

## A SHORT BIOGRAPHY OF KAVITHAMANI K.M.SOUNDARYAVALLI

(July 22, 1914 — October 8, 1994)



**S**rimathi K.M. Soundaryavalli, a Tamilian lady, was the eldest child of Sriman Nadadoor Ammal Narasimhacharya, who spent the major part of his life in the Andhra region, serving as teacher, principal and Inspector of Schools. Sri. Narasimhacharya was an eminent scholar in Telugu and Sanskrit, and was noted for his piety and devotion. His favourite pastime was composing poetry in Telugu and Sanskrit, translating great Sanskrit works into Telugu, and writing exhaustive commentaries on them. He had composed hundreds of *padyams* and other types of literary pieces in Telugu and Sanskrit, but none of them came to be widely known; because of his modest nature he shunned publicity and limelight. His works were, however, highly appreciated by eminent title-holding scholars, such as Ongole Venkatrangayya Pantulu, Sripada Krishnamurthy Sastry of Rajahmundry, Paravastu Govindacharya of Vijayanagaram and Satavadhani Srinivasa Sodarulu. After his demise, only one of his compositions, Ramayana Keerthanalu, could be got recorded by the All India Radio (AIR) Hyderabad, portions of which are played in the Bhakthi Ranjani programme on the Sri Rama Navami every year. His translation and commentary on Subhashithaneevi of Srimad Vedantha Desikan was also published. Dr. K. Vageesh, presently Station Director, All India Radio (AIR), Thirichirapalli, had recorded one of Sri. Narasimhacharya's lyrics, Sangraha Ramayana, on a cassette. Two other lyrics have been recorded by AIR Delhi and are being frequently relayed in the first programme of the day. Sri. Narasimhacharya's talent for writing poetry and verse was very great. His literary works and a number of his compositions appeared regularly in the religious periodical Vaishnava Patrika from Pentapadu in Andhra Pradesh.

Srimathi Soundaryavalli spent her childhood in the Andhra region and was conversant more with Telugu. She had minimal formal education and musical

training. In fact, her initiation to music was by a naadaswara vidwan, Sri. Murugula Seetharamayya. She was nurtured in the divine lore by her illustrious father.

Married at an early age, she migrated back to the Tamil region. She re-learnt Tamil by reading over and over again great Tamil works like the Kamba Ramayanam and the Divya Prabhandams.

Her family life was none too happy. She lost her first six children soon after their births. She was mentally and physically afflicted. When she was pregnant with her seventh child, she proceeded to Chola Simhapuram (corrupted as Sholingur and also variously known as Ghatikadri, Ghatikachalam or simply Ghatikai) in the North Arcot district of Tamil Nadu. At that holy place she worshipped Goddess Amruthavalli and Lord Yoga Narasimha, presiding on top of the taller of the two hillocks. There, the Lord appeared in a vision and assured her that not only the child she was carrying would survive but her future issues would also.

And, this became a reality! Her five daughters and two sons born later all survived!

One day, in a dream, she was questioning herself: "Why should I not sing the praises of the Lord and His Divine Consort who have blessed me with children?" And, as if answering, she heard the voice of the Lord: "Sing! I'll listen!" She woke up with a start. She recounted her dream to anyone who cared to listen. This narration was itself a lyric of five verses – Yoga Narasimha Sevai. She followed this up with a twelve-stanza verse, Dasaavatharam, and sung it as a raagamaalika.

These incidents and the two lyrical compositions were included in an article entitled Cholasimhapuram by the late Sri. M.K Rangaswamy Iyengar, published in the Dinamani Sudar dated February 5, 1956. These compositions were also reproduced in the Devasthaana Pathrikai of Sholingur, in its issue dated February 26, 1956.

The gene of her noble father, bearing the talent of composing poetry involuntarily, passed on to her. In her mournful and care-worn moments, she started praying even as she was cooking or doing other household chores – but her prayers were not mere prosaic words; they came gushing out as keerthanas, pasuram-like compositions and padyams, with rhetorical and prosodic beauties built into them. Later she used to scribble these on bits of paper and stash them away in some place.

Unlike her father, whose compositions were mainly in Telugu and Sanskrit, she was blessed with the gift of composing in Tamil as well as in Telugu and Sanskrit. Her childhood training in music enabled her to set her own compositions to music with ease, in chaste Karnatak tradition.

During the 1940s, she participated regularly in Padya Pathana programme of AIR Chennai, till she had to give up because of her growing filial responsibilities.

In 1950, she had an opportunity of visiting Thiruvayyaru, the holy place where Saint Thyagaraja, having composed his immortal keerthanas, attained the bliss of samadhi. She then visualised the Saint as her Guru and composed a composite set of thirty keerthanas in Telugu on the Saint and christened the set as Sri Thyaga Guru Sthuthi Keerthanas. These won the appreciation of Prof. P. Sambamurthy and of Srimathi Bangalore Nagarathnamma. In 1955, the periodical Andhra Mahila serialised these keerthanas with notation. These keerthanas were reviewed in The Hindu dated April 21, 1957, by no less a person than Sangeeth Kala Acharya Sri. T.S. Parthasarathy. The measure of his appreciation can best be understood by the fact that five of these keerthanas have been included in one of his books, which contains a collection of poetical compositions on Saint Thyagaraja by various vaggeyakaraas. After that the songs went into oblivion. However, later in 1973, a few of these keerthanas were recorded by the AIR Vijayawada, for broadcast. A noteworthy feature of these keerthanas is that, having considered Saint Thyagaraja as her Guru, she was reluctant to advertise herself and, therefore, did not use her normal mudra "sunadara" in any of the kritis. Instead she used the synonymous names of her two eldest daughters "Amrutha" and "Sudha" in these keerthanas.

In 1954, she had the good fortune of having the divine darsan of the venerable Paramacharya of Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham and singing in his august presence her compositions and a ragamalika of twelve stanzas detailing the sublime life of the Aadi Sankaracharya, composed by her in Tamil specially for the occasion. Moved by her devotion and by the excellence of her compositions, the Jagadguru conferred on her the title of KAVITHAMANI. As ordained by him, the late Justice Sri. P.V.Rajamannar, the then Chief Justice of Madras, announced the conferment of the title at a public function got up to felicitate her in Saidapet, Chennai.

In 1962, the Vijayawada station of AIR accepted her compositions. Some of her keerthanas have been rendered on AIR and in public concerts by the late Sri. Susarla Sivaram, Sri. Raghavachari, her daughter Amruthavalli and others.

In 1964, discovering her knowledge of Sanskrit and her talent to set Sanskrit verses to music, the Desika Sabha, Chennai, got her to cut five gramophone discs (two 75 RPM and three LPs) of some of the stotras of Sri Vedantha Desikan. The discs (GE 22806 & 22807 and SEDE 3606, 3607 & 3608 of Columbia) are not now available, though the Delhi Station of AIR plays the Srithuthi on some Fridays.

Sri Krishnadevraya Andhra Bhasha Nilayam, Hyderabad, presented her Sri Thyaga Guru Sthuthi Keerthanas in a vocal concert on April 10, 1974, at the Nilayam Hall, Hyderabad. The concert was presided over by Sri. Nookala China Sathyanarayana (the then Principal of the Government Music College, Hyderabad) and reviewed in The Indian Express dated April 14, 1974 by Sri. E.N.Purushothaman.

From 1965 to 1985, in Delhi, where she had shifted, she endeared herself to many by setting to music Sanskrit verses of Sri Vedanta Desikan, Aadi Sankaracharya and other great saints and teaching them to ladies of high social status.

Endeavours were made to bring out her compositions on cassettes, in which Dr. T.R. Subramanian, a musician of repute, then teaching music in the University of Delhi, was of great inspiration and help. But the task did not fully fructify. Only two cassettes - one of Telugu and the other of Tamil keerthanas - could be brought out under the aegis of the Music Education Trust, New Delhi. The cassettes were released in 1990 by Vidwan Sri. S. Kalyanaraman.

Sri Balantrapu Rajanikantha Rao (a writer of eminence and a poet in his own right, who retired as a Station Director, AIR) also included Srimathi Soundaryavalli in his monumental work Andhra Vaaggeyakaara Charitramu.

In 1991, AIR, Bangalore, chose to interview her. The broadcast had a good response.

In his six-volume compendium of music, musicians and composers (the "GARLAND" series), Sri. N. Rajagopalan, I.A.S (Retd.) has included the name of Soundaryavalli also, with encomiums and praise.

At the age of 75, when all her children were well settled and she had a host of grand children and great-grand children, her mind was still wandering in search of inner peace. She then got herself initiated as an Abhyasi in the Sahaj Marg of Sri Ram Chandra Mission of Shahjehanpur. At that advanced age, though physically weak with lifelong Diabetes, varicose veins, hypertension, loss of hearing and memory, her faculty of comprehension and appreciation, and involuntarily composing lyrics was quite intact. She composed 27 krithis in Telugu and 34 in Tamil on the method, mission and the Master (the President of the Mission). The Committee of the Mission, while profusely appreciating the compositions and their content, declined any music to interfere with their missionary work, as they felt Abhyasis might get engrossed in the music and neglect the real aspect and goal of the great movement that is Sahaj Marg. Perhaps, they are right. In order not to create any controversy, the lyrics on Sahaj Marg are not included in the volumes. The President of the Mission, however, gave us permission to print these kritis as separate booklets and distribution among interested Abhyasis. Our grateful thanks are due to him for this kind gesture. An extraordinary feature of these kritis is that, when on the path to salvation by renunciation, she was utterly reluctant to use any means of signing the kritis with her own name or even any other means!

It was sometimes felt that she had a congenital compulsion to write -- and write poetry. It is now noticed from an old diary of hers, an entry dated September 18, 1993 - just a year before she attained salvation at 80-plus. She was with a notebook and a pencil in her hands. Her youngest grand son playfully asked her: "Would you

take these with you to the bath room also!" Her reply was a verse of eight lines in Tamil:

படமுடியாத துயரிலும்  
பரிவுடனே பிரியாமல்  
திடமனித்துத் தொழனைப் போல்  
துணையாய் இருந்தெந்தன்  
மடமைமிகும் இருள் நீக்கி  
மதித்தென்னை மகிழ்வித்த  
உன் பிறந்த தல்வெழுத்தே  
உனைப் பிரிந்தும் வாழ்வேனோ !

Before closing, a mention must be made that these compositions are not literary pieces in the strictest sense, but yearnings and laments of a harried wife, a concerned mother and a firm believer. If a scholar delves deep into these and finds literary gems and pearls of wisdom scattered among them, they are godsend and not a product of wilful sculpture of a professional poet, using dictionary, thesaurus, book of quotations and such other implements in crafting poetry.

Collections of these outpourings in Tamil are in a book "AMARA SOUNDARIYAM". Her lyrical compositions in Telugu are in a companion volume "SOUNDARYAVALLARI". Her compositions on Sahaj Marg are in another volume "SAHAJA SOUNDARYAM.

My nagging desire to publish her music has finally begun to take shape. Sri. Sunder Kidambi (now in Boston, USA) has put up her musical renderings of the Stotras of Srimad Vedantha Desikan on his website <http://www.prapatti.com>. Any amount of thanks and gratitude is proverbially insufficient. I shall remain indebted to him for generations to come.

And Sri Natraj Venkat (now in Seattle, USA,) has hosted all her lyrical compositions in Roman script on his website <http://www.musicalnirvana.com>. My gratitude to him is immeasurable.

And now, Mr. Lakshman Ragde (living in Canada for the past forty years) has kindly obliged me and has added all the compositions to his database that has already more than 34,000 compositions of various vaaggeyakaras! Mr. Ragde can be contacted at [luzchurch@hotmail.com](mailto:luzchurch@hotmail.com). How to repay my gratitude him will ever haunt me.

What more do I aspire for? Nothing. These three loving and lovable "brothers" of mine have completed my life's task.

Bangalore:  
September 6, 2004  
(Gokulashtami)

K.N. Sundaram

PS. – 1. This write up has been put up on the website <http://www.karnatik.com/article015.shtml> - to the webmaster of which I am thankful

2. Audio versions of 20 compositions of Srimati Soundaryavalli on Saint Tyagaraja have been put up on the website <http://www.surasa.net/music/karnatak/contrib/index2.php>, for which I am really grateful to the site's Webmaster Sri. Sai Susarla. They have also been put up on [www.ecse.rpi.edu/Homepages/shivkuma/ personal/music/Sundaram/index.html](http://www.ecse.rpi.edu/Homepages/shivkuma/personal/music/Sundaram/index.html), by Sri, Shivkumar Kalyanaraman to whom also my grateful thanks.

3. Blue Lotus Informatics Pvt.Ltd (203, Kalyani Classics, Srinivasa Colony East, Ameerpet, Hyderabad – 500 038, INDIA) has brought out a 3-disc set “*RAGANIDHI*”, in which two of Srimati Soundaryavalli's special compositions (1. a raga maalika of 12 raagaas – the names the raagaas ingeniously included in the sahyta – and 2. a raga-taala-maalika of seven ragas and seven taalaas – the names of the raagaas as well as the taalaas ingeneously included in the saahitya) have been included) as “specialities”. A mere word of thanks to the Company's Director Dr.L.N.Prasada Rao Gandlur would be a mere scanty formality..

Bangalore – Oct.2, 2005.

4. On 25<sup>th</sup> June 2006, Mr. Rajagopalan Srinivasan has been kind enough to upload on his website <http://www.sangeethapriya.org/Composers/kms/kms.html>, 20 of Sri Thyaga Guru Stuti Kertanaas and the special compositions Raagamaalika and raga-taala-maalika. My grateful thanks to him.

