was a musician of repute.*

Unlike other gurukulams* the children were not expected to participate in the household work.



*Kamakshi and her sister Kanchipuram Dhanakoti were famous as the Dhanakoti sisters

*a system of education where the students stay with the teacher

During their lunch break, they came home to eat. However, food invariably got delayed at Naina's house. One afternoon...



How dare both of you walk in late time and again?

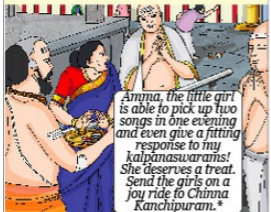
News of this incident also reached the ears of the children's parents. Their ever-practical mother, Kamakshi, came up with a solution to the problem.



Take good care of my little ones and serve them their food on time.

Kamakshi rented a small house in the vicinity and appointed a kindly old lady to ensure that her children returned to school before the bell rang.

Naina was astonished at Brinda's extraordinary talents.



*Amma, the little girl is able to pick up two songs in one evening and even give a fitting response to my kalpanaswaranis! She deserves a treat. Send the girls on a joy ride to Chinna Kanchipuram.**

*otherwise known as Vishnu Kanchi, it comprises the areas surrounding the famous Varadaraja Swami temple

On coming to know of this, Naina was furious.



I'll put the teacher in her place.

But for all practical purposes the children lived in Naina's house. After school hours, Naina took classes for Brinda. For some reason, he felt Muktha was not up to the mark.



*Muktha looks like a Pillaiyarkutti.***

None ever imagined that this Pillaiyarkutti would quietly absorb everything that Naina taught Brinda and become just as accomplished.

*composition of Tyagaraja in the raga Saurashtram; **baby Ganesha



But he also had a temper to boot.

The same mistake over and over again!

Brinda go and slap that student.



It was Naina's peculiar habit to have Brinda deliver his punishment on erring students.

Thambi, let's have the arangetram of these girls. Muktha can just sing the songs alongside.*



Kamakshi, who was monitoring Brinda's musical progress, came up with this suggestion.

*debut stage performance

At the arangetram...

What fabulous raga alapanas and kalpanaswarans from such a young girl!*



Brinda's creative abilities attracted a lot of attention.

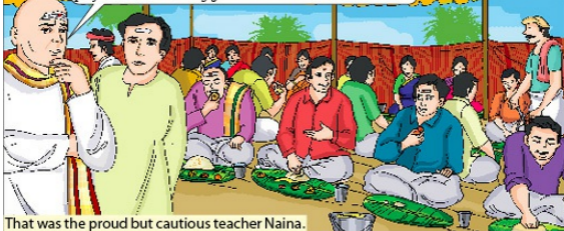
*elaboration of ragas

Kamakshi celebrated the occasion in style.



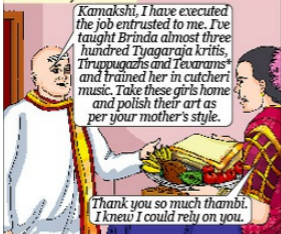
Can I have another helping of the sweet? It is fantastic!

I wonder why Kamakshi is in such a hurry to have the girls perform. Brinda is very good but she has a lot more to learn.



That was the proud but cautious teacher Naina.

It was the year 1925.



*compositions of the three Saivite saints — Tirunavukkarasar (Appar) Tirugnanasambandar and Sundarar

But the next song evoked a different reaction.



*composition of Tyagaraja in the raga Jaganmohini

Kamakshi further requested veena vidwan Krishnamachariar,* the brother of Tiger Varadachariar,** to teach the girls veena.



*(d.1947); **vocalist (1876-1950)

Four years after they had left home, the girls returned to their grandmother's house.



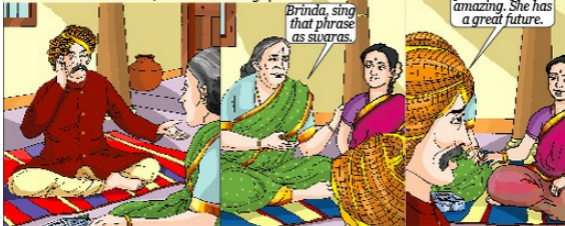
*composition of Tyagaraja in the raga Ganavaridhi; **Boat Mail was the train that connected India to Ceylon



Whenever time permitted Kamakshi also taught Brinda and Muktha. The girls joyfully bathed in the vast ocean of music.



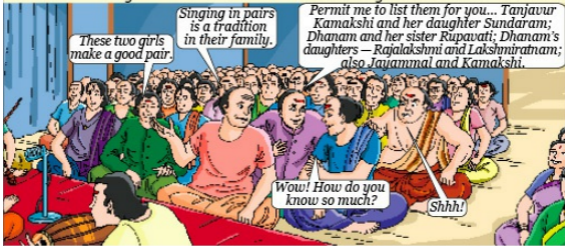
One day, Abdul Karim Khan visited Dhanam's house. In the course of conversation, he hummed a raga phrase.



Tiger Varadachariar was another frequent visitor.



Brinda and Muktha gave their first concert in Madras at the Jagannatha Bhakta Sabha.



The children also performed at the Rama Navami festival organized by Jalatarangam Ramaniah Chetty.* Apart from being a fine musician himself, he was a businessman and an active promoter of the arts.



These granddaughters of Dhanam deserve to be encouraged.

The children's father, Soundararaja Iyengar, was also very fond of music.



Kamakshi, come and listen to this Ramanatakam* song. I had asked Brinda to tune it and she has done it so well in Saveri.

* (b. 1887); ** composition of Tyagaraja in the raga Harikhamboji * composition of Arunachala Kavi (1711-1778) based on the Ramayana



Mukta complements Brinda's singing so well.



And how is our Abhirami progressing on the violin?

Abhiramasundari, the youngest daughter of Kamakshi and Soundararaja Iyengar, was being trained in the violin by the great violinist Papa Venkataramaiah.* It was only the girls who were formally taught music. The boys though interested in the art, would take to other professions.

* (1901-1972)

And so the years passed. One day, just before a concert in Perambur...

We would be happy if you can sing the Aitana composition Vachamagocharundani* in today's concert.



But we haven't been taught that song.

There is still time for the concert. I will be happy to teach you that kriti.

Brinda and Muktha sang the song in that evening's concert.

* composition of Mysore Sadasiva Rao (1800-1870)

The following Friday...

Amma, these girls have learnt a new song.

Sing it for me.



Vachama: Vachama Sundari!

Stop! Stop! I will teach you the right version of this song.

Dhanam's version of this song came to be identified with Brinda and Muktha as one of their masterpieces.

In 1934, Brinda and Muktha performed at the Tyagaraja Utsavam* organized by Naina Pillai. He turned out to be in for a pleasant surprise.



TYAGARAJA

Kamakshi, I must confess that I was wrong in my assessment of Muktha. She is as good as Brinda.

In 1936, Brinda and Muktha performed at the prestigious Music Academy.



CONCERT by Kumari Brinda and Kumari Muktha

They are Dhanam's granddaughters!

The same year Naina passed away. Dhanam and her family were plunged into grief.

*festival conducted in commemoration of Saint Tyagaraja

In 1938 Dhanam passed away. She left behind a rich legacy of music.



Many of her grandchildren would come to be regarded as eminent artists.



T. Sankaran



T. Balasaraswathy



T. Ranganathan



T. Viewanathan



T. Brinda



T. Muktha

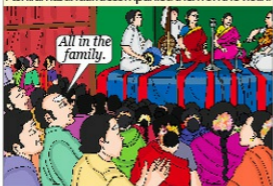
Just two years later, Dhanam's second daughter Lakshmiratnam passed away.



Shortly thereafter, Srinivasachari, a lawyer by profession, entered Brinda's life. The couple would have three children Surendrababu, Soundaram and Vegavahini.



Notwithstanding changing scenarios, Brinda and Muktha remained focused on their music. They practised and performed together. Abhiramasundari accompanied them on the violin.



In yesterday's concert, Brinda's Todi alapana⁴ was exceptional.

Muktha supports her admirably, but have you noticed that she confines herself to singing composed music?

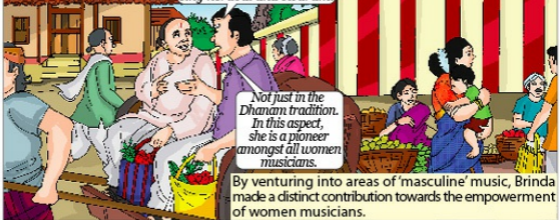


Muktha was fully capable of singing improvised music but the sisters for their own reasons had arrived at this arrangement.

⁴elaboration of a raga

Brinda's creative explorations won her much appreciation.

She is the first woman in the Dhanam tradition to sing neraval and swaram.



By venturing into areas of 'masculine' music, Brinda made a distinct contribution towards the empowerment of women musicians.

She had an intuitive understanding of music.



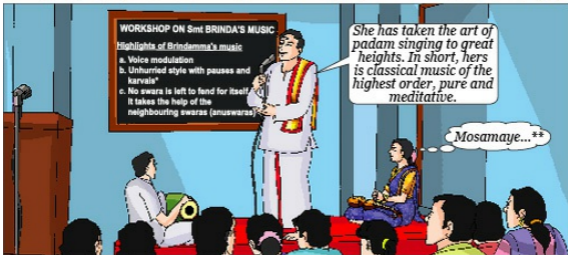
Brinda was proud of being Naina's student. Her genius lay in the manner in which she blended his bani perfectly with that of Dhanam.



*thorough knowledge of the intricacies of a raga

*style of music

As with her grandmother, Brinda's style drew a lot of admiration from connoisseurs of music.



*elongation of notes; **padam in the raga Ahiri

Notwithstanding all its beauty, Brinda's music appealed more to the connoisseur than to the casual listener.



The fast-paced music of GNB and the comforting medium tempo of Ariyakudi seemed to be more attractive to the lay rasika.



A sabha secretary once shared in private his opinion of the Brinda-Muktha concerts. But the listener mischievously conveyed it to Brinda.

*G.N. Balasubramaniam—vocalist (1910-1965); **Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar—vocalist (1890-1967)

Several months later...



Regardless of such criticism, Brinda steadfastly stuck to her style.



Semmagudi Srinivasa Iyer* was all admiration for this courageous lady and her admirable music.

*Iyer (1938-2003)

True. Brinda believed in herself and her music.



Brinda owed much of what she was to her mother. Kamakshi passed away in 1953 with the satisfaction that the family's traditional music was safe in the hands of her daughters.



Misfortune struck the family again in 1963 when Abhiramasundari suffered a stroke.



But Abhirami's health showed little improvement. Adding to the sisters' grief, a misunderstanding cropped up between Brinda and Muktha.



As Brinda's supporting vocalist, Muktha had added perceptible value to the music presented on stage. Rasikas fondly recalled special features of the sisters' concerts.



*swara passages that are part of a composition; **lyrics



Undoubtedly they had made a good team.

*the concluding section of a composition

After Muktha's exit, Brinda took the support of either her daughter Vegavahini or one of her other students.



This rasika had voiced the general opinion.



*padam of Ghanam Krishna Iyer in the raga Atana

The woes of Brinda and Muktha worsened with the death of Abhiramasundari in 1973.



Notwithstanding these obstacles, Brinda's career made impressive progress.



Even as early as 1965, she received the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award. Many more awards followed.

In 1976 she received the much-coveted Sangita Kalanidhi.* In her acceptance speech, Brinda said—



My sister Smt Muktha who has been my singing partner for nearly forty years has a big share in this honour...

Clearly, their personal relationship had survived the professional split.

*awarded by the Music Academy

It was not just awards that sought her. The recognition came in various forms.

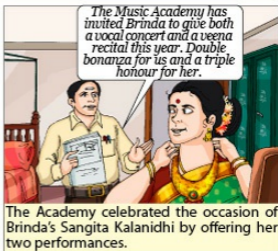


Welcome, welcome... the King of Nagaswaram music and the Monarch of the Todi ragam!

Brindamma, I have come to listen to your unparalleled Todi!

Nagaswaram maestro T. N. Rajarathnam Pillai* who stayed opposite Brinda's house for a few years, dropped in whenever time permitted to listen to her Todi.

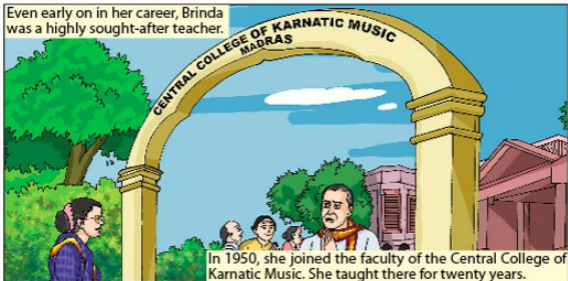
*(1898-1956)



The Music Academy has invited Brinda to give both a vocal concert and a veena recital this year. Double bonanza for us and a triple honour for her.

The Academy celebrated the occasion of Brinda's Sangita Kalanidhi by offering her two performances.

Even early on in her career, Brinda was a highly sought-after teacher.



In 1950, she joined the faculty of the Central College of Karnatic Music. She taught there for twenty years.

She also gave private lessons. Many of her students became famous musicians and teachers.



S R Janakiraman



T R Subramaniam



Govinda Rao



Indra Menon



Aruna Sabram



Bombay Ramachandran



Geetha Raja



Ravikiran



Harharan



Alamelu Mand



Aruna Ranganathan



A R Sundaram



Anuradha Sriram

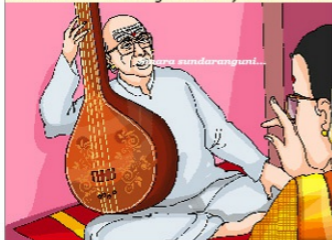


Unnikrishnan



Ritha Rajan

Even stalwarts like Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer and M. S. Subbulakshmi learnt select compositions from her.



*composition of Tyagaraja in the raga Gaulpantu



The phenomenal musician Ramnad Krishnan** was so enamoured by Brinda's music that he became her student.

*composition of Tyagaraja in the raga Sahana; ** (1918-1973)

Brinda was a great stickler for punctuality.



Her counsel to her students constituted veritable pearls of wisdom.



*compositions of Tyagaraja in the ragas Harikambhoji, Suddha Saveri and Atana respectively

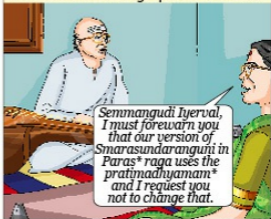


Vocalist Aruna Sairam, in an interview, recalled her tutelage with her guru.

She never permitted her students to take liberties with tradition.



Creditably, she did not compromise on this even with her high-profile students.



*the raga Paras generally uses only the suddha madhyamam; ** in lay terms pratimadhyamam refers to the higher 'ma' and suddha madhyamam to the lower 'ma'

She was absolutely intolerant of anything that fell short of her standards.



Brinda once chided a musician who had given a poor performance of padams and javalis in a radio concert.

Her reputation as a teacher was such that the University of Washington, Seattle invited her twice to be a visiting professor.



In 1960, she helped the Academy bring out a book on javalis. In the preface to the book, scholar and secretary of the Academy Dr V. Raghavan wrote:



Her lecture-demonstrations on several topics, especially on padams and javalis, were eagerly awaited by the rasikas.



*man and God

There were other interesting facets to this musician's personality too.

*Hmmm... what aroma!
I must say your vatha
kuzhanbu* is as ethereal
as your music!*



*a dish made out of tamarind

In 1988, the fiftieth death anniversary of Veena Dhanammal resulted in a joyous development.

Grand Brinda-Muktha Concert

*In celebration of the
fiftieth death anniversary of*

Veena Dhanammal (1867-1938)



Seventy-six-year-old Brinda performed once again with her sister after a gap of twenty long years. Rasikas were thrilled.

The aura surrounding Brinda remained undiminished with age. In 1992, none other than M. S. Subbulakshmi stepped forward to present a concert on Brinda's 80th birthday.

*MS amma was
anxious to present
a catcher worthy
of Brinda.*



Her grand-niece Gowri Ramnarayan recalled the concert for which she had provided vocal support.

Sadly, one June morning in the year 1996 at 5.30 AM...



Brinda fell down and fractured her hip. Muktha took care of her sister lovingly.

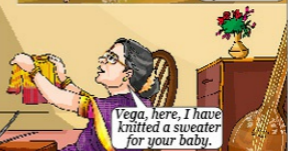
Despite all the care given, Brinda's health began to fail.



Brinda seemed to have had a premonition of her death.



The eighty-four-year-old veteran would often emotionally recall bygone days.



Brinda passed away on August 6, 1996.

Like her ancestors, Brinda had also made a significant contribution to the elevation of women artistes.



"The presiding deity of our arts is a Goddess. Women have thus not only a right to practise music but also a great responsibility in doing so."

*one of the pseudonyms of N. Pattabhiraman, founder-editor, Sruti magazine

Brindamma

(1912 - 1996)

A Musician Who Bowed Down Only To Classicism

"My conviction is that if musicians and institutions insist upon presenting only good music, rasikas will naturally take a liking for such music."





This book on Smt Brinda is very informative and presented in an enjoyable format. Youngsters will enjoy reading the life story and the musical contributions of this legend who has left an indelible mark in the history of Carnatic music. This work clearly portrays the hard work that my mother put in and the obstacles that she surmounted to become the artiste that she was. Lakshmi's impeccable research and racy narrative style is complimented by the beautiful art of Ajay Krishnan. Together they bring alive the story of my mother.

Lakshmi has to be truly commended for her efforts towards creating awareness about the lives and contributions of yesteryear legends amongst the younger generation.

This small book is a complete biography of my mother and contains information neither shared nor published so far. The information is authentic. Even hard-core facts are presented in a beautiful and engaging style.

Vegavahini V.

Vegavahini Vijayaraghavan
(Daughter and disciple of T. Brinda)

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Acknowledgements:

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Books referred: Carnatic Summer - Sriram V; Great Masters of Carnatic Music (1930-1965) - Indira Menon; Balasaraswati - Her art and life - Douglas M. Knight JR; The Madras Quartet - Indira Menon; Sruti June, July, August 2007; Journal of the Music Academy 1977 Madras - Presidential Address - T. Brinda

PICTURES of melody



My Guru Sangita Kalanidhi Smt T. Brinda was one of the greatest representatives of the highly acclaimed Dhanammal tradition of music. Brindamma was not only a great musician and teacher, she was also a great human being - a towering personality, indeed. I have been singularly blessed to be the disciple of such a great maestro.

The capture of life and achievements of such formidable personalities authentically and in such simple little nuggets for the young minds of today calls for a great understanding of the art, not to mention a particularly winning style of writing. Smt Lakshmi Devnath has these credentials in ample measure, which has allowed her to write such a pleasant, readable and accurate, graphic biography of Smt T. Brinda. Adding to the appeal of the book is the artwork of Ajay Krishnan.

Sponsoring this book, dedicated to my guru, has been the first major activity of my Trust. It is my humble offering to her and to my parents Smt Rajalakshmi and Sri Sethuraman who were equally devoted to Smt T. Brinda and her music

Padma Shri **Smt Aruna Sairam**



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This book is sponsored by the Nadayogam Trust established by Smt Aruna Sairam and Sri Sairam for the preservation and propagation of classical music.



LAKSHMI DEVNATH is a well-known researcher and writer in the field of Carnatic music. Her articles and features numbering close to 200 have featured in leading publications like The Hindu and Sruti – India's Premier Magazine for the Performing Arts. Her passion is to familiarise the young with India's glorious heritage through innovative stories. An earlier effort of hers in this direction, Poorva – Magic Miracles and the Mystical Twelve, that narrates the stories of the Azhvars and released in 2007 was a runaway success. The projects that she is currently involved in include Poorva in the Vedic Age; Sargam – a fascinating journey into the world of Carnatic music and this pictorial biographies series. Her other books include – A Class Apart, the biography of the educationist Dr. (Mrs.) YG Parthasarathy and Lotus – a monograph written for danseuse Anita Ratnam. Lakshmi's full-fledged biography of the living legend Sri Lalgudi Jayaraman is due to be published by Harper Collins shortly.

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