

T. N. RAJARATNAM PILLAI

REMINISCENCES

T. Shankaran

This is the story of a colossus. Nature denied him a giant build but he made up for it by his music, his outlook on life, habits, his associates, accompanists, teachers, disciples, sartorial accomplishment and by his behaviour. The number of wives he married, the automobile he owned, the size of his *nagaswaram*, the silver *pan-supari* box, his methods of travel, his letter-heads and ever so many appurtenances tell the tale of a colossus in a gigantic dimension. This side of his nature has to be studied along with his musical eminence.

Rajaratnam could do as little to plan his physical stature as he could to determine his parentage. He was diminutive in stature and his parents—father, Kuppuswami Pillai, and mother, Govindammal, came of humble stock. As if catering to his later whims, his maternal uncle, Thirumarugal Natesa Pillai, a master of *nagaswaram*, adopted Rajaratnam as his son. Thirumarugal, his home, and Natesa Pillai had both a stature tailored to Rajaratnam's outlook. Thirumarugal, though a small village is a famous pilgrim centre amidst a cluster of similar *kshetrams* in Tanjore District. It is associated with the saint-singer, Thiru Gnanna Sambandar, whose divine music had in the historical past revived a Chettiar lad who had died of snake bite. The other claim of the village to eternal fame was that Nagaswaram Natesa Pillai was born here. Such was the hoary tradition of Rajaratnam's birth place. The genius of Natesa Pillai is best understood

from the story of the President of the XXIX Music Conference at the Madras Music Academy, Sangita Kalanidhi Marungapuri Gopalakrishnier: "Many were the *vidvans* of the day who were friendly with the Deputy Collector, Ganapathi Iyer of Mylapore. At a marriage in the house of Swaminatha Iyer (son of late Sir T. Muthuswami Iyer) Vidwan Sarabha Sarabha Sastrigal gave a flute performance. Thirumarugal Natesa Pillai, the famous *nagaswara vidwan*, was there listening. At the close of the concert, the flutist (being blind) was told of Natesa Pillai's presence and Sastrigal pressed him to play the *nagaswaram* for at least half an hour. Natesa Pillai elaborated *kedaragowla* which had earlier been dealt with by Sarabha Sastrigal and played so well that the blind bard could not contain himself. 'Natesa Pillai', he hailed, 'I had wanted to go to Chidambaram and worship Lord Nataraja. Through the splendid strains of your melody I have now had a vision of the Lord.'" Such was the music of Rajaratnam's uncle and competent opinion holds that Rajaratnam did one better than his uncle in melodic grace and in this connection, an unintended tribute by *Akashvani*, the official programme journal of All India Radio, is worth quoting. The Printer's devil featured him as "*Raagaratnam*" and never did the devil speak more true than on this occasion.

Unfortunately for Rajaratnam his foster father Natesa Pillai died while Rajaratnam was just four years of age. The memory of the uncle's genius was kept alive by Rajaratnam's *guru*, Ammachatram Kannuswami Pillai for he had also become Rajaratnam's *tavil* accompanist in later years. Rajaratnam's father died within three months of his son's birth but the mother lived long enough to see the young hopeful complete his training under great masters and enter the service of the Thiruvavaduthurai Matam. Rajaratnam had one sister, Dayalu Ammal who was a good vocalist. Her son, T.N.R. Nataraja Sundaram Pillai became Rajaratnam's disciple and played "second fiddle" to Rajaratnam as *nagaswaram* accompanist. This nephew became a performer in his own right and also recorded his music for H.M.V.

Like a typical oriental potentate Rajaratnam had a harem of five wives and the eldest of them Mrs. Saradambal could be seen travelling with him on his professional rounds. He left five widows and an adopted son. The marriage of this son, Sivaji, was performed with great

eclat. The invitation card was literally a booklet containing the names of almost all the well-known names of musicians in South India. The invitations were issued with the compliments of all the musical luminaries!

Like all geniuses of his calibre he was temperamental to the core. He was a bohemian and though extravagant by nature if his whims could not be met, he lost financially by throwing up contractual obligations. For festivals he used to be engaged for several consecutive sittings. If upset he would coolly leave the station after partial fulfilment of his contract and without in the least bothering about the remuneration.

In this sense he was considered difficult and unreliable. But personal affection and regard for friends could bring him round to be most reasonable and accommodating. For example, he would all of a sudden insist on a *tanpura* drone in preference to the conventional pipe drone for a broadcast recital. To change his mind would be next to impossible but a few friends used to offer their services as *tanpura* strummers. That would restore peace but never did he forgive himself for having reduced his nearest and dearest to the role of just *tanpura* strummers.

Another strategy that some of his understanding friends resorted to for keeping him within bounds was the bait of good music. Whenever he was scheduled to appear on the radio, he would arrive five to six hours ahead of time; but to keep him in good humour till the broadcast was an ordeal. The infallible recipe was to invite him to listen to Bismillah Khan's recorded music. That would do the trick and it would then be impossible to dislodge him from the studios as his infatuation for that brand of *shahmai* bordered on madness. There was no question of satiety or staleness about it. Discerning connoisseurs could see the hand of Bismillah in Rajaratnam's improvisation of *Malkaus*.

Rajaratnam was no stranger to politeness or courtesy. The daughter of the jurist late T. R. Venkatarama Sastri, Lakshmi Ramachandra Iyer, was once travelling by Class I in the Tanjore District. Rajaratnam entered the same compartment at a wayside station with his wife. He recognised his patron's daughter and immediately moved to another compartment with instructions to his wife: "Look, Saradambal, Amma

is travelling alone; attend to her needs and let me know if any further assistance is required.”

The colossus had never any misgivings about his own stature or the holy mission of his sacred instrument. When titled heads and potentates were looking askance at titles and honours and were shedding them, Rajaratnam collected them with avidity and displayed them loudly in his letter-heads. Not less than ten titles preceded the summit which he reached with the winning of the Akademi Award.

He was Akhila Indiya Nadaswara Eka Chakraadhipati; Akhila Indiya Venugaana Nadaswara Chakravarti; Isai Ulaga Jyoti (the beacon light of the musical firmament); Isai Mannar Mannar (king of musical princes); Sangita Ratnakaram, a benediction by H. H. Sri Sankaracharya; Nadaswara Everest; Isai Sikharam—the pinnacle of musical quintessance; Thiruvavaduthurai Adheena Prathama Sangita Maha Vidwan. These honours pre-eminently became his stature and accomplishments.

With legitimate pride Rajaratnam displayed these as his letter-heads on his note paper the size of which may well be likened to that of a wall-poster. Naturally these letter-heads could only be accommodated in magnum paper-sacks, not envelopes, and the corresponding load on postage was a happy privilege of the colossus.

He purchased an eight-seater Buick that covered hardly eight miles a gallon. He had to go on long journeys with a big entourage to places not accessible by rail. The car was an inescapable necessity and it was another colossus in its own right. The first instalment of the hire-purchase was promptly settled and for subsequent instalments, there went a letter to his friend, Prof. M.M. Dandapani Desikar, Principal of the College of Music, Annamalai University, to clear the balance regularly.

Similar is the story of a pair of over-sized diamond ear-rings. There are two different versions about the source from where they came to adorn his ears. It is a conventional ornament of men of the orthodox type, particularly professional *nagaswara vidwans*. But this pair would seem to be out of all proportion to any human countenance and could

easily pass off for a pair of automobile headlights! In that generation there was a famous theatrical group run by C. Cunniah, actor and producer, who put on mythological and religious themes like *Dasavatar*, *Bhagavad Gita*, *Andal*, etc. He collected the best artists, musicians and stage equipment and jewels from various princely houses. S. G. Kittappa, a great friend of Rajaratnam was 'the Hero' of this theatrical group and was featured as Rama. The costliest dresses, costumes and jewels bedecked 'Rama' who on the stage ceased to be Kittappa, the mortal. In due course, after the liquidation of the Company, the ear-rings continued to be the personal property of Kittappa who agreed with Rajaratnam that they should adorn the ears of the colossus if 'Rama' did not use them. That is one version and plausible.

Rajaratnam's cousin, who vouched for quite a few details of his biography, and *Namasivayam* have no doubts that the ear-rings were purchased on the hire-purchase system and that they were paid for as the unwieldy motor car. The fact remains that Rajaratnam wore them for a short period which was a nightmare to his personal attendant, Santhanam, the drone piper, keeping sleepless vigil over his reckless master's person and property.

Among the *gurus* of Rajaratnam, the famous violinist, Thirukko-dikaval belongs to the rich age of Karnatak music when similar titans like Flute Sarabha Sasthigal, Thirumarugal Natesa Pillai, (his uncle) Vina Dhanammal, Harikatha Krishna Bhagavata, Mridangam Narayanaswami Appa, Mridangam Alaganambi Pillai, Fiddle Govindaswami Pillai and Kanjeera Manpoondia Pillai reigned supreme. Rajaratnam in his early teens had the unique privilege of his early initiation in vocal music under Krishniah whose wizardry of *alap* is yet to be surpassed. Rajaratnam has recorded for All India Radio his reminiscences of his association with this virtuoso. The best translation of the Tamil version into English can hardly reflect the feeling with which the pupil recalled the telling effect of the master's teaching and music. Rajaratnam was one day being literally led by the nose by the teacher playing the *varnam* in *Begada*, *Inta Jaalamu Chesite*. Rajaratnam followed him like a shadow. The teacher was just an incarnation of the grace characteristic of Karnatak music but the pupil seemed to have unconsciously drifted into the

snare of straight graceless notes. This was too much for Krishnier to stomach and by way of reprimanding the erring pupil, he flourished his bow in the air like a banner which graced the pupil's sumptuous nose. Rajaratnam began to bleed and like the burnt child shunning fire ever afterwards dreaded graceless notes in all his career as a vocalist or a *nagaswaram* player. Competent critics are of the opinion that it is this matchless grace that stood Rajaratnam in good stead and skyrocketed him to everlasting fame. He was indebted to Srilasri Ambalavana Desikar, the Matadhipati of Thiruvavdauthurai for this musical novitiate under Krishnier.

There was yet another memorable experience for Rajaratnam, this time with the renowned Veena Dhanammal, grandmother of Balasaraswati, decorated by the President of India with the *Padma Bhushan* for her distinct service to Bharata Natyam. Dhanammal abhorred loud sound even if musical and was not a lover of *nagaswaram* music with its noisy *tavil* accompaniment. But Rajaratnam was an exception to this. In 1938 she was on her deathbed in her 78th year. She sent for Rajaratnam to play for her. She could, unlike others, take liberties with him to the extent of precluding his drummer and she herself played the *tanpura* drone. The concert was in her own sick chamber and his music was not considered loud or offensive indoors. That was the measure of his reverence for her and her own admiration for his music.

He started off the usual *alapa* in right earnest and she was entranced. All of a sudden, she accosted him with wonted affection: "Thambi, (little brother) could you please enlighten me what *ragam* I have the pleasure of listening to?" No, by no means could he be persuaded to believe that his music was incomprehensible to her. Half apologetically he replied, "Why mother, I am first trying my hand at the *alapa* of *Vachaspati raga*". She smiled broadly and continued, "O, this is *Vachaspati*? Very well, but could I have the pleasure of listening to something which an old fashioned individual like me can understand and enjoy"? With a guffaw he readily switched over to her favourite melody, *Kambodi* and she was in raptures. To her ears "his music was reminiscent of the bewitching grace of Coimbatore Raghava Iyer"—a musical luminary in the Travancore Court a generation ago.

Dhanammal lived for a few days after this encounter. She carried this memory with her; on his side Rajaratnam could not forget her advice about an old fashioned individual's understanding of music. He could laugh at himself as caustically as he could blurt out his remarks about others. In his inimitable Tamil language he used to reminisce about Dhanammal, "Yes ! I tried to fool my mother with the *alapa* of the broomstick brand and she never spared the birch. She served me right."

Another amusing incident happened when Rajaratnam called on Dhanammal one afternoon. The visit coincided with the arrival of an arm-chair critic. Inadvertently the critic accosted Rajaratnam without any honorific prefix and respect due to his art, if not his person and this was a serious affront in the presence of Dhanammal. The critic tried to pick holes in the armour of Rajaratnam's grammar of music. "Hey Rajaratnam ! I understand from a competent critic's review of your records that you have perpetuated on gramophone disc a confused mixture of *raga Nayaki* in your handling of *Darbar*". It was very recently that he had recorded for the Columbia Gramophone Company the Tyagaraja Kirtan '*Yochana—kamala'lochana*' in *raga Darbar*. Even granting that Rajaratnam had erred, the indiscreet language within earshot of Dhanammal would tell on the patience of a saint. Rajaratnam's sense of humour got the better of him, evidently Dhanammal's presence exercising a moderating influence, "I am disappointed", flared up Rajaratnam, "that you and the music critic are too unromantic to visualise a *darbar* without a *nayaki* ! (a Princely Court without a lovely damsel to adorn it !). The bitterness of the situation was lost in the mirth in which the critic joined heartily.

Dr. Muthiah Bhagavatar was yet another senior contemporary of Rajaratnam. He was a well-known performer of *harikatha*, Court musician at Travancore and Mysore, composer, musicologist and perhaps the first musician to be decorated with a Doctorate. Rajaratnam was once to perform at Maavoor in Tanjore district where the late Sir R. S. Sarma had built a replica of the Kalighat temple. Muthiah Bhagavatar presiding on the occasion spoke for one full hour about Rajaratnam's genius. It was a well deserved tribute by one eminent musician to another.

Muthiah Bhagavatar, S. G. Kittappa and Rajaratnam made a mighty

trio. Kittappa became a child star of the Tamil stage as early as his fifth year, with a gifted voice and striking style of rendering songs—classical and popular. He made his mark as the best stage musician and he was revered by all music stalwarts of the era before his premature death at 28. It is well-known that Rajaratnam collected innumerable presents from Kittappa everytime he played the *nagasivaram*. Kittappa's friend, Akkoor Anantachari, has described a nice encounter between Kittappa and Rajaratnam. The latter, who was a believer in the vocal tradition, loved to have a dig at vocalists who aped the *nagasivaram* tradition. In the course of a chat, Rajaratnam threw out a challenge to vocalists to imitate the nuances of his *nagasivaram* recital. Kittappa readily accepted the challenge. Rajaratnam was quick to realise his mistake and beat a diplomatic retreat with the remark, "This challenge was not meant for you !"

Rajaratnam's affection for another Akademi winner, Flutist Swaminatha Pillai, has a sad note about it. Rajaratnam's health was breaking up, but he defied all medical advice that with a weak heart it was suicidal for him to dream of playing the *nagasivaram* again. Rajaratnam was adamant; parting company with the instrument while yet there was a spark of life in him was out of the question. Just about 1956, Swaminatha Pillai had built a new house and though he was anxious that Rajaratnam's *nagasivaram* music should lend sanctity to the house warming, he discreetly avoided even a formal invitation. The new mansion was packed to capacity with front rank musicians. Uninvited, Rajaratnam landed up with his entire troupe to the embarrassment of Swaminatha Pillai and in right earnest started blessing the occasion with literally divine strains. With a guilty conscience Swaminatha Pillai sat by Rajaratnam like an accompanist as tears of joy and excitement flowed down his cheeks. All that Rajaratnam said was that he had done his duty. The duty of the host was but to enjoy the music and the sporting gesture of his guest.

Mannarguide Chinna Pakkiri was a distinguished contemporary of Natesa Pillai both of whom vied for equal honours as matchless exponents of *raga alapa*. Rajaratnam's wedding in his 15th year was sanctified by the divine strains of Pakkiri Pillai's *nagasivaram*. Just when the groom was called upon to tie the sacred *mangala sutra* round the bride's neck, the piper was at his best and the precocious Rajaratnam lost himself

and was about to let slip the auspicious hour. Chinna Pakkiri Pillai rushed to the bridal rostrum and assured him of a command performance if the groom would only fulfil the obligations of the moment. Of course, Rajaratnam did so, and Pakkiri Pillai kept his promise. Rajaratnam was invited by the veteran to take his turn on the *nagaswaram* and in an ecstasy he poured forth his blessings "Thambi, you are not merely heir to your uncle's wealth but you are his rightful melodic heir."

It is hardly necessary to mention that *nagaswaram* music is an essential part of any South Indian religious rite and in ecclesiastical establishments, several groups are invited for marathon processions lasting more than 12 hours at a stretch. This is a coveted occasion for *nagaswaram* artistes to show their mettle in the light of established conventions, and for fans to feast their ears and intellect too. This is a unique occasion for competitive display of talent. But Rajaratnam was a law unto himself and he chose the path of emotional edification to the exclusion of dilettante interest. In fact he had a lofty contempt for feats of strength in music and exclaimed, "I am proud of having taken the initiative in driving the nail into the coffin of the "*Rakti Melam*" which causes so much unpleasantness sometimes in the name of rhythm and its ramifications".

But such an attitude did not preclude him from engaging as his own drummer the greatest genius of his day, Iluppur Panchapakesa Pillai, more intimately known as Panjami.

Young Panjami hailed from an ancient family of professional musicians and his uncle, Iluppur Ponnuswami Pillai, composer and violinist, was a hallowed name among stalwarts of rhythm like Kanjira Manpundia Pillai. To Panjami, rhythm was a family heritage. He was not merely a *tavil* accompanist but he was also a reputed vocalist and a *kanjira* player. His wizardry on the *tavil* added particular charm to any *nagaswaram* recital and, young as he was, he compelled the respect of his senior contemporary, Tavil Minakshisundaram Pillai. This great Panjami joined Rajaratnam as accompanist. There were several noteworthy occasions when both Panjami and his senior, Minakshisundaram Pillai, were yoked together as accompanists of Rajaratnam. The thrill of such an encounter at the present Midland Theatre is still green in the memory of *rasikas*.

Rajaratnam's *guru*, Kannuswami Pillai was also his accompanist in the formative stages of his career.

Kannuswami Pillai of Ammachatram was Rajaratnam's guide, teacher, philosopher, accompanist and a living link with his uncle, Natesa Pillai. This was the one accompanist in those days who was unbeaten by Nagaswaram Ramaswami Pillai of Semponnarkoil. Even today rhythm-conscious experts feel a real excitement listening to his solo rendering on an H.M.V. disc. He had more than one string to his bow for he was a top class drummer, vocalist, and composer of *tillanas*. Even today he is hailed as the *guru* of another Akademi winner, Midicondan Venkataramier. The genius of this teacher of Rajaratnam could to some extent be gauged from a recent demonstration of rhythmic skill by the *guru's* son, A.K. Ganesa Pillai at the XXI Music Conference at the Music Academy in 1957. He was rendering a *pallavi* in *Sankarabharanam*, "*Siva Saravanabhava Kumara, Kumara gurupava Muthu Kumara*". He counted *khanda jati ata tala* on the right hand, *trisa tripata* on the left (both *chaturasa nadai*—quadruple count) singing the *pallavi* in 3 degrees of speed and winding up with *trisa nadai*—triple count. He followed up this orthodox rendering with the addition of the *trisa nadai* maintained by his two feet. Such was the rigour and precision of the master's training.

Rajaratnam's paternal uncle, i.e., father's younger brother, Kadiresam Pillai and then Rangaswami Pillai of Perumullai village in Tanjore district initiated him in *nagaswaram* tradition. Later at Thiruvavaduthurai, it was Markandam Pillai. He was aged about nine at this stage. He had the enviable privilege of learning vocal music under three great maestros of the day. Schooling under the well-known violinist, Krishiner is a well-known story. Konerirajapuram Vaidyanatha Iyer was another great vocalist of the day. He was the founder of a new era in vocal music concert with a powerful accent on rhythm. In the company of his own *guru*, Manpundiya Pillai of Pudukottah as Kanjira accompanist, Vaidyanatha Iyer had revolutionised concert tradition by his architectural rhythm of learned length and thundering sound. Rajaratnam could not escape the influence of this music.

Rajaratnam had a number of disciples some of whom he nurtured to musical manhood and the others were content to play second fiddle.

The most outstanding among them are the late Karukurichi Arunachalam, the late T. N. R. Natarajasundaram and Kulikkarai Pichaiyappa. One of his five wives is also a piper and a disciple of his.

There are a few unforgettable occasions when he played to distinguished audiences. One was at the Central College of Karnataka Music before the students of the College and several musical stalwarts. Rajaji was then the Chief Minister of Madras and he was a special invitee. He could not help speaking a few words on the conclusion of a delightful performance. He was of the opinion that the dignity and sanctity of the instrument and the possibilities displayed by the musician of the evening justified the creation of a host of other artistes of his calibre. He realised the objection of the orthodox to the pollution of the lips caused while piping. But as a lover of music he also reminded the orthodox how the daily ablutions did wed all of us to pollution of the lips. In a humorous but realistic vein he proved that the *nagaswaram* is the harbinger of every bliss in Hindu life, particularly conjugal bliss. If ever one happened to solemnise one's wedding without the strains of the auspicious *nagaswaram*, he feared the bridal couple would one day or other feel an inexplicable lacunae in their life!

Yet another occasion was Rajaratnam's recital at the Kalakshetra which celebrated the birthday of Rukmini Devi Arundale. Kalakshetra had an inspiring decor and a wonderful musical atmosphere, with a gathering of students of music at whose head sat two titans, Karaikkudi Vina Sambasiva Iyer and the centenarian composer, Mysore Vasudevacharya, both winners of the Akademi Award. Rajaratnam scaled newer heights and both the performer and the audience were spellbound. Vasudevacharya rose to propose a vote of thanks and he laconically concluded with just saying that so far as he was concerned he had realised in person the blessings of Krishnavatara through Rajaratnam's 'magic flute'. He could not visualise Rajaratnam except in terms of Lord Krishna and his flute.

The conclusion of a Radio Sangit Sammelan by Rajaratnam's *nagaswaram* concert at the Desaprakash auditorium in 1955 is also memorable. Rajaratnam had just recovered from a severe heart attack and so he was persuaded to retain Karukurichi Arunachalam as a stand-by.

Rajaratnam was in good form but he kept on encouraging his hesitant disciple to play. The audience included Padma Bhushan Balasaraswati, her mother Jayammal, Jalatharangam Ramaniah Chettiar, Musiri Subramania Iyer and Chittoor Subramania Pillai. Rajaratnam beckoned to Jayammal and Balasaraswati to sit on the dais with him and turned towards them every now and then as if awaiting a nod of approval. After a few minutes he told Jayammal in the middle of the broadcast, "I am afraid I have to grope my way. . . ." but before he could conclude Jayamma interposed "Yes, it is understandable. You have your reputation at stake. But I am not able to see anything wrong with your music today. It is as fresh and invigorating as ever." Rajaratnam got into his stride and Karukurichi Arunachalam was proud to sit still and watch his master waxing stronger — musically.

In 1952 he undertook a long tour with a gusto which he expressed in the following words, "I have sojourned in Tokyo and I am afraid no *nagaswaram wallah* has done so before." Immediately on his return he was invited at the annual festival of the Music Academy. Rajaratnam was to perform late in the evening at the conclusion of a concert earlier by Ustad Bade Gulam Ali Khan. The Ustad was making his debut at Madras and he had literally taken his listeners by storm. He collected a bumper house and a heavy gate for the Academy. Rajaratnam had arrived at the hall sufficiently early and was enjoying the Ustad's music. *Nagaswaram* was scheduled to start exactly at 9.15 p.m. in time for the broadcast relay. The hall was practically empty, the listeners having left about 9 p.m. for their night meal. It looked unfair to ask the veteran to pipe to an empty hall whatever the listening strength on the radio. Nobody had the courage to remind him that it was time to start. With his wonted brusqueness Rajaratnam stepped on the dais with instrument in hand exclaiming, "What are we waiting for? I have the unique privilege of having for my audience the veteran musician, Ramaniah Chettiar and Balasaraswati". Without any further ado or inducement Rjaratnam started off in right earnest for he meant what he said. Ramaniah Chettiar was a noteworthy figure in music circles, an expert *jalaharang* player, a patron of musicians and a rich store-house of Tyagaraja *kritis*. A nod of his appreciation was worth a kingdom to a discerning musician and Rajaratnam played his card judiciously. The

other member of the audience was the prima donna of dance, Balasaraswati, for whose musical tradition and family Rajaratnam had great reverence. Of course the crowd swelled up in another half an hour and it was almost impossible to conclude the concert even as late as 1 a.m. He was in scintillating form.

A *pan* casket is a sine qua non of any South Indian musician varying from a reed pouch to a silver casket. Rajaratnam had a silver trunk claiming for itself a sole caretaker.

In sartorial accomplishment, it was not mere court attire peculiar to the Mysore State, but it could be the garment of the Emperor himself. Wasn't he himself a Chakravarti? The *nagaswaram* is temple furniture and its player has even by appearance to evoke a religious atmosphere. The *nagaswaram* player is traditionally a 'naked fakir' clad in a loin cloth from below the waist and in holy ash above. His head is tonsured and holy beads hang in garlands round the neck. A cropped head, *churidar* pyjamas, an *achkan* and a pair of patent-leather pumps are unheard of, an unconventional dress even outside the sacred precincts. He was the founder of a new order and more often than not the so-called processions round the four main thoroughfares ended up in road-side platforms for the Chakravarti to sit on and perform in *katcheri* style. If he chose to perform inside temple precincts, he would conform to traditional dress woven out of gold or silver silk thread and never a single cotton yarn. It was gorgeous splendour.

His instrument was as unique for its size as its music. The instrument he last used is the only bit of treasure bequeathed to his senior wife and should be available for careful study by students of music.

Rajaratnam was nurtured in the Tiruvavaduturai Matam and he was the *aadhina nagaswara vidwan*. He began his musical career as a vocalist shaped to maturity by the violinist Krishnier through the good offices of the then Pandara Sannadhi, Srila Sri H.H. Ambalavana Desikar. But the death of Rajaratnam's uncle left a void which none but Rajaratnam could fill as *nagaswaram* player. Likewise the death of the palace *vidwan*, Madura Ponnuswami Pillai, legitimately yielded place to Rajaratnam at the Mysore Court particularly during consecutive Dasara Festivals.

Stunted in growth, his nose occupied more than the permissible area of the face which bore a pair of bright eyes slightly squint. The colossus had a neck of colossal proportions bulging out visibly like a bladder when he blew the pipe. His neck had the unusual bulge of a huge cylinder bursting with music.

He was a cinema star too. He co-starred with T.V. Namasivayam in the Tamil film 'Kavi Kalamegham' and one of his film scores is current on HMV discs.

Believer in things big, he did the right thing by recording for the Columbia Gramophone Company as many as 22 discs. Most of it is *alapa* of as many as 16 *ragas*, *Todi* being the brightest jewel in the diadem. His records which include one 'concert set' of 5 records starting with a *kirtana* of Muthiah Bhagavata and a *mangalam* by Tyagaraja. He was a composer and one of his compositions in *Kalyani*, 'Siva Guruparane' has also been recorded. The discography appended at the end should serve as a valuable guide.

In an interview in 'Sports and Pastime', Rajaratnam revealed that his maiden performance of the *nagasaram* was in the presence of His Holiness Srilasri Ambalavana Pandavasannidhi of Thiruvaduturai Matam. He was only about 16 years of age.

It is doubtful if in later years his patrons could countenance his ways even if infatuated by his music. But in 1947 when India attained independence, Rajaratnam was sent to Delhi by the Pandarasannadhi of the Thiruvaduturai Matam to present on his behalf a mace of solid gold *senkol* (symbol of righteous administration). Rajaratnam was thrilled by this proud privilege. It was Dr. P. Subbarayan who introduced him to the Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, to whom Rajaratnam played the *nagaswaram* before handing over the mace.

About 3 years of his last days were spent in Madras. He had his headquarters in a hotel, and was to have performed at the Tamil Isai Sangam on 2-1-1956, and two days later at the Music Academy. He had a severe heart attack on New Year's eve. Except for his adopted son and his accompanists nobody was there to help him but they had the

good sense to rush to Balasaraswati's residence where her old mother was struggling alone with asthma. Her friend, Dr. Mehta, was good enough to respond to her invitation when he saw her walking all alone. He rushed to Rajaratnam's bedside and administered an injection. The hopes of his rallying round seemed far off and before 8-00 p.m. Bala's brother, Varadan managed to muster the help of his cousin Sankaran. An SOS was sent to Rajaratnam's family, they were bundled into the Boat Mail proceeding to Madras from his hometown. Rajaratnam was advised absolute rest. Dawn brought a wagon load of relatives and the Tamil Isai Sangam, in spite of the disappointment caused by the cancellation of Rajaratnam's engagement, magnanimously paid his fees in full out of deference to his great art. Crowds began to besiege the hotel. But where was Rajaratnam? He was at Rangachari's Nursing Home. Next minute he was with Dr. M. Arunachalam and the next minute he vanished into thin air! Two days later he was scheduled to play before a delegation from the U.S.S.R. at the N.K.T. Kala Mantap. There he was on the stroke of time to defy doctors who tried 'to separate me from my *nagaswaram*! He was given barely ten minutes and out came with lightening speed the ecstatic melody of his favourite *Todi*.

A round of daily engagements and frequent collapses followed. He went all the way to Alleppey from Madras and on his return was to appear at the R. R. Sabha, Mylapore after a series of performances. His disciple K. Arunachalam was also invited to accompany and rest him wherever necessary. The *sabha* authorities waited endlessly but Karukurichi Arunachalam did not turn up. Rajaratnam was furious and so the concert started late and concluded somewhere about midnight. That was on 1-12-56. Next morning Rajaratnam was to broadcast. Arrangements were made to convey him to the studios at only just about 8 o'clock so that he would have rested enough after the previous night's strain. But Rajaratnam arrived on the stroke of 6 with a bantering dig at his AIR friends, "Well, is this how you discharge your duties? Look, I am here at six and you are comfortably dozing in your beds! Alright, let us settle down to business. What would you have me elaborate this morning?" *Saveri* was decided on, but within a few minutes he was outside the studios begging to switch over to *Varali* as he found *Saveri*

running counter to his mood. The rehearsals were over with brilliant *Dhanyasi*, until it was time to start off the broadcast with *Kedaram*. That was the last public engagement. But reports from his residence at Adyar were as thrilling as ever. Rajaratnam and Brinda, the current Akademi winner, were neighbours. His swan song was an excursion into *Kanada*. His friends M. R. Radha and N. S. Krishnan, film artistes, had arranged a benefit performance and Rajaratnam was dressing to meet his friends. As he lifted his arms into the sleeves he gave a terrible cry in mortal pain and collapsed immediately.

DISCOGRAPHY

COLUMBIA : GE :

ODEON : CA

CA 720	<i>Todi alapana</i> — Parts 1 and 2
CA 790	<i>Todi Pallavi</i> — Parts 1 and 2
CA 731	<i>Yochana</i> — Darbar — Tyagaraja
CA 731	<i>Niravadi Sukha</i> — Ravichandrika — Tyagaraja
GE 6390	<i>Kharaharapriya alap</i> — Parts 1 and 2
GE 6348	<i>Subbapantumarali: Pallavi; Ragamalika</i>
GE 6349	
GE 1148	<i>Natabhairavi</i> — alap — Parts 1 and 2
GE 1234	<i>Vachaspathi</i> — alap — Parts 1 and 2
GE 1465	<i>Pantumarali</i> — alap — Parts 1 and 2 (with tanpura sruti)
GE 6043	<i>Pantumarali</i> — Pallavi — Parts 1 & 2
GE 6472	<i>Kalyani</i> — <i>Sivaguru</i> — own composition
GE 22222	<i>Kambodi</i> — alap — Parts 1 and 2
GE 22223	<i>Charukesi</i> — alap — Parts 1 and 2
GE 22090	<i>Kanada</i> — <i>Konjum Kili</i>
GE 22108	<i>Anandabhairavi</i>
GE 22119	<i>Vageeswari</i>

GE 22121 *Karunakarane and Olamitta Surumbu*

Katchery set

CA 916 *Shanmukhapriya — alap and vallinayaka — Muthiah
Bhagavatar*

CA 917 *Bhairavi — alap — Parts 1 and 2*

CA 918 *Bhairavi — Pallavi — Parts 1 and 2*

CA 919 *Malkaus/Behag*

CA 920 *Ritigauls: Nannu Vidachi — Mangalam*