

Bangalore Nagaratnammal An ardent devotee of Tyagaraja

- Chandra Bhanu

Saint Tyagaraja's contribution to the world of Karnatic Music is unparalleled. It is our good fortune that his musical compositions, which were divine inspirations, are handed down to us by his numerous disciples. Tyagaraja had over 30 direct disciples drawn from different places. They were greatly responsible for immortalising his kritis. But none of them had the initiative or vision to construct a memorial or Samadhi for their great guru. Even the Umayalpuram brothers who were close to the saint composer did not set up a suitable memorial for him. It was Bangalore Nagaratnamma, the multi talented, philanthropic lady from the Devadasi community, the benefactor devotee of Tyagaraja, who single handedly constructed a temple for the Saint composer at his Samadhi near the banks of the river Kaveri.

Nagaratnamma, daughter of Puttalakshamma (a devadasi and Subba Rao, a successful lawyer) was born in Nanjanagudu near Mysore on 3rd November 1878. Giribhattara Thammayya, a poet at the Mysore court, was her first guru who taught her Sanskrit, Music and many other art forms. She learnt violin from her uncle Venkataswamy Appa, a famed musician at the Mysore court. Later Puttalakshamma moved to Bangalore and put Nagaratnamma under the tutelage of Munuswamy Appa, who was a student of Walajapet Krishnaswamy Bhagavatar, son of Walajapet Venkataramana Bhagavatar, a direct disciple of Tyagaraja. Thus Nagaratnamma's musical lineage can be traced to Tyagaraja.

The well known musician and composer, Bidaram Krishnappa took special interest in Nagaratnamma and was to a great extent responsible for her becoming a renowned vidhushi. Her pleasant voice and strong musical background created great demand for her concerts. She usually rendered Tyagaraja kritis in her concerts. Nagarathnamma was especially fond of the raga - Yadukulakamboji and she rendered this raga in almost all her concerts. Those fortunate to have listened to her rendition of Thyagaraja's "Sri Rama Jayarama" in Yadukulakamboji claim it was an unforgettable experience. Nagarathnamma was a versatile artiste having learnt Bharatanatyam under Bangalore Kittanna and abhinaya from Tiruvenkatachari. Her talent in singing, dancing coupled with her attractiveness drew support from the Mysore Palace. She was bestowed with honours and accolades. Being a multi-linguist, Nagarathnamma published works and gave discourses in Telugu, Tamil, Sanskrit in addition to Kannada, which was her mother tongue. Her performance at Veena Seshanna's house during the Dusserah festival at the Mysore palace in 1892 was greatly appreciated by many experts in the field of music.

Nagaratnamma shifted her base from Bangalore to Madras in 1894 after the demise of her guru Munuswamy Appa. She was in the midst of great musicians of that time and Veena Dhanammal was her close confidant. She received great encouragement from Poochi Srinivasa Iyyengar. Her concerts were very well appreciated and her reputation grew all over South India. She was honoured with golden anklet by Sripada Krishnamurthy at a place called Rajamahendravaram.

Nagarathnamma had a fascinating life, according to this profile on Sruti "...a colorful personality, enormously capable and courageous, compassionate and witty..."

[she] never forgot the trauma of her childhood, the slights and humiliation and hardships she and her mother had to suffer, their valiant efforts to lift themselves out of a place society did not look upon with any kindness but never ceased to exploit, to a rightful place of honor and dignity. Once she was invited to a conference of Telugu and Sanskrit poets where a noted poet spoke admiringly of a translation of Andal's Tiruppavai by one Muttu Palani whom he mistakenly referred to as a man. Nagarathnamma burst out laughing and chastised the great poet: "Shame on you! Despite all your learning, you do not know that Muttu Palani had the honor of being a devadasi, like me." She tirelessly championed the cause of women artists.

The rise and fall of the Devadasi tradition is intertwined with the life and times of Bangalore Nagarathnamma. From small beginnings, Nagarathnamma rose to become a stellar figure in the cultural firmament of Madras of the 1920s and 30s. Bangalore Nagarathnamma was an icon of that age, highly skilled in the arts and well regarded by connoisseurs of music. She was an exceptional woman, much ahead of her times, a champion of the rights of the Devadasis and of women in general.

Nagarathnamma, in a dream, had a vision where she was charged with the responsibility of constructing a memorial to Saint Thyagaraja at Thiruvaiyaru. She thereupon gave up her comfortable life style and set aside much of the proceeds from her many concerts. She took to the life of an ascetic devoting all her time and her resources to the only cause dear to her heart.

She came to Thiruvaiyaru in 1920 and purchased lands adjacent to the samadhi of Saint Thyagaraja on the banks of river Kaveri. She developed the area into a worthy pilgrimage centre to pay homage to the Saint composer. She built a permanent Temple around the samadhi, where the mortal remains of the Composer were enshrined and installed a granite idol of Thyagaraja. She toiled day and night for four years (from October 1921 to January 1925) to realise her dream. One interesting feature of the Temple is that the inner walls of the prakaram are covered with Italian marble slabs with inscriptions of the composer's krithis in various languages.

Prior to her taking charge of conducting the Thyagaraja aradhana, several splinter groups (like Peria katchi and Chinna Katchi) were celebrating Thyagaraja aradhanas all over Thiruvaiyaru and neighboring villages. Bangalore Nagarathnamma combined all these groups into a single entity. The aradhana is celebrated on Pushya bahula Panchami (in the month of January) on the premises of the Thyagaraja samadhi. This has become a national event of major importance. But for the tireless work of Bangalore Nagarathnamma, such organized effort to celebrate Thyagaraja aradhana in Thiruvaiyaru on such a grand scale would be impossible. Her will charges the executors "never to depart from the real spirit of principle and purpose underlying the celebration," and forbids anyone from trying "to debar lady artists and singers including devadasis."

Nagarathnamma spent the rest of her life as a yogini and served her lord - Thyagaraja. She described herself as 'Devar Adiyal' meaning servant of God. She breathed her last on May 19, 1952 and her last rites were performed near the banks of Kaveri. Her Samadhi is built just in front of Thyagaraja's shrine. Her statue with folded hands gives us the feeling that she is still there paying obeisance to Saint Thyagaraja.

