

# T.K. Govinda Rao : Musician In Four-Cornered Hat

**T**.K. Govinda Rao wears a four-cornered hat.

This is not to say that he has a fancy for a peculiarly shaped hat or that he wears such a hat because he belongs to a particular service.

In reality he wears no hat at all. He dresses up, yes, but in an entirely Indian mode—dhoti and kurta, or pajamas and kurta, usually a silk kurta.

The reference to the four-cornered hat is simply a literary device to indicate that there are four aspects to his career in the music field. He is a performing artist, a Carnatic vocalist to be precise; a teacher; a composer; and a radio executive, currently Chief Music Producer (Carnatic) for AIR.

If the reference to the four-cornered hat was possibly misleading for a few moments, the name Govinda Rao is even more so. Who would guess that, with a name like this, he hails from Kerala, from a family of pottis (priests) at that ?

The family moved to Udupi at some point and became domiciled there, but Govinda Rao did not acquire the caste suffix of Rao because of this transplantation. The family did not take on the suffix to identify with the people of the town whose devotion to Krishna, the lord of the universe with a local residence, and whose aptitude for the restaurant business are both beyond question. The temptation might have been there if Govinda or any other member of the family, besides becoming a devotee of the black god, had the inclination or the desire to enter the hotel business.

How Govinda became Govinda Rao is a different story for which the beginning was his choice of music as the field of his career. The fact that music was an important part of his family's culture contributed to this choice but the determinant factor was the aptitude he himself had for music, for singing.

Even while at school, he took private lessons in music and, with his aptitude made manifest by this training, he pursued the study of music further at the college in Madras which was then known

as the Central College of Music. There the guru he identified as his own was Musiri Subrahmania Iyer. It was natural therefore that, after completing the formal programme successfully, he should ask to study with the titan as a personal disciple within the framework of the traditional gurukula system. With Musiri agreeing, he served as his apprentice and Man Friday for 15 years, till the former's demise, raising the total period of his career as a formal student of music to 27 years.

It was when he became a disciple-in-residence of Musiri

that the lad whose family had originally belonged to Tiruvilmala (the home of the late ghatam vidwan Vilvadi Iyer also) took on a caste suffix suggestive of his Udupi domicile. It came about because he realised that when his guru wanted to call him, he would be calling out "Govinda !" The very thought of this was mortifying to him and he quickly told his master that his name was Govinda Rao. The name stuck.

Musiri Subrahmania Iyer had no children of his own and he virtually adopted Govinda Rao as a son. But it was not in Iyerval's nature to overtly display affection.

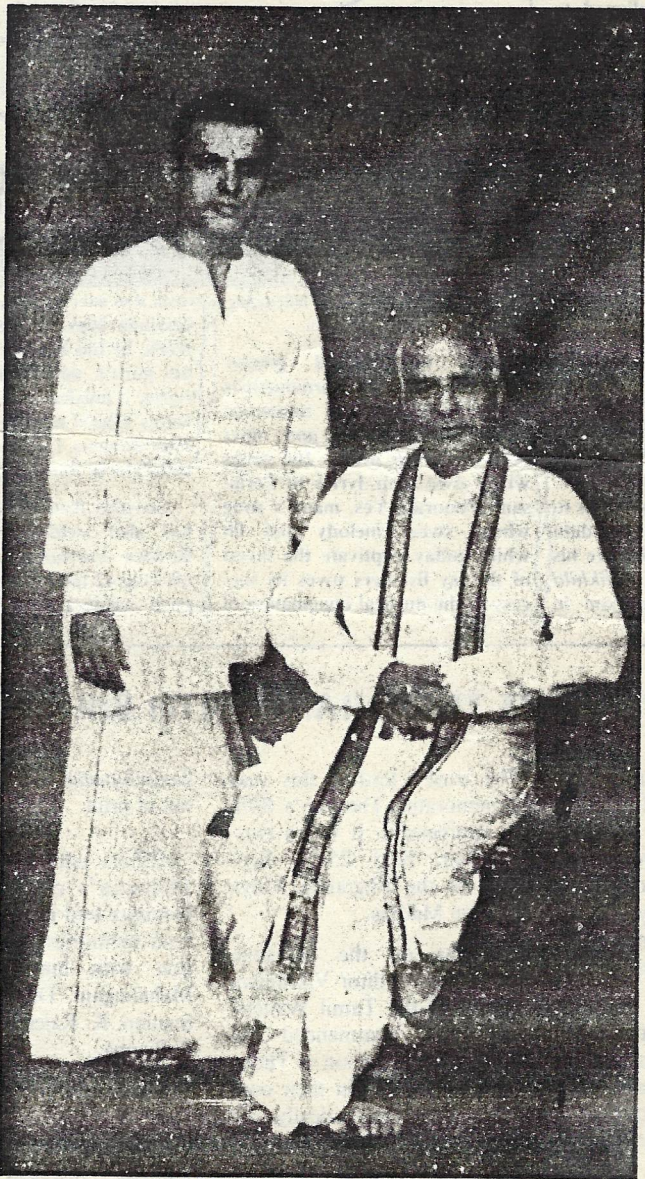
Both as a master and acting parent, he was a stern disciplinarian. He rarely smiled and was never indulgent. As a guru, he would criticise often—as often as he found it necessary—and hardly ever gave praise. Govinda Rao probably found this attitude trying when he was an apprentice but certainly later he came to cherish its value.

Besides the value of discipline, Govinda Rao learned from Musiri the importance of singing with sahitya bhava (that is, bringing out the emotions encompassed by the lyrics of a song) and the beauty of lakshya gnana. It has been his consistent endeavour to uphold these values.

Musiri also bequeathed to Govinda Rao all his papers relating to music. These include one or two important documents, such as a list of about a thousand ragas which alone, according to the stalwart musicians who served on the faculty of the music college of the Annamalai University in its formative years, had enough scope for enjoyable elaboration.

Despite his long and hard apprenticeship, Govinda Rao despaired of ever becoming a successful concert artist because of the constraining influence of certain principles his guru wanted him to follow. So he more than once sought to obtain a job but in every case his guru was connected with or consulted on the selection for the post concerned and he was turned down. His guru was firm that he should pursue a career as a concert artist. He landed a job at AIR-Madras only after his guru passed away. Reportedly Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer helped him to get this job. His career as an AIR producer was briefly interrupted but, on resumption, he rose to become the Chief Producer for Carnatic music. His performance in this role has won him wide appreciation.

Govinda Rao did not, of course, give up singing in concerts. But he has not been a frequent performer. The major reason he gives for this is his strict adherence to his guru's admonition never to seek kutcheri engagements on his own, either directly or indirectly, and never to treat



With the master in 1961



music as a trade. For that matter, he never stipulates any particular amount of compensation for the kutcheries he performs.

Whenever Govinda Rao does perform, the Musiri stamp is clearly discernible, despite individual mannerisms.

Commenting on a recent performance in Bombay, SRUTI's P.N. Krishnamoorthy had this to say: "T.K. Govinda Rao is a veteran of the old school who has played a prominent role in the preservation of all that is precious in the truly classical style of rendition of Carnatic music. His recital... reiterated this aspect... His renderings of Mukhari, Saranga, Kambhoji and Saveri were all the very best of genuine old vintage." Another critic noted that Rao's voice is always well-aligned to sruti and drew attention to the singer's own delight in presenting sanchara-s in the lower octave and portraying subtle graces.

But he has gained greater recognition as a teacher and music composer. His numerous disciples include the popular Bombay Sisters (Saroja and Lalitha), and Padmaja Srinivasan. Some of them he tutored as assistant to Musiri.

A man with scholarly instincts Govinda Rao has the habit of working late into nights. This has enabled him to have the time to compose music and to produce books of songs.

There are some compositions to his credit where both the datu (lyrics) and matu (music) are his own. These include *Nikhila Lokanayaki* a tana varnam in



President R. Venkataraman felicitating Govinda Rao after 'command performance' Dhanyasi. It is in Telugu.

What has gained greater recognition are the varnattu-s he has composed for numerous songs of Purandara and other dasa-s and for nearly 200 songs which owe their lyrics to Periasami Thooran. Yes, many a song whose sweet melody and lilt which today captivate the layest of the lay listeners owes its success to the musical imagination of

Govinda Rao. In his composing work, he has been ever guided by his guru's admonition never to repeat a musical idea or theme. It seems Musiri used to cite Patnam Subrahmanya Iyer as an example to follow in this regard.

Govinda Rao's late night work has also yielded many books. Besides *Varnamanjari*, a book offering 42 tana varna-s and eight pada varna-s of different com-

posers, complete with notation in Roman script, he produced in Tamil other volumes consisting of Tyagaraja's compositions linked to different kshetra-s or places of pilgrimage, and translated into Tamil the Malayalam edition of Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer's *Ghanaraga Pancharatna*.

The idea of preparing a book of varna-s using the Roman script came to him when he undertook a concert tour of Malaysia and some other countries of the region and came across a surprisingly large number of music enthusiasts who were handicapped in their efforts to learn songs because of lack of suitable text-books in a universally accepted language. The book of varna-s, first published in 1979, has gone into a second edition.

The title of Sangita Choodamani conferred on Govinda Rao by Sri Krishna Gana Sabha, Madras, in August, is naturally in recognition of all the four streams of his career in music. But this is not the first title which he has been awarded. The titles received by him earlier are Sangita Sastra Ratnakara and Ganakala Tilaka.

Incidentally, while the 59-year old Govinda Rao has figuratively worn only a four-cornered hat, he belongs rightly to the tribe of musicians who are adept at playing many instruments besides having the ability to sing. The instruments he can play are the veena, the violin, the mridangam, the kanjeera, the morsing and the harmonium.

P. ORR

## THE LATE THOORAN'S 80TH BIRTH ANNIVERSARY

Periasami Thooran, the prayerful lyricist (SRUTI 13) had instituted a trust in his own name. While he was yet alive, the trust organized a couple of music programmes every year in which the featured musicians mostly rendered Thooran's own compositions.

After the passing away of Thooran, the trust, under the leadership of industrialist N. Mahalingam, has been conducting an annual festival in Thooran's memory, largely for the purpose of propagating Thooran's compositions.

The trust's festival this year commemorated Thooran's 80th birth anniversary. It was a two-day affair, held 25-26 September at the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan in Madras.

Speaking on the occasion, *Amudasurabhi* editor Vikraman, President of the Tamil Writers' Association, commended to musicians the inclusion of Thooran's compositions in their concerts. More emphatically he pleaded with Mahalingam to arrange for bringing out fresh editions of Thooran's *Tamil Encyclopedia* and *Children's*

*Encyclopedia* which have been out of print.

Others who spoke, praising Thooran's contributions to literature and music, or recalling fond memories of their association with him, included N. Mahalingam, Dr. C. Balasubramanian, K. Rajendran and Azha Valliappa.

Some paid tribute by singing some of Thooran's lyrics, without accompaniment. Those who did so included Thooran's daughter Saradamani, Prameela Gurusurthi and M. Kotilingam.

The festival concluded with a proper concert by Saroja and Lalitha, the Bombay Sisters. They sang soulful songs of Thooran for an hour and a half. Particularly impressive was their handling of *Vel eduta kaiye vinai teerkum meyyae* in Todi and *Enna perum tavam* in Sahana. As a preface to the latter song, Saroja sang, too, a virttamm in Sahana on the Kanchi Paramacharya: *Karunenum varidhiye*. The bhava-lader concert was a fitting finale to the festival.

V.S. SUNDARA RAJAI