

KOTHAMANGALAM SUBBU Storyteller par excellence

Vamanan



Young Kothamangalam Subbu

Kothamangalam Subbu was many things all at once – actor, writer, director, lyricist, poet, performer and novelist par excellence. From a timber store clerk whose formal education ended with class eight, he rose to be a tall renaissance man during the freedom struggle. Vitriolic wit, character actor, folksy poet, effective story-teller on celluloid and paper, and great impresario, all rolled into one, he made his home resound to the strains of Carnatic music year after year. When he lost his job of twenty years at Gemini Studios, he adopted the mantle of a people's performer, telling inspiring tales spiced with snatches of poetry and song as a performer of villupattu, a popular folk art.

Tillana Mohanambal

Another facet of Kothamangalam Subbu's creative power burst on the world in the summer of 1956, when

Vasan asked him to inject new energy into his weekly, *Ananda Vikatan*. Under the pseudonym 'Kalaimani', Subbu took upon himself the daunting task of writing an ambitious novel that would be a throwback to the early decades of the century when devadasis still flourished. It encapsulated in the heroine Mohanambal all the beauty, power and glory that the traditional dancers had gained for the art. By the mid-fifties, the age-old system of dedicating girls to temples to perform ritual dance had been outlawed in south India on the charge that it encouraged prostitution, and the time was ripe to show the brighter side of the devadasi dancers. Subbu's artistic life started in the Chettinadu area where affluent Chettiars were known to be patrons of temple dancers. Bringing the wealth of his observation and ardent appreciation of dance and music into full play, he held the reader in thrall, relating the vicissitudes of a tempestuous romance between dancer Mohanambal and nagaswaram genius Shanmugasundaram. Subbu was a stunning raconteur, his narrative reflexes had been honed to perfection in his studio years. With *Tillana Mohanambal* he had the opportunity to weave reams of artistic life that had unfurled before his very eyes into a monumental tale of protagonists who represented the highest ideals of classical dance and music. When Subbu sang his epic requiem not only to the golden age of the temple dancers but also that of nagaswaram players like Rajarathnam Pillai, the devadasis were fast disappearing into the social fabric – away from the glare of persistent bad-mouthing by puritans and reformers. Subbu managed to suggest the Sanskritisation that had struck the clan by making the narrator of the saga, the only son of the Mohanambal-Shanmugasundaram duo, a professor. In the brave new world of independent India, it was more respectable to be an academic than an inspired dancer or spirited piper, especially if you came loaded with the feudal baggage of the past.

It was heartwarming for Subbu that his serial, accompanied by the eye-catching illustrations of artist Gopulu, hit the bull's eye and kept readers mesmerised for more than 100 issues spread over two years. He dreamt that *Tillana Mohanambal* would be filmed

some day; perhaps Vasan would do it or perhaps he himself would, and he would play 'Savdaal' Vaithi, the unflappable, glib-tongued villain who makes life hell for the lead pair, and bring the roof down. Vaithi, after all, was yet another avatar of the conman Subbu had played with consummate success in *Miss Malini*.

Within a decade, Subbu's dreams would come crashing down. Vasan sold the film rights of *Tillana Mohanambal* to filmmaker A.P. Nagarajan under the impression that he (Vasan) owned the rights while Subbu actually did; Nagesh was to play Vaithi to great success though percipient critics pointed out that his Vaithi trivialised the novel's character considerably. Now out of Gemini but still collaborating with it whenever his services were called for, Subbu reportedly refrained from seeing the film, but happened to bump into Nagesh once. The great actor and greater gentleman that he was, he embraced Nagesh warmly.

Kutcheris at home

Subbu's decision to make the age of sadir and nagaswaram the subject of his novel might have been sudden and sparked by Vasan's need to boost his journal's circulation, but it was backed by a lifetime of fascination for dance and music. The responsibilities he had to shoulder even as a youngster deprived Subbu of formal training in music but his tryst with music began back at Kothamangalam with participation in bhajanas. Listening to good music was an overwhelming passion all his life, and he evinced a particular fondness for the nagaswaram and nagaswaram players. One day, indisposed, he missed attending a kutcheri of Rajarathnam Pillai but heard a direct radio relay of the concert. Pouring forth his homage to Pillai in lilting Tamil verse, he crashed into the latter's house the next morning with two of his children in tow. "Rajarathnam, you are a chakravarti of music. As a poor poet, all I can present you in tribute to your musical genius are these verses of mine." Rajarathnam was bowled over by the transparent sincerity of this ardent rasika, a poet, actor and film director in his own right, and of course by the beauty and simplicity of the poetic tribute, and expressed a wish to perform at the wedding of Subbu's daughter. While that wish of the pied piper did not materialise, Subbu went beyond writing celebratory odes to musicians, and offered chamber concerts despite his constrained circumstances. He hosted kutcheris on the Saturdays of the Tamil month of Purattaasi (September-October) in Kothamangalam, and continued the practice with such devotion all through his life, that musicians began to look forward to

performing at his residence. They knew that it was a free ride, the proverbial 'tenga-moodi' affair, but who would miss the cordiality of his home, the food that would follow the concert, and most important of all, Subbu's concluding comments brimming with fitting praise, laced with wit and humour. Perhaps the fact that Subbu was a cinema personality who rubbed shoulders with stars and starmakers also figured in the minds of many a musician. Carnatic music was not anathema in films then, and who knows, the Subbu connection might land you a celluloid role or at least a well-paid marriage kutcheri.

The Saturday kutcheri took place even when Subbu's wife was seriously ill in hospital. The lady had expressed the wish that the kutcheri should not be cancelled as it was very dear to her husband, and died with the satisfaction that it was held as usual. The list of those who performed for Subbu would read like a Who's Who of Carnatic greats, from Ariyakudi to Maharajapuram to Madurai Mani to GNB and Madurai Somu. Lalgudi Jayaraman, who played in many a Purattaasi concert had been a reader of *Tillana Mohanambal* and marvelled at the musical and dance scholarship of its author. Listening to Subbu's summing up of the concerts, he would again wonder at the depth and range of this polymath's musical knowledge.

The overpowering desire to enjoy music at any cost marked Subbu out. Madurai Somu made his appearance at Subbu's residence at something past nine after singing at the Music Academy, and being no respecter of deadlines or the dead of the night, continued singing till three in the morning. Rasikas did keep awake to appreciate the marathon offering, though one suspects the cups of coffee served in between might have helped. Subbu himself wouldn't have found it exacting as it was his habit to stay up late, reading. He also got up late, and would launch straight into bed coffee and writing. This was how much of *Tillana Mohanambal* was written.

Master of villupattu

While Subbu chimed to the best in Carnatic music and sadir, and could come up with soaring lyrics for classical tunes – who can forget his *Maname Murganin mayil vahanam* to a Hindolam air in *Motor Sundaram Pillai* – the folk idiom was his métier for poetry and stage performances. Year after year, *Ananda Vikatan's* Deepavali Malar issues saw Subbu bursting out in rustic song with an élan and empathy unequalled so far. And we know from the response of common folk to his stage performances, whether it was on Kamban's

COVER STORY

Ramayana or Subbu's own folksy works on Mahatma Gandhi (*Gandhi Mahaan Kathai*) or poet Bharati (*Paattile Bharati*), that they regarded Subbu as one of their own. And that was how Subbu made a career of his performances in poetry and music. He was a well-known personality and a draw at literary and religious festivals, where he belted out songs to the accompaniment of a rhythmic instrument, the 'jamukku', with a harmonium (or violin) in tow.

Tamizhmaran, poet and writer, recalls being a witness to Subbu's performance at Terazhundur the birthplace of Kamban. The organisers were sceptical about a good turnout, but Subbu smiled at them, saying, "Wait and see". And just as he said, villagers in bullock-drawn carts suddenly turned up from nowhere, with friends and kin to listen to him. "Didn't I tell you?" said Subbu. Subbu's sheaf of short stories, titled *Manji Virattu*, made such an impression on maverick Tamil writer and journalist Va.Ra. for its closeness to the soil and its understanding of common folk that he called for a common man's Nobel for Subbu. And this was the Subbu that some jealous Gemini staff hated for being a brahmin! Their take was that Vasana banked on Subbu because of his caste. If that had been the case, perhaps Vasana would have closed shop earlier than he did.

Awards like Padma Shri (1971) and Kalasikhamani (1967) came his way. But it is the way Subbu influenced and inspired people that defines him. Dramatist, actor and journalist, Cho Ramasamy was inspired by Subbu's acting and re-enacted Subbu's role in *Miss Malini* (1947) in his *Mr. Sampath* (1972). Cho has openly acknowledged that

Subbu was his role model as an actor. When Ramanand Sagar wrote *Paigam* (1959) for Gemini Vasana, he made the acquaintance of Subbu, who dinned the greatness of *Kamba Ramayanam* into his ears. Later, Sagar was inspired to make his immensely successful TV serial on the *Ramayana* (1987). Nationalist, politician and Tamil savant M.P. Sivagnanam's enthusiasm for popularising the life of the Poligar chieftain Kattabomman as a freedom fighter was derived initially from Subbu's line in a song in *Miss Malini*, where he mentions Kattabomman along with Mahatma Gandhi and Netaji (*Gandhi Mahaan, Netaji, Kattabomman kathai koori*). Subbu commended the work of Sri Lankan Tamil composer Inuvil Veeramani to playback singer T.M. Soundararajan, particularly praising a song composed as a ragamalika. TMS went on to sing *Karpagavalliyin porpadangal* set in Anandabhairavi, Kalyani, Bagesree and Ranjani and it became one of the classics of Tamil devotional music. In his book *Maharastrians in Tamil Nadu*, N. Vittal, IAS (retd.) refers to the novel *Ponniavanattu Poonkuyil*, in which Subbu highlights the role of Maratha rulers like Pratap Singh who played a role "in preserving Tanjore against the designs of people like Chanda Sahib and the Arcot Nawab, as well as the British and the French."

Subbu's centenary went past us quietly in 2010. His grateful children (whom he educated very well) and grandchildren celebrated it with true feeling and as well as they could. Considering the extent of his cinematic and literary output, Subbu deserves to be studied and understood better.

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