

SRI PALGHAT RAMA BHAGAVATHAR
A LIFE SKETCH



(5-6-1888 — 26-6-1957)

By K. V. Ramakrishnan

SRI PALGHAT RAMA BHAGAVATHAR
A LIFE SKETCH
BY K.V. RAMAKRISHNAN

An artistic vacuum occurred in the third decade of the present century by the removal from the scene of Carnatic Music of titans like Konerirajapuram Vaidyanatha Iyer, Poochi Srinivasa Iyengar, Palghat Anantharama Bagavathar and Madurai Pushpavanam Iyer, nearly half a dozen artistes, who had undergone rigorous training in music with an unalloyed classical tradition, stepped into this breach. One of such artistes was the late Palghat Rama Bagavathar who held audiences enthralled during four-hour concerts in a career spanning nearly half a century not only in South India but in other parts of the country holding a sizeable population of lovers of Carnatic music.

Nearly thirty years after the demise of Rama Bagavathar, there are living today connoisseurs who still fondly recall with thrill Bagavathar's incomparable rendering of the raga 'Kharaharapriya' and the Thyagaraja masterpiece 'Rama Nee Samanam Evaru', the Dikshitar composition 'Bhajare' and Gopalakrishna Bharathi's immortal song 'Varukalamo'. They still remember the

mellifluous grace Bagavathar used to impart to padas like 'Netranthi Nerathile' and Javalis like 'Sanoro EE Mohamu'.

As the late A.S.P. Iyer has observed in his foreword to a biography on Chembai Vaidyanatha Bagavathar, Carnatic Music was taken to Kerala by the Tamil Brahmans when they migrated from the Cauvery delta area and settled in places like Palghat and Trivandrum, in sizeable numbers. During this trek, a number of families who had been votaries of Carnatic Music for generations settled in the villages of Palghat and around. One such family was that of Palghat Rama Bagavathar. His brother, the late Venkatakrishna Bagavathar was a competent performer on the Carnatic Music platform but was famous as a background singer in 'Kathakali', giving the Manipravala and Malayala Padams a new orientation and beauty.

It was Rama Bagavathar's good fortune that after early initiation in Carnatic Music from his brother he was able to sit at the feet of the renowned Palghat Anantharama Bagavathar who was at the hey-day of his brilliant career. Anantharama Bagavathar was a disciple of Nurani Mahadeva Bagavathar, son of Nurani Parameswara Bagavathar, who was a 'gem'

adorning the court of Swati Tirunal. Not only had Anantharama Bagavathar a sonorous voice with a wide range but he had a commanding presence also. Anantharama Bagavathar was one of the most sought after and highest paid attistes of his time and was encouraged by the courts of Mysore, Pudukottah and some of the Zamindars and 'Madas'.

Rama Bagavathar was a disciple of Anantharama Bagavathar for twelve years and accompanied him in his concerts at Madras, Kumbakonam, Mysore and other places. When at the request of the Thiruvaduthurai Adheenam, Anantharama Bagavathar resided in Kumbakonam for a few years, Rama Bagavathar had the unique opportunity of learning music from Umayalpuram Swaminatha Ayyer of the 'Tyagaraja Parampara, the late Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer being a fellow student.

One unique advantage Rama Bagavathar enjoyed during his sojourn with his peripatetic Guru was that he was able to come into contact with the trend-setters in Carnatic Music and imbibe the good aspects of their style but also to build up an immense and varied repertoire of compositions of the great maestros in all

their authenticity. From the cauvery Delta area he had learnt many pieces of the Trinity, Patnam Subramaniya Iyer, Poochi Srinivasa Iyengar and lesser known composers. He knew several Tirupugazhs, Javalis, Padams and Viruttams. From Mysore he had learnt compositions of Mysore Sadasiva Rao and others.

Rama Bagavathar was allowed to give concerts on his own by his guru after a tutelage of twelve year, by which time he had blossomed into a complete artiste. He was then 24 years old.

After his guru's demise in 1918, Rama Bagavathar settled down in Palghat. In the early stages he was giving 'Harikatha' Kalakshepams for a few years but switched on to Carnatic Music concerts, which had by then become popular.

Rama Bagavathar had a sweet voice of Four kattais which was in complete unison with Sruti, and mellowed, with the progress of years, into two and a half. Because of his rigorous practice his 'akara' rendering was amazing and faultless. Even in the begining of a concert, he could hold the audience spell bound by his

'neraval' in the charana of a song like 'Sivaloka Nathare Kandū'. His rendering of ragas like Todi, Kalyani, Sankarabharanam, Bhairavi, Kamboji and Kharaharapriya used to be elaborate and entertaining. His style was chaste without any cheap frills. Often he used to say that the authentic Carnatic style was that of 'Chola Desa' because of the contribution of the Trinity and those who followed in their footsteps.

Renowned violinists and percussionists had a great regard for his music. Among the violinists who accompanied him were Malaikottai Govindaswami Pillai, Kumbakonam Rajamanickam Pillai, Mysore T.Chowdiah, Papa Venkataramiah Palghat C.R. Mani Iyer and T.K. Jayarama Iyer. Jayarama Iyer, when he was at the Trichy station of A.I.R. used to see that he was programmed to accompany Rama Bagavathar when he broadcast from the station. Even Dwaram Venkataswami Naidu who preferred to play solo and was choosy about accompaniment has played violin for Rama Bagavathar several times. Percussionists in Bagavathar's concerts include Kumbakonam Azhagan Ambi Pillai, Pudukottai Dakshinamoorthy Pillai, Thanjavur Vaidyanatha Iyer, Palghat Subba Ayyar, Ramanathapuram C. S. Murugaboopathy, and of course, Palghat Mani

Ayyar who had the good fortune to accompany him in the twenties and for Bagavathar's last concert, a fortnight before his demise.

A reference to the quality of Bagavathar's music has been made by L.R.V. in his biography in Tamil of Chembai. Says L.R.V. : 'Only those who have had the opportunity to listen to Rama Bagavathar have an idea as to the supreme quality of his music. If any music can be described as 'Brahmananda Sangita', it is Rama Bagavathar's music',

Prof. Sambamoorthy writes in the Hindu of June 25, 1957 under the caption 'A Top Ranking Musician' that he was shocked to hear about the death of Rama Bagavathar who was an eminent singer and a familiar figure in the music performance arranged by the sabhas two decades ago. Says Prof. Sambamoorthy: "He was a top ranking musician and a brilliant exponent of Pallavi and raga alapana, exhibiting good Manodharma. He also used to render rare compositions in concerts."

"The Vidwan had a rich and powerful voice and his madyamakala renderings were characterised by verve and appeal. Like the stalwarts of the previous generation of singers he gave

only a few pieces in a concert and devoted the major part of the time to the rendering of creative music. His concerts were always impressive and were appreciated by the initiated as well as the layman. He kept up the great traditions of the singers from the West Coast and this was markedly seen in his extraordinary Laya Gnana."

Rama Bagavathar has also been honoured by many Samasthanams and Durbars. He was one of the illustrious artistes who gave concerts at the first conference of the Music Academy in 1927.

Even a few weeks ago, when demonstrating the salient points of Pallavis, Kalanidhi Dr. S. Ramanathan recapitulated how 'Sangathis' used by him in the Sankarabharana Pallavi 'Mahima Teliya Tharama' were those employed by Rama Bagavathar.

Fulsome praise has been bestowed on the quality of Rama Bagavathar's art by knowledgeable critics like the late C. R. Srinivasan.

One striking thing about Bagavathar was that his life was as pure as his music. He never used to hanker after fame or wealth. In fact,

when All India Radio asked this writer to communicate with Bagavathar for a National Programme, as he was a very senior artiste, Bagavathar politely declined the offer saying that his health would not permit him to travel to Delhi, there being no arrangement for broadcasting of recorded concerts then.

Bagavathar was of a retiring nature, never offending others by word or deed. He had impeccable platform manners also. Being a great devotee of Lord Rama, he used to spend time chanting 'Rama Nama'. On the lines of the Tiruvayaru festival, he along with Palghat Subba Iyer, used to arrange for the performance of Sadguru Tyagaraja Aradhana for four days in Ramadhyana Madam in Kalpathi. These festivals used to attract leading musicians and also a large number of music lovers. People used to eagerly await Rama Bagavathar's concert at these festivals.

Violinist Chowdiah used to tell friends how deeply obliged he was to Rama Bagavathar for the development of his violin style.

It was a divine coincidence that his first and last concerts took place in the VISWANATHA SWAMY temple at Kalpathi.

The manner in which death came to him is also noteworthy. While giving 'argyam' during Sandhyavandanam in the Kalpathi river after bath, his soul left him.

The fact that he is remembered thirty years after his death speaks volumes about the art and life of the noble artiste that Rama Bagavathar was.

The officials and experts of the Music Academy deserve the gratitude of music lovers for conferring the honour, though belatedly, on Rama Bagavathar and rectifying a lapse which had caused many eyebrows to be raised.



SRI PALGHAT RAMA BHAGAVATHAR

(Courtesy : SRUTI)

A grand-disciple—a term coined by Flute Mali—of Parameswara Bhagavatar, was Palghat Anantharama Bhagavatar, (1867-1919), who studied with his violinist-son Mahadeva Bhagavatar for seven years. Anantharama Bhagavatar later went to Tiruvaiyaru and received instruction from Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer also but, according to Professor P. Sambamoorthi, in order to gain admittance he had to pretend to be a mantrika or sorcerer from Malabar and thus secure the interest of the great musician's brother Ramaswamy Sivan first.

It is said that Anantharama Bhagavatar was endowed with an impressive voice to match his tall and attractive physical stature and commanding personality and that his voice was powerful yet flexible. "In his performances one heard all the subtleties and excellences of vocal music. It was a delight to listen to his rendering of *mudritam* and other graces characteristic of vocal music." (Sambamoorthi).

Anantharama Bhagavatar lived in Madras for 12 years during which he learned the art of

Harikatha kalakshepam from the renowned exponent Pandit Lakshmanachariar. He himself became proficient in the art.

Palghat Anantharama Bhagavatar's gift to the Carnatic music world as a teacher was Palghat Rama Bhagavatar (1888-1957), who was also known as 'Munday' Rama Bhagavatar, after Mundaya, the village near Shoranur he was born in. In his teens he showed an aptitude for Kathakali music and his brother Venkatakrishna Bhagavatar, who was responsible for modernising the musical aspects of Kathakali pada-s, took him under his tutorial wings. Astonished as also delighted by Raman's talent, the older brother virtually compelled him to go to Kumbakonam to learn proper Carnatic music. Before enrolling as a disciple of Anantharama Bhagavatar, who made his home there in Kumbakonam, the lad took tuition for some time from Kavaseri Rama Bhagavatar and Subbarama Bhagavatar, two turn-of-the-century musicians of repute. Anantharama Bhagavatar in turn was so impressed by Rama Bhagavatar that he sent him to Umayalpuram Swaminatha Iyer, who also lived in Kumbakonam, for 'post-graduate' studies. Rama Bhagavatar and Maharajapuram Viswa-

natha Iyer were together as students under this great guru. The former admired the latter's manodharma; vice-versa, the admiration was for the altherness and tenacity of purpose of the man from Mundaya.

Rama Bhagavatar earned a reputation in the concert circuit even during the days of his main guru. His contemporaries, like Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar, Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavatar and Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer, paid him the ultimate tribute by attending his recitals, of whom Chembai exclaimed several times that he would never aspire to sing better. He cut many records, of which some may have survived the ravages of time and the maw of advancing technology. He also broadcast regularly over AIR.

Rama Bhagavatar's music was very simple, yet wholesome and tasteful. It projected a style of his own, characterised by an even melody and the absence of adventurous speeding. His voice had a cultivated quality, a result of strenuous training. His rendering of raga-s like Kharaharpriya, Kedaragoula, Manirangu, and Udayaravichandrika were noted for their beauty. He had a vast repertoire under his command. He is reported to have mastered as many as 40 kriti-s in each of

the ghana raga-s alone. His forte was, of course, Tyagaraja's *Rama nee samanamevaru* in Kharaharapriya. He had, according to his admirers, no equal in rendering that song, so much so that, according to N.N. Ananthanarayana Iyer of Kalpathi (Palghat), the late Nelluvai Neelakanta Iyer, an eminent lawyer and jurist, was moved to compose a four-stanza tribute, in Malayalam verse interspersed with English words, entitled *Rama Chatuskham* (see box).

Rama Chatuskham

Soundezum azhiyil ezhum thiru pole thuki
 Kondu exquisite melody othozhukum swanathal
 Entranced athakki manam ecstasy seail mukkum
 Mundaya gayaka bhavan vijayee bhavikka

Mundaya gayaka bhavat swara gana mayee
 Undaya porathil amornakam ambarannu
 Kandalum yee madhu vasundara vittu poodhu
 Kandulla kombukalil olichidunnu

Hey, Rama bhagavatatare, bhavateeya ghana
 Saarasavam vasudhayil sudha kanda neram
 Chera namukkini vasundharayennu vechu
 Cheranurachu suraloka mamandhu lajjam

Ramakhya gayaka, Saraswati gana
 Leelakamennu theerta mani thantrikal antharange
 Premam kalarnu bhavataha kala kandanala
 Dhamatinay nijapathikku koduthu noonam.

A. NEELAKANTA IYER

Rama Bhagavatar's rendering of *Rama nee samanamevaru* perhaps owed its great quality to his own great devotion to Sri Rama. In 1923, he organised a musical tribute to Tyagaraja at the Ramadhyana Matham in Kalpathi, prompted by his disappointment in being prevented by dislocated rail transport from participating in the aradhana in Tiruvaiyaru. The celebration has been conducted annually ever since.

Once, while on a visit to Chathapuram (Palghat) to raise funds for the matham dedicated to Rama he was building in Mysore, Bidaram Krishnappa was so attracted by Rama Bhagavatar's music that he arranged for him to sing in Mysore during the Dussera celebrations. The Palghatan made many more visits to Mysore, in subsequent years, to give recitals.

The great sidemen of those days, 1918 to 1957, considered it a privilege to perform with Rama Bhagavatar. Mysore Chowdiah actually stayed at Rama Bhagavatar's house in Kalpathi for four years, 1925 through 1928, a period in which he was a regular sideman for the vidwan. Tiruchi Govindaswami Pillai was another bowman at the Bhagavatar's side. His swan song as

a violinist as Bhagavatar's accompanist in one of the two recitals conducted by him at the Gokhale Hall in Madras in 1930 to raise funds for the Tyagaraja festival in Tiruvaiyaru. Govindaswamy Pillai, who already had one foot in the grave, literally limped to this kutcheri and the other one in which he accompanied Kanchipuram Naina Pillai. At the end of Bhagavatar's recital, he thanked him for accepting an invitation from "a smallman" like him. Rama Bhagavatar burst into tears.

One of the other proud violinists who accompanied Rama Bhagavatar was Papa Venkataramiah. For a scheduled radio broadcast of Bhagavatar's kutcheri from AIR-Tiruchi, Papa was a trifle late in arriving. Bhagavatar agreed to sing a raga pending Papa's arrival. But when the announcer stated that Bhagavatar would sing *Marugelara* in Jayantasri, the latter quickly told his listeners, in a full throated voice, that he could not sing that raga.

Palghat Mani Iyer led the percussionists who played with Rama Bhagavatar. He was the one who accompanied his fellow Palghatan in his last recital, at the Kumbhabhishekam of the Viswanatha temple in Kalpathi on 26 June

1957. That was Rama Bhagavatar's last recital.

For a brief time, during the beginning stages of his musical career, Rama Bhagavatar was giving Harikatha kalakshepams but the increasing demand for his music recitals made him give up story-telling.

Rama Bhagavatar adhered very strictly to parampariya sampradaya or inherited tradition. He would not make any compromise himself, nor allow his students to do so. This resulted in many of his students dropping out; one who did not and who became a prominent musician himself was Puducode Krishnamurthi.

An Alapana Expert

It is a truism that Rama Bhagavatar's expansive delineation of raga-s prefacing kriti-s and pallavi-s were unique, remarkable and without parallel. His powerful, rich and resonant voice was a tremendous natural asset. The mellifluousness of his tonal vibrations in his alapana-s and his niraval-s and the ease and sureness which too marked them were attributable to his sustained sadhakam and mute self-confidence. His alapana-s frequently elicited acclamation and applause from the audience. This type of audience reaction to raga elaboration set his recitals apart from those of his contemporaries.

N.N. ANANTHANARAYANA IYER
KALPATHI, PALGHAT.

COPIES CAN BE HAD FROM :

M. R. Venkatramanan
7, Sriram Colony, Alwarpet
Madras-600 018. Phone : 458550

Printed by : Printograph
59, Luz Avenue, Madras-600 004