

Looking back with Lalgudi



Lalgudi Jayaraman

When I went to see violin maestro Lalgudi G Jayaraman to discuss the launching of the Brahaddhavan Art Circle, he was reading an article in *The Hindu* on the Gandhi Museum in Gandhigram and how, years ago, a road *roko* had been organised nearby, near Chinnalampatti village, by weavers wanting to have a *darshan* of Mahatma Gandhi.

Lalgudi remembers vividly that tour of Mahatma Gandhi around 1942. He was a young man in Lalgudi when the Mahatma was to pass through the village. Jayaraman remembers the entire village coming to the railway station long before Gandhiji's expected time of arrival, 9 a.m. But the train came in only at 12.30 p.m.; it had to make many unscheduled stops.

"We all shouted Mahatma Gandhi *kai jai* with great fervour. There was one compartment that was not completely covered. It had a verandah-like open space with railings. Rajaji came out first and Gandhi followed him and smiled at all of us. We all surrendered to the power of the man who offered such brightness, yet was in such a simple attire. We were all filled with great joy and shouted some more. When he started speaking, we all fell silent. His was a bass voice. If he sings he might sound like K L Saigal, I thought.

Mahatma Gandhi's Hindi apology for coming late was translated by C N Gopalaswamy. Ganapati Iyer, an important man in Lalgudi, went up to Mahatma Gandhi and got his autograph. Gandhi wrote his name in Tamil. "The piece of paper was touched by all of us. We felt there was some power in the paper also." It was a great irony that when they all got back to Lalgudi village, thrilled after seeing Gandhi, they found some houses had been burgled! While the entire population of the village was away, thieves had a field day!

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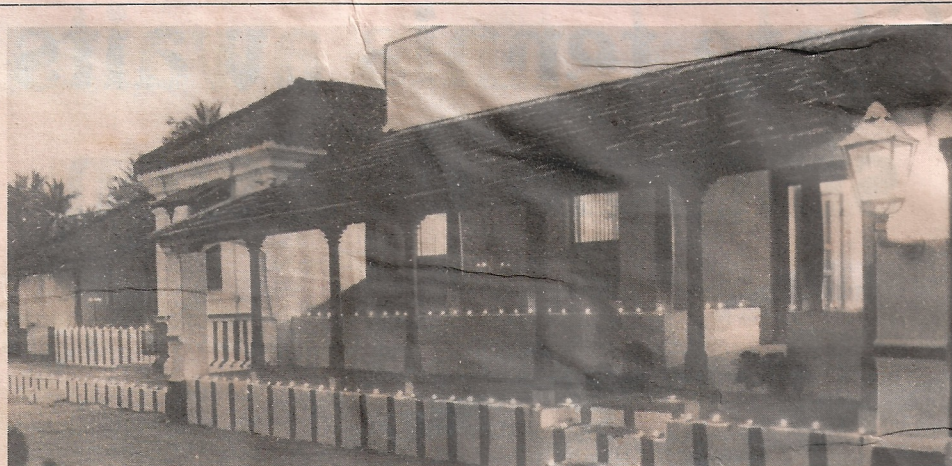
Lalgudi Jayaraman belongs to a family of musicians which can trace its music lineage to Saint Tyagaraja. Jayaraman's great-grandfather Rama Iyer trained under the saint. Tyagaraja visited Lalgudi and composed five *kritis* on the deity in the Lalgudi temple. They are called the *Pancharatnas*. Grandfather Radhakrishna

Iyer took up the violin and was patronised by the ruler of Ramanathapuram. His two sons, Kandaswamy Iyer and Gopala Iyer, were respected violinists. Gopala Iyer's son Jayaraman learnt vocal music first, in the family tradition, and only later turned to the violin. By the time he emerged as a violin artist, the violin had been fully accepted as an indispensable accompaniment for vocal music in the Carnatic music tradition. But full-length instrumental performances were not a common feature on the concert stage at the time. The *veena* was the only solo instrument from antiquity. Some flute music was also played solo on rare occasions and *nagaswaram* was played at auspicious functions as a social custom, but not much on the concert platform.

Carnatic music on the solo violin was played only by a few, stars like Mysore Chondiah and Dwaram Venkataswami Naidu, who began as accompanists but turned more and more to solo concerts. Jayaraman too first gained experience of various styles of music as an accompanist to many great vocalists of his time. He would change his style to suit the style of the vocalist. But as a solo artist he developed his own style. He went on to great heights and Yehudi Menuhin presented him with a violin. In 1986, the Krishna Gana Sabha celebrated 50 continuous solo concerts on the same platform by Lalgudi. Lata Mangeshkar presented him a gold violin on the occasion. Lalgudi Jayaraman is known for his compositions for dance. His *tillanas* are danced by many a Bharata Natyam dancer.

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After the visit of Gandhi, the village turned completely nationalistic. Lalgudi Gopala Iyer was a keen nationalist and held many discussions on it at home. He had a big music school in Lalgudi and made all his students sing the nationalistic songs of Subramania Bharati. "On August 15, 1947, the tricolour went up on all the



Sterling's Swamimalai property... the first of its heritage hotels, in this case one lodged in a hundred-year-old home.

1897-1997 at Swamimalai

(By A Staff Reporter)

Sterling Swamimalai is a unique Heritage Hotel which offers an "authentic Indian experience" rather made to order.

The Heritage Hotel has refurbished *Thimakkudy House* (the house where Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswathi Swamikal of Kanchi Kamakoti Peetam stayed when he used to visit Swamimalai) is over hundred years old. It has been renovated without losing anything of the antiquity of the exterior of the house. The interior decor, with typical lamps and other antiques, gives a glimpse of the rich heritage of India — but seems obviously laid on.

A traditional experience is arranged right from 5.30 a.m., with strains of morning music waking the guests to see a traditional-looking 'Maragathamal' sitting on the *thinnai* weaving garlands of fragrant flowers. The flowers are offered for a puja in the traditional way. Then a Muslim priest fumigates the whole place with *sambhani* (frankincense). Yoga follows in front of the huge Siva mural in an open air ambience, with trained teachers guiding the guests. Then begins the Royal Bath, with an age-old ayurvedic herbal massage done by professional masseurs. The breakfast, lunch and dinner are traditional, with thematic spreads served in banana leaves. The tour includes rides in bullock carts in Swamimalai and excursions to nearby destinations. Sterling Swamimalai also offers a full-fledged Ayurveda Health Care Centre, established in collaboration with the Arya Vaidya Chikitsalayam of Coimbatore. The traditional Copper Sauna Bath facility in Sterling Swamimalai is available in very few places.

It might seem like a bit of make-believe, with bits and pieces of traditional India offered in and out of context, but fun is suspending reality for a couple of days.

houses. *Pandals* made of green palm and flowers came up everywhere. The music students gave continuous concerts at the street corner."

Lalgudi Jayaraman had been making regular visits to Madras for concert engagements. On January 30, 1948, he was playing in a concert in Tiruchi. "It was Thyagaraja Bahula Panchami and we were on the stage in the hundred-pillar hall when F A Natesa Iyer, a leading personality of Trichi, came on to the stage and announced the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. People could not comprehend what he said at first and sought information from others, but a huge snake-like hiss to quiet the people arose from the audience and we stopped the concert. I remember sobbing uncontrollably. To think that Gandhi was dead and that too killed! I still remember the man with a charisma that cannot be described, standing on the train in Lalgudi station.

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Lalgudi Jayaraman's children, G J R Krishnan and Vijayalakshmi, are continuing the family tradition of the violin. His daughter-in-law is a vocalist and is now on a tour of the US. The Lalgudi couple dote on their granddaughter and are keeping her busy during the summer holidays by telling her stories about Mahatma Gandhi and giving her lessons in music in the absence of her mother.

— V R Devika

On the Bookshelves

The book that has caught the attention of the media worldwide is Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (IndiaInk - Rs.395). A semi-autobiographical novel, it captures the sociopolitical climate of the 1960's in Kerala, when Communism took the state by storm. The novel is also about the Syrian Christians and their lifestyle. Roy weaves a beautifully — and meticulously — worded story about the twins Estha and Rahel and the turn of events after the arrival of their cousin Sophie in Ayemenem.

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Another autobiographical novel to hit the stands is Manohar Devadoss' *Green Well Years* (EWB - Rs.295). The book captures the childhood days of the author in the temple town of Madurai. What really stands out in the book is a series of ink drawings done by the author himself. The drawings, exquisite and minutely detailed, capture the essence of Madurai. These drawings are very special because the author is near-blind.

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Ramanujan: Letters and Commentary (EWB - Rs.295) is

a compilation of the correspondence between the two great mathematicians, Ramanujan and G H Hardy, and letters from Ramanujan's family. Bruce C Berndt and Robert A Rankin have retrieved a lot of letters, including the famous letter written on 16th and 27th February, 1913. These letters are considered landmarks in the field of maths. A must for maths lovers.

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In the popular fiction section, Philip Kerr's *Esau* (Vintage - UK £2.95) is set to make a mark. Tipped to be Britain's Micheal Crichton, Kerr churns out a gripping story set mostly in the Himalaya. A search is on for the Yeti, there is a psychopathic spy on the loose and a possible nuclear war, all leading to the discovery of the Abominable Snowman. Disney has already bought the filming rights for *Esau*.

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Coromandel (HarperCollins - UK £3.20) by Owen Sela is an epic tale of passion and intrigue, set in 17th Century India. The book is about the establishment of the East India Company — a saga of men and women who struggled to gain a foothold on foreign soil. This is about Richard Darnell who has this passionate dream of establishing an empire in India.

Savitha Padmanabhan