

POETIC JUSTICE

Vaagaikkulam Mutta Nallaa Pillai was a maestro who traced his ancestry to the musical tradition of Mullai Punganur Sankaralinga Annavi. He had performed in the court of Maharaja Balarama Varma and won honors with a silk shawl and a diamond necklace as gifts. He was the eldest son of Panchamalingam Paavanaasam. The childhood musical training with his father would prove a strong foundation when he later apprenticed with his Guru Simmam Sivananda Pillai. He also mastered special compositions under Kalikesanallur Kandiah Pillai Bhagavata and Yagna Narayana Sastrigal. He excelled as a flutist too, but he was renowned as a vocalist.

He dominated the music field from the early Seventies; what if he lacked the trappings of loyalty - the throne, flag, scepter, and crown - or owned no armies, elephants or horses? As far as music is concerned, Pancham, as he is called, is indeed an emperor. He might be a total stranger to those whose artistic taste stopped short of film music. Even today, the name Pancham evokes adoration and reverence in the musical world.

He commanded the largest crowds of admirers next only to Madurai Somasundaram. It was said that when Pancham was young and performed in the hall of Boothalinga Swamy Temple, Boothappandi Sonachala Annavi was so moved by his feat that he warmly embraced the young artist and said, "You are indeed a lion!"

He was lauded for his innovation in popularizing the compositions of Kavimani Desikavinayakam Pillai and the Namakkal Kavinzar. His patrons were familiar with both the names Panchamangalam and Pavanasam, but to his fans he was always Pancham. Please note here the word Pancham has nothing to do with the Tamil meaning 'famine'; the word corresponds with the number five.

As befits his name, he was known as an authority on *Pancharatna Kritis*. He also popularized the five great compositions on Lord Siva as *Panchalinga Kritis*.

He had contributed more than eighty records to his admirers. Among these were the *kritis* of Arunachala Kavi; songs of Gopala Krishna Bharatiyar; *Kavadi Chindu* of Annamalai Reddiar; patriotic songs of Poet Bharatiyar; *Tiru Arutpa*; *Abhirami Andaadi*; *Tiruppaavai*; compositions of Pavanasam Sivan and Periasami Tooran, commanded big sales. It was said that the Bhakta Ramadasa's song *paluke bangaramayine Kodandapani* in raga *Anadna Bhairavi* alone sold one lakh records.

He also contributed CDs in individual *melakarta* ragas - a long list that includes *Kalyani*, *Todi*, *Mohanam*, *Ritigowla*, *Sindu Bhairavi*, *Sankarabharanam*, *Karakarapriya*, *lataangi*, and *Kambodi*. Still, his rendering of *Ragam*, *Tanam*, and *Pallavi* in raga *Nattakkurinji* in a live performance was rated the best of all his innovations.

The moment he takes his seat on stage, Pancham would set the tone and his voice would begin its magic. It is not just the *bansuri* that can charm a snake. Pancham can charm patrons of every ilk. He is also exceptional in that he would never render the Tamil songs -as gratis - in short pieces - the way other artistes did in a covert and resentful manner. Invariably, more than half the compositions in Pancham's concert would be in Tamil. Occasionally, the main feature of the program would be Tamil songs only; that was indeed revolutionary in those days.

It was said that once, when he rendered a Bharatidasan's song in a concert, a member in the audience rose and shouted at him "Now, how about a composition by Periyar?" That too was a sign of the times.

Pancham paid special attention to *sahitya* - the meaning of the words, their context and import as the musician articulated them; he would render the words with correct pronunciation. Some musicians are not proficient in their mother-tongue and they are also unfamiliar with the language in which the composition was written. Their knowledge is by rote learning - so they strictly follow their Guru the way he sang and demonstrated it to them. Any variation in the melody the Guru had adopted in his lessons would be austere repeated by the faithful disciples -including a sneeze.

Pancham also displayed extraordinary creativity in his recitals. Some musicians seemed proud to acknowledge that they knew neither to read nor write in Tamil; they wore this as a badge of honor from the President of the Republic. But Pancham composed his own *kritis* and set them to ragas that conveyed his aesthetic sense and passion.

Once, in Chennai concerts during the December music season, different singers at various recitals rendered composition that, when literally translated, meant "Oh, Lord, we are begging for your grace!" To many it sounded as if they were beseeching for a can of kerosene oil. But Pancham is different; like a flood gate bursting out; his delivery struck an emotional impact on his listeners.

Just as his music, he also had an excellent command over language. You might have come across his poems in many special - Pongal, Deepavali and New Year-issues; they were never

deemed inferior to the poems of the commercial artistes; you may include in the list the national leaders, vice-chancellors of the universities, and the wives and daughters-in-law of high court judges.

Still, once in a while, Pancham struggled to flaunt his knowledge in English; such a tendency has unfortunately turned into a social disease. In a concert where the audience was consisted of only Tamils, he would venture a statement, “*The next composition is of Thygaraja, in the raga Atana, set to Adi Thala.*” Most likely he had forgotten that the audience had little problem in listening and understanding the Telugu and Kannada kritis and the *Abhang* in Marathi; or he might be imagining that he was actually performing in some temple in San Francisco. May the Trinity of Carnatic Music lend their ears to his audience!

This was the compliment from the doyen of Carnatic music, the octogenarian, Kaniyankulam Chinnayya Bhagavathar, paid to Pancham: “He sings well and also earns well.”

There is virtually no foreign country that Pancham had not visited. He has gone to all the countries where the Indian passport is welcome. He has not yet been given an opportunity to perform before the U.N. audience. Invariably he has taken part in Parliament, state legislatures, religious centres, monasteries and the parties given honoring foreign dignitaries.

Pancham has no complaints; his three children live in individual bungalows, are happily married, and enjoy luxury cars and grandchildren.

He is tall and well built, has an attractive and captivating look with a hearty laugh; he is indeed an emperor in the music world. Like the erstwhile musical giants Ramarathnam Pillai and M.K.T. Thygaraja Bhagavathar, he was destined to a life of pomp and pageantry.

It has been a widely held opinion among the traditionalists that in his previous birth Pancham had worshipped Goddess Saraswati by pouring honey on her image; it is not that everyone is blessed with such an opportunity. We know artistes who have been playing the *shehnai* for over many years; yet how many of them could compare with Pandit Bismillah Khan? Does honey gush through their recital? There are any number of flutists, but it is only in the performance of a Pandit Ronu Majumdar or Pandit Hariprasad Chaurasia one senses the surge of intense emotion; one feels like tasting an admixture of ginger and lemon, so it never cloys.

When Pancham was recently felicitated and presented with the honorary title of *Sangitha Paricharaka Kalanithi*, he lectured on his thesis and offered proof that there are similarities

between the *raga Mohanam* with an African musical note, and the *raga Todi* with a Chinese musical note.

The conventional wisdom says that those blessed with Goddess Saraswati's grace are shunned by the Goddess Lakshmi; but Pancham proved an exception to this rule.

If it is not unusual that a classical Hindustani singer from *Gwalior Gharana* or *Benares Gharana* gets paid one lakh of rupees for just one performance, why should one object to the same honor bestowed on Pancham? It is just a case of demand and supply. How can one put a price when it is considered an honor to listen to his music? Still, one should acknowledge he is paid much less than the play-back singers in the film world.

We can be sure of one thing; if one can't make to his recital half-an-hour before it is to begin, one should resign himself to the announcement of 'Standing Room Only' - even when the recital is held in a big auditorium. And Pancham insists that his listeners abide by the following nine conditions:

1. Cell phones must be turned off; one must keep them in silent-mode;
2. No one is allowed to walk out of the auditorium during the percussionist's solo performance;
3. During the recital, those suffering from blood pressure or diabetes are prohibited from taking their medication; they are allowed to get up and leave only after a composition is completed but not when it is in progress;
4. No conversations allowed during the recital; yawning, belching, sighing or farting are strictly prohibited;
5. Request Notes soliciting favorite compositions will not be entertained;
6. Photographers are prohibited from obstructing and getting in the way of others;
7. Secret recording of the recital is strictly prohibited;
8. Autographs are strictly prohibited; and
9. Falling at the feet of Pancham is strictly prohibited.

When it comes to his food habits, Pancham displayed decorum and consistency. To elaborate on that point would become another story. The same thing can be said of the prizes and medals bestowed on him. His most recent honors include *Kalanithi* and *Padma Sri*.

It was the *Ayudha Puja Day* when Pancham was scheduled to perform in *Hanumath Gana Sabha*. His rendering of a composition in raga *Karakarapriya*, "*Rama, ni samanamevaru*

raguvamsodharaka” was so beguiling that Hanuman, Rama’s servant would have presented himself in that concert hall, his hands folded in a respectful gesture, beside his master. Such was the tenderness in Pancham’s voice - the flowing water stream as pure as a crystal. He received a standing ovation from the audience.

The next day was one of complete rest. Pancham was lodged in the guest house of Satyaveera Annamma Naicker - the well known music patron and the owner of three textile mills. The in-house cook was Palaghat Ramunni; the attendant at his ear shot was Bhagyanathan, who drove Annamma Naicker’s Kantsa car. The day after Pancham was scheduled to perform in a village temple in Noorani next to Palaghat. He was expected to leave for Chennai after that program.

As usual he woke up the next day, had a one-hour walk in the garden, took his bath, conducted prayers and had the midday meals. Then he returned to the front A.C. room in the guest house for conversation with his accompanying artistes.

“Anna, last night the Sabha went wild after your performance,” said the Kanjira player. “You sang the pallavi in different ragas - *Nattai, Kambodi. Sama, Amritavarshini, Sahana, Keeravani* - and the listeners were wiping tears off their faces. Even I was overwhelmed.”

“Yes, I too felt the same way,” said the *mridangam* player. “I felt I was in a trance.”

They heard noise from a small crowd gathering at the front of the guest house. Pancham turned around thinking some local big wheel or an affluent patron might be visiting him.

The visitor walked in with a stride of an elephant - erect, with deep-set eyes, broad shoulders, dressed in a pure white *veshti*, full-arm shirt, an angavastram, a dot of sandal-wood paste adorning his forehead - his attractive face commanding instant deference from the onlookers to stand up and fold their hands in respectful gesture. His name was Neminathan and he was followed by the shy and reticent professor of the local music college with five or six students.

“Anna, please come . . . I was actually thinking of visiting you . . . I am so busy . . . I am very glad you came . . . Please be seated . . .” Pancham offered him a seat.

He knew perfectly well that even the most famous musician could hardly sing a note in the musical realm of Coimbatore without a nod from Neminathan; such was his clout and he was among the first generation of national leaders who lost their wealth and he dedicated himself to music in Coimbatore. He was a bold, upright and known for honesty and frankness in dealing with others. Had he wanted, he could have easily become the owner of four textile mills. But he preferred the life arts and steadfast dedication to music and its practitioners.

After easing himself into a chair, Neminathan invited the professor to sit beside him.

“Have you had your meals? Are you satisfied with the arrangements?” he began, and continued: “Your concert yesterday was brilliant . . . It has been a long time since I heard someone sing in raga Mukari . . . I think everybody admired your rendering”

“Thank you. I owe all that honor to your blessings,” said Pancham.

“Do you know him? This is Gopi Krishna Bhagavathar . . . the Principal of our music college. Those boys standing are his students . . . I have come to see you for a particular reason . . .”

“It is no big deal; please tell me, it is a done deal . . .”

“The boys are excited . . . They would like to you to give a lecture demonstration in their college at your convenience . . . I think one hour will be enough.”

“Well, we can do that,” said Pancham, smiling. Then, opening his both hands he folded the ten fingers and slowly opened them; he repeated this, again and again, five times.

Neminathan lost no time in understanding Pancham’s demand. He was quick to probe the underlying the message. Yet he pretended as if he has not noticed the hand signal.

“That would be beyond their means,” he said. “You know the kind of people who are interested in music . . . Please understand . . . I am appealing to your generosity . . .”

“I know what you mean . . . That was the reason I reduced my remuneration to half . . . I can’t reconsider my decision . . . If they want, let them go for an artiste meeting their condition . . .”

Neminathan became speechless; his face turning pale, he turned around and looked at the college principal and students. His eyes turned moist and his vision became blurred.

His lips began to recite the song in raga Jayanti, “*marukelaraa, O raghava . . .*”

He suddenly stood up and folded his hands in a parting gesture. “May I take leave of you?” Pancham smiled and folded his both hands.

Contrary to my intention, I would like to end the story here. Sometimes truth looks like a false front jeering at us. I am afraid the next few lines I would be writing may look like a feeble attempt to congeal revenge under a sluice. But how can one bury the truth under a swamp?

The next day, after his performance in Palaghat, Pancham had his dinner and was resting on the front seat of Kantsa car and returning to the guest house. The accompanying artistes would

be leaving for Chennai on the same night. Pancham was scheduled to take a flight the next morning.

Around half an hour past midnight his car rode past the K.K. choultry, crossed the iron bridge and, as it approached Madukkarai, it sped fast under a trailer lorry parked on the road. The collision broke Pancham's head and he lay on a pool of blood. The survivor, driver Bhagyanathan, called for an ambulance which made its way to the site and carried the victim to the main government hospital - but not before the Grim Reaper had his target.

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