

A LITERARY SOJOURN

# TRANSLATED SHORT STORIES BRING ALIVE TAMIL SOCIETY OF 1950s

K R A Narasaiah

In the 1950s, tales of tradition, rituals and a woman's coming of age from a woman's perspective raised eyebrows but avant garde author India Devi was among the few who still wrote on such topics.

The stories in Tamil, written under the pen name Vindhiya, got a wider readership when her brother Andy Sundaresan translated a 10-tale compilation into English. Retaining the colour and flavour, 'Cupid Alarms and Other Stories' provides a glimpse into the dynamics of the Independence period.

The 1927-born author's first story 'Parvathi' was published in Tamil journal 'Kalaimagal'. Highlighting the problems associated with a girl's coming of age and the added pressure of marriage, it explores how a girl is forced to wed a heartless man. The writing of such a story in 1947 and a conservative journal publishing it shows a period on the cusp of change.

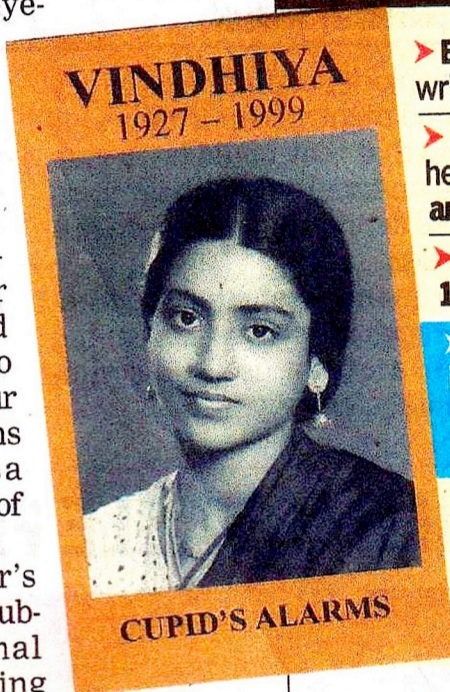
Her popularity and relevance came to the fore in 1950 when Kalki conducted a competition on behalf of an international competition of short stories held by the New York Herald Tribune and she won the second prize in Tamil category. The tale of two women and their marriages had a domestic theme but sensitively portrayed their feelings, reminding one of Manikodi-era writers. The protagonist, a woman narrator, suspects the motives of her husband's friend when his wife is away.

Interestingly, India captured the social milieu in Tamil households and the changing position of women in it from a distance. Daughter of a brahmin professor, K N Sundaresan, she grew up in Odisha where her family relocated after the anti-brahmin Justice Party formed a government in TN and passed a sort of reservation policy in September 1921. Sundaresan, who gave her name out of patriotism, ensured all his children learned Tamil. Her interest in the language and Sundaresan's encouragement made her take to writing. The longing for her land may have also helped her get a better insight into Tamil society.

It was not always women that interested India and one of her most haunting tales is 'The Warmth in His Eyes' about a blind violinist's feelings towards his father — his guide and inspiration. 'The Folded Palms' (1954), another avant garde piece, revolves around a waiter and a businessman in a hotel, and the events that follow showing that it is mental

## AHEAD OF HER TIMES

India Devi gave a modern perspective to age-old traditions in Tamil culture



> Born in 1927, India Devi, started writing at the age on 20

> Although she grew up in Odisha, her stories capture the traditions and rituals of Tamil Nadu

> In 13 years she wrote more than 100 short stories

> 'Cupid's Alarms', 'The Warmth in His Eyes' and 'The Folded Palms' are some of her best known pieces

> Her stories used to be published in leading Tamil journals like 'Ananda Vikatan', 'Kalki' and 'Kalimagal'

**A DIFFERENT TAKE:** The cover of the translated work, 'Cupid's Alarms and other short stories' is a reproduced from a 1951 issue of Kalki magazine



will and not a social or physical standing of individuals which matter. The structure and characterization are definitely far ahead of their time. 'A New Month' sees the author thinking in abstract and telling the story of a guilty mind. At a time when people baulked at writing about divorce, India talks about alimony and the reaction of the separated couple when they meet. All her stories were published in leading Tamil journals, including Ananda Vikatan, Kalki and Kalimagal.

She stopped writing after 13 years and more than 100 short stories but India remains one of the most important writers who captured a society in transition. In the foreword to the translated work, the late Rajam Krishnan, while analyzing the stories, concludes, "I feel it is a loss to the Tamil literary world that India Devi didn't continue her writing career." The cover illustration, reproduced from the August 1951 issue of Kalki, adds to the original charm of the journals in which these stories appeared.

(A former marine chief engineer, the writer is a Tamil author, historian and heritage enthusiast)