

## FRIEND, PHILOSOPHER AND GURU

by N. Vijay Siva

One evening in early August 1991, just about six months after my guru Sri D. K. Jayaraman's demise, D. K. Pattammal's son I. Sivakumar presented me before her: "Vijay has accepted to sing a concert of patriotic songs on 15th August. He needs your help." She was sitting with her eyes closed, listening to her practising students seated around. She raised her head on hearing her son's voice and affections welcomed me. She then must have read in me the same helplessness she experienced when Ambi Dikshitar was snatched away from this world after imparting to her only a couple of Dikshitar kritis. She still rues over his demise. She knows that helping me would mean reaching out beyond the capacity of her memory, an arduous task at her age. But she sounds positive and she asks me to come after two days.

Obviously she is reluctant to say 'no' to an earnest student and as ever as she does, she is going to bank on her corpus of grit to recollect the songs for me. This is the grit, the world speaks of in profusion, which made DKP the first Brahmin woman to ascend a concert platform, challenge male preserve in pallavi singing, cross swords with the British through patriotic songs and bring to the fore numerous Tamil and Dikshitar kritis which were unapparent in concert circuit.

When I return to her a couple of days later, she has promptly recollected many songs from her huge stock of patriotic music and is waiting to offer them to me. First the teacher must be alert and equipped, she seems to believe, and only then comes teaching. Is it a belief imbibed from tutelage under many stalwarts and not from a single formal teacher?", I wonder. As she feeds me with the songs, Namakkal Kavi's "Aadu ratte" flashes across her mind. She hasn't sung it for several decades, but this song will suit the occasion well. She will not leave it ir-retrieved. She seeks the help of her husband Sri Iswaran's helping hunting for the recording of the song from her personal archives but does not wait for the result of the search. She goes into mental search, closing her eyes, not even aware that the lunch served for her lies cold. She hums the tune and it's lyrics before singing it full-throated. The search is over, once again her grit had to come to her rescue and she starts teaching. By the time I thank her and pack-off, her husband announces the retrieval of the recording and plays it. I stand flabbergasted. How could she recollect a song after so many years without missing even the minutest of the sangatis! She smiles as if to mean, 'This is child's play for me'.

For Pattammal, learning, teaching and recollecting are an enjoyable routine exercise. She refuses to allow age to catch up with her and remains unrelenting in her generosity. "Haven't my teachers TLV, Ambi Dikshitar, Sivan, Prof. Sambamurthy, N.S. Krishnaswamy Iyengar et al unflinchingly teach me their best? Shouldn't I do so to my disciples?", she reasons out her generosity .

To Pattammal, teaching does not stop with classroom lessons. She must know at the earliest how the student fared on stage and how press and public responded to it. By the time I ring her up on 16th August morning to report on the previous evenings concert, she has already obtained a first-hand account of the performance and its sidelights and opens the conversation with a chuckle, "You sang with a Gandhi cap on your head!". This time it was Nithyasri who did the reporting. This concern is for all students and not just one. Kavitha Ramnath has been geared up to sing a few songs in Sivarathiri Akhandam just after midnight. "Listen to her," she summons me affectionately apparently wanting me to report to her on her performance. If she had stayed awake past midnight praying for Kavitha, I wouldn't be surprised.

To pray for students' success is a family trait. D K Jayaraman too did it on several occasions for his disciples. Their concern and anxiety would mean sleepless nights, frequent calls to the disciple conveying last minute tips and sometimes even forgoing food - much to the annoyance of their family members. 'Why this concern? Should she fret so much. ..?' you ask Pattammal... She would say, "TLV waited to see me as a Sangita Kalanidhi before breathing his last that very night. Papanasam Sivan trudged several miles to teach me and granted unconditional permission to record his songs anytime for any company. The Telugu Vadhiyar looked upon me as his own daughter. Naina Pillai heartfully wished me well even in death bed," as if to indicate that love for disciples is a quality she has unconsciously imbibed from her teachers and is ever determined to practise it.

"You are going to present a concert of Shyama Sastri kritis? I saw in the papers today. You may not be aware that he has composed a mangalam. Come today and learn it," she says to me one morning in April 1995. Obviously she has no hesitation in instructing a disciple to learn nor does she wait for him to approach her. But how is she able to adapt herself to students of many age groups and establish instantaneous rapport? It is sheer magic. In reality, she does not adapt. She doesn't have to. Speaking from the heart in clear and affectionate language and tone, she makes all of them feel like innocent little children and mutual understanding comes instantaneously. The feeling lingers for long after the lessons.

To see Pattammal shower encomiums on her disciples when they live up to or exceed her expectations, it is a marvel - very few teachers praise their students in such bounty. Madhumita, a doctor student, cannot believe that she has gathered so many words of praise from Pattammal. "How transparent is her love for disciples!", many like Madhumita bewilder. If Pattammal's love for her disciples is complete, the disciples' regard for her is no less. Her brother and first disciple D K Jayaraman excelled all her other disciples in his love and regard for her. "She is everything to me - matha, pitha, guru and God. I cannot live to see a hurdle befall her," he would say looking at Patta's portrait in his drawing room. He christened his house 'Rohini' - the star under which Pattammal was born. Once an astrologer predicted evil prospects for those born under this star. This was more than adequate to upset DKJ. He took Pattammal's horoscope to every reputed astrologer in town till he was convinced that the prediction was ill - founded. "Should an evil befall her, I wouldn't live to see it," he said with a choked voice. The words ultimately turned out to be true in a very ironic way! Evil befell her in the form of DKJ's death. She still weeps for him.

At DKJ's classes, a phone call from Pattammal signaled a big break from lessons. But we enjoyed the delay by listening to him share the most trivial of trivia with her.

While in each other's company, they would talk on mundane matters, on music, pay tributes to each other and sometimes pause for several minutes as if in speechless conversation - two hearts full of mutual love and affection.

DKJ blushed like a child and would be all smiles for hours together, when Patta praised him. She in turn, understood her brother and disciple only too well. When she found him depressed or worried, she assumed the role of a caring mother to console and comfort him.

If love and affection come to her in abundance, bhavam comes into her music in no less strength. To her, music is an emotional outpouring filled with resonating raga bhavam and clear-cut diction.

She leaves no stone unturned in cultivating this in her disciples. One morning in March 1992, she is disturbed by a call from me, "Could you help me with a song welcoming the new (Tamil) year? I would like to sing it on the eve of Tamil New Year's Day in my concert in Srirangam". "Oh yes! Get on written and bring it to me...?" She replied enthusiastically. In a few days, I stand before her with a song 'Chittira Paavai' and she immediately jumps into a tunesmith's role, soaking it in Danyasi, tightening the sangatis and polishing it to shine

like a well knit 'Sangita Gnanamu' or 'Balakrishnan Padamalar'. As I learn it she stops and looks for something I am missing. It is the bhava. "How will you feel if 'Aangeerasa Aandu' gracefully walked towards you in the form of a devatha with a bowl of happiness and prosperity? Wouldn't you welcome her with all your heart? Visualize it and sing". That does it! She has opened up the bhavam in the rendition and we rejoice singing it together many times over.

To a teacher who does so much, paying a dakshina would seem silly but failing to do so would mean ungratefulness. After many sessions of learning, I offered her a basket of fruits and flowers with a few rupees in an envelope topping them - very much the way she would have done to her childhood music teacher 'Telugu Vadhiyar' when he visited her several years after she became a legend. Like the Telugu Vadhiyar the Iswarans resented it. "Who asked you for all this?", "Sri Iswaran yelled. I pleaded, "I don't see this as paying a fee for your services but as an offering I would place in a temple as thanksgiving to the Lord for blessing me. Even God accepts tokens drenched in love and regard. Why don't you?" The heavy silence that followed was broken only by the whisper of tears that shed from Pattammal's eyes.

DKP and DKJ believe that guru shishya relationship should benefit students not only academically but also monetarily. DKJ said in unambiguous terms: "Never allow my friends or relatives to exploit our relationship to slice down your monetary gains especially when I am not alive." Once a close acquaintance of DKP approached me for a concert, which I turned down due to paltry remuneration. Unhesitatingly he sought DKP's help to influence me to accept it. "We never indulge in anything that would be monetarily unprofitable to our disciples. We say this keeping in mind your close association with us," the Iswarans dismissed him. Given this sort of protection, it is only natural that none of her disciples - however short or long be their tutelage - have deserted her.

Her concern for the disciples' well-being surfaces again and again. They share secrets with her and she guards them safely while expressing words of comfort. Even the kith and kin of her students share a special relationship with her and she amuses herself calling to mind their deep attachment towards her.

Pattammal never fights shy of admitting her faults, even if pointed out by a disciple, or even learning from them. Once she agreed to my invitation to sing a concert of patriotic songs at Trichy but wished to present the first half with regular kritis and fill the next half with regular pieces. She was apprehensive about the success of a full-fledged patriotic song concert. I acceded to her wishes though I was quite sure her apprehension was unfounded. In a few days, she

chanced to hear me present a concert of patriotic pieces, at Kalki Krishnamurthy Memorial trust, from beginning to end, and when I met her next, she showed me a list of songs she proposed to render at Trichy. It was all patriotic, top to bottom. She confessed with pride that she had changed her mind after listening to me and had also borrowed from me an idea for swara singing in Bhairavi piece 'Thondru Nigazh' - "All these years I never conceived this line - 'Viranmagalam Yengal Thai' suited for swara singing. I sang them only after my Thondru Nigazh". Struck by the straight forward humility and delighted that my idea had been borrowed, I also learnt the most important lesson in life - absorb good things from all sources, take pride in learning.

Undoubtedly this virtue has made her a remarkable musician. Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer had no second thoughts in acknowledging that only two artistes produced music absolutely supreme and wholesome - Ariyakudi amongst men and D K Pattammal amongst women. Pundits and commoners have hailed her music as soulful. Babu Rajendra Prasad had moist eyes when he requested her to repeat 'Chetasri Balakrishnam' (Dwijavanti) twice and GNB appealed 'once more' to listen to her 'Sivakamasundari' (Mukhari) at a Music Academy concert. School and college students and freedom fighters in 1930's and 1940' held her songs in awe. How else could she have sung so many hits in films inspite of laying down stringent conditions: only patriotic or spiritual songs, no playback for artistes - only background numbers, no duets, no sharing of microphone with any other male vocalist other than her brothers...

Rasikas craving to listen to her 'Naan Oru vilayattu' or 'Nannu Brochutaku' at least once is a common occurrence and she has never lamented singing or repeating a song, no matter who asks for it. When a stranger just walked into her house introducing himself as her admirer and asked her to sing a song, she did so happily as she would have done for Babu Rajendra Prasad or GNB.

"I shall perform and teach till people want me to. Only God has to bless me with adequate strength to do so. I wouldn't like to live a minute after I have lost this strength." She prays.

May God bless her eternally with this strength.