

**K.P. KITTAPPA PILLAI****A true sangeetagna****Nandini Ramani**

**A**s I stand in front of the sanctum sanctorum of the Lord of the Universe, at the Brihadeeswara temple, Kittappa Pillai's words "*Neenga poyi Avarai paarthuttu vaanga*" (*Go have darsan of Him and come*) ring in my ears. Those were probably the last words the great natyacharya uttered before he slipped into his final moments before joining his illustrious ancestors – the Tanjavur Quartet on the following day – 30 October 1999.

I was fortunate to have worked closely with him in the two-and-a-half years before his death, on a book of rare compositions in the Tanjavur repertoire of Bharatanatyam. It was a very emotional experience for me to have been present during the last few hours of Tanjavur K.P. Kittappa Pillai.

I had taken the final press copy to Tanjavur to show it to Kittappa Pillai, knowing fully well from my previous visits that his end was approaching. As I waited for his comments he looked deeply at me and told me in a feeble voice to go to the temple, place the copy of the book at the feet of Lord Brihadeeswara and bring it back with His blessings. I choked and tried to control my tears. I did as I was told. Coming back from the temple I extended the book to the ailing guru. Then came the most moving gesture from the illustrious sangeetagna; he placed his hand on my head, almost pulling it closer to him and blessed me saying, "*Neenga nalla iruppeenga*" (*You will do well*). I can never forget the parting look from the master even 13 years after of his departure from this world.

"The Tanjavur Quartet – Chinniah, Ponniah, Sivanandam and Vadivelu hailed from the Tamizh Oduvamurti tradition; they were disciples of Muthuswami Dikshitar and Samasthana Vidwans of Tanjavur, Travancore, and Mysore, and were offering dance ritualistic service at the Sri Brihadeeswara temple," says Sangita Kalandidhi K. Ponniah Pillai in his preface to the book *Tanjai Peruvudayaan Perisai*. Kittappa Pillai repeatedly mentioned this whenever the traditional lineage was discussed. Kittappa Pillai belonged to this devotional musical background. He was born on 5 May 1913, and his centenary is being celebrated in Tanjavur.



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Young Kittappa was raised in an atmosphere of bhakti-soaked music. A son of the illustrious vaggeyakara Sangita Kalanidhi K. Ponniah Pillai and Lakshmi Ammal, he was named Sabhapati; Kittappa was his pet name. He was also known as K.P. Krishnamurti Pillai. Trained by Natesa Sastry, grandson of Syama Sastry, in vocal music, he became skilful in playing the mridangam as well. He learnt the art of nattuvangam from his maternal grandfather, the illustrious Pandanainallur Meenakshisundaram Pillai (a disciple of Mahadeva Nattuvanar belonging to the direct lineage of Sivanandam of the Tanjavur Quartet).

Kittappa Pillai initially started out as a vocalist—performing with his maternal cousin Narayanaswami. After the demise of his cousin, Kittappa stopped rendering vocal concerts. For sometime he assisted Meenakshisundaram Pillai who was teaching at Kalakshetra, and also worked with some dance teachers in Bangalore. He concentrated on teaching the varied aspects of nritta and abhinaya in Bharatanatyam, doing nattuvangam, and composing jatis. All this gradually expanded over the years after senior stalwarts of his paramapara passed away, and Kittappa Pillai became the byword for nattuvangam and technical excellence in Bharatanatyam. During his career of four-and-a-half decades as an expert dance master-conductor-choreographer, he came to be known as a unique teacher of countless Tanjore compositions, many of which he re-created from memory and close observation of his own gurus. This seventh generation guru of the Tanjavur lineage was a repository of an exquisite collection of

Bharatanatyam and musical compositions handed down by his forefathers. With his younger brother Sangita Kalanidhi K.P. Sivanandam, a vainika, he brought out publications to document and propagate the treasures of the Tanjavur artistic heritage.

Kittappa Pillai's career assumed a rising graph with his teaching commitments as the principal of the Tamil Isai Sangam, Chennai, and later as the Head of the Music/Dance department of Annamalai University, Chidambaram. He was Professor of Dance for some years at the Tanjavur Tamil University. He taught several students under the scholarship scheme of the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi and the Ministry of Culture.

Kittappa Pillai was invited to deliver a special lecture under the Dhanalakshmi Ammal Subramania Pillai Endowment (South Africa), at the Tamil University in which he deliberated upon the "Music of Bharatanatyam and the Tanjavur Quartet". He sat with renowned contemporaries like T. Balasaraswati, Nattuvanar K. Ganesan of the Nelliappa Nattuvanar lineage, Rukmini Devi and many other exponents and scholars in the very first dance seminar organised by the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi, at New Delhi.

Kittappa Pillai was wholly instrumental in reviving the navasandhi compositions for the Bharatanatyam format. For many years they had only been part of ritualistic worship. He was a visionary in the sense he realised that the devotional aspects and lively lyrical content of these ritualistic pieces had ample scope for natya improvisation, and felt these should be carried forward to the future generation of artists. This he did in the face of criticism from strict disciplinarians like Bala who adhered to the margam-based repertoire meant for the stage. A publication titled *Navasandhi* was brought out by him, supported by one of his lead disciples Vjyayantimala Bali. Earlier in 1961, he published *Ponniah Mani Malai* with support from Mrinalini Sarabhai (disciple of Meenakshisundaram Pillai) who invited him to teach at her institution Darpana in Ahmedabad.

Padmalochana (Nagarajan) was Kittappa Pillai's first student and a prominent performer in the initial years of the master's career. She and Sudharani (Raghupathy) his seniormost disciple, trained under him for many years. Both of them participated with their master in the 1958 dance seminar of the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi.

Vjyayantimala Bali has created a unique place for herself

K. Ponniah Pillai

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in Bharatanatyam with her dedicated, consistent work of presenting the Tanjavur repertoire as the mainstay of her performances in accordance with her master's vision. Her years of training with Kittappa Pillai were an important phase in the artistic lives of both teacher and taught. I can even now recall the full-house conference session in the main hall of the Music Academy during the December season when Vyjayanti presented an outstanding exposition of some items of the rare Tanjavur repertoire like the taayam, geetam, prabandham, and sooladi. She sang the compositions, accompanied by Kittappa Pillai on the cymbals and K.P. Sivanandam on the veena. We were treated to unforgettable moments of musical ecstasy.

In the later part of the 1960s, Kittappa Pillai helped Sucheta Bhide Chapekar to set to dance the Marathi compositions on King Shahaji. Padmalochana accompanied him in vocal support for Sucheta's programmes. Around the same time Padmini Rao in Bangalore came under the veteran's wings to establish the reputed Sri Ponniah Lalita Kala Akademi, where Kittappa Pillai stayed for some years to propagate his tradition. Padmini built an auditorium in memory of her guru with a financial grant from the Karnataka Government. Film star Hemamalini, Yamini Krishnamurti, Indrani Rahman, Roshan Wajifdar, and Narmada – well known teacher in Bangalore – were some of the very senior artists who felt enriched by their tutelage under Kittappa Pillai. He took every care to teach them some of his fine choreographic creations.

Typical of a genius, Kittappa Pillai in his younger days, seemed to be a firm, stiff person with minimal words even when he appeared on stage. This created a sense of awe and bhaya-bhakti in younger artists. In later years he became more accessible, and pleasant in conversation. As I got to know him better, I understood that behind the tough and aloof exterior was hidden a magnanimous, soft-hearted, kind soul. For a man of few words, his statements were subtly laced with humour and sarcasm. This unassuming sangeetagna never expected favours from any quarters, and carried himself with nobility.

Kittappa Pillai's nritta technique had an inherent musical quality. Almost every creation was a masterpiece. His rhythmical patterns had a special touch, often based on 'usi eduppus' (commencing off the beat). These jatis gave you exquisite moments of aesthetic delight when he conducted the recitals, especially for Vyjayantimala at the Madras Music Academy or displayed his unique grip on laya while Hemamalini performed the tricky sankeerna nadai jatiswaram in Poorvikalyani (a composition of Kittappa Pillai's father Ponniah Pillai).



Young Kittappa, Meenakshisundaram Pillai and young Padmalochana

He always adhered to a slow tempo, but his intricate handling of seemingly complicated rhythmic nuances flashed like lightning, leaving the keen rasika wondering about the calculations underlining the laya choreographies of the maestro.

Some of the renowned nritta patterns prevalent in the various Bharatanatyam schools in India and abroad can be traced to his knowledge bank or to his heritage that received a further dimension in his hands. Such were his skill and artistry.

As Kittappa Pillai was a fine musician, his approach to abhinaya too had a perfect sense of laya blended into it. His traditional view, which came to the fore in the interpretative segments, was marked by a high degree of dignity and propriety. He was a wholesome musician with sumptuous resources to notate, compose, create, and interpret. In setting up the dance format for a composition, he employed adavus to cover space, and movements

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aligned to bring beauty in performance, for he believed that Bharatanatyam for the proscenium is a visual art that must bring enjoyment to the viewer. His recitation of the jatis, his singing and his perfect alignment with his orchestra were an aural and visual treat. He appreciated his mridangist and other accompanists from time to time with a “Bale” or “Besh”, which too would be in perfect sync with the on-going music or recitation of jatis!

Kittappa Pillai was also associated with the Melattur Bhagavata Mela productions for sometime. He told me he had specially composed for the group five jatis called the “Melattur jatis” which are in practice even today, and taught them to S. Natarajan, the renowned Bhagavata Mela exponent.

Kittappa Pillai was a member of the Experts Committee of the Music Academy, Madras. He received prestigious awards like the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi Ratna (Fellow), the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, Isai Perarignar title from Tamil Isai Sangam, Chennai, the E. Krishna Iyer Medal from the Sruti Foundation, Chennai, and the Kalidas Samman from the Madhya Pradesh Government. He was, however, disappointed that the coveted Sangita Kalanidhi title eluded him, a feeling he openly voiced in 1998, for he felt that he was a full-fledged musician in his own right.

Kittappa Pillai’s dance legacy is being preserved and continued by his last son K.P.K. Chandrasekharan, who runs the Kittappa Natyalaya in Tanjavur and its branch in Tirunelveli under the auspices of Sri Jayendra Saraswati

Golden Jubilee Higher Secondary School, supported by local teacher Ganga. Chandrasekharan works as Dance Teacher at the Government Music School in Tiruvarur.

Some of Kittappa Pillai’s well known younger disciples are Rajshri Gautam, Srividya Natarajan, Malavika Thanikachalam, Hari Krishnan, Indu Varma, and Srividya Sanakaranarayanan. Prominent among them is Narthaki Nataraj. Vocalist Saraswati Sankaranarayanan and Bhartanatyam Guru K. Ramiah (from the Balasaraswati school) benefited much through Kittappa Pillai’s musical training and resourceful guidance on various aspects of technical choreography respectively, during their tenure under him at Annamalai University. Students like Krishnaraj, Pandanallur Ravi, Raviraj, Swarnasekhar Purnapushkala and some others received training from Kittappa Pillai in the same campus, to become talented dance teachers-conductors to propagate his natya sampradaya. Hari, son of Tanjavur Herambanathan, learnt dance and the nuances of nattuvangam from Kittappa Pillai under a government scholarship. For a very long time, Herambanathan’s family were closely associated with that of the Quartet as ‘muttu’ (mridangam) players for their tradition.

In later years, Kittappa Pillai’s generosity was extended to many aspiring dancers – male and female, young and mature, less-privileged or poor. Many such students who benefited from his teaching are in different parts of the country, even in remote villages and towns, doing their bit to perpetuate the memory of this outstanding guru, who shared some of his vast knowledge with them.

President R. Venkataraman honouring Kittappa Pillai



Receiving the citation for the E. Krishna Iyer Medal from T.T. Vasu (President, Music Academy) as N. Pattabhi Raman (Sruti) looks on

