

MS and Tamil Isai

Gowri Ramnarayan

COURTESY: RADHA VISWANATHAN



Tributes are being paid everywhere to the legendary Carnatic musician M.S. Subbulakshmi by innumerable organisations holding innumerable concerts with innumerable musicians old and young. So, though I was grateful to the Sruti Foundation for giving me an opportunity to celebrate her 100th year, I wondered how and what I could add to the homage. What can I say about MS that has not been said?

I remembered Subbulakshmi's crusade for Tamil Isai, a less known, near forgotten chapter in her life.

We have all seen MS as the upholder of tradition, as a meek, unassuming, modest, super-conservative Indian woman of the old school. How interesting then to see MS in the role of a rebel! In the 1930s and 1940s, M.S. Subbulakshmi found herself in the midst of an aggressive, no-holds-barred, brangling controversy. Mind you, *not* on the side of Authority and Status Quo, but on the *other side of the fence!*

She who had always bowed her head, now looked up to raise her voice in support of the radicals! She who had toed the conventional line, now transgressed it! She even dared to oppose her own revered gurus and seniors.

Yes, M.S. Subbulakshmi joined the Tamil Isai Movement. Undoubtedly, without her leading voice, this movement would have toppled quickly. And as I studied her part in this historic movement, I realised that her musical satyagraha made a singular contribution, not to a language-driven agitation, but to Carnatic music itself, in a lasting and remarkable way. We also discover a very useful truth. An artist can remain rooted in sampradaya, tradition, but go against convention.

It is strange to recall that MS was banned by the Madras Music Academy for five whole years, for singing Tamil songs in the major, first section of the concert. For the Academy opposed the movement tooth and nail, even passing resolutions against Tamil Isai. After those five years, she returned to the Academy on her own terms – she would not accept any restrictions of language or content. And the Academy mandarins accepted her on her terms, only because they feared competition from the rival sangeeta sabha that her husband Thiagarajan Sadasivam was planning to launch. Moreover, they needed her benefit concerts to raise funds to build their own auditorium which now stands on Cathedral Road.

So what was this Tamil Isai movement?

In the 1930s and 1940s, Carnatic music concerts consisted almost entirely of Telugu and Sanskrit compositions, and no Tamil song was ever heard in the first and serious half of the concert. In the post-tani tukkada segment, a tevaram or a tiruppugazh might make a reluctant appearance, quickly smothered by songs from other languages.

A group of people in the Madras Presidency, many of them Tamil litterateurs like T.K. Chidambaranatha Mudaliar, along with wealthy music patrons from the Tamil-loving Chettiar community of music patrons, thought that their enjoyment of Carnatic music would be enhanced if *some* songs in the concerts were rendered in their mother tongue. They argued that Tyagaraja who lived in Tamil Nadu, composed in Telugu only because it came naturally to him as his mother tongue. So was it not equally natural to understand the desire in Tamil-born listeners for songs in their own language?

Incredibly, this simple request unleashed a frenzy of objections, acrimonious, even venomous. Their opponents denounced the singing of Tamil songs in the pre-tani stage as a sacrilege. Why? Some saw Tamil as a harsh, *kaattumirandi* language. Secondly, they argued that the poor quality of Tamil compositions would demean Carnatic music.

The Tamils faction did not begin their fight demanding “Tamil only” in concerts. All they wanted was the inclusion of more serious Tamil songs, and only in concerts held in Tamil Nadu. But the Telugu faction feared that giving importance to Tamil songs posed a threat to the Mummoorti or the trinity. If allowed entry, Tamil kritis would replace the gems of

Tyagaraja, Dikshitar and Syama Sastry. “Down with Tamil!” became their slogan.

The opposition was roused into holding Tamil Isai Conferences in many towns where only Tamil songs were permitted in the festival series. Carnatic vidwans wanted to participate, but the all-Tamil kriti demand frightened them. They did not want to offend the Telugu faction bigwigs. More importantly, they simply did not know enough Tamil kritis for a three-hour concert. The kritis of Papanasam Sivan, Gopalakrishna Bharati and Ghanam Krishna Iyer were not well known as they are today. The Tamil trinity – Arunachala Kavi, Marimutha Pillai and Muthu Tandavar had been almost forgotten.

It is hilarious to note that the majority of the Tamil song “haters” were not Andhravadus or Kannada folk, but were themselves Tamil born. Many of these listeners knew no Telugu and less Sanskrit, but opposed their mother tongue Tamil on the Carnatic concert platform. The vidwans would say in robust Thanjavur dialect: “Sing Tyagaraja and you grip every ear. Try Tamil and the concert sags....”

But this myth was easily dispelled. All you had to do was to

go to the Devakottai Tamil Isai conference (1941) and hear the lady – in midnight blue vairaoosi sari with an arakku border, her blue jagger diamonds twinkling on ear and nose, jasmine crescent on her bichoda coiffure as fragrant as her brigas and gamakas – in the Hamsadhvani opener *Arul purivai karunai kadale*, by Suddhananda Bharati, the nationalist poet and yogi. Listeners went into a trance when MS sang a rousing viruttam by Subramania Bharati which asked, “Is there a language as sweet as our Tamil in the entire world?” showering coruscating sangatis as only she could.

MS knew of Subramania Bharati’s warning that singing exclusively in a language that the listener did not understand would make Carnatic music lose ground in Tamil Nadu. She often heard Rasikamani T.K. Chidambaranatha Mudaliar insist that sahitya bhava was indispensable to the kriti, and that neither singer nor listener could experience rasa without understanding the lyric – “*Porul terindu paaduvadu bhava sangeetam, matradellam ayyo paavam sangeetam*”.

It was one thing to demand Tamil Isai, but quite another to supply it. There were very few Tamil compositions going around with the finish of a Tyagaraja kriti or Syama Sastry swarajati.

Braving the ban

Tamil Isai concert scripted, directed and narrated by Gowri Ramnarayan for *Sruti* in February 2016



The musicians

Vocal: Amritha Murali
Violin: R.K. Shriramkumar
Mridangam: K. Arun Prakash

Song list

Yamarinda mozhigalile – Subramania Bharati, ragamalika
Arul purivai – Suddhananda Bharati, Hamsadhvani
Saranam saranam – Arunachala Kavi, Saurashtram

Guhasaravana bhava – Papanasam Sivan, Simhendramadhyamam
Artha piravi – Manickavachakar, Sankarabharanam
Deiva Tamil naattinile – Kalki Krishnamurti, ragamalika
Nenjukku neediyum – Subramania Bharati, Sindhubhairavi
Angai kodumalar – Chenchuritti, Nadanamakriya
Vazhiya sentamizh

The only Tamil compositions in rakti ragas which had *azhuttam*, depth, and *ghanam*, weight, belonged to a genre that was then confined to women singers. And though vidwans trekked to Georgetown to hear Veena Dhanammal and were awed by the musicianship of her daughters and granddaughters, few men could rise to the challenge of singing a ripe padam. Also, few men wanted to give it a try as they disdained their sringara content and devadasi associations.

It must also be admitted that, unlike Kshetrappa's lyrical verses, Tamil padams mostly had pedestrian sahitya, often downright *kocchai* – vulgar, the lyric often absurdly out of sync with the noble music. Think of *Ettanai sonnalum* – where the words totally mismatch the fabulous Saveri! And anyway, MS did not want to sing padams in any language. She was most at home with the kriti format.

So MS found that opting for Tamil Isai also meant exploration and discovery. She had to develop a brand new repertoire of compositions with dignity in thought, emotion, language and raga. She began to spend whole days in searching, learning, polishing, fine-tuning a wide range of concert-worthy compositions. After all Tamil Isai's goal was to prove that Tamil could go beyond mere bhajanai, it could be as euphonious as sundara Telugu, its content as uplifting as a Tyagaraja kriti.

Not easy! But since her partnership with Sadasivam had widened her world, she had writers and connoisseurs to suggest new lyrics. Kalki quickly wrote a song for her with niraval possibilities – *Vandadum solai tanile*. He was no vaggeyakara and had to be content with setting the words to Tyagaraja's music in *Undedi ramudu*. His ragamalika *Malai pozhudinile*, written especially for the duo Bharatanatyam performances of his daughter Anandhi and Sadasivam's daughter Radha, became a hit as MS rendered it for their dance and in her concerts. It may be mentioned here that with TKC's advice, Anandhi-Radha's parents chose some very special songs for their abhinaya, bringing Kamban (*Maaninam*) and Subramania Bharati (*Aduvome pallu paduvome*) to the Bharatanatyam stage for the first time. Anandhi-Radha's dance recitals became part of the Tamil Isai movement!

MS found compositions to present – songs like *Araar asaipadar* (Muthu Tandavar), *Yaro ivar yaro* (Arunachala Kavi), *Saranam saranam* (Kavi Kunjara Bharati), *Jhankara sruti* (Suddhananda Bharati), and *Sambho Mahadeva* (Neelakantha Sivan). They began to bear the MS stamp.

Why did so many experts and heavyweights see the demand for Tamil sahitya as a death knell for Carnatic music? The Music Academy stalwarts even tried to pass rules to stop the new disease – “Tamil vyadhi”. *The Hindu* wrote leaders condemning the Tamil demand. You wonder how all these people could have been so deaf and blind to Papanasam Sivan, lovingly called Tamil Tyagayya. Sivan's compositions strengthened Tamil Isai immeasurably, especially as he was

so prolific and offered such a fantastic choice of raga and theme.

MS had tremendous admiration for Sivan. On the rare afternoons she was alone, you could hear her humming his songs... *Sikkil meviya* was a favourite. She would sing the sangatis again and again, nodding her head as she relished his special touches. The Sivan kritis which she often sang – *Kartikeya gangeya*, *Ka va va*, *Saravana bhava Guhane*, stood out not only for their raga bhava but also invoked the linguistic power of Tamil.

Sivan composed enchanting songs for all the four films in which MS Subbulakshmi acted between 1939 and 1947. Some of them have become part of the Carnatic music treasury. One of them, in the film *Savitri*, a lighter tune with a poignant sahitya, survived in vidwan D.K. Jayaraman's repertoire. Though poor MS was embarrassed and reluctant to play the male role of Narada in this film, on the screen she looks glad and lighthearted as she sings that song. And yes, you saw the same carefree joy on D.K. Jayaraman's face when he sang *Maname kanamum maravade* in his concerts, relishing its sweetness everytime.

Funnily enough, in espousing the Tamil Isai cause Sadasivam, Kalki and MS found themselves in an unexpected political dilemma. Affiliated to the Indian National Congress and devoted to the Mahatma's ideals, on the Tamil Isai cause alone they found themselves on the same side as Justice Party stalwarts like Raja Sir Annamalai Chettiar and Shanmugam Chettiar who favoured British rule in India. Worse, the pro-Telugu faction was mostly sympathetic to the Congress.

But even more strangely, no one found this alliance-switch in and for a cultural cause, strange or unethical. Can India today boast of such ruthless honesty?

Kalki, Sadasivam and MS solved a major problem by maintaining their ideologies in the songs. The Tamil songs they chose became a means of propagating their own political ideals. For example, Gopalakrishna Bharati's *Sabhapatikku veru devivam* hoisted the flag not only for Tamil *mozhi* or language but also Gandhi's message of caste equality.

In *Sevasadanam*, a film based on Munshi Premchand's cutting critique of oppressing women in Indian society, when MS sang as a character who was a victim of gender exploitation, her *Guhasaravanabhava* was not just a bhakti song, it became a reformist call for women's emancipation. Yes, MS Amma's Tamil Isai concerts became manifestos of nationalist aspirations, social reform and spiritual goals.

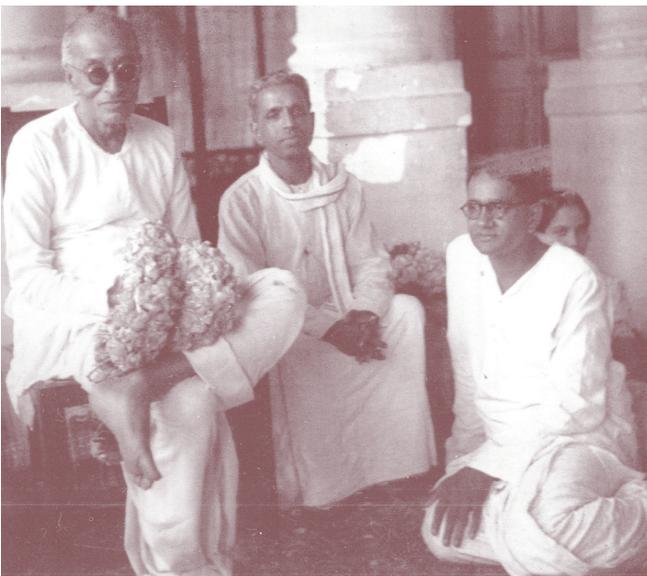
But Tamil Isai continued to suffer from scarcity of songs. Kalki attends Annamalai University's three-day Tamil Isai conference hoping that Tamil only concerts would have unearthed a huge variety of Tamil compositions. But his glum guide tells him that he heard the same songs in every concert; moreover most vidwans mangled the words beyond linguistic identification!



Sadasivam and MS

An opponent taunts Kalki, “Why do you need new kritis? Why not simply chant *Tevaram* and *Tiruvachakam*?” The contempt is evident as these songs were innocent of classical kriti ornamentations. Almost as a reply, the MS concert at the Tamil Isai Vizha featured Manickavachakar’s exquisite devotional verse as the main piece. The question was, could this short lyric accommodate panoramic classicism?

Rajaji, Kalki and Sadasivam



Despite his misgivings about Tamil Isai, guru Semmangudi came to the rescue and set the piece in a Sankarabharanam – rivalling *Saroja dala netri* or *Swararaga sudha* in grandeur.

We all know that niraval is the specialty of the MS bani. And in this piece MS absolutely outdid herself with “*Vaartaiyum pesi.... Kuzhal mel vandaarpa*”. As her voice rose to glorious heights, ragabhava and arthabhava enhanced each other in a magnificent pageant. The audience was spellbound, swaying in rapture. The next day Semmangudi said to MS, “Kunjamma, your niraval haunts me still!” TKC who was present immediately exclaimed, “*Appadi vanga vazhikku!* Now you have understood the magic of Tamil Isai.”

Apart from developing hardcore kritis in Tamil, MS also sang a host of Tamil poems, belonging to different ages, each a gem of beauty. Their classicism stems from their linguistic grandeur, from the sheer power of the word. In their own way, they elevated listeners just as classical Carnatic kritis did.

I mention two such evergreens. The first is no surprise, where Subramania Bharati calls his Saraswati *Kalai-Tamizh-vani*, the Tamil goddess of speech and the arts, and commands her never to let a single moment of his life stagnate in idleness. She must flood him with the powers of creativity. Whenever I hear this song I see MS – not on the stage, but among workers and labourers on Vijayadasami day, at the Kalki printing press, with huge, sandalpaste-splashed printing machines in the background. She always sang *Nenjukku neetiyum* for their ayudha pooja, with the same ardour she brought to it on the concert stage. For this audience, her music was no entertainment, it was the mantra to sustain them in their work space right through their round-the-year labours.

The next song was also mantra – but to MS Amma herself in her own life. It was taught to her by laya wizard Dakshinamurthy Pillai, who encouraged young Kunjamma during her uncertain, difficult and vulnerable early stage. “Child!” he said with his hand on her head. “You have something unique. Bhavam, emotion. That is the soul of sangeetam, music. Everything else is only a frill. Don’t worry. *Nanna varuve*. You will do well.”

All her life MS remained simple, innocent, trusting. And I end with her words about that sanctified moment. “The great vidwan wished me well. Nothing is permanent, but the guru’s grace and the blessing of elders will always protect us.”

Angai kodumalar toovi, taught by Dakshinamurthy Pillai, a prayer to Dakshinamoorti, the guru of gurus, sage of sages, yogi of yogis, became a talisman to Subbulakshmi. Listeners who heard her sing it were filled with the wonder of His wisdom and the music of His silence.

We can see how, by stressing the importance of poetry, the need to understand the meaning of the sahitya for total immersion in music, Tamil Isai also elevated the artist, the poet and the singer, as the true visionary, the guardian of ideals, the leader of humankind.