

Parur S. Sitalakshmi, My Aunt

Dr. M.A. Bhageerathi

Parur S. Sitalakshmi was married to Kalakkad Ramanarayana Iyer. She was the first of the eight children of Bhageerathi Ammal and Parur Sundaram Iyer, the renowned violinist. She was born in 1920. The other children were daughters Muthulakshmi (1921), Maragatham, Rajalakshmi, and the two sons M.S. Anantharaman (the fourth child) and M.S. Gopalakrishnan (the eighth child).

Of the four daughters, two were married into families with a musical background. Sitalakshmi was married to Kalakkad Ramanarayana Iyer and Muthulakshmi was married to Manakkal Sivaraja Iyer. Sitalakshmi was the first woman violinist to have played in an orchestra, that presented South Indian music.

Sitalakshmi trained under her father from the age of four. She was his first student at home. Early in the morning she, her sister Muthulakshmi and her brother Anantharaman practised the Adi tala varnam-s and Ata tala varnam-s at least fifteen times in three speeds. They also played varnam-s on a single string. In the afternoons, after coming back from school, they practised kriti-s, raga, niraval and kalpanaswara under the able guidance of their father. After evening coffee, he taught them to sing a new kriti and then to play it on the violin.

In 1932, M.S. Anantharaman and Sitalakshmi played violin duets (probably the first brother-sister duo) at the Ramanathaswamy temple in Rameswaram, at the



Parur Sitalakshmi (3rd from R) and little Anantharaman (3rd from L) playing the violin in the orchestra

Subramanya temple in Tiruchendur and at the temple in Kanyakumari. The same year they also played together at the Padmanabhaswami temple in Tiruvananthapuram. Trivandrum Ramaswami Bhagavata, Parur Sundaram Iyer's guru, was present at the concert, after which he honoured and blessed them.

In 1934, M.S. Anantharaman and Sitalakshmi played the violin in an orchestra, which was presented in Bombay. They travelled by MSM Railway from Madras to Bombay where they stayed for about two weeks. The concert took place at the Opera house, where they presented kriti-s like *Neevadane gana* and rare kriti-s like *Sreeraghukulanidheem* (Husseni raga, Adi tala, Poochi Srinivasa Iyengar). Anantharaman recalls with a smile that it was there they saw a ship for the first time – it was called Jala Raja. The stay for the entire orchestra was arranged at Modern Hindu hotel located at Ballard Pier, Fort. The orchestra then went to Pune where they played for fifteen days.

In 1934, when Muthiah Bhagavathar got many awards and

T.L. Venkatarama Iyer became a Supreme Court Judge, Sundaram Iyer threw a party to honour them. This was held on the first floor of Sangita Vilas, his residence in Mylapore. At the instance of Delhi Rajamani Iyer, Sundaram Iyer arranged a home concert of a very young and talented boy who played the flute that evening, for whom M.S. Anantharaman played the violin. This boy was Flute Mali. Kalakkad Ramanarayana Iyer also attended this party. The proposal for marriage of Sitalakshmi to Ramanarayana Iyer was put forward by Mannarkoil Swaminatha Iyer. This is how Sundaram came to know about Kalakkad Ramanarayana Iyer and chose him to be his first son-in law. The marriage took place in 1935 and Tiger Varadachariar gave a memorable concert for which Gopala Sarma provided able violin accompaniment.

After marriage, Kalakkad Ramanarayana Iyer learnt many kriti-s, including the Navagraha kriti-s from Sitalakshmi and from his father-in-law (which

REAR WINDOW

my father M.S. Anantharaman told me in November this year).

In 1985, nearly fifty years later, when M.S. Anantharaman's son M.A. Sundareswaran joined AIR-Pondicherry as a violinist, he was in for a pleasant surprise. The radio station used to broadcast a programme titled *Palliya Virundu*

from 8.45 am to 9 am conducted by Karukurichi Narayana Iyer. He told Sundareswaran: "This script belongs to your family." On further enquiry, Sundareswaran learnt that it was his own aunt who had taught not only Karukurichi Narayana Iyer, but also the famous nagaswara vidwan Karukurichi Arunachalam

Pillai (Karukurichi Balaji and Mohanram are related to them).

Sitalakshmi is survived by two sons – Mani and Ganesan and a daughter Sundari, all of whom are proficient in music, though not prominent musicians.

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