

# THE HINDU

Online edition of India's National Newspaper

Friday, September 22, 2000

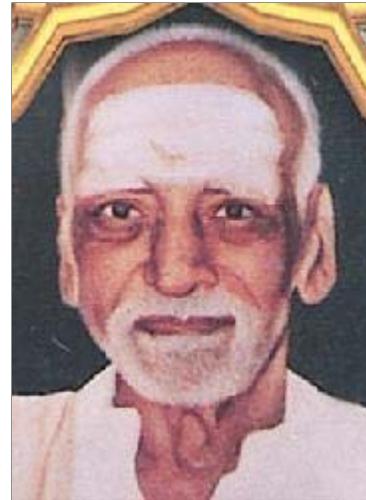
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## The phenomenon lives forever

The 110th birth anniversary of Papanasam Sivan, musician, lyricist, composer and actor, falls on September 26. Even as several programmes are being organised for the occasion, RANDOR GUY recalls the early struggles and later successes of a legend of Tamil cinema.

IF TAMIL film music is today a part of life for Tamilians anywhere in the fast-shrinking world, a good share of the credit should go to Papanasam Sivan, classical Carnatic music maestro, a legend in his lifetime, a legend that still lives and a savant of music hailed as ``Thamizh Thyagaiah". His contribution to Tamil cinema, its music and more precisely its songs is richly outstanding. Indeed his body of work in cinema awaits a proper, full length and indepth study. He laid the firm foundation for film songs to become popular during the 1930s-1940s almost single-handedly. Besides he made Carnatic music popular among the common folk with his melodious film songs.



``Radhey Unakku Kopam....." (Chintamani).... ``Natakame Ulagam....." (Chintamani).... ``Gnana Kann Ondru...." (Chintamani).... ``Sivaperuman Kripai....." (Sathyaseelan).... ``Maa Ramanan Uma Ramanan...." (Seva Sadanam).... ``Manamey Kanamum Maravathey...." (Savitri).... ``Manmathan Leelayai....." (Haridas).... ``Krishna Mukunda Murarey...." (Haridas).... ``Dheena Karunakaraneey Nataraja....." (Thiruneelakantar).... ``Characharangal Varum...." (Thiruneelakantar).... ``Vun Azhagai Kaana...." (Thiruneelakantar).... ``Unnai Kandu Mayangaatha..." (Ashok Kumar).... ``Satrey Sarinda Kuzhaley...." (Ambikapathi).... ``Vadanamey Chandra Bimbamo...." (Sivakavi).... ``Kavalayai Theerpathu Naattiya Kalayey".... (Sivakavi).... ``Soppana Vaazhvil..." (Sivakavi).... ``Nee Illaamal

Anuvum Asaiyumo...." (Pankajavalli)... ``Enthan Idathu Tholum Kannum...." (Sakunthalai)... And hundreds more! Papanasam Sivan created them all...

In recent years two of his film songs, ``Maa Ramanan Uma Ramanan..." and ``Manamey Kanamum..." are sung regularly by Carnatic musicians in their concerts and have won popularity. Indeed not many are aware that ``Maa Ramananana..." in Hindolam was sung by M.S. Subbulakshmi in K. Subramaniam's hit film, ``Seva Sadanam" (1938)!

All his songs were written in Tamil and form one of the glittering pillars of the edifice of ``Thamizh Isai".

Cinema began to talk and sing Tamil in 1931 with H.M. Reddi's ``Kalidas" produced in Bombay by the Indian film pioneer, Ardeshir Irani, the maker of the first Indian talking picture, ``Alam Ara", in the same year. It inherited the legacy of Tamil theatre where songs ruled the roost. Everybody sang. The hero and heroine, message-bearing maids, comedians and all the king's men and women. Even the villain sang while approaching to dishonour the heroine. The average film had as many as 30 to 40 songs and some had more. The more the merrier was the motto! ``Pavalakodi" (1934) which introduced many major talents to cinema had as many as 50 songs. The composer was Papanasam Sivan. M.K.T. Bhagavathar, S.D. Subbulakshmi (later a noted star), and sadly neglected film maker, K. Subramaniam took their bow in this film. The film proved a hit mainly because of its songs.

However, ``Pavalakodi" was not Papanasam Sivan's first film. His debut was ``Seetha Kalyanam" (1933). Its genesis, or `back story', as they say in Hollywood, is interesting....

Indeed the name `Papanasam Sivan' is a misnomer. He was neither from Papanasam nor was his name Sivan! His name was Polagam Ramaiah, an ascetically lean, pious, orthodox Brahmin from Polagam, a small village in Thanjavur district. Though he was born into a well to do family, due to quirk of fate he spent his early years in poverty and left home to live in Trivandrum, (now Thiruvananthapuram), the capital of the maharaja-ruled state, Travancore. Here he learnt music, among others, under the noted composer, Neelakanta Sivan. In deference to his guru he called himself Sivan. He visited temples in South India and in inspired moments of sheer ecstasy he composed songs in classical Carnatic music style in many ragas. After marriage and children he needed a steady income and he went to live in the small town near Thanjavur, Papanasam. Here he eked out a precarious living teaching music and was also a performing artiste. He composed music for stage plays and conducted bhajans going round the streets of Papanasam. Hence he came to be known as Papanasam Sivan! In this town he befriended K. Subramaniam who was to play a great role in his life soon.

Looking for greener pastures Papanasam Sivan migrated to Madras, the cultural capital of South India then and now. Here he found a Good Samaritan in a Mylapore lawyer, V. Sundaram Iyer. Sundaram

Iyer became his friend, guide and patron. Sivan taught music to the lawyer's children, the strikingly handsome artistic teenager, S. Rajam and his sister Jayalakshmi. The youngest, a lad of six watching it all was to emerge later as a multifaceted genius of music and movies. His name was S. Balachander, the veena wizard!

Meanwhile, back at Kolhapur V. Shantaram, one of the greatest film makers then making his way in movies with the celebrated Prabhat Pictures, wrote to a Madras-based movie magazine, "Sound and Shadow" seeking help to make a Tamil film using the sets, props and all of his Hindi film, "Sairandhri" (1933, India's first film in colour). The film had not done well and the company was trying to cut its losses by launching a Tamil film using the same re-usable materials. The magazine was being run by the talented trio, Muthuswami Iyer (later film maker under the name 'Murugadasa'), A.K. Sekhar (art director, production designer, and master of all, and later a big name in South Indian cinema), and K. Ramnath (brilliant technician and genius of Tamil cinema, sadly neglected today). They were financially backed by a rich impresario and fine arts-lover, and talent-scout G. K. Seshagiri.

Soon the trio, Seshagiri, the Mylapore lawyer, his children, and members of an amateur drama troupe boarded a train at Madras to Miraj (a railway junction) en route to Kolhapur. Accompanying them was Papanasam Sivan, as music composer, blissfully unaware that as the train chug-chugged its way, he was on his way to fame and fortune...!

In Kolhapur Sivan composed songs for "Seetha Kalyanam". It was his first film and he had no knowledge of film music, orchestration and its nuances. But he knew music! He chose the tunes and melody of the songs of Tyagaraja (Telugu) and Purandaradasa (Kannada) and wrote Tamil words taking out the words in the original lingo using the same raga, meter and melody for the film tunes. And, lo the film tune was born!

Thus began the brilliant and historic career of Papanasam Sivan as film music composer... His way of composing was unique. Sivan not only wrote the lyrics but also set the tune by singing it himself as he wrote! The music composer had to set only the background music and do the finetuning of the song. "Seetha Kalyanam" was a success and the songs rendered mostly by S. Rajam became popular.

And then Sivan joined his small town friend, K. Subramaniam and with the success of "Pavalakodi" both began to go places. The two worked together and the songs in "Naveena Sarangadhara" (1936, MKT Bhagavathar and S. D. Subbulakshmi in lead roles and shot in Calcutta) became very popular. A song by SDS, about a dove as messenger of love, "Venpuraavey..." became a raving hit.

The year 1937 was a leap-ahead year for Tamil film music. And for Papanasam Sivan and M. K. Tyagaraja Bhagavathar. Two of MKT- starrers, Y. V. Rao's "Chintamani", and the American Tamil filmmaker, Ellis R. Dungan's "Ambikapathi" created box-office records.

The films seemed to run endlessly 25 weeks.... 50 weeks... and more! The reason was the songs. Bhagavathar and Papanasam Sivan became living legends. Sivan being a musical genius, knew the pulse of the listeners and chose ragas with accent on melody which could be easily sung by the common man or woman. Besides he had the knack of choosing the right raga to suit the singer's voice, range, timbre, and singing skill. After the phenomenal success of ``Chintamani" and ``Ambikapathi" Papanasam Sivan became a star of Tamil cinema and a major draw. His name appeared prominently in film publicity materials and until the early 1950's he dominated the Tamil film horizon scene. Interestingly Papanasam Sivan acted in a few films and won praise.

He played Kuchela in K. Subramaniam's ``Bhaktha Kuchela" (1936)... R. S. Mani's ``Kubera Kuchela" (1943), and also in K. Subramaniam's classic and cult film, ``Thyaga Bhoomi" (1939) as the heroine's father... With his lean ascetic body and ever- hungry look he was the ideal choice to play Kuchela, Lord Krishna's childhood friend. In ``Thyaga Bhoomi" he played a man of great vision and social consciousness and high ideals who fought against untouchability and other such discriminatory practices. Indeed the role was written specially for Sivan by the writer, ``Kalki". With advancing age and changing trends in Tamil film music under the impact of Hindi film and Western music Sivan began to move away from movies and dedicated himself to classical music.

Cinema has contributed immensely to Thamizh Isai and it all began with Papanasam Sivan way back in the 1930s. The man is no more but his music and film songs shall live for ever...

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