



A man ahead of times, a man with a bewildering depth and range of creativity, a man who was a fountain of music, a man who lived less than 35 years in the early-19th century, and a man who had dejecting experience in both career and personal life: this in short, was the life of *Swathi Thirunal Rama Varma* (1813-1846), renowned as the king among musicians and the musician among kings.

Swathi Thirunal was born as the second child of Rani Gauri Lakshmi Bayi and Raja Raja Varma Koyi Thampuran, at Thiruvananthapuram, the capital of erstwhile princely state of Travancore (the southern region of present Kerala



Swathi Thirunal

(1813-1846)

A fountain of music

state). His birth was a long awaited event to the royal family, as it was in the danger of having to hand over the reins of power to the British, for want of a male heir. As soon as Rani Gauri Lakshmi Bayi conceived, and as soon as it was predicted that it was a male child, the child was

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acclaimed a king (Swathi is hence known by the name 'Garbha Sreeman'). The joy of the whole royal family and the people of the state seems to have been distilled into the lullaby 'Omana Thinkal Kidavo', said to have been composed specially for putting baby Swathi to sleep. To date, this remains the most popular lullaby for Keralites (See Vol.1, No.2 of The New Millennium).

His mother passed away while he was hardly two years old. He was brought up in the care of his aunt Rani Gauri Parvathy Bayi and his father. Rani Gauri Parvathy Bayi herself was a wonder. At the age of 13, she became Queen Regent of Travancore. Swathi Thirunal showed his prodigy from early years. He grew up in the company of Rugmini Bayi, his elder sister and Uthram Thirunal Marthanda Varma, his younger brother who succeeded him to the throne. Irayimman Thampi, a close relative of Swathi and a composer and poet of merit, Vidwan Koyi Thampuran, another literary figure, provided close company to Swathi Thirunal. Subba Rao, who later became Swathi's Dewan (Prime Minister), was his personal tutor during the initial years of his informal schooling.

A very graphic description of the times of Swathi Thirunal and an authentic record of Swathi Thirunal's personality is available in "Military Reminiscences: A journal of nearly 40 years of active service in East India". It was published in London by Smith, Elder and Co in 1830 and is authored by Colonel James Welsh of the British Army. He visited Kerala twice, in 1819 and 1825. Even though the Colonel held a contempt for anything that is native, as is seen in his reference to Ramanattam, maternal hierarchy etc, he ends his brief note with a reference to Swathi Thirunal as the 'rising sun of the country'. The note relating to the visit of the Colonel in 1825 is given below verbatim:

Being on a tour of inspection during the month of May and stopping to pass a few days at the

residency, with colonel Newall, I had an opportunity of witnessing the studies of the young Rajahs in private, and forming an estimate of their progressive acquirements and abilities. On the morning of the 16th, at ten o'clock, I accompanied the Colonel in his gig, without attendants, to the fort, where we are immediately conducted to a room in the Palace, and found them, with their father, their sister, her husband, and their schoolmaster ready to receive us. The elder boy, now thirteen [Swathi], seemed greatly improved in mind though rather diminutive in person. He read a chapter of Malcolm's Central India; the Governor-general's Persian Letter, on the capture of Rangoon; a passage in Sanskrit; another in Malayalam, and seemed equally clever at each. He then took up a book of Mathematics, and selecting the forty-seventh proposition of Euclid sketched the figure on a country slate; what astonished me most, was his telling us in English that geometry was derived from the Sanskrit, which was 'jaw meter' to measure the earth, and that many of our mathematical terms were also derived from the same source, such as hexagon, heptagon, octagon, decagon, duodecagon etc. His remarks were generally apposite, but their language inelegant and ungrammatical. This is much to be lamented, because with so many studies on hand he can never read enough of English to correct his idiom; and the master, a very clever Tanjore Brahmin could not speak it much better himself. His Persian was pure and elegant; but of other languages I am too ignorant to offer an opinion. This promising boy is now, I conclude sovereign of the finest country in India; for he was to succeed to the Musnud the moment he had attained his sixteenth year. The younger brother gave us various specimens of his acquirements; somewhat inferior, of course to those of the rising sun



Aayilyam Thirunal Rani Gauri Lakshmi Bayi



Swathi as a child



Uthrittathi Thirunal Rani Gauri Parvathy Bayi

of the country, but still very fair.

Swathi Thirunal mastered Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Persian, Hindi and Marathi at an early age (The reference to inelegant and ungrammatical English of Swathi Thirunal must have been in the learning phase, as can be ascertained by his command over the language in later years, such as the letter he wrote to the Madras Governor in 1843). He also mastered vocal, veena and swarabath, in addition to traditional learning of Hindu scriptures and sciences. He ascended the throne as soon as he turned 16. From day one, he established himself as a ruler with a modern vision. It wouldn't be wrong to call him the architect of modern Trivandrum. The University College, University Observatory, Public Library, Charity Hospital, Manuscripts Library, Public Works Department, Zoo, Government Press etc in their earlier forms were established by Swathi Thirunal. However, Swathi Thirunal dwarfed all such physical achievements with his monumental contributions in the field of Carnatic music, the form of Indian classical music most popular in south India. He composed in 6 languages over 380 compositions, in various forms, ragas (scales) and in praise of various deities. These compositions show as much variety in form and content as the personality of the composer himself. In traditional

carnatic music concerts, if performers confined to compositions of a single composer, it would be no doubt Swathi compositions, which will not restrict the performer in any way.

Swathi Thirunal was also one of the few kings of his times who was an Indian nationalist much ahead of his times. In his court, he invited musicians from TamilNadu, Maharashtra, Punjab, Andhra Pradesh, and even Lahore. He also honoured scientists, engineers, poets, painters, dancers, sculptures and even magicians. Among his close associates were the great Thanjavoor Ponnayya, Thannjavoor Vadivelu (disciples of Deekshithar), Kannayya (Disciple of Thyagaraja), Shadkala Govinda Marar (who was famous for singing in 6 tempos), Palakkad Parameswara Bhagavathar, and Meru Swami. Among the wonders of Swathi's musical contributions, his Hindustani compositions in Hindi, based on North Indian classical music styles, stand out.



Swathi lived during the period of the famous trinity of Karnatic music, the great Thyagaraja, Deekshithar and Shyama Sastri. Swathi is said to have invited Thyagaraja to Trivandrum, but the latter politely declined as he avoided royal patronage towards the latter part of his life. Deekshithar is believed to have visited Swathi Thirunal and it is known that he has composed a song on the deity of the Padmanabhaswami temple.

Swathi Thirunal was great devotee of Sreepadmanabha, the chief deity in the Padmanabha Swami temple of Trivandrum. He is known to have made offerings worth millions of rupees to the same deity. Even his signature in the compositions is the word 'Padmanabha'. Towards the latter part of his reign, he had a miserable time, having strained his relations with the British Resident William Cullen. Cullen was a scholar himself and had great admiration for Swathi initially, but later became a





menace for Swathi. Cullen interfered in all matters of governance to the extent that the king was reduced to a figurehead. Swathi Thirunal reacted firmly and tactfully, but with the British power established all over India, there was little he could do. When Cullen tried to oust the Prime Minister Subba Rao, Swathi Thirunal wrote to the Marquis of Tweeddale, Governor of Madras in 1843 and succeeded in reverting the decision of Cullen. This letter is a testimony to his mastery over the English language. It began:

My Lord, with due deference I beg to lay the following statement before Your Lordships, and hope you will kindly excuse the intrusion on your precious time because my painful struggles against an unprecedented interference of the Resident at my Court in the affairs of my Government having harassed my mind to a degree expressible,

have at last driven me to the necessity of thus seeking your Lordship's protection and support in the time of need.

Cullen however had the last laugh when he wielded his power as the Resident to strike down each and every order of the king. Swathi Thirunal finally withdrew into solitude, spending his days in prayers and music. He stayed in the Horse Palace (*Kuthira Malika*) which he himself designed and got built during the last year of his short eventful life. In the tiny wooden room facing the pagoda of the Padmanabha Swami

Temple, he in said to have spent most of his time. His personal life was also going through a crisis. When Sugandha Parvathi Bayi, a dancer from Tanjore walked into his life in addition to the Veena exponent Narayani Pillai, it created strains in the royal family. The deaths

of his father, sister and his close associates Vadivelu and Vidwan Koyi Thampuram shook him and soon the rising sun of of the country, before reaching the zenith, set. He left behind a treasure of musical compositions for the lovers of carnatic music all over the world to enjoy. The landmarks in the tiny city of Trivandrum which even today remain as the earliest sign of modernity can also be traced backed to the times of Swathi Thirunal.

His family continued to produce creative talents and even today is not devoid of the same. Aswathi Thirunal Rama Varma, a key disciple of the Carnatic mastero Dr. M. Balamuralikrishna, carries on the tradition. Sri Rama Varma's father hails from the Changanassery palace, home of Swathi's father, and his mother is the neice of the late Maharaja Sri Chithira Thirunal. When Aswathi Thirunal Rama Varma sings the beautiful Hindustani piece of Swathi, *Aaj Aaye Shyaam Mohan*, in a rare shade of raaga *Pahadi*, which sets in the mood of a folk song flowing through a desrted village in a magical afternoon, one is confident that the Swathi lineage is alive. ■

