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MUSIC

A lifetime for Carnatic music

Interview with D.K. Pattammal.

She is a traditionalist but not one who has been bound by it. Not in her life nor in her music. **Damal Krishnaswamy Pattammal** took Carnatic music to new heights by blending traditionalism and trailblazing novelism, and defied tradition to become the first Brahmin woman to give public concerts. She challenged traditional attitudes, not by argument, but by talent. Thus, DKP, as she is popularly known, was the first woman to sing in concerts *ragam-tanam-pallavis*, the rhythmic complexities of which call for great skill and demand a high degree of concentration.

And all this with no formal grounding in basics. Circumstances prevented her from learning in the *gurukula* system under one guru. But she trained under many *vidwans* to acquire a rich and varied repertoire of not merely the compositions of the Trinity - Thyagaraja, Muthuswami Dikshitar and Syama Sastri - but also the Tamil *kritis* of Muttuthandavar, Arunachala Kavi, Gopalakrishna Bharati, Subhramania Bharati, and hymns from such Tamil devotional anthologies as Tiruppugazh, Thevaram and Arutpa. Again, in a break with tradition, DKP was among the first woman playback singers in films where she is best remembered for her rendering of patriotic songs in *Naam Iruvar* and *Thookku Thookki*. Her special talent and musical sensibility were evident even when she was three.

Not very surprising because if her father, Krishnaswamy Dikshitar, was deeply interested in music, her mother, Rajammal, was a singer whose talent remained suppressed by the orthodox ways of those days. DKP managed to break those shackles, nurture her talent and rise to become a major figure in the world of Carnatic music. And since 1933, when as a 14-year old she began her career in music, she has not looked back.

DKP's 65-year-old career has seen her winning innumerable awards and titles, including the coveted Sangita Kalanidhi conferred by the Madras Music Academy (1970), the Padma Bhushan (1971), the Kalidas Samman (1998-99) and the Padma Vibushan (1999) conferred by the President of India. For Pattammal, however, the most significant accolade is the one from one of the giants of Carnatic music, "Tiger" Varadachari, who described her as Gana Saraswati.

Meeting Pattammal, one realises that her capacity for feeling is immense. She recalls: "At 50, I turned from the heady *laya* to *bhava*, singing with feeling, singing so as to let

the music touch you deep inside." As she sings "Enraiku siva kr ipai varumo" one is moved, immersed in music the power of which lies not in virtuosity or vocal gimmicks, but in feeling. Her feeling extends beyond music to the love showered on her by her parents, her headmistress Ammukuttiamma (who encouraged her to sing in public), her guru Krishnaswamy Iyengar, her greatest inspiration Naina Pillai, and others who supported and encouraged her. She breaks down as she reminisces about them.

After her marriage to R. Iswaran at the age of 20, Pattammal performed her "duties" as wife, mother and daughter-in-law alongside her busy career. Music, she says, has been her solace and if there is another birth she would dedicate it to music.

Pattammal, in spite of her ill-health, has been training youngsters and giving concerts. On July 11 she sang in the 18-hour Carnatic music concert conducted in Chennai for the Kargil soldiers benefit fund.

Severe arthritis has left her almost immobile. But the unassuming and ever-smiling DKP readily agreed to meet Chitravina exponent **Ravi Kiran (RK)** and *Frontline* Special Correspondent

Asha Krishnakumar (AK) at her Chennai residence . In the two-hour-long interview, DKP looked back at her life and music. She also spoke about Carnatic music, and about musicians and audiences then and now.

Excerpts from the interview:

RK: *Can you share with us the experience of your first stage performance?*

I gave my first public concert in 1932 at Madras' Rasika Ranjani Sabha. I was 13 then. It was a group concert in which five of us sang. But before that I had given a concert on Madras Corporation Radio (run by the Corporation of Madras before the All India Radio came into being) in 1929. In those days it was a rare feat.

AK: *You were the first Brahmin woman to come on stage in Carnatic music. It must have required a lot of courage. Who encouraged you?*

It was indeed a big thing in those days. I was the first Brahmin woman to come on stage in Carnatic music as Rukmini Devi was for Bharatanatyam. Everyone was supportive. At first my father opposed it. But later he gave in.

AK: *What about the support from fellow musicians and the public?*

Colleagues were supportive. But I have heard some people make remarks like "How dare a Brahmin girl sing in public?" and so on. I did not give up. At that time women from one particular community used to sing in public. It was anathema for a Brahmin woman to sing in public. My mother, Kanthimathi (Rajammal), used to sing very well. But she never sang in public.

AK: *Who encouraged you to sing in public?*

Primarily my father's friends. I was 10 when my father's friends approached him to let me sing for a gramophone record company. First, my father refused, fearing that the record will be played at all and sundry places. He did not want the works of great masters like Thyagaraja and Dikshitar and his daughter's voice to be heard at such places. Then Dr.Srinivasan of Kancheepuram, who is my husband's uncle (I was not married then), persuaded my father to let me sing. My school headmistress, Ammukutti-amma, also urged my father to let me accept the offer. After a lot of pressure from a number of his friends, my father finally agreed.

RK: *You were the first woman musician to present layam in pallavi. Whom did you learn that from?*

Naina Pillai used to sing *pallavi* with *kuraippu*. I used to go to his concerts repeatedly to learn the technique. I then practised it on my own. I have set *pallavis* such as "Mamava Pattabhirama" inspired by Muthuswami Dikshitar's masterpiece in raga Manirangu.

RK: *What were your practise methods? This may be a useful tip for youngsters.*

S. MAHINSHA

I used to practise whenever I got the time. Untiring practice is most important. My father was my first guru. Even when I was four he would wake me up at 3.30 a.m. for practice. First he taught me to sing *shlokas* (hymns) and later, *kritis* (compositions). I used to sing 10 *kritis* in different ragas everyday. My father would make a weekly time-table. Every day the songs would be different. To perfect the songs, I had to sing each one for about 50 times. After that I would have to do *alapana* (delineating raga in extenso) for each one of the raga. I used to practice till 6 a.m. (from 3.30 a.m.) every day. Then again, after I returned from school in the evening I used to practise singing *shlokas* such as Mukundamalai, Shyama la Dhandakam, Meenakshi Pancharath-nam and Lalitha Pancharathnam. And, then, more *kritis*.



My father never allowed me to look into a notebook and sing. He used to say that it will divert concentration. Nowadays youngsters use notebooks all the time, even during concerts. I wonder how they can concentrate on singing.

RK: *Did you ever practice under Naina Pillai?*

No. I did not. But even when I was five, he was an inspiration for me. My father used to take me to all his concerts, and I would come home and practise the songs he sang.

Naina Pillai used to conduct a Thyagaraja Utsavam in Kancheepuram every year. Carnatic music giants such as Ariyakudi (Ramanuja Iyengar) and Musiri (Subramania

Iyer) used to sing there. I used to attend all the concerts. Rajaratnam Pillai was another inspiration for me. I was also encouraged by my elder brother, Ranganathan (he is no more).

When I was eight, Naina Pillai conducted a competition at Kancheepuram. I got the first prize, singing "Raksha Bettare" in Bhairavi. Naina Pillai was impressed. That was a real turning point in my life.

RK: *I have heard a lovely rendition of "Raksha Bettare" by Palghat Mani Iyer. From whom did you learn the song?*

I learnt it in Kancheepuram from Chinnamma, who used to live in Pattu Iyengar's house. I learnt about 10 *kritis* from her.

AK: *Who were your other gurus?*

Naina Pillai was my primary inspiration. It used to be a wonderful experience hearing Naina Pillai sing "Nenje Ninai Anbe", a *pallavi* in Jaganmohini. I also learnt from his student, N.S.Krishnaswamy Iyengar and Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar's student Vaidyanathan. Kancheepuram P.B. Srinivasan and Chinnamma were my other teachers.

In Madras, I learnt some Dikshitar *kritis* from Ambi Dikshitar and T.L. Venkatrama Iyer. I studied under Papanasam Sivan, the great composer. I learnt about 50 Tiruppugazh songs from Appadurai Achari. I also learnt a few compositions of Tirupati Na rayanaswami and also many *varnams*, *pallavis* and *javalis* from Vidyala Narasimhalu Naidu.

RK: *I have listened to the records you cut when you were young. You had not only a high sruti (pitch) but also tonal depth. How did you marry the two? Did it come naturally?*

From *shadjamam* to *panchamam* (lower to higher octave) I had the same depth in voice. This, I think, was because of my intense, and long hours, of practice from very early in the morning.

RK: *Did you learn music from the beginning, say, from sarali and janta varisai?*

I have never learnt *sarali* and *janta varisai*, *geetham* and so on. I practised some *varnams* on my own. Now, I start from *kritis* to my students.

AK: *How has the audience culture changed? What is the difference between the musicians and the audience of your times and now?*

There is a change in the attitudes of both listeners and artists. At the beginning of a concert the youngsters sing a *swaram* and then a *korvai*, for which they get a long applause. They sing that way to get that applause. There needs to be < I>bhava and depth, without sacrificing *vidwat* (scholarship). The youngsters need to practise a lot

for that. Art should be performed for art's sake. It should not become commercial. If it does, then we would be forced to sing for the audience and not for the sake of the art. Music is now being sung with great speed. It has become very commercial. That is very sad.

As for the audience, only genuine music lovers used to come to concerts in the earlier days. But, now, it has become fashionable to go to concerts.

R. Iswaran, D.K. Pattammal's husband.

RK: *Has the kutcheri pattern changed over time?*

Earlier *pallavi* was the central piece of any concert and hence *varnam* was very important. They used to sing only four to five songs.



RK: *What pattern do you follow?*

I follow the pattern set by Ariyakudi and Naina Pillai. I sing a *varnam*, a few *krithis* of different types, a *ragam-tanam-pallavi*, some *javalis* and *padams*. In some concerts I sing *thillanas*, patriotic and other lighter songs.

RK: *I would like you to clarify a few doubts about Dikshitar kritis. Subbarama Dikshitar has put together 250 keertanas in Sangeetha Sampradaya Pradarshini and we all accept that as authentic. But now, many songs that are not in that collection are also passed off as Dikshitar kritis. How authentic are these?*

Yes. There are many spurious songs attributed to Muthuswami Dikshitar. Some such as the popular *kriti* "Akilandeswari", in Dwajawanthi, are not Dikshitar *kritis*. But they are all passed off as his. T.L.Venkatarama Iyer made a specific point when he said that "Akilandeswari" was not Dikshitar's *kriti*.

RK: *There are also some other keertanas in this category. For instance, "Sri Ranganatham" in Poornachandrika. The chittaswaram in that song is the same as the one rendered in "Paluka Vemi". How did that come about?*

I was responsible for that. I tried it and then discussed it with Venkatarama Iyer, who encouraged me to go ahead.

RK: *What about "Gananayakam"?*

Again, there is a problem with that. Some say it is in Rudrapriya and others say it is in Poornasajjam. I am not clear on that.

RK: *You sing "Gananayakam" in Poornasajjam. Isn't it?*

Yes. I learnt it from Venkatarama Iyer.

RK: *Some other keertanas, such as "Gajanana Yutham" in Vegavahini, do not have the grandeur of Dikshitar kritis...*

Yes. Also, "Gajamba Nayako" in Junjooti, which even I used to sing. Some composers have spuriously introduced such songs as Dikshitar *kritis* so that they become popular especially when rendered by leading artists.

AK: *You have sung many swathanthara geetams (freedom movement songs) in Tamil...*

Yes, I have sung a number of freedom movement songs. Even before the Tamil Isai Sangam was formed, I popularised Tamil songs composed by Gopalakrishna Bharathi and Muthuthandavar.

AK: *How did you get interested in Tamil songs?*

The works of Papanasam Sivan and Gopalakrishna Bharathi are among those that inspired me to sing Tamil songs.

RK: *We don't have Gopalakrishna Bharathi's original compositions. Do we?*

I do not know whether or not they were original compositions, I only learnt those that already existed. There are books on Bharathi's songs now. Not in those days. In fact, the infrastructure was poor - no records, television, radio or books. We just had to listen to musicians during concerts and learn. I had to struggle to get the lyrics of the songs. My elder brother used to help me. It used to be very difficult.

RK: *From whom did you learn Gopalakrishna Bharathi's songs and Arunachala Kavirayar?*

Ariyakudi tuned Arunachala kavirayar and I learnt it from Vaidyanathan. I also learnt *thevaram* in Kancheepuram. I sing a lot of *thevaram* songs such as "Sirai Arum", "Adukkana", "Bhanthathal" and so on.

AK: *How did you start singing in films?*

It was Papanasam Sivan who introduced me to films. Then K. Subramaniam, the well-known director, also encouraged me to sing in films. I used to sing only *bhakti* and patriotic songs. I never sang romantic songs. *Thyaga Bhoomi* was my first film. After that I sang for *Naam Iruvar* and so on.

RK: *What are the concerts you cherish?*

I feel elated to have sung at the *shastiabdapoorthi* (60th birth anniversary) celebrations of many great musicians such as Swaminatha Pillai, Papanasam Sivan and Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhaga-vathar and on many such occasions in T. Brinda's and

some of her musicians' houses. I am proud that I sang in Brinda's house before a dream audience well-versed in Carnatic music. There was Jayamma, Brinda, Mukta, Balasaraswathi, Periya Kuttiamma, Chinna Kuttiamma, T.Sankaran, Swami-natha Pillai and others. I sang "Rama Rama Prana Sakhi" (*padam* in Bhairavi) and it was well appreciated. That was a memorable experience for me.

RK: *From whom did you learn to sing padams?*

Ariyakudi's student, Vaidyanathan, taught me a few *padams* - Sankarabharanam, Atana, Gaulipanthu, Panthavarali, Kambodhi, Bhairavi and so on. Mukta also taught me some *padams*. I love singing *padams* in concerts.

RK: *When did you first go to Mumbai?*

In 1934. I gave a number of concerts there. I used to sing a lot of Tamil songs. Chidambaram Iyer, a music critic in Bombay, used to write: "We are all fortunate to be treated by Pattamma's Tamil songs". Since 1934, I visited Bombay every year.

AK: *How many students do you have now and how promising are they?*

I have seven students now. Two are very promising. I have students all over the world, including French, German, American, Canadian and Japanese people. Akiko, from Japan, was brilliant. She sings very well. Absolutely impressive. Carnatic music is popular in the United States. But in Japan it is unfamiliar. She sang at the Thyagaraja Aaradhana in Tiruvaiyur near Thanjavur, a few years ago. It was well received.

RK: *When did Palghat Mani Iyer play on the mridangam for you?*

He played for me first in 1967. Till then he would not play for women. I did not ask him, but he himself volunteered to play for me at the Music Academy. Not because he is my son's father-in-law but because he thought I sang in the traditional manner.

RK: *Initially you gave only solo concerts. When did your brothers join you?*

Much later. First Nagarajan (now in Washington) sang with me in concerts. My other brother, Jayaraman, was first my student and later started to sing with me.

RK: *When you sang with Jayaraman, did you have to compromise on sruti?*

I reduced *sruti* a bit and he increased it a little. But it was very difficult for him.

RK: *You have given many concerts abroad and popularised Carnatic music...*

First I went to the U.S. on an invitation from the Carnatic Music Association of North America. Then I went to France for the Festival of India. Since then I have been to many places - Berlin, Bonn, Geneva, many places in Canada and the U.S. and so on.

AK: *How many concerts on an average do you give every month?*

During my busy days I used to give 20 concerts every month. But not now.

AK: *Who would manage the household when you were away?*

My mother-in-law used to be at home. We had a cook. For my husband, home was very important. Even when I had to go off somewhere on tour I had to buy all the household items before I left. When I was at home, my husband was particular that I took care of the house and everyone at home, even the cows!

AK: *What is your advice to youngsters?*

They are very talented. They can sing any raga. But they should have a sense of proportion. They should avoid extensive *swarams* and *raga alapanas* for a small *keertana*. Proportion is very important. They should practise a lot and sing for the sake of the art and not, as I said earlier, for the applause. They should understand the words of every song and enjoy singing. They need to desist singing with great speed. They should not get into the commercial tangle.

RK: *People like you have been an inspiration for the younger generation. You have done Carnatic music proud...*

Carnatic music is like an ocean. There is so much to learn. How much ever you learn, there is always more. One lifetime is not enough even to fathom the depth of the art. My wish is that I should die singing. I ask for nothing more.