

## F.G. NATESA IYER (1880-1963)

### Actor, philanthropist and patron of arts

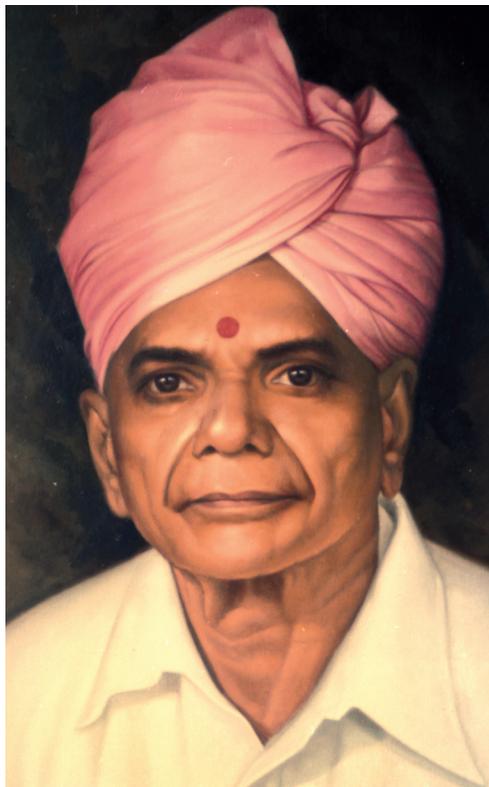
T.S. Mani

A prominent patron of arts in 20<sup>th</sup> century south India, F.G. Natesa Iyer of Tiruchirapalli earned the gratitude of the Tamil population for his discovery and training of great artists like M.K. Thyagaraja Bhagavata, K.B. Sundarambal and the T.K.S. Brothers. He projected M.S. Subbulakshmi as a child prodigy when she was 11 and arranged concerts for her with T. Chowdiah and Dakshinamoorthy as her accompanists. Who knows how many more such gems benefited from his training and guidance? His invaluable contribution in elevating terukoothu to sophisticated stage productions was the foundation on which the future of south Indian drama and cinema was solidly built.

The 1800s and 1900s saw many great achievers endowed with determination, patriotism, and belief in service before self, justice and fair play. They had humility and they shunned publicity, but they also had the burning desire to elevate the public to higher levels. F.G. Natesa Iyer had all these qualities.

Born on 11 November 1880 in the lineage of the famous Adayapalam Appayya Dikshitar, FGN was the grandson of Tiruvalangadu Tyagaraja Sastrigal, the guru of Umayalpuram Swaminatha Iyer, Tirukkodikkaval Krishna Iyer and Konerirajapuram Vaidyanatha Iyer, among others. His father Gangadhara Sastrigal was a legal adviser in the state of Pudukottai, a vainika and a renowned expert in making musical instruments including the veena and swarabat. He helped Manpoondia Pillai in his research in perfecting the khanjira. FGN's elder brother was Rao Saheb Ganapati Sastrigal, Dewan of Pudukottai.

Young Natesan inherited the qualities of love of music, search for perfection, talent for administration and religious devotion from his forefathers. He loved music and drama so much that, when his father forced him to abandon his love for them, he ran away from home at the age of ten and joined the railways as a clerk in the Madura and Tinnevely-Quilon Railways Construction Department.



SRI KADAM

He sacrificed the best of part of his life and a major share of his wealth in the pursuit of his passion for theatre. While in the railways, he is said to have mastered the English language and its diction to the amazement of Englishmen, even without passing the matriculation examination. He memorised all of Shakespeare's plays and enacted them for audiences that included European officers. He created a drama troupe consisting of amateur actors from well-to-do families and produced plays in Tamil like *Manohara*, *Raja Harischandra*, and *Bhakta Prahlada*, as well as Tamil versions of the works of Shakespeare and Sheridan. The plays became the rage amidst the public because of excellent acting and exciting stage effects.

FGN's six-foot tall, muscular body and his loud, imperious voice gave him a grand stage personality. Whenever he appeared in the role of a king, the audience was spellbound by his realistic portrayal of the character. The role that shot him to fame was that of Manohara, a rebel king, bound by chains and brought before the ruler, breaking the chains by a sheer show of physical strength in the open court. He was so realistic as Othello that his own wife was afraid of him after the show.

## COVER STORY

The intensity of the drama was the hallmark of FGN productions. Even though he had only petromax lights to illuminate his special stage effects, he was able to create deep feeling and wonder (adbhuta) in the audience by his superb direction, stage management and music. He infused spectacle and colour into his plays with such props as long swords with shiny handles and velvet covers which he imported from Peshawar, rich, colourful dress material from Bombay, and royal robes designed in the patterns used by the nawabs of Lucknow. He went to Bombay and Calcutta to watch Maharashtrian and Bengali plays and

incorporate their techniques in his productions. High quality classical music composed by Alathur Venkatesa Iyer was an added attraction of his plays. His acting was inspired; budding actors like the T.K.S. Brothers, M.G. Ramachandran, M.R. Radha and M.K. Radha looked up to him as their ideal and sought his help in furthering their talents and prospects. Nawab Rajamanickam Pillai who revered FGN prostrated before him whenever he met him. FGN remained an amateur dramatist all through his life, never using his dramatic talents to earn money.