

KAMALA MURTHY

A Harikatha artist par excellence

As I entered Mela Raja Veedhi in Tanjavur, a stoic silence prevailed. I am never at a loss for words whenever I pass through the palace area reminiscing about great personalities and incidents connected with it. But that day, my heart was heavy as I was returning after paying my last respects to the great Harikatha exponent T.R. Kamala Murthy. As I approached Baloba lane, I asked my nephew to slow down where Kamala Murthy had lived. Memories of Mami raced through my mind; it was difficult to accept the passing away of the favourite, lovable, precious daughter of Tanjavur. When I entered the house on the outskirts of Tanjavur that morning, it was the first time that I was not welcomed with the trademark greeting of “Ram, Ram” in that deep voice of hers. The small gathering of local artists including Mythili Kannan, T.K. Ramachandran, and Veenai Ramdas, who were there to pay their last respects, were all in tears as they narrated their personal experiences with Kamala Murthy. She was an embodiment of bhakti

Young Kamalamba presenting a kathakalakshepam



and had regaled innumerable rasikas with her gripping stories.

Born in 1932 in Tanjavur, Kamalamba, was an intelligent child who could grasp anything she heard at the first instance, she was an ‘ekasantagrahi’. She moved to Chidambaram with her maternal grandfather at a very young age. Raja Bhagavatar, who taught music in the neighbourhood, heard the eight-year old Kamalamba sing the compositions that he was teaching his student. Impressed with her talent, he decided to groom her in the art of kathakalakshepam. He taught her the nirupanam for *Vatsala Kalyanam*—the first story that is taught to beginners of the art. Kamalamba learnt it in no time and was able to reproduce it with her own charm. Her maiden performance saw her perform the same story at a Dikshitar’s house in Chidambaram for which she was rewarded with a ‘*vaira oosi*’ pattu pavadai with lines and lines of zari. Kamala Mami used to fondly recall the incident with a lot of laughter saying that the pattu pavadai had attracted her attention more than the appreciation of the audience at that tender age!

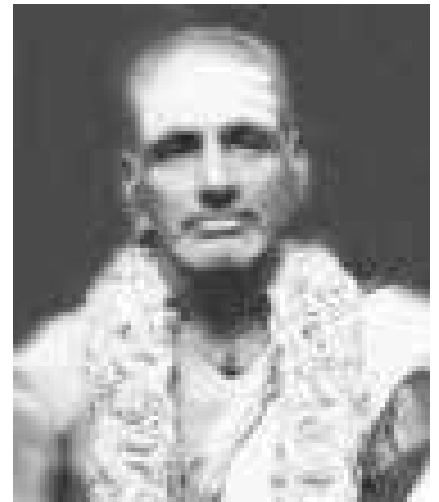
The ensuing Navaratri witnessed the nine-year old performing *Vatsala Kalyanam* in several homes of the Dikshitar in Chidambaram. Her little hands handled the talam and the chipla kattai in a very seasoned manner. She soon became the flavor of the season and the talk of the town. But



soon, she had to return to Tanjavur to her parents, which left Raja Bhagavatar very sad. On her return to Tanjavur, she was fortunate to come under the tutelage of Tiruvaiyaru Annasami Bhagavatar. Every day, her father would escort her to Bhavasami Agraharam in Tiruvaiyaru, to learn from the doyen. Bhagavatar’s entire family showered heaps of love and affection on the child.

Annasami Bhagavatar, who was orthodox and shy by nature, never

Annasami Bhagavatar





The Harikatha artist

sat face-to-face while he taught Kamalamba. When mami and I visited Bhagavata's house a few years ago, she recalled with nostalgia the place where he would be seated during class while she sat close to a pillar in the same hall. Kamalamba not only imbibed the great tradition and style from Annasami Bhagavata but also his simplicity and modesty. Like him, she would never quote a fee for her performances.

The seed sown by Raja Bhagavata had borne fruit over the years. Unfortunately, he was not alive to see Kamalamba blossom into a fine Harikatha artist. She went on to attain significant name and fame in the history of the Harikatha tradition.

After marriage Kamala balanced her family and profession with utmost care. At home, she was a simple wife and mother, who raised four sons and two daughters. On stage she was transformed and took a completely different avatar!

She was a story-teller par excellence, propounding dharma. Her mastery over several languages, her inimitable singing style, and choice delivery of appropriate verses and compositions, culminated in exceptional kathakalakshepams, taking her to new heights. Like her guru, she also had the knack of handling humour in a subtle, soft and deft manner. Mami would often say: "Not everyone can learn or perform Harikatha". She was a stickler for tradition and her performances were enjoyed by all, even in remote villages. She would never complain

nor gossip. Even in her discourses, she would refrain from talking ill of the characters in the storyline. When she was asked to present a programme on Arunagirinatha for All India Radio, I recall her telling me that she planned to focus only on his bhakti and the greatness of *Tiruppugazh* rather than tell stories about his early life.

Her Harikatha performances were interestingly woven with many traditional forms such as choornika, pancha chamaram, dandakam, matta kokilam, ovi, saki, dandi, gatka, dwipada, padyam and many others that she had mastered. She used to sing along 'vanavarnana' gatka—an excellent record of all the trees found in the Indian diaspora. She had great respect for her co-artists on stage and would often state that providing mridangam accompaniment for a Harikatha performance was really tough. Rajam Iyer, disciple of Tanjavur Vaidyanatha Iyer, ably accompanied her till his end.

With her husband





With her granddaughter Suchithra

Kamala Murthy chose to live in Tanjavur all her life and did not want to move to Chennai like her peers. She was fortunate to have been closely associated with the diverse culture of Tanjavur, especially with the Maharashtrian bhajankars. Her passion for the art form was immense; she would become a student wherever she heard a new song or verse—classical or folk—and made sure she learnt it on the spot. “She learnt about Vallalar from Swaminathan Pillai of Ammanpettai with great devotion. Her discourse on Vallalar for All India Radio was famous and was repeatedly aired on popular request from rasikas,” recalls Suchithra, Kamala Murthy’s

granddaughter and a Harikatha artist.

Kamala Murthy received the TTK Award from the Music Academy, Madras (1993), the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi Award (2000) and the Tagore Akademi Fellow (2011) among other awards and accolades. From the prize money she received, she contributed to Veda pathasalas and to the acharyas. When S h a n m u k h a n a n d a Sangeetha Sabha,

Mumbai, honoured her with an enormous kuthuvilakku, she in turn donated it to the Bangaru Kamakshi Amman Temple in Tanjavur.

Although she attained name and fame, Kamala Murthy was an epitome of modesty and considered herself a humble student till the very end. I have seen her clearing her doubts and learning new slokas from Swaminatha Athreyar who lived nearby. She also visited Sekkizhar Adi-podi T.N. Ramachandran (TNR) with equal verve. During the last few years, when she was unable to move out, TNR would send books to her house. She also had great reverence for Venkatasubrahmanya Sastrigal

who played a major role in shaping her career. She always spoke about him with great reverence, with palms folded and guru bhakti gleaming in her eyes. She held senior musicians in awe and was very fond of M.S. Subbulakshmi and her music soaked in bhakti.

Even a five-minute conversation with her would teach us lessons of a lifetime—from *Bhagavatam* to kitchen hacks. She would render the choicest of sacred chants.

Mami and I shared a very special friendship, as did my mother. Kamala mami’s performances were part and parcel of every happy occasion in our family. When Kalakshetra decided to document her performances, she chose our Marabu Foundation as the venue for the documentation and stayed with me in Tillaisthanam through the process. I remember that she sat for hours together tirelessly shooting for the project.

Filled with surging memories, I decided to leave her house. This time there was none to say “*Ram Ram*”. The euphonious voice of Harikatha Vani Kamala Murthy was silenced for ever on 10 December 2018; the art of Harikatha had lost a legendary performer.

RAMA KAUSALYA
(A musicologist and academician)

Prabhudas B. Patwari, former Governor of Tamil Nadu, honouring Kamala Murthy



Receiving the SIES Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswati National Eminence Award from V. Shankar

