

AN ODE TO MY PARENTS

(Rangan)

In 1977, I was in Buffalo, N.Y. - it was the second year of my graduate program - when Mother passed away in Vellore Hospital. Seenu, who had visited her in late December of 1976, gave me some indication about her deteriorating condition. Kamali too wrote to me to convey as much. Kamali was the last person to see Mother alive as she was wheeled away for – what later became – her last dialysis procedure.

I am ashamed to admit that at the time I considered it a blessing that I didn't have to witness Mother's final days. I always remember her as very energetic and quick in movements and only later when I saw some of the photographs taken at the Vellore hospital did I realize how different - weak and sick - she became. Still, she was strong in spirit and never lost her zest for life – and in this she was like Father who was full of passion and enjoyed every minute of his life. Mother was in the hospital for nearly forty days but not once did anyone hear her complaining, “Why do I have to go through all this? When will all this end!” She had the willpower to go through all that was demanded of her till the last breath.

But I knew, and heard from Seenu - that I was very much in her thoughts; she was concerned about my life in US away from Kamali and Anupama, so she asked Nannu at the hospital that he should make sure that they would join me in United States as early as possible. She had reportedly remarked, “Rangan is the luckiest member of the family; he didn't have to see me suffer like this.” She knew my temperament and my reluctance to face unpleasant truths. Kamali and I are very proud that we named our second daughter Thaila (Kamali made the selection and there was no alternative female name to consider; in the family tradition we knew it would be a girl!). Mother, of course, would never know this. Thaila knows about her grandmother only through anecdotes and others talking about her.

When I grew up in Berhampur I understood that both my parents were popular with the locals. Father was always referred to as Professor and in spite of his inability to speak Telugu or Oriya he endeared himself to his students and their parents. I was once asked by one of my

friend's older brother and a former student of Father's: "Is it true that your mom helps your dad in grading the exam papers?" He was discreet enough to draw me aside while posing the question; I kept mum and said nothing. Later, I wondered: "Is it plausible?"

Mother had no formal education but father saw to it that she read and enhanced her general knowledge and literary interests. Father told me he bought the Tamil plays of Pammal Sambanda Mudaliar ("Each cost only five *annas!*") for mother to read and enjoy. *Pammal*, as he is widely known, had translated many of Shakespeare's plays into Tamil. I once watched Mother talk about the play *Macbeth* (in Tamil it was called *Magabathi*) with Selvi's teacher Buchamma Garu. Later I heard that Father had corresponded with Pammal over his choice of word *kaadal* for love in *Amaladittan* (a translation of *Hamlet*). Father argued, in this particular context, the word *love* actually meant the beloved (*kadali*). Father convinced *Pammal* by quoting from the Shakespearean scholars like A.C. Bradley, Dover Wilson and A.L.Rowse to back up his case.

I later came to know Mother's favorite play of Pammal's was *Manohara* – which I saw, later, as a movie in the 1950's. Mother told me it was her favorite and that she had seen the play in *Kattuputhur* (I guess she was barely ten or a little older at the time); yet, after so many years she was able evoke the scenes from the play with vividness and also name the men from her hometown who played the key roles in that play! It is men who played the female roles in those days.

Father used to subscribe to the daily *Dinamani Kadir* mainly for Mother to read and keep in touch with current events; he also used to select and highlight snippets from the news items in 'boxes' for his *Ammanai* poems. At dinner time, Father would invariably discuss some story or a piece from the Tamil magazines which we all read at home. I remember him once discussing a humorous skit by *Nadodi* – and I asking him, innocently, why a vagabond (literal meaning of *Nadodi*), would ever get published in a popular magazine. I also wondered why a magazine would pay someone money to publish his piece. I was ignorant about these things – the pseudonyms and how writers made their living - even when I was well into the habit of reading and enjoying the printed word.

There is one particular incident from mother's 'literary forays' that stands out in my memory. In the fifties *Kalaimagal* published a novel *ANBIN OLI (The Sound of Love)* by writer MAYAVI in installments. In the very first installment readers were told about one Shyam Dev – all the characters in MAYAVI's stories have invariably Marathi names because the setting is always Bombay – who absconded after embezzling the company funds. Then, in the following installments, in flashbacks, the readers were led to the past events as they unraveled in the narrative. One particular installment described in detail – step by step – how Shyam Dev, the alleged perpetrator, festers inwardly over his betrayal of his generous and decent employer and wallows in anguish and guilt. That installment ended with the ubiquitous cliff hanger: *To be continued.*

At dinner Father mentioned the episode and casually remarked: "Do you see how a guilty man's conscience pricks him? You can see how well the author describes a criminal's inner turmoil."

Mother was the first one to respond.

"I think somebody is really watching him embezzle money," she said.

"Why do you say so? He is guilty and so he imagines that someone is watching him. There's nothing in the story to suggest anybody else was at the scene of crime," Father said.

"But I feel somebody else was actually there, . . ." Mother was saying.

When subsequent installments appeared we found out Mother was right. I could never divine how well her instincts worked to her advantage.

One day Mother was talking about the *Naladiyar* poems; only much later, I came to know they belonged to the *Sangam* period; each is a four-line poem about morals and ethics extolling righteous behavior.

"What is this *Naladiyar* poem?" I asked.

"It is similar to the poems of *Vemana* you study in school," she said.

"How do you know about *Vemana*'s poems?" I asked a little bewildered.

She immediately recited a well known poem of *Vemana* which, when translated, reads:

*The salt and camphor look the same, but they vastly differ in taste and quality;
So do all men look alike, but some are special and very different from others.*

Mother said she had heard someone in the Marella family (they were our householder before we moved to our home in Church Road) mention about *Vemana* and she wanted to know more about his poems. Now, after many years, she could still recite a couple of them.

Father also used to read his poems to Mother for her opinion and comments. I remember him saying that when he showed his piece on *Kothai*, Mother told him his poetic interpretation demiraculising the legend cherished by many Vaishnavites would be a hard sell. I remember once in a while in a conversation with Father, Mother would say, “That’s how poets and story tellers think!” not to sound sarcastic but to chide, gently, that Father risked the danger of being misunderstood.

A case in point. Father was once telling us about *Sangam* poetry and how poets viewed love in ancient Tamil culture. He posed a question: “Let’s say a boy and a girl fall in love – but their parents disapprove. What should they do?” He directed the question looking at Selvi and I remember she was embarrassed enough to say anything in response but Father preempted her: “They should elope – otherwise the pair would be compromising their *karpu* - unswerving *fidelity*.” Mother stormed out of the kitchen and told him, “That’s enough! No more need to be said.” Prof. T.K. Satyamurthy, who was present, told Mother: “*Mami*, don’t be angry. Mama, as a teacher, is trying to explain everything.”

Mother was a great cook and the dishes she prepared had both the Tamil and Andhra flavor; some items were taboo in our home: no garlic or spinach was ever allowed. I guess garlic was dropped from the menu on some religious (?) grounds. As for spinach there was a belief that it made one become darker! Only later I knew that was not true because many families that used spinach regularly had members of fair complexion! At home *Okra* was preferred over other vegetables – because it was supposed to improve one’s brain! *Kovaikkai* – *dondakai*, in Telugu – was viewed as bad for one’s brain. On the other hand onion was generously used in all *curries* – in contrast to what many Tamil Brahmin families regularly ban in their homes.

In retrospect, I wish I was a little more flexible and less demanding of Mother when it came to my culinary tastes: she used to prepare extra dishes to conform strictly to my taste, for example, *avial* using no coconut oil. I must have made myself conspicuous at lunch and dinner

because once Parvathi Mami - Sister India's mother-in-law, visiting us – noticed my intransigence and told Nannu about it – and he, discreetly, mentioned this in a letter to Mother. He wrote, “Rangan should learn to demonstrate flexibility in food habits so as to avoid problems in the future.” Nowadays, I recall his words as I try hard to cope with the special dietary requirements of a diabetic.

Both my parents were interested in arts and literature; Mother learned to play violin in *Kattuputhur* from a Telugu teacher at Father's insistence. Mother has also taught Selvi the basics with harmonium. When I asked Mother why I heard only film songs played on that instrument and not the classical music, she said the harmonium lacked *gamakam*. Later, I learnt that it is *gamakam* that achieves tonal oscillations in a *raga*; a *raga* without *gamakam* is like a creeper with no flowers or a river with no water. I guess that's how sisters India and Selvi got into violin.

Both parents also shared a common trait – compassion – and were moved by simple gestures and scenes from day-to-day life events. Father felt intensely about mundane events that touched him; I think that's how he could revisit and articulate his feelings in his numerous poems. It is said that poets and writers do not always know what they mean, so they put them in words on paper to ‘share the honey of their experiences’ with others.

One evening, in Neyveli, while returning home from shopping, Father and I paused at an intersection for a moment when Father noticed a single shoe lying by the roadside. He continued to stare at that single shoe, and asked me: “Have you ever seen a single shoe – and not a pair lying around? This certainly gives me an idea.” In a day or two he penned a short poem on a single shoe and read it to me.

Father sported quite a few arbitrary habits and they are interesting because they were generally contradictory to the manners of the world. He was proud of his unconventional ideas and was never afraid to make them public. Once, while visiting *Kattuputhur*, he met with his cousin sister (Sarada Athai) whose husband had passed away after a brief illness. Athai was telling Father that she felt terrible because she didn't predecease her husband. Father told her that she ought to feel grateful because her husband got the best attention from her in his last

days. “He needed you and you were there; if you predeceased him, he would have felt orphaned,” he comforted her.

I think he felt the same way when Mother passed away in Vellore with nobody near her. She passed away during dialysis. Many expressed sorrow that Mother was alone when the end came to her, but Father felt differently, as he told me: “Mother was in the best hands when the end came. If she died with only us around her we would have probably panicked; it happened in circumstances where the doctors gave her their best attention.”

Father also believed in certain ‘rules’ and expected others to follow them. He had a pathological dislike for coffee – I don’t know why – and the fact that ARS family (Visalam Manni and others) also had a similar aversion pleased him, immensely. Father was constantly exhorting us to ‘sit with a straight back’, ‘walk with the head held high’, etc. He was also particular that we should avoid clichés and infantile expressions like, “Well and wish to hear the same from you.” He told me it was grammatically wrong but people used it as a routine – just like one followed convention in printing wedding invitation in Tamil: “There’s always a line for the recipient, but it is faithfully never filled in!” Once in a post card he had written a couple of lines in the area where you are supposed to write only the recipient’s address. When I asked him if what he did was permissible, Father simply shrugged me off and said: “I don’t mind if the postman reads what I have written there.” He would bristle if he saw me wearing a full-arm shirt and I happened to fold the sleeves tucked up to the elbows. His aesthetic sense seemed to be offended by these ‘transgressions’ and he felt it was his duty to correct others when they strayed from his rules. Maybe I was the only member in our family who resisted these admonishments and mildly rebelled against Father. I didn’t like when he demanded to know if a non-descript passenger in a train actually bought a ticket or when Father was suddenly upset to question someone smoking in a theatre lobby – where it was entirely legal – at least in those days.

I can still recall – how Father seemed a little naïve and frank in expressing his opinions before others. It was in the late sixties when the anti-Hindi agitation was in full swing in Tamil Nadu. Father, unsurprisingly, was against the imposition of Hindi on the unwilling Tamils but he also disliked the idea of violent protests. He told me he once spoke with a group of students

carrying the placards that read TAMIZH VAAZHGA, HINDI OZHIGA which literally meant, “Let Tamil flourish and Hindi perish.” I guess the students took to Father and respected him, so they let him say his piece. Father told them he would like their slogan to be altered to read instead TAMIZH VAAZHGA, HINDI PEYARGA – which implied that Hindi need only to be “passed over” and it needn’t perish. “We have nothing against Hindi as a language,” he said, “so why should we condemn it?”

As Father described the scene to me, one of the protesters seemed convinced and told his colleagues: “*Ayya* is right; why should we hate Hindi?” Father was pleased at what he heard, but the joy was only short-lived. Another protester expressed his opinion: “Not everyone will understand the word PEYARGA; only OZHIGA will convey our message and be effective.” Father replied: “You are right.” He told me the word PEYARGA was certainly bloodless and not quite catchy as OZHIGA!

Sometimes Father’s passion and love for Tamil seemed to border on absurdity to miss how others do have strong feelings about their own vernacular languages. Once Professor Ranganathan (we used to call him Banpur Ranganathan) whose wife spoke *Kannada*, told Father that because *Telugu* and *Kannada* shared some common characteristics there was a new movement among scholars to evolve a common script for both the languages. I recall Father saying he had a simple solution: both *Andhras* and *Kannadigas* could dispense with their languages and adopt Tamil as a common language. Professor Ranganathan seemed flabbergasted and said nothing. I am sure Father ventured the suggestion not in jest or to play some trick on Prof. Ranganathan.

Father had passion for his literary interests and till his last days he immersed himself in revising and writing his old plays. In Neyveli I used to bring home from my book club five or six magazines once a week and he would read them with interest - and also with regret that he was reading instead of actually writing. He nursed a grievance that most of his literary output didn’t gain accolade, but he went ahead because he used to say, “If I don’t do this, who else will? He felt he owed the Tamil literary world something innovative and creative and his dedication and work in *Iyappurai* is a testimony to it. In *Iyappurai* he saw a new device to ‘parse’ a classical text – mostly a poem – by recasting the lines into horizontal and vertical

columns to facilitate better understanding and appreciation. Father had a strong faith in himself, his dedication to Tamil and his role in the Tamil literature. I was reminded about his temperament in April 1997 when Nannu and I were on our way to meet with Jayakanthan at his home in Chennai - the first time ever. I told Nannu that I had heard a lot about Jayakanthan: that he was a writer with strong ego and confidence in himself. Nannu's response was quick: "More than our father?" In December, 2004 I told Jayakanthan about this anecdote and he laughed and smiled in an appreciative manner.

I feel a little uneasy and guilty that I didn't devote more time to reading and enjoying Father's works when I lived in India. After all, I was the only family member who lived with him in South India. So what little I knew about his work in classical Tamil is only a smattering, so when I visited K-4, I brought back some of Father's personal collections - including a treatise on Tamil grammar for the beginners. After our surviving family members published KRISHNA AND GANDHARI in 2008, I was toying with the idea of publishing some of Father's remaining works. I was familiar with KRISHNA AND GANDHARI – both the Tamil and English versions - in Berhampur in the fifties - and even translated the play into Telugu for publication in a literary magazine published by the Neyveli Andhra Association in 1970. The only other Tamil play by Father's I ever tried to read was KADIMARA YAANAI – and the Tamil used in it was very pure and classical for someone who constantly read and enjoyed modern Tamil literature. I chose KADIMARA YAANAI as it evoked memories of KADIMI CHETTU (a Telugu text by Viswanatha Satyanaraya, the first ever Jnaanapith award winner from the South) prescribed for our seniors in Khallikote College. The main reason I was interested in that text was because it had some words like DINGARI, DHIMBAKA, NATI, etc., widely spoken in the movie *Pathala Bharavi*! Curiously, even many Andhras were not quite familiar with these words before they heard them in the movie, but they became so popular that even the Tamil version of *Pathala Bhairavi* had them! They sounded esoteric and funny and that was enough to make them popular!

But I soon realized I have neither the expertise nor the qualifications to undertake an effort to publish another book of Father's works and involve others in it. In September 2008 I personally handed over four bound volumes of *Iyappurai* to Mr. Moti Rajagopal in Tiruchi, the

founder of *Urumu Dhanalakshmi College* in Tiruchi and he assured me he will have the volumes preserved in the college library to be used for research. I knew Mr. Rajagopal as Jayakanthan's friend and met with him when he visited US in early 2008. Unfortunately, there was no follow-up on the subject because Mr. Rajagopal suddenly passed away in June, 2009.

But I am happy that I have now gained more respect, interest and appreciation for Tamil classics with some of the books I brought back from Father's library in K-4. Notable among them is an English translation of SILAPPADIKARM by one V.R. Ramachandra Dikshitar published in 1939. Prof. George Hart told me it is a rare book, now out of print. Others include T.K.C.'s book on *Kamba Ramayanm (Bala Kandam and Ayodhya Kandam)* and a treatise on Tamil grammar for the beginners. In my retirement these books seem to be a good way of learning more about Tamil.

When Father passed away in 1983, I remember VKB telling me and Seenu that we should feel privileged that our parents had a long life and that they taught us many good things about life in general and literature. When I feel despondent, I try to remember how Father refused to be discouraged and marched ahead pursuing his passion for poetry. Sister India used to tell how Father, every January, made a new-year resolution of what he planned to do and finish in the year ahead. My mother, as well as my maternal grandmother – are known to have never uttered any word ill of others.

I feel fortunate that Father could spend his last days in US with his children. Both parents – their words, their deeds, and their persona – are etched in my heart. They have left a rich legacy and continue to inspire me.

Rangan (Andy Sundaresan)

El Cerrito, CA

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(90th Wedding anniversary of my parents)
