

Nayana Pillai of Kancheepuram

(1887-1934)

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Kancheepuram Subrahmanya Pillai popularly known as Nayana Pillai was born in a family of professional musicians. His great-grandmother is still remembered in Kancheepuram as "Metu" Kamakshi, because the house of this musician was built on a steep incline. Her daughter Visalakshi (Thayee Ammal) was a violinist. In the days which followed, both these musicians were eclipsed by the renowned vocalist, Kancheepuram Dhanakoti Ammal (their grand-daughter) and later by Kancheepuram Nayana Pillai (their great-grandnephew). There are people who still speak of Kancheepuram Dhanakoti Ammal's powerful voice, her extensive repertoire of devotional songs in Tamil and her participation in the Sarva Vadyam during the Dussera festival in the temples. Her recordings of *Saroja dala netri* and *Ennadi metta talakku* are still treasured in private collections and recording institutions. She had two sisters namely, Kamakshi Ammal (Amma Ponnu Ammal) and Palani Ammal. Dhanakoti Ammal always appeared on concert platforms in the company of her younger sister Amma Ponnu Ammal. Their family guru was Kanchi Kachi Shastry and this accounts for the heritage of the compositions of Shyama Shastry, Subbaraya Shastry and Annaswami Shastry.

Subrahmanya Pillai was the only son of Amma Ponnu Ammal. He was the darling (Nayana) of the three sisters and in course of time he came to be known as Nayana to the public as well. Music was in his blood and continues to be so in the family. His two nieces, Kuppu Ammal and Ramu Ammal and his two sons Ratnaswamy and Rajaratnam were also his disciples. Kuppu Ammal has recorded a few songs for Saraswati Stores, Madras. Rajaratnam is now an instructor in the music school run by the Tamil Isai Sangham, Madras. His daughter Nilayatakshi who married Nageswaran (brother of Mridangam Subrahmanya Pillai of Palni) had a fine voice and in her younger days was in charge of the "balashiksha" of most of the disciples of Nayana Pillai.

Nayana Pillai frittered away his youth in the gymnasium, but the family vocation was too strong to be discarded. Contacts with eminent musicians and formal musical education was only a question of time. Unofficial apprenticeship under Ettiapuram Ramachandra Bhagavatar gave him a good start. The association with Kumaramalai Subrahmanya Swamiji was a real eye-opener. He became the inheritor of the Valajapet tradition of Tyagaraja's music. In later life, he worshipped the great violinist Govindaswamy Pillai as his *paramaguru*. Ettiapuram Ramachandra Bhagavatar, Sangeeta Kalanidhi Gopalakrishna Iyer and Puducheri Rangaswamy Iyer were prominent musicians who enriched the musical atmosphere of Kancheepuram when Nayana Pillai was still in his teens. Both Nayana Pillai and Madura Pushpavanam Iyer (another meteoric star on the musical horizon) were the accompanying

singers in the Harikatha recitals of Ettiapuram Ramachandra Bhagavata who even today is remembered for his unique rendering of *madhyama kala swara vinyasam* and his wide repertoire of rare compositions. As a homage to this teacher, Nayana Pillai invariably rendered in his concerts the *kriti* in *Rudrapriya*, *Amba Paradevate* which he learnt from "our Bhagavata". He followed the Bhagavata throughout the length and breadth of Tamilnad as his 'chorist' and it was a lucky chance which gave him an opportunity to listen to the music of Konerirajapuram Vaidyanadha Iyer who had just then established a new tradition of "Kacheri Paddhati", laying emphasis on extensive *Pallavi* and *swara vinyasam*. Nayana Pillai was thrilled and would not rest until he was in a position to emulate Vaidyanadha Iyer.

Kumaramalai Subrahmanyaswamikal, an ascetic, was at this time staying in a temple near Nayana Pillai's house. Nobody could answer Nayana Pillai's prayers more competently than the Swamiji, who was himself a disciple of Brahmananda Paradesi who in his turn had inspired the *Guru Parampara* of Konerirajapuram Vaidyanadha Iyer. The Swamiji was an expert in *Pallavi*, *Neraval* and *swara vinyasam*—a feature which characterised the concerts of Konerirajapuram Vaidyanadha Iyer and Nayana Pillai alike.

The compositions of Shyama Shastri were a rich treasure in the family but Nayana Pillai turned to Tyagaraja for inspiration. In fact, he celebrated the annual festival at Kancheepuram and learnt as many as four hundred *kritis* of Tyagaraja from Walajapet Ramaswamy Bhagavata and also from Jalatarangam Ramanayya Chettiar. The sources and methods he employed to improve his repertoire are too numerous to recount here. He practised almost daily on the pattern of a full length *kacheri* with all accompaniments. For full-throated reach without interruption he chose his Guruji's favourite haunt within the temple precincts. He lived for the art and died for it. He would neither play to the gallery nor belittle himself or his art for monetary considerations. He was never in very affluent circumstances but neither for love nor for money would he oblige his friend C. Kanniah of theatrical fame by singing a series of Tyagaraja *kritis* in praise of Rama.* With all his respect for the good intentions of his well-meaning friends, Dakshinamurti Pillai and Chowdiah, he would not agree to 'edit' music to suit the requirements of gramophone records. Even when he was in dire distress and badly in need of money for medical treatment, he refused to compromise as far as music was concerned. He would insist on singing elaborate *Pallavis* and *swarams* against all odds. Deviation from this path was considered *gurudroham*.

Nayana Pillai trained his disciples to provide suitable accompaniment and in the initial stages of his career, the *Pallavi* dominated his public concerts. But as his repertoire widened and his voice mellowed with constant practice, he would find a place for at least eight to ten *kritis* of

*Kanniah suggested that a string of *kirtanas* in praise of Rama without any *swara* appendages would constitute *Ramarpanam* or propitiation of Rama. Nayana Pillai hotly repudiated the suggestion. Mere *kritis* without *swara vinyasam* could hardly be considered *Ramarpanam*; and he would not do anything that would constitute a violation of his own guru's fascination for *swara vinyasam*. Consequently Nayana Pillai had to forfeit the *Kanakabhishekam* offered by Kanniah.

Tyagaraja in his recitals. There was no *kriti* without a *raga alapana* to precede it or *swarams* to follow. He considered himself a student right through life and thoroughly profited by the masterly exposition of *apoorva ragas* by Govindaswamy Pillai who often accompanied him. Thanks to his perseverance, *Manirangu*, *Rudrapriya*, *Jayantasena* have come within the reach of students. In later days he took delight in elaborating *ragas* like *Jaganmohini* and *Mandari* as preludes to the *Pallavi*. Invariably his concerts started with some *kriti* in the *chapu tala* and a brisk *swara vinyasam*. This had a telling effect on the audiences. He popularised the singing of *korvais* and singing the *arohana* and *avarohana swarams* in *trikalam* while rounding off the "strings of Jatis" set to music. His favourite accompanist, apart from Govindaswamy Pillai, was Konnakol Pakkiri Pillai. He had great regard for the mridangists, Palni Muthia Pillai, Pudukkottai Dakshinamurthi Pillai, Palghat Mani Iyer, Palani Subrahmanya Pillai and Tanjore Ramdas Rao. He thoroughly enjoyed his dialogues with his accompanists. His own contributions were challenging, provocative and the great ones among the accompanists rose to the occasion, sometimes even improving on his poseurs, to the master's delight. He was not a composer of *kritis*, but he composed his own *Pallavis* in Tamil and in praise of Subrahmanya Swamy. They were set in twenty-eight *talas*, leaving out the seven of the *sarvalaghu talas* out of the "thirty-five". His concerts had no place for the usual post-*Pallavi* light music. The closing part of the *kacheri* was always reserved for *tiruppugazhs*. His association with Kadirvelu Pillai of Yazhpanam helped him to study the *tiruppugazh* closely. Even though these hymns are set in complicated rhythms he made them easy for his students to learn by singing them in devotional congregations. Thevaram Sarangapani Chettiar is one of his disciples who learnt several of these pieces. It is worth mentioning here that tunes for these songs were chosen with due regard to Karnatic music and tradition. Some of these have been collected by his disciple Sangita Kalanidhi Chittoor Subramania Pillai* and published under the auspices of the Annamalai University. He found a place in his recitals for a number of *tevarams* too. The music of the Tamils found an honoured place in his repertoire.

The *sisya parampara* consisting of over forty disciples is perhaps the only authentic evidence of his style and tradition. Even this is only indicative, and not exhaustive. He had the distinction of singing *Pallavis* composed by himself. He revelled in the thirty-two *kalai chaukam*. His disciple Seithur Sundaresa Bhattar records with pride the confidence and aplomb with which his *vadyar* sang a *Pallavi* in *tisra jathi ata talam* in thirty-two *kalai chaukam* set to the *sahityam* "*bhayamedu namakku*" in a concert arranged by Panchapakesa Shastry before a distinguished audience which included the Karaikkudi brothers, Konerirajapuram Vaidyanadha Iyer and Puducheri Rangaswamy Iyer. Citing another *Pallavi*, then *pazhani Vadivelane Arumughane Esan magane*, set in *chatusra jathi matyam* with *kaal edam eduppu*, another of his disciples, Mridangam Akhilesvara Iyer explained the *modus operandi* of his guru for simplifying the exposition. Nayana Pillai treated this *chatusra jathi matyam* as *khandam* in application. Similarly he handled another

* Among the many disciples of Nayana Pillai should be mentioned, in addition to Chittoor Subramania Pillai, T. Brinda and T. Mukta.

Pallavi, Kumara Guru Parane Shanmughane, in *chatusra jathi jampai* with *araeda eduppu* as *misram* taken as a whole. Sangeetha Kalanidhi Chittoor Subramania Pillai often renders another of these *Pallavis*, *Vadivelan Adhiyarkku Anukoolan Devakunjari Manaalan* in *tisra jathi dhruva talam* in sixteen *kalai chowkam* starting on *samam*. Smt. D. K. Pattammal who delights in the tradition has recorded for the Columbia Gramophone Company one of the *Pallavis* composed by Nayana Pillai. He identified himself so deeply with *Pallavi* that some of his jokes were in terms of humorous *Pallavis*, such as *Chandaala Bhairavai* and *A Kaakara kaayalu tinna chilukaa Nee Kinta dudukaa*. Nayana Pillai had a weakness for *mandara stayi vinyasam*. He resorted to this either during *raga alapana* or *swara vinyasam*. He would not miss an opportunity to draw the best out of his accompanist Govindaswamy Pillai playing in the *mandara stayi*. He did not believe in extensive *raga alapana*; but, on the other hand, he would sing a few minutes of *ragam* for every one of the *kritis* in *apoorva ragas*. Unless compelled to do so, he kept away from singing *tanam*. Paying his tributes to Govindaswamy Pillai in this particular aspect of *raga* elaboration, Nayana Pillai used to go into raptures describing a performance in the Rock Fort at Tiruchi when Govindaswamy Pillai drove home to advantage a request from the audience to sing *tanam*. *Sankarabharanam* was being elaborated, and Govindaswamy Pillai walked away with the honours of the day and Nayana Pillai never grudged it.

The joviality of his youth persisted through life even amidst the bitterness caused by the lingering illness of his last days. Under medical advice he was forbidden to sing but he was conscious and happy that his end was drawing near. He would deliberately sit up and sing *Bhoobharam gani sura bhusurulai janinchina nee bhakti bhagya sudha*. He was conscious of his mission in life and he had the courage of his convictions. Quite literally he used to run a *Gurukulam* where, in addition to feeding poor students, *Vidya Dhanam* was given gratis. His old mother who survived him, his wife Kuppu Ammal and his daughter took turns at imparting instruction at various stages to his many pupils.

A word about the collection of songs for his repertoire and the exposition of the songs will not be out of place. Walajapet Ramaswami Bhagavata and Ramanaiah Chattiar were no doubt inexhaustible sources. He did not consider it below his dignity to learn *kirtanas* from his *sishtyas*. It was Kalyana Sundaram Pillai of Tiruvizhimizhalai who brought him *Sive pahimam*. On another occasion he visited Veena Dhanammal who was bedridden. She expressed her desire to learn from him *Tanayuni broya* and readily consented to teach him in return *Dasaradhi* in *todi*. C. Ramanujachari of the Ramakrishna Mutt helped him with *Grahabela memi* and *Saketaniketana*. His rendering of *kritis* had the stamp of genius, of a master of *laya*, *swara*, *sahitya*, *anubhava*. His powerful voice, pure diction and expression lent colour and lilt to the *kirtanas* he rendered. Very rarely did he repeat *kritis*, but when he did, they showed freshness and individuality.