

The day is Guru Purnima – July 15, 2011. We enter his simple, Spartan room in Kurnool. After we pay our respects the first query he has is, “Have you learnt ‘Dhitalangamani’ in Pantuvarali?”

On August 3, our Guru’s Guru, Dr. Sripada Pinakapani, popularly called the “Singing Doctor of Kurnool” turned 99. At this age and time, Pani garu’s every thought and word is to do with music. It is our privilege to have been closely associated with Pani garu’s style and tradition of music since 1991.

Our father Sri Suribabu, our first teacher, often mentioned Pani garu as one who had contributed abundantly to the world of Carnatic music. Sangita Kalanidhi Dr Pinakapani – the illustrious guru of Sri Voleti (our father’s guru), Sri Nedunuri (our own guru), Sri Nookala, Srirangam Gopalaratnam, and others – is not only a vocalist par excellence. He is a qualified medical practitioner and an illustrious guru – a guru who “transferred” to his disciples not just his music, but also his most admirable quality of humility, besides many other valuable lessons.

It was Dr. Podili Brahmaya Sastri of Visakhapatnam, colleague of Dr Pani garu, who drew us into the world of Pani’s bani in 1990 by giving us six volumes of his own renditions, replete with weighty kritis and padams. Pani garu, in his early eighties by then, was more than willing to impart as much knowledge to us, not as much as he could give, but as much as we could take. With Pani garu, week-long learning sessions at Kurnool would invariably consist of classes for at least eight hours a day. As he honed our swara and anuswara jnanam, we had the good fortune of learning almost 200 compositions. It was during these learning years that his magnum opus, “Sangeeta Sourabham,” a Te-

lugu work of four volumes containing over 1,200 kritis, was getting ready to be published by TTD. This has been our Guru Gita, a work that bears his imprint in every handwritten notation, which he edited and proofread.

To date, each of the kritis Pani garu sings is attached to a memory of his own learning or teaching. He vividly remembers GNB learning ‘Emanni Pogadutura’ in Veera Vasantam, which in turn he taught Alathur Brothers. He believed that before the infusion of sahitya into a raga, one had to master its swaras.

Pani garu was known for his rendition of both the swara and sahitya components of a varnam in concerts. He would insist on being able to sing the swaras even for phrases in a raga alapana. His jnanam for writing notations was simply astounding. We were blessed to learn from him many pallavis from his book, ‘Pallavi Gana Sudha’ where he has notated over 200 Pallavis in English and Telugu.

It is not just his musical genius, but also his passion for the divinity of Carnatic music that made him notate over 75 kritis of Spencer Venugopal garu, and the 72 Melakartas of Sri Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer. He embarked on all of these projects after the age of 80, defying conceptions of creativity, by notating even the manodharma aspects of music in his book “Manodharma Sangeetam.” This covers over 50 ragas and serves as a guide to teachers and students alike.

At a time when Pani garu’s hands failed him, as an exercise to keep his brain active, he went about preparing a work of 150 muktayi swaras, where he made painstaking calculations for the swara structures that would suit various ragas.

Pani garu was fascinated by the Thanjavur bani of music, and was inspired by Veena Dhanammal, Ranga Ramanuja Iyengar, and Ariyakkudi Ra-

Sangita yogi

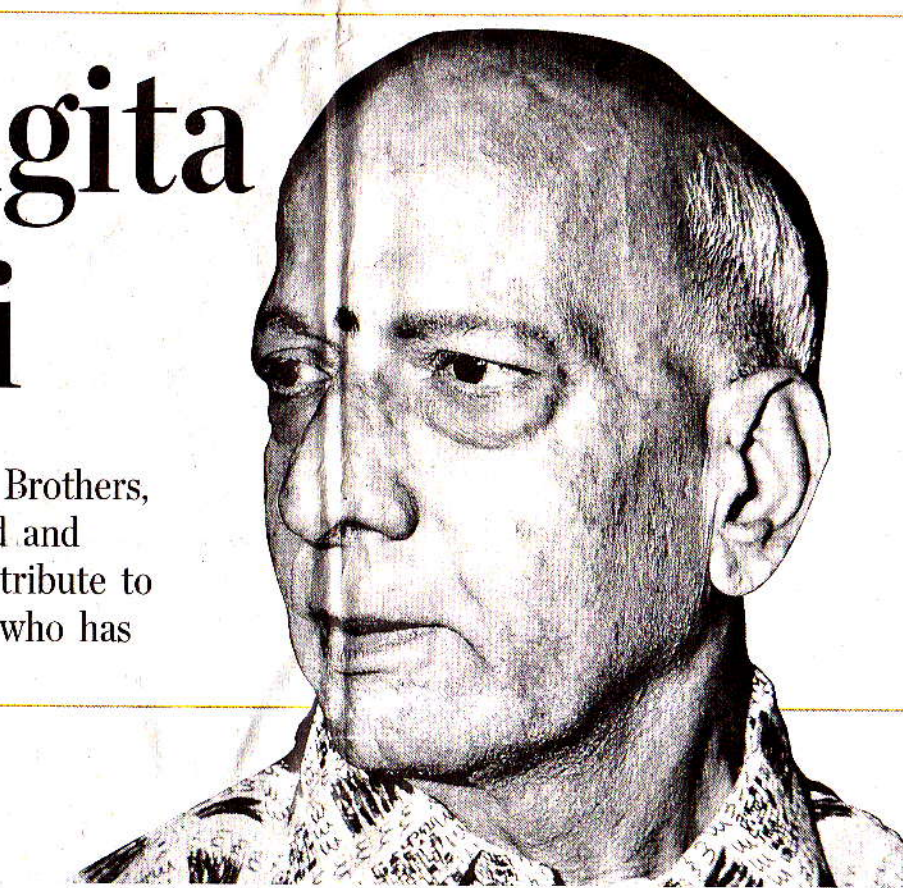
DOYEN Malladi Brothers, Sreerama Prasad and Ravikumar, pay tribute to Dr. Pinakapani, who has just turned 99.

manuja Iyengar. Every phrase in a raga alapana would bring the name of one his illustrious predecessors to his mind: Sri Rajagopala Pillai, Mudicondan Venkatarama Iyer, Sri Swaminatha Pillai (flautist) and Sri Govindaswami Pillai (violinist). Dwaram Venkataswamy Naidu’s fineness lay in, Pani garu always said, his renditions never being bereft of sukham.

Pani garu’s own renditions were weighty, worthy of the adulation of the predecessors he worshipped as his own gurus. His music never stooped to the level of the listener, but was always elevated. He insisted on a slow kala pramana for sangatis to have an identity for themselves, and for kirtanas to have the appropriate gamakams with a bhava-laden patantharam.

Raga alapana

True to the Thanjavur bhani, Pani garu emphasised on raga alapana being a total package, rather than a phrase-oriented effort. He emulated



AT GURU’S FEET: Dr. Pinakapani flanked by Nedunuri Krishnamurthy (right) and Malladi Brothers. PHOTOS: BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

the purvanga-uttaranga format of raga alapana, popularised by Rajaratnam Pillai and Ariyakkudi. Raga bhavam in ragam, thanam, niraval, swara kalpana – the sky being the limit for creativity grounded in sampradaya – often made Pani garu’s rendi-

tions seem like the flow of a river – deep, smooth and endless leading the way to the vast realms of unexplored manodharma.

A lover of Thodi, Begada, Khambodi, Suratti, and all that is traditional, Pani garu

once told us that if one were to collect every possible musical gem and place them together, they would equal the kritis of the Trinity. He loved singing rare vivadi ragas such as Raghupriya, Yagapriya and Natakabhushani, and insisted that

they had to be sung as mellifluously as any other ghana raga, without any concentration on the vivadi swara.

Pani garu spoke of four goals that every musician must strive to fulfil. A good musician must (a) learn music grounded in Sampradaya from good guru(s), (b) teach music to able students (c) propagate music by presenting concerts, and (d) preserve the style of music through notations and other means.

Above all, Pani garu believed in Atmananda – singing for oneself – an ideal he set for himself as the highest, in addition to the four golden goals he preached. Simple people with a good heart attracted Pani garu rather than flattery, concerts or money. We remember Sri Semangudi Srinivasa Iyer bringing his hands together with respect and high regard for Pani garu.

Pani garu in his 99th year has a musical memory that is intact, and continues to sing for himself and the Almighty. He is in the musical mode – it is hard to get him to switch off for even a moment. Though his own renditions might be lofty, his “aha” of appreciation, a ready prize for even a beginner singing Sarali swaras, is like a shot of adrenaline for any singer he encourages.

The words he left us with on Guru Purnima were these: “It is not my greatness that I taught so many vidwans. Krishna Bhagavan has blessed me with the opportunity to learn and to transfer my knowledge to the students who came to me.” It is this selflessness and humility that make him a yogi. And, these are the precious words that we remember as we continue on our musical journey. As all his disciples look forward to celebrating his centenary, we remember with gratitude our guru’s guru, for it is his kaktaksham that has brought us this far.

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Music on his mind

Even in his 99th year, a day in the life of this legend begins at the Brahma muhurtam – 3.30 a.m. – with three hours of japam. He hums away while his son Kameshwara Rao assists him in his daily ablutions. He is busy tapping his fingers when he is fed mashed food. His hands move to the swaras in his mind when his son Muvvagopal checks his pulse and general health. The only time he does not hum a few swaras is probably when he is asleep.

