

MANGALAMPALLI BALAMURALIKRISHNA

A prodigy and a genius

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Not many performing artists or composers become legends in their own lifetime. The rare distinction belongs to Dr. M. Balamuralikrishna, a leading exponent of Carnatic music for over six decades now. Balamuralikrishna hails from a family which considered music taboo. To the surprise and displeasure of his elders, Balamurali's father Mangalampalli Pattabhiramayya took up music as his career. He was born in 1892 at Antarvedipalem, a tiny hamlet in the West Godavari district of Madras presidency, as the sixth child of a Vedic scholar, Venkataramayya. Kocharalakota Rama Raju, a composer and left-handed violinist, was his first guru. The tutelage lasted exactly six days!

Venkataramayya then became a student of one Subramania Iyer of Pakshiteertham, who lived in nearby Yelamanchili. He travelled all over Tamil Nadu with his teacher, only to find the teacher abscond one fine day. Young Pattabhiramayya had to come back home. His next stop in music learning was at Pedda Kallepalli where he became a student of Susarla Dakshinamurti Sastri, a disciple of Manambuchavadi Venkatasubbier. After the demise of Sastri, Pattabhiramayya received advanced lessons in music from Parupalli Ramakrishnayya Pantulu, the prime disciple of Susarla, settling down in Vijayawada.

Early training

In 1918, Pattabhiramayya married Suryakantamma, daughter of a renowned composer, Prayaga Rangayya. She came to Vijayawada to become a member of her husband's household only in 1926. She was proficient in the veena and languages such as Sanskrit, Telugu and Hindi. Music was her life. Devoted to Gandhian principles, she spun the charkha and wore khadi all her life. On 6 July 1930, she gave birth to her only child – a boy – at Sankaraguptam, a tiny village where the Prayaga family was then living.



The mother showered all her love and affection on the infant. At times she would whisper into his ears, as if revealing some secret. On the thirteenth day, Suryakantamma had a headache, followed by fever. Three days later, she passed away.

It became the responsibility of Suryakantamma's elder sister Subbamma to rear the child. Subbamma, a widow since the age of seven (her married life lasted only a fortnight), named the boy Krishna, but called him Murali. Pattabhiramayya held his sister-in-law in great respect and treated her like his mother.

Every morning Pattabhiramayya rode his bicycle, taking young Murali in an attached bucket seat to the homes where he taught music. When it was time for Murali to be fed, Pattabhiramayya's students sang until the child finished his meal. For music was the only trick to make the boy eat without resistance. Now four years old, Murali regularly sat with his father's students and keenly watched them sing and play. It was said God had sown the seed of music in him while he was in his mother's womb. Pattabhiramayya decided not to marry again despite persuasion by family and friends. His only ambition in life was to make his beloved son a great person.

With financial help from friends and with his own savings, Pattabhiramayya built a three-storeyed house and named it 'Suryakanta Bhavanam'. When Murali was five, he took him to the municipal school in Buckinghampet, but Murali had to quit school in his fifth standard as his teachers and the Headmaster advised Pattabhiramayya to train him only in music. Eight years old, Murali focused all his attention on music. Manodharma singing came easily to him. He could not only immediately repeat a kriti sung by his father's students, but also embellish it. Pattabhiramayya taught Murali a few geetam-s, though he had already learnt varnam-s just by listening to them. After long consideration, Pattabhiramayya took Murali

to his own guru, Parupalli Ramakrishnayya Pantulu, also residing in Vijayawada. After taking one look at the puny boy, the guru advised Pattabhiramayya to bring him later, but soon relented at the father's repeated pleas. Thus Murali became an assiduous disciple of Ramakrishnayya Pantulu – starting a new course of geetam-s!

Vocal debut

Pantulu was in charge of chalking out the programmes at Susarla Dakshinamurti Sastri's annual remembrance festival conducted by his disciples at Vijayawada. With 17 days to go for the 1940 festival, Pantulu had to go to his native village on some important work. He entrusted the job to his student, Neti Lakshminarayana. Radhakrishna Raju, Lanka Venkateswarlu and some others prevailed upon Lakshminarayana to include Murali's recital in the festival. When he saw the announcement with Murali's name on it, the guru was taken aback. He said, "Are you joking? Pattabhiramayya's son has started to learn music only recently from me. The standard of the festival will be brought down by this novice, who has not even completed a geetam". Lakshminarayana and others managed to convince the guru. The programme notices had already been circulated, they told him.

On 18 July 1940, on Ashadha Suddha Ekadasi day, exactly nine Hindu calendar years after his birth, Muralikrishna ascended the stage – with Kambhampati Akkaji Rao (veena) and Radhakrishna Raju (mridanga) as his accompanists. He paid obeisance to his guru seated in a corner of the platform. The Kalyani varnam *Vanajakshiro* was the opening item, followed by *Sobhillu* in Jaganmohini. Young Murali's music seemed to challenge the audience: "Are you looking for melody? It is inborn. Do you expect mastery over laya? It is there in abundance. Sruti, laya, arithmetical manipulations – are all at my beck and call". Though the allotted time was thirty minutes, the concert crossed three hours. The audience was unaware of the passage of time. When the recital came to an end, Pantulu stood up to say a few words, but his voice choked. Tears rolling from his eyes, he rushed into an adjacent room, carrying Murali on his shoulders and started to weep. Musunuri Bhagavata took Pantulu's place and spoke at length about Murali's music. He said, "This boy reminds us of the young Muralikrishna of Brindavan, who swept away the universe with his sweet music. This young Muralikrishna may henceforth be called 'Bala Muralikrishna'. Hope you will all agree." From that day, Murali came to be known as Balamuralikrishna.

Balamurali's second performance was on 9 October 1940, during the Dasara festival at the Durga Malleswara temple.

That year, he gave some eleven performances. His fame spread to all corners of the state and invitations started to come in plenty. Pattabhiramayya had to be selective. Balamurali broadcast from All India Radio for the first time – without going through an audition – on 2 July 1941. He accompanied his guru to Tiruvaiyaru to attend the Tyagaraja aradhana festival. On 5 January 1942, after rendering the Pancharatna kriti-s, each vidwan presented a composition and Pantulu asked the boy to sing. Balamurali sang *Manasa Sreeramachandruni* in the raga Easamanohari. After Pantulu offered the time allotted to his own concert to the boy, Balamurali's individual programme was chalked out, two days later. Murali sat on a stool so that the audience could see him. Andhra Saraswata Parishad, a cultural organisation run by the zamindar of Vuyyur, Raja Venkatadri Appa Rao, Dr. Veturi Prabhakara Sastri and other scholars, arranged a function on 15 January 1943 at Nuzvid to honour young Murali with the title, 'Gana Sudhakara'.

Self taught instrumentalist

When he was barely seven, Murali became adept at playing the violin by sheer practice, and without any formal learning. After some years, Ramakrishnayya Pantulu asked him to accompany him on the violin in a concert at the Durga Malleswara temple. Murali then accompanied G.N. Balasubramaniam in a concert. Soon it became the custom for him to give a vocal concert on one day and provide violin accompaniment to a high-ranking vidwan the next. He shortly switched over from the violin to the viola.

In 1944, Balamurali provided viola accompaniment to Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar and Chittoor Subramania Pillai. He also accompanied Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer, Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, Voleti Venkateswarlu, K.V. Narayanaswamy, and a host of others. He also acquired proficiency in playing the mridanga. When he was invited to accompany a vidwan on the mridanga at a concert, Balamurali expressed his vow to play first for his guru. His desire was soon fulfilled. One day, just before the commencement of Pantulu's programme, Radhakrishna Raju, the scheduled mridanga accompanist asked Balamurali to take his position. The boy prostrated at the feet of his guru, who had no inkling that his young sishya would be the mridangist that day. The programme went off very well and everyone, including Pantulu praised Balamurali. Later, he played the mridanga for many stalwarts. He also mastered the khanjira, and accompanied vidwans like Lalgudi Jayaraman.