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Joys and Sorrows Forge Firm Faith in Female Vocalist of Lanka

Kandasamy, R. It was a charming domestic scene at the residence of Mrs. Nageswari Brahmananda, in Jaffna, Saturday afternoon, November, 1985. The talented singer was busy helping her husband with arrangements for the monthly worship service which Sivathondan Nilayam conducts at the chariot house (Theradi) of Nallur temple.

The Theradi was long associated with the Guru lineage of whom Siva Yogaswami, her "Gurunathar," is one. "I met Swami for the first time in 1949 at the age of seventeen, when my husband took me to his hut in Columbuthurai to receive wedding blessings." Her husband, V.S.S.K. Brahmanandan, a businessman, responded impulsively, "I married her for her music." From thence, she was drawn to Swami's hut to be absorbed in the Divine atmosphere and to sing bhajans. "Swami was fond of listening to the song, 'Yero Iver Yero.' He made me sing it often."

The renowned sage and seer was so moved by her music that he paid her the finest tribute, "You did not sing them. It is God." He prophesied of her future greatness as a musician when he blessed her during his last illness, quoting a verse from the Holy Kural - "Wealth gained by the ear is wealth of wealth. That wealth is the chief of all wealth."

Mrs. Brahmananda came into the limelight when she sang in the Pageant of Lanka, a cultural event that highlighted Sri Lanka's first Independence Day celebrations held in Colombo in 1948. She has given public and radio recitals in Sri Lanka and abroad and appeared on TV in Malaysia in 1971.

Of late, her appearance on public platforms is rare. But whenever she sings she

draws the attention of the public and the press. Of her recital at Veerasinghamn Hall in Jaffna in 1971, Veena maestro S. Poolachander of India commented, "I have listened to a recital which is even rare in Tamil Nadu. In my country I would speak with admiration of Mrs. Brahmananda's melodious voice."

She had the rare privilege of singing at the World Tamil Research Conference held in Sri Lanka in 1974. Mali, in a press review, referred to her as "a comet in the music horizon of Sri Lanka." At the Festival of the Trinity held in Saraswati's full blessings are on you!"

"I do not have the heart to turn down a request to sing for any deserving cause," she Kuala Lumpur in 1971, she won "universal acclaim." After listening to her recital at Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan in London, in 1982, Mathoor Krishnamurti commented, "Goddess says. When she sang for the Thiruketheeswaran Temple in Mannar, her singing was described as excellent. Her bhakti-inspiring singing at the Sri Selva Vinayaka Temple in Katukelle in 1978 "kept both Hindu and Sinhalese Buddhist worshippers spell-bound." The Hindu inmates of the Bogambara Jail in Kandy were "visibly moved" when she sang devotional songs for them on a Sunday morning the same year. "They seemed to have found solace in her music at least for some time," remarked Sinniah Thirunavukkarasu. Of her rendering of Natchintanai songs (a collection composed by Siva Yogaswami) regularly at Sivathondan Nilayam in Jaffna, Sivasakthyvel Annapoornan, a devotee, observes, "Her music has an inner power which brings the congregation into a fine devotional mood." Her only daughter, Brahmananda Varathalakshmy, sings the Natchintanai at Wimbledon Pillaiyar Temple in England on Yogaswami's Guru Puja day.

Religion and music are intertwined in the singer's checkered life. For her, where there is religion, there is music; where there is music, there is religion. Bhakti, the essential factor common to both, is found abundantly in her. She says, "Classical music is full of devotional songs. Songs of God inspire bhakti. When I sing, I get into the spirit of it." Her first meeting with Yogaswami in her teens seems to be the focal point from which these two developed in her gradually. She turned to religion for guidance in life. "I began to fear and worry when pain started for my first childbirth. I prayed. Gurunathar came to me in a dream and said, 'Don't worry. Everything will be all right.' Things went better after that." Her only son, Satchidanandan, fell off a black-berry tree while playing and met his death in 1960, at the age of 9. The grief-stricken mother lay bed-ridden. She had high temperatures for three months at a stretch and lost all appetite for food. Doctors could not cure her. Yogaswami asked her to go on singing devotional songs. "I sang, obeying Gurunathar." Ultimately, it was religion and music which helped her

to recover slowly from her grief and illness. She says she never plans anything in life after her son's passing away. "Facing a tragedy like this has helped me to attain maturity of mind akin to spiritual initiation." Perhaps recollection of this past terrible experience prompted her to rush to the aid of her neighbor Suryakumari, whose young husband was shot dead at their residence in broad daylight in the black July of 1983.

In the balance of recognition, joy and tragedy, pride has found no place in the life of Mrs. Brahmananda. She remains humble and simple.