

## K.B. Sundarambal From sringara to bhakti

Vamanan

**M**emories of the singing star Kodumudi Balambal Sundarambal, remain green in her centenary year, more than a quarter century after her passing. Her musical voice still reverberates in mind's ear and the mark of her personality as a modern-day minstrel on the lines of the legendary Tamil poetess Avvaiyar, whom she portrayed so successfully in the eponymous Gemini film, remains vivid.

The contours of her vibrant personality, and the impact of her energetic song survive, but the saga of her life, times and character cry out to be recorded in greater detail. Her spectacular rags to raga-s to riches story not only spans many genres of music like stage song, classical concert, devotional performance and film singing, but is also poignant in many ways. The most celebrated stage actress when she was with her prince charming, S.G. Kittappa the musical phenomenon, she created a sensation as his widow after his sudden demise, donning sackcloth (white khadi to be precise) and sacred ash at the age of 26.

That did not prevent her, as an independent woman and artist, from scaling new heights in her career or achieving new peaks of social recognition. As such, she should be a role model for women, though feminists may find her single-minded devotion to her man, and her sacrifice of her youth at the altar of God, unacceptable. In an age given more and more to easy and self-serving values, she stood for incandescent integrity. The message of her life and music, if it can be put in a single word, is bhakti, a word that conveys infinitely more than devotion. Asked by a journalist in the late sixties about the sort of roles she would accept in cinema, she replied: "The role can be of any sort, social or puranic, but the character should be full of bhakti".

This woman of such clarity of vision was born in extreme poverty on 26<sup>th</sup> October 1908 in Kodumudi, on the banks of the Kaveri, which courses down the village southwards from Erode. The name of the father, reportedly a Velayudha Goundar, is almost non-existent in the accounts of her life, written or oral. Sundarambal and her younger siblings



Young Sundarambal

Kanakasabhapati and Subbammal might well have been born by immaculate conception to Balambal!

The family hut by the side of the railway track in Kodumudi was on the edge of existence. A maternal uncle, Malaikolundhu, who wrote accounts at a petty Chettiar shop nearby, was the only breadwinner. This same Malaikolundhu, Sundarambal's guardian, would taunt a film producer many years hence on whether he would offer a lakh of rupees for her to essay her first film role and get that sum too! That would be written into the history books of Tamil cinema. It was such a monumental figure for the times, that everything else paled before it. If Sundarambal was being paid the moon for her acting, she should be a woman of worth!