

Sangeethanubhavam

Composition :
Raga :
Artist :
Composer :

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Palghat Rama Bhagavatar (5th June 1888 - 25th June 1957)



A Life Sketch

He was one of the vocalists who was in forefront in the first half of the last century. Today he is hardly remembered. There are however fans of the older generation who remember his music with nostalgia. We had been receiving mails from some of our regulars, asking for information about him. Recently, when we had called on Mr. Atmanathan, Secretary to MS Subbulakshmi, we were informed that Seshamani Bhagavatar, son of Rama Bhagavatar was here in Chennai on a short visit from the US. We immediately made a beeline to him. He was kind enough to spend some time with us and tell about his father and about himself. We have also supplemented this information with some independent research of our own.

Early Life

Palghat Rama Bhagavatar was born on 5th June, 1888 at Mundaiya, near Shoranur, Kerala, as the fifth and last son of Kasturiranganatha Iyer, village munsiff by profession, and Alamelu Ammal. The other sons were, in the order of descending age, Narayana, Venkateswara, Venkatakrishna and Veeraraghava. Of these Venkatakrishna was already learning music, when Rama was born.

At the age of eight he began learning music along with elder brother Venkatakrishna from Vadakkancheri Rama Bhagavatar and his brother Subbarama Bhagavatar. At same time, he and his brother also learnt Kathakali padams from a Namboodri at Moothidathumana. Brother Venkatakrishna began singing for Kathakali performances and later on in life began the Kalamandalam group at Cheruturuthi with Mahakavi Vallathol. Initially young Rama accompanied his brother in this singing. But Kathakali performances generally were all night affairs and the strain began to tell on the young lad of ten.

So his brother dissuaded him from taking to this line. The family then decided to send him to train in vocal music under Palghat Anantarama Bhagavatar (1867 -1919), the renowned vocalist and Harikatha exponent, who lived in Tondikulam, Palghat. Rama was twelve then. The boy undertook the journey of 30 miles in two days, having spent a night at Tiruvillamalai, a kshetram associated with Lord Rama.

In 1918, his marriage was arranged with Rukmini of Ottapalam. The marriage was a very happy one with six children. On 15th August, 1923, the couple were blessed with their second son, Seshamani.

Gurukulavasam

When he arrived, the first question that his prospective Guru asked him was whether he knew how to cook. Realising that much depended on this seemingly innocuous question, the boy replied in the affirmative. In reality he knew nothing. But the answer gained him a Guru. Slowly he learnt how to cook and learnt music besides. The bond between the Guru and Sishya became so strong that, Anantarama Bhagavatar would take him along for all his performances. He therefore managed to travel all over South India with his Guru. Their travels took them to Tiruvaiyyaru where they met the great Ramaswamy Sivan, brother of Mahavaidyanatha Iyer. On the latter's request, young Rama sang and was appreciated.

During one of Anantarama Bhagavatar's performances, Rama Bhagavatar accompanied him. He suddenly felt uneasy and wanting to ease himself, excused himself from the stage. As he walked away, he noticed someone following him. He turned around to see his Guru., who anxious about his disciple's health, had suspended the performance and followed him.

The Gurukulavasam lasted till 1914. His Guru had however launched his student's singing career with a debut in 1912 at Kalpathi, Palghat, Kerala. At the end of his Gurukulavasam, Rama Bhagavatar also went to Kumbakonam, where along with Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer, he learnt from Umayalpuram Swaminatha Iyer, a maestro who had learnt from Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer himself. Swaminatha Iyer was known for his repertoire of Tyagaraja Krithis. This continued for two years, at the end of which he returned to Kalpathi and settled there. Anantarama Bhagavatar's health had begun to decline and he too began encouraging his disciple's career. Mundaiyya Rama Bhagavatar, had arrived on the Carnatic Music scene.

Music Career

Rama Bhagavatar' career was at its peak during the years 1925 to 1945. During this period he traveled widely to Travancore, Mysore, Bombay, Delhi, Calcutta and of course Madras. It is said that he participated in the All India Music Conference of 1927, held at Madras. But his name does not feature in the list of participating musicians, released by the Music Academy, Madras.

His Sruti in his younger years was at 3 kattai. Later he reduced this to 2 ½. The first time he used the lower sruti was at a chamber concert at the house of KR Srinivasa Iyengar in Mylapore, where he sang with Ariyakkudi Ramanuja Iyengar. The latter asked him to lower it to suit his own voice and Rama Bhagavatar changed his Sruti forever accordingly.

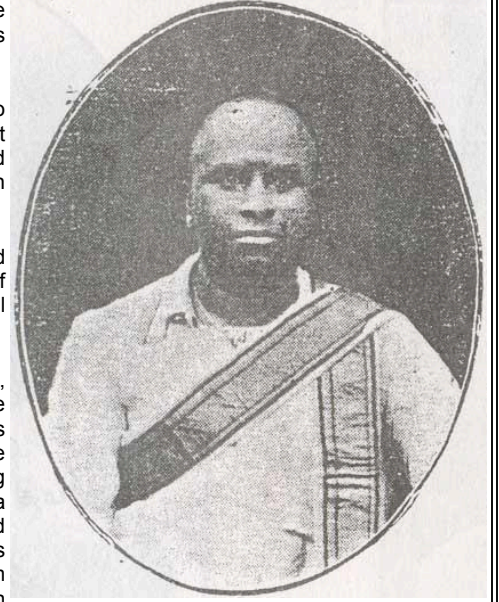
His voice was deep and he preferred singing Ghana ragas. His style was gamaka laden and he was very good in madhyama kala singing. Like his Guru, he started with Tana varnams. An RTP was a compulsory item. But Rama Bhagavatar rarely indulged in kanakku (mathematically complicated

passages). His opinion was that such effort was for those who were not able to produce melodious music. He was famous for his rendition of the Raga Kharaharapriya. Songs such as rAma nI samAnam and pakkala were his favourites. Another favourite was kolvai in bhairavi.

Strangely enough, Rama Bhagavatar had an excellent repertoire of Mysore Sadasiva Rao compositions. Where he could have acquired them is a mystery. One possible explanation is that his Guru, Palghat Anantarama Bhagavatar acquired them from Veena Vidwans Seshanna and Subbanna, when he was Asthana Vidwan at Mysore. An alternative source could have been Umayalpuram Swaminatha Iyer from whom he learnt music for a short while in Kumbakonam.

Being Anantarama Bhagavatar's student, Rama Bhagavatar was also a Harikatha exponent and was widely regarded for his talents in that field. Till 1930, he followed his Guru's tradition of performing on two successive days, one day devoted to Harikatha and the other to a vocal performance.

Bhagavatar was also an active participant in the Tyagaraja Utsavam at Tiruvaiyyaru, till 1923, when due to circumstances which are not known, he could not attend. He decided to celebrate the Tyagaraja Utsavam at Kalpathy itself. This gradually expanded into a town festival and is celebrated even today at the Ram Dhyan Matom. An interesting aside is what happened to the festival in 1939. SK Chettur, ICS, then collector of Palghat, inaugurated the event and while doing so casually lit a cigarette. The audience began to boo and heckle and he left the pandal in a hurry, only to instruct the police to dismantle the entire structure immediately. The organisers tried meeting up with the collector and explain the situation but to no avail. Finally the celebrations committee dismantled the structure themselves, but not without sending a strong memorandum of protest to Rajaji, then Prime Minister of Madras Presidency. The Hindu strongly came out in support of the organisers and widely reported the events that led to the disruptions.



Commercial Recordings

Rama Bhagavatar also recorded music for the Gramophone Company of India and similar organisations that were into manufacturing 78 rpm discs. Some of his songs that were available commercially are:

mahima teliya taramA	Anai Ayya	shankarAbharaNam	rUpakam
innamum oru daram	Gopalakrishna Bharati	yadukula kAmbOji	Adi
tirumagal ulAvum		kalyANa vasantam	
Enta ninnE	Tyagaraja	mukhAri	rUpakam
cinna tavar		hamlr kalyANi	
shivalOkanaAthanai	Gopalakrishna Bharati	nAdanAmakriya	rUpakam
bhajarE rE citta	Muttuswamy Dikshitar	kalyANi	mishra cApu
apaduru	Pattabhiramaiyya	khamAs	matyAdi
nAdarmuDi mEl	Pambatti Sidhhar	punnAga varALi	Adi
vAri nIdE		bEhAg	

Awards

Strangely enough, awards did not come Rama Bhagavatar's way. But it is said he shunned them in any case. Once, Palghat Mani Iyer's father requested Rama Bhagavatar to settle in Madras as he would then be in the thick of things. But Bhagavatar was not interested. He is reputed to have said that when the Perumal Temple was in the front of his house and the river was flowing through the backyard, he did not require much else from life.

His attitude towards money was similar too. He used to accept concerts for Rs 125 in Chennai, when half that money was spent on travel and the balance had to be shared with the accompanists. But he led a life free from want.

End

Bhagavatar's career was at its peak till 1945, when he developed a heart problem (though he did not know of it). He was breathless often and this was often the fate of most vocalists of that era, when they had to strain themselves without audio equipment. He gradually began reducing his engagements. The end strangely enough like that of Chembai, was after a concert at the temple at which he began his career. He was offering arghya in the river as part of his daily rituals when he became one with the absolute. The date was 25th of June, 1957.



Sri Palghat Rama Bhagavata

By Gana Kalanidhi Dr. Vinjamuri Varadaraja Iyengar

We were also fortunate enough to receive a copy of an article written by the late Vinjamuri Sri Varadaraja Iyengar on Palghat Rama Bhagavata. This has been sent by his daughter, Ms Sandhya Vinjamuri Giri, to us as a token of her appreciation of what we wrote. We thank her for the same and we reproduce the article below for the benefit of our readers.

Sri Palghat Rama Bhagavata By Gana Kalanidhi Dr. Vinjamuri Varadaraja Iyengar

In the year 1935 A.D, after completing my B.A examinations, I went to Madras for the summer vacation. I have already mentioned (in another article on Papanasam Sivan) that during that time I had the good fortune of meeting Sri Papanasam Sivan.

During those times, Sri Palghat Rama Bhagavata's music performances used to be held frequently in Music Sabhas. Many audiences, who were interested in listening to the traditional music, used to enjoy his divine music. Rama Bhagavata would sing according to the old tradition, without singing too many songs, just four or five Kritis from the compositions of the musical trinity, Thyagaraja Swamy, Muthuswamy Deekshitar and Shyama Sastry. He would give more importance to Neraval and Kalpana Swarams. The concert commences with a Varnam. After singing the Kritis he would sing Ragam Tanam Pallavi. For the Raga elaboration, he would chose one of Bhairavi, Thodi, Kalyani, Sankarabharanam, Saveri or Dhanyasi and elaborates it for a long time. After singing weighty (Ghanam) Tanam and the Pallavi set either to Adi Talam or Rupaka Talam or Tripuda Talam he would give the Mridangist a chance to show his expertise. After that he would sing a Slokam, a Padam, a Javali, a Tillana and a Thiruppuzal and conclude the concert with Mangalam. By then it would be more than four-hour performance. Bhagavata was very traditional. He would not drink coffee or soda in the middle of the concert. His was a Tri-Sthayee (three octaves) Sareeram (voice). The audiences would sit spellbound when he sings Sarvalaghu Swarams.

Sri Parameswara Bhagavata was a famous musical maestro who was the court musician at the palace of Sri Swathithirunal Maharaja of Tiruvancore. His son and disciple was Nurni Mahadeva Bhagavata and his disciple was Nurni Anantharama Bhagavata. The famed Violinist Palghat Anantharama Bhagavata is the same person.

Our Rama Bhagavata, in the beginning, learnt music from his older brother Venkatakrishna Bhagavata and, by his good fortune, became the disciple of Sri Anantharama Bhagavata. He had twelve years of rigid training under him as a live-in disciple and started performing from the age of twenty-four and soon earned unsurpassed fame all over India. For about half a century, he gave enjoyment to many an audience.

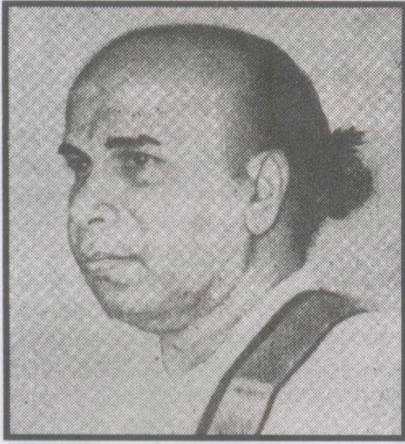
He was a handsome man and he had a tuft.

He was a man of few words. He would neither insult anyone nor would criticize anyone.

He was a Rama Bhaktha. He always recited the Rama Namam. We can say that he was non-egotistic. I will write a few words about my association with him and conclude this article.

During the years 1936 - 37 A.D, I studied for the Diploma in Indian Music, conducted by the University of Madras under the guidance of Sriman Tiger K Varadachariar. At that time, Sriman Tiger taught us the vocal music. Professor Sambamurthy was the professor of the Theory of Music, Sri Parur Sundaram Iyer was the professor of Violin and Sri Udayavarma Raja, who was from the lineage of the Veena musicians from the court of Cochin Palace, was for Veena. In our vocal music class there was a person called Sri K. S. Viswanatha Iyer. When he worked as the excise Inspector in Palghat, he became the disciple of Sri Palghat Rama Bhagavata. Sri Viswanatha Iyer used live with his family in a large building near the place where I used to live.

I used to go to their house every Sunday. In one particular week (when I went there), Sri Rama Bhagavata was sitting on a mat in their house. When he saw me, he invited me into the house. When I went in, Sri Bhagavata made me sit next to him. Then, Sri Viswanatha Iyer introduced me to Sri Bhagavata. Sri Bhagavata had only one son (Seshamani - at that time) and he asked his son to fetch the Tambura. After setting the Sruthi, he asked me to sing a song. In the beginning I was a little frightened. But, he encouraged me and asked me to sing. Then, I sang Darbar Ragam and then sang the Saint Thyagaraja Kirti "Mundu Venuka Iruprakkala Thodi" set to Adi Talam. I finished the kriti by singing Kalpana Swaras in two Kalas at the charanam " O' Gajarakshaka, O' Rajakumara". He asked Seshamani to write down the kriti saying that the singing was traditionally perfect. As I sang again and again, he set the swaras and made his son write down that kriti. This incident was the result of my good deeds in my past life! He blessed me whole-heartedly!



Rama Bhagavatar

There is a village called Kalpathi in Kerala. There is a Mandir called Srirama Dhyana Mandiram there. As they do in Thiruvaiyyar, every year, Sri Rama Bhagavatar would conduct a three-day Thyagaraja Aradhana festival there in Kalpathi Srirama Dhyana Mandiram. He invited me for ten consecutive years (to the festival) and made me sing there. All the famous musicians used to participate in that festival. T. Chowdiah played accompaniment for me a number of times. One day, he told me that his violin has improved by playing for Sri Palghat Rama Bhagavatar. The then Presidency Magistrate Sri L. R. Venkataraman once commented to me that Rama Bhagavatar's music is what is called "Brahmananda Sangeetham".

All the following people played Violin accompaniment to Sri Rama Bhagavatar.

Tiruchi Govinda Swamy Pillai, Kumbakkonam Rajamanikyam Pillai, T. Chowdiah, Papa Karur Venkatarama Iyer, C. R. Mani Iyer. Sri Dwaram Venkataswamy Naidu used to say "if you want me to play accompaniment, put me for Palghat Rama Bhagavatar".

Among the great people who played Mridangam were Pudukkotai Dakshinamurthy Pillai, Azaghanambi Pillai, Thanjavore Vaidyanatha Iyer, and Chattapuram Palghat Subba Iyer. T. S. Mani Iyer himself told me that he participated in Sri Bhagavatar's final performances.

One day, after taking the bath in the Kalpathi River and while performing the ritual of the Sandhya Vandanam, his soul reached the heavenly abode.

All those who heard this sad news had wetness in their eyes.

The Sankarabharanam that he sang thirty years ago cannot be forgotten even today. Music world had lost a musical giant. He was famous during the time of people like Koneriraja Puram Vaidyanatha Iyer, Madurai Pushpavanam Iyer and Ramanathapuram Srinivasa Iyengar.

Many people may not know that Sri Rama Bhagavatar belonged to the lineage of the disciples of Sri Thyagaraja Swamy. He, for sometime, was a student of Sri Umayalpuram Swaminatha Iyer and learnt a lot of (Thyagaraja) Swamy's kritis. Sri Swaminatha Iyer was the son of Umayalpuram Sundara Bhagavatar. Sri Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer was a co-student of Sri Rama Bhagavatar. Sangeetha Kalanidhi Sri Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer also learnt some kritis from Sri Rama Bhagavatar.

I just had the good fortune of visiting him only. The opportunity to write this essay is my good fortune. He was slim and tall and used to wear Vesti and an ungavastram. Sri Swaminatha Iyer, Sri Venkatarama Iyer and Sri Rajagopala Iyer were his sons and I had close contact with two of them. The Thyagaraja Swamy kritis sung by the vidwans today is the alms given by Umayalpuram Sundara Bhagavatar and Rama Bhagavatar who protected them and given them to the world of music. These two people set the swaras (tuned) as (Thyagaraja) Swamy sang, and propagated them.

More on Sri Palghat Rama Bhagavatar

was flooded with appreciation on the articles that we wrote on Sri Palghat Rama Bhagavatar. We are giving below some interesting information, anecdotes and an audio sample of his voice from our readers:

- Sri VAK Ranga Rao, noted dance critic and collector of 78 RPMs, has sent us a sample of Rama Bhagavatar's voice. To listen to his rendition of shivalOkanAthanaai
- Reader Sivaprasad informs us that one of the disciples of Rama Bhagavatar was Pudukode Krishnamoorthy, who later became the Principal of the Swati Tirunal College of Music.
- Another reader who wishes to remain anonymous has sent us this humorous anecdote: Those were the days when many musicians were referred to by the names of their hometowns. We had Ariyakkudi, Alathoor, Chembai etc. So Rama Bhagavatar was referred to by his, Mundaiyya, which was unfortunately not a very complimentary term in tamil. He then changed it to Palghat. Once Vallathol Narayana Menon asked him the reason for the change and Rama Bhagavatar told him that he had done so because Palghat was more well known than Mundaiyya. Whereupon Vallathol suggested that he change it to Paris as that city was more well known than Palghat!
- Vidwan Sri S Rajam informs us that Rama Bhagavatar was most particular that audiences must appreciate his music. He took great pains in the selection of songs, no matter how small the audience may be.
- Sri KV Ramanathan adds:
Rama Bhagavatar was the last exponent of the style of singing known as Ghanam. This was a precursor to the Tanam and required tremendous breath control. His rendition of varugalAmO aiyya in mAnji was a great hit and he was asked invariably to render it in many of his concerts.
- We were also fortunate enough to receive a copy of an article written by the late Vinjamuri Sri Varadaraja Iyengar on Palghat Rama Bhagavatar. This has been sent by his daughter, Ms Sandhya Vinjamuri Giri, to us as a token of her appreciation of what we wrote. We thank her for the same.

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