

MY MOTHER

Thaial *alias* Thailammal

(17 May 1910 – 18 Jan 1977)

My parents were married when my mother was 10 years young and my father 21. My mother Thaialnayaki (Thaial for short) belonged to do a well-to-do family, her father being a landowner in a village called Katuputur. She married her paternal aunt's (athai's) son Sundaresan. My father was the son of a school teacher who became the Headmaster of the well-known Sethupathy High School in Madurai. Father lost both his parents when he was seven, and he along with an elder brother and a younger sister was raised by a maternal aunt (*chithi*) Sellam, a widow. It appears the marriage was decided even as the couple were kids, "as made for each other". Such consanguine alliance was common in those days.

Sundaresan was a gold-medallist in M.A. Mathematics from St. Joseph's College, Tiruchirappalli. But he had to seek his livelihood outside Tamil Nadu because of the communal G.O. of the Justice Party government. He joined the Khallikote College, Berhampur (now in Orissa) as a lecturer in 1921 and continued to work there until his retirement in 1967. Three generations of students remember him as a brilliant teacher of Mathematics. But my father's first love was poetry. He wrote hundreds of poems and scores of plays, both in English and Tamil from 1920 until his death in 1983. His early work was in English inspired by Shakespeare and Tagore, but while in his thirties he switched over completely to write poetry and plays in his mother tongue Tamil, following the advice of C.F. Andrews. As a student of Sanskrit he had no formal training in Tamil. Yet he mastered the language, its early classical non-religious and secular texts of *Sangam* literature and the devotional Tamil literature typified by *Thevaram*, aided by the scholarly English commentaries by missionaries like Rev. G.U. Pope.

Almost all the Tamil poetry, set in the contemporary period was in the genre of "love poems" and the model he used was the *Kalittogai* of the *Sangam* period. His poems were "*Sangam* poetry clothed in modern raiment". Regarding the plays, he wrote few modern ones but wrote hundreds of historical fictional plays based on the characters of the *Sangam* period. Several books of his poems have been published but the plays remain mainly in manuscript form, but 'printer-ready'. It is interesting to note that he completed writing the bulk of the plays just a few months before his death in 1983 at age 84, based

on the notes he had made 50 years earlier. He was a staunch nationalist, inspired by the freedom struggle of the 1920's led by Mahatma Gandhi.

My mother joined my father in 1925 and they lived in an outhouse of *Marella* Bungalow, a big mansion owned by a zamindar (rich land-owner) family. The Matriarch (Doddamma garu) lived with her eight sons and their families. For an outhouse, the home was quite spacious set in peaceful surroundings. It was quite close to the college and father used a bicycle for commute. The dominant language of the place at that time was Telugu and my mother quickly learnt the language. After living for more than a decade at *Marella's* they shifted to another rented house in the main town Berhampur in 1937. The move was forced by a couple of burglaries (within two weeks) in which were lost some utensils, clothing and a clock. *Marella* family and our family were very close to each other and the parting was sad; Doddamma garu offered complete waiver of the rent if we agreed to stay on! The change of residence turned out to be a good move; the house was very spacious (about 13 rooms big and small) with open spaces inside, a spacious backyard, long verandahs and a room upstairs in the terrace. The rent was Rs. 20 per month about 20 % of my father's salary and considered affordable!

My father ever steeped in the study and writing of literature, left the entire management of the home to my mother. But my father had some specific ideas about running a home and laid down some ground rules. The family ate together, with all cooked food in their containers placed around my mother who was seated at the center distributing the food. All of us, my father and the children, were seated around the food. Father felt that the conventional way of serving people seated in a row by one person walking and bending was too stressful. At my mother's insistence, when guests were present for food, she would serve all seated in a row. Father was very sensitive to the fact that my mother spent major part of her time making and serving food. For example he nearly banned the making of idlis, because he could not bear seeing my mother's labor at the grinder preparing the idli dough. We had idlies twice or thrice a year and they were memorable days. My father had given up coffee, but he would take coffee with idli, because the combination was unbeatable.

We all ate fresh food in the morning before going to school. There was no regular "tiffin" in the afternoon. Occasionally we had some fruits. Dinner was mostly the carried-over food from the morning with one new dish, chutney (*thogayal*). This was a practice borrowed from the Andhras; almost any vegetable could be made into a chutney to be mixed with rice and eaten. Mother was an expert cook. She baked biscuits in an improvised oven and the smell of 'pachaikarpuram' continues to haunt. Occasionally we would buy some biscuits. (e.g. 'Cinema' brand biscuits – about 20 for one and quarter anna), a delicacy. We never ate food in restaurants. In my 18 years in Berhampur, only once did I eat in a restaurant, lured by a visiting guest. My father was not against

restaurants. He used to say “Restaurants, if they made good, wholesome food in hygienic conditions, would be great relief for housewives”. For many orthodox families, restaurants were out of bound more because of doubts about the caste of the cooks and servers, than about the hygiene.

Once, the youngest son of the *Marella* family, Krishnamurthy, who later became a state tennis champion, was stricken with a mild illness, idiopathic (cause unknown) I guess. The recommended cure was to give the patient a food, which he craved most. Krishnamurthy asked for ‘*aviyal*’ made in Sundaresan master’s home. My mother made a sumptuous quantity of *aviyal* for the whole *Marella* family. In contrast, when a similar option was given to me, the food I craved for was the raw cucumber-salt-pepper sold near my college. In hot weather it was tempting, but we were all forbidden from eating outside. I don’t remember if my wish was granted!

We, the children once complained to my mother that her ‘*upma*’ is not as good as ‘hotel’ *upma* we had heard about. Mother got a hotel cook (Rajagopala Iyer), also a family friend, to demonstrate to her the making of *upma*. I was also a witness and followed the procedure. It is my favorite snack.

Father did not like mother wearing nine-yard saris. He felt they were needlessly long and cumbersome to wear, yet they did not fully cover portions of the back of the legs. My mother resisted first, but gave in. It was not very difficult to abide by this dictat because the locals (mostly Andhras) wore only six- yard saris. But she was allowed to wear nine-yard saris on special occasions like Tamil weddings. Father disciplined his children to adopt proper posture; “straight back and straight face” always, sitting, standing or walking. He taught us proper manners in speech. We were never allowed to address anyone as “*da*” or “*di*”, words commonly used in addressing very close pals or relatives. Most parents addressed their children appending a “*da*” or a “*di*” at the end of every sentence (e.g. “*vada*” “*poda*”, “*vadi*” “*podu*”). Father considered it as rude language and the ban applied to my mother too. On the other hand he insisted that we, the children addressed the parents in the singular, not plural: “*nee*” instead of “*neengal*”, “*un*” instead of “*ungal*” etc. Such a mode of addressing parents by children is usually considered disrespectful – my wife Visalam was horrified when she knew about this – but father felt that it helped generate intimacy with parents who should be regarded as peers and not superiors. We had great respect for our parents, never feared them. I don’t remember any harsh word ever spoken to the children by my parents. But there were times when we erred or misbehaved and could not face father. When that happened we took our troubles to mother.

I recall the time when I lost a very expensive Parker Pen in a freak occurrence. The pen was not only superb, it was also a gift from his sambandhi (sister India Devi’s

father-in-law Vaidyanatha ayyar). The pen was thick and long with a big barrel for ink and could not be clipped to the shirt pocket. So, I had clipped it to my pant pocket and walked to the college. After reaching the college, I noticed that only the top cover of the pen remained clipped to the pocket, and the bottom part was missing! The pen had got unscrewed while walking and the bottom of the pen fell through a hole in the pocket! I could not face my father and so I told my mother. My father never raised the topic of losing the pen with me. When I looked at him with my head almost bowed, he simply showed no reaction: no rebuke or comforting words. But he let me use another Parker pen, a smaller one, which too had been gifted to him by Vaidyanatha ayyar.

When father disapproved of some act by anyone in the family (including my mother), he adopted Gandhi's weapon of "satyagraha". He would not eat and go on fast, until the erring person apologized. It was my mother who usually persuaded the offender to apologize. Once, I walked up to the college to apologize to him.

Father believed in an Almighty God, but did not believe in rituals. He prayed often, reciting hymns from *Thevaram* in his own musical style. He was a rationalist. Father had great admiration for the mythology of *nayanmars* and *azhwars*, but he felt that the 'miracles' attributed to them were unnecessary appendages; their greatness and virtue were immense without the miracles. While in college he had given up his '*kudimi*', '*poonul*' (caste symbols for Brahmins) and even sported a moustache (which he had till his death). There were no rituals or organized *puja* at home on auspicious or festive days. He made one exception: for *Saraswathi puja* (during *dusserah*) he would gather the entire family around him and recite Tamil poems in praise of *Saraswathi*, the Goddess of Learning. My mother abided by his wishes. However mother insisted that father perform *sraddham* in memory of his dead parents every year in the traditional way. To respect her feelings he went through the mechanical movements of the *sraddham* rituals. She wore a nine-yard sari on the day. For my mother, *sraddham* was ever an occasion for stress and anxiety: not sure whether the cook (*Ramayya garu*) or the performing priest will turn up! She would begin to worry a month ahead of the ceremony. She had enough reason to be anxious, since once the cook failed to turn up.

My mother bore nine children, but only five survived. The difference between the age of the eldest (India Devi, 1927) and the youngest (Seenu, 1942) is more than 15 years. Seenu was born four months after India Devi's marriage. Between me (1930) and Selvi (1938), a son (Kannan) lived for about two years (a flower that "bloomed on a Deepavali, blossomed forth on the next Deepavali and withered on the following Deepavali"); two more sons died as blue babies within days of their birth. For abundant precaution, my mother was admitted into a hospital for special care when she was pregnant with Selvi. Selvi was a healthy baby weighing 8 pounds 10 ozs. Brother Rangan

was born in 1939 and Seenu in 1942. After Seenu was born Parvatharani (1947) who lived for less than a year. Selvi was the only child born in a hospital, all the others were born at home aided by my grandmother.

A few days before I was born, my mother had a dream, about which she told me many years later. In the dream she found a precious stone almost perfect except for one defect! The dream fits neatly into the Freudian paradigm of “wish fulfillment” in the interpretation of dreams. If indeed she had such a wish, it is remarkable that she was pragmatic enough to realize that nobody in the world is perfect!

Since my father never did any shopping, the task fell on the shoulders of the children. Vegetable vendors came to the doorstep. But for groceries etc, the sons did the shopping. My mother would mention the items for purchase, and invariably I would forget one or two and will return to the shop a second time. My mother would wonder, how a child who was good in arithmetic, could fail to remember five items. Again, I would be very reluctant to return any item to the shop. Another task assigned to me was during the monthly three-day-period when mother was “out-of-doors”. For about six years (1942-48), I had to cook for the family on those days. During these years, my elder sister had left the home and my younger sister Selvi was too young. My mother would stand outside the kitchen window in the backyard and give detailed instructions. For example, *rasam* was made every day, but I had to be given fresh instructions every day. Again this was mysterious for my mother. I can rationalize my behavior by saying that *one does not learn if he has no desire for learning*.

I had noticed that while putting away or transferring cooked food and the dairy products like milk, butter, curds, ghee etc. my mother would wipe the containers clean without practically any trace of the food. To me the procedure seemed rather ‘extreme’, and I commented that we need not be so miserly. My mother’s reply was that she was simply showing our respect for food, especially the milk products because the cow is worshipped as a goddess. So every such act was one of thanks giving to the provider of food. No food should be wasted. This was one important lesson I learnt during those days of my cooking.

My father’s only earnings were from his salary, but he was able to save substantial amount till the late thirties. My mother was in charge of running the home. We were used to simple living, with no luxuries. My father could indulge in his few “luxuries” like books on Tamil classics, Tamil magazines and even a Tamil typewriter. In 1938, the family was deeply affected by a financial crisis, the crashing of two banks in Trivandrum. Father had invested his entire savings, about Rs. 15000 – a large sum those days - not as fixed deposits, but as shares. Being a ‘share holder’ he had greater liability. (Mother once commented ruefully about my father: he never bought anything in his life, not even

vegetables; yet he bought shares which amounted to taking responsibility to run a bank, about which he knew nothing). My mother dreaded the monthly warnings from the bank about legal action against him. But father had a stoic attitude. He had no money to pay. A few years later the bank made an offer of full settlement of his dues for a nominal sum of Rs. 187! That day was one of the happiest days for my parents, especially mother. Apparently the bank realized the futility of taking any legal action. Earlier, he had displayed a similar attitude, when he heard about the bank crash. He is reported to have said: "I saved the money when I had no need for it, and even now I don't need it". But the realities of life changed all that: as the family grew with needs for education and marriage, and the inflation in the economy shot up in the wake of World War II (1939-45), the family felt the hardship. Managing finances became more critical. For example, February was a month to celebrate because it had only 28 days to cover the expenses of the month on a fixed salary (not 30 or 31 days). I remember once mother remarking that dropping the daily newspaper could save Rs. 2.50 per month. But she never suggested it seriously.

I remember an informal chat with my mother in the kitchen when I was in high school. I was standing looking over her shoulders into the cooking utensil. Conversation drifted to my education. I blurted out that I could not hope to become a graduate (B.A. or B.Sc.) because we were poor. Mother calmly assured me that the family would somehow ensure that I got my degree. We talked without looking at each other. Later, I not only completed my B.Sc. in the Khallikote College with the first rank in the university (1948) but also went to Benares Hindu University (BHU) where I completed M.Sc. (Physics) with first rank (1950). This is a remarkable achievement of my parents because I had no scholarship of any kind (need-based or merit-based) throughout my educational career, in spite of my being at the top of the class every year. (One exception: the Horsfal scholarship in my I.Sc. or B.Sc. – a one-time payment of about Rs. 11). Reasons were twofold: paucity of scholarships and more importantly my not being an Oriya, and only a domiciled Oriya.

For my BHU education, father had borrowed Rs. 3000 from his Life Insurance Policy. Monthly expenses at BHU were less than Rs. 100. College fees were less than Rs. 100 per year; the hostel room cost Rs. 7 per month and the canteen charges about Rs. 30-40 per month.

In 1942 when my elder sister India Devi was married at age 15, the wedding cost my parents Rs. 3000, my father's entire savings. The wedding was held in the groom's place Coimbatore, mainly because it suited both the families, as our family was isolated in Berhampur, about 1000 km away from Coimbatore. We were fortunate that no dowry was asked for. Also the timing of the wedding turned out to be a great advantage, because the following year (1943) when my brother-in-law's sister (Radhabai) was married in

Coimbatore the wedding costs were three to four times higher for a similar wedding. That was the year when the inflation due to the World War II peaked.

Besides his salary as a lecturer (and later as professor) in the Khallikote College, father would earn some little extra money as an examiner of answer papers. In late 1940's he took one student for private tuition and earned Rs. 25 per month. He was never happy about this, but he needed the extra money. Over the years he might have had 3 or 4 such students. The tuition students generally came from well-known rich families. One student, however, was the son of the parcel clerk in the Berhampur Railway station. The clerk was one of the very well-to-do persons in the town. He ensured that betel leaves exported from the railway station were dispatched promptly. For this service he was paid two annas per basket and on the average about 200 baskets were sent daily, adding about Rs. 25 per day to his earnings, several times his salary.

My mother had little education, but had uncanny common sense. As a child of 8 years, daily I wanted to leave home too early for school which was only ten minutes away, since I was apprehensive of being late. My mother solved the problem in an ingenious way. She knew that the school watchman would walk past our home every morning and she requested him to take me along with him. I had no fear of being late at school since the school started only after the watchman rang the school bell. Although mother had little musical education, she disciplined both her daughters in their musical training. India Devi became an accomplished vocalist and violinist and gave regular public performances in temples and music sabhas. She was an avid reader of Tamil magazines. My father regularly discussed his literary works with her and took pride in her approval/acclaim for his writings. He respected her views and wishes in matters of concern for the household. When we moved from the *Marella* bungalow outhouse to the spacious 13-room home in the town, my mother requested our new landlord to have some work done (bathroom, lavatory) before we moved. The landlord tended to brush aside the suggestions coming from a lady, but my father insisted that as the lady of the house her suggestions should be heeded.

Although she knew little about finance, my mother felt that 'compound interest' on loans is the most sinful and vicious form of exploitation of people. Too often she had heard about loan sharks charging 100 % interest per month and waiting to grab the monthly salary earned by borrowers even before they could see their earnings. In such dealings, compound interest – 'interest on interest' was the dominant component. She wondered aloud how the practice (known as '*kandhu vaddi*') could be tolerated in civilized society. She had also known instances where small children were lured into borrowing petty cash from '*kabuliwalahs*' at exorbitant interest rates. As children we never got any pocket money and we were warned to be wary of kabuliwalahs. In real life, however, it is 'compound interest' or 'exponential growth' that drives a successful

economy over the years. But when growth rates are very high and are out of control, the situation is more akin to cancerous growth.

Many consider eight as a lucky number. But my mother figured out from her experience that it is her unlucky number. I think the ‘fear of eight’ started with her new born dying on a date which had 8 (8th, 18th, 28th day or 8th month). If a year ended in 8, the whole year could turn out unlucky for her. The year 1938, when the bank crashed, fit neatly into her superstitious belief. When 28 May 1942 was chosen as the most auspicious day for her daughter’s wedding, she was very concerned but gave in only after lot of persuasion. Later she might have suspected that the wedding day was somehow connected with her daughter being childless! She died on 18 Jan 1977, well before the decade 1980-1989.

My mother stitched all our clothes (for sons and daughters) on a Singer sewing machine for many years. My father taught her tailoring and prepared the templates on newspaper. Only exception was perhaps the long coat (sherwani), which he made his professional costume at work. When I was about 12, two of my cousins (*athans Seenu* and *Ramu*) visited our home from Tiruchi. Mother bought a 24-yard bundle of striped shirt material for about Rs. 4 and made a dozen shirts for three of us. A Malayalee lady, a widow, approached my mother for learning tailoring. Mother gave her some lessons with the templates she had. After some years the lady visited my mother with a small gift to thank her for helping her to make a living.

As the eldest son of the family, my completing education and getting a job was a turning point in my parents’ lives. I joined the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR), Bombay (now Mumbai) in July 1950 as a research student on a stipend of Rs. 175 per month. Less than a year later I went to Berhampur on vacation. I had two gifts for the family: a radio that I had built myself and an electric table fan. My mother’s delight in receiving the fan is indescribable. Although we had electricity, we could not afford the luxury of fans. All those who have experienced sitting in front of a fan in the hot and humid summer days, will appreciate my mother’s ecstasy. At TIFR almost every research worker built his own radio, as the market was flooded with war-surplus electronic items. One could buy a kit complete with the cabinet, tuning dial with controls knobs for about Rs. 100. For the fan, I got a 20 % concession (net Rs. 120), as the product was manufactured by a Tata company. I learnt that the EMCO fan is still in working condition in the village *Keezh-Kar-Kandar-Kottai* where my parents lived after 1968.

When I was about 8 years young, my mother taught me to draw the *kolam* ‘*Brahma mudi*’ (*Brahma’s knot*) at my request. I was fascinated by the ingenious twirls and loops that wrapped around the dots and the symmetry of the design. The fascination

continues. I learnt several *kolams* (*parijatham, kilimookku, mavelai* etc) from her and realized that there was interesting mathematics behind them. In particular the fact that larger *kolams* could be drawn from smaller units, was very appealing. For example the basic *Brahma mudi* (square grid of 4 x 4) dots can become the basis for drawing larger *kolams* of any desired size. In 2007, I found a beautiful mathematical link between *Fibonacci numbers* (1,1,2,3,5,8,13) and *kolam* designs. The connection could be exploited to produce *kolams* of any arbitrary size and shape using smaller modules. The recursive process made the *kolam* art amenable to computer-aided-design of complex *kolams*. I wrote a long paper (in two parts), which can be accessed, on the internet:

<https://vindhiya.com/snaranan/fk/index.htm>

I dedicated the paper to the memory of my mother.

A major event in my life, and also for my family, was my wedding to Visalakshi in 1954 in Chennai. My younger sister Selvi was married to V.K. Viswanathan from the US in 1967 in Tirupathi. Then followed quickly, the weddings of Rangan with Kamala in 1968 in Salem and Seenu with Sugandha in Srirangam in 1970. Soon after Selvi's marriage, I went to the US (MIT, Boston) and my parents too moved from Berhampur to a small village called *Keezh-Kar- Kandar-Kottai* (K4 for short) near Srirangam and Tiruchi in 1968. My father bought an old dilapidated home and renovated it. My parents were frequently visited by my cousin (athan) Gani who lived in Tiruchi. Gani and his wife Parvatham were of great help to my parents. Passing away of Gani about a year ago was a big shock to all of us.

For day-to-day help my parents had a family – Ganesaratnam, his wife Saraswathi and their two daughters– as neighbors. My mother was a diabetic from 1956 and she needed constant medical help. Ganesaratnam helped with the shopping, doctors etc while his wife helped with household chores. Quite often Saraswathi slept with my mother at night. Both father and mother were very much attached to the two daughters Vidyagowri and Uma. Mother's diabetes was managed as best as possible with medication, diet and insulin injections.

The quiet and peaceful life in K4 was rudely shaken by a scary incident. On 26 July 1973, at midnight, two burglars broke through the roof into the bedroom where my mother slept alone. They snatched away her 4-stranded gold chain, leaving behind the sacred *thali* (symbol of married women) and ran away. My mother was in shock for a while. The theft was the talk of the village. Almost a year later, the thieves were caught red-handed in another burglary they committed on the same street. Within hours of the theft, police dogs tracked them down. They confessed to the earlier robbery of mother's gold chain. After the court trial and sentencing, it took another year for the police to

return the stolen chain. What mother received was a different chain of lesser gold content (may be 14 carat), presumably because the original was melted down to destroy its identity. It is believed that the investigation of the burglary was speeded up after two DGP's (Director General of Police) of Orissa (one serving and another retired), both very good friends of my father, contacted their counterpart in Tamil Nadu.

The above information is gathered from a poem my father conceived on 30 October 1974 and completed the same day (119 lines). It was the day of the court judgment on the theft case. The poem gives vent to the feelings of confusion, conflict, anguish, fear and compassion that riddled his mind for a year. The burglary was a savage act but the thieves did not take the *thali* or kill my mother. The chain was only an adornment for my mother, but it may have provided for some pressing need or even livelihood of the burglars. He prayed for a short jail sentence that will get shorter by good behavior of the convicts in jail. Will the thieves take revenge on us after they are freed? Perhaps the second theft will keep them longer in jail. He concludes in the poem: "Who am I to decide on the punishment? I leave it to the Almighty to decide".

On 30 November 1976, I was in Hyderabad for a balloon-launch of an experiment in X-ray Astronomy. I received an urgent call from Ganesaratnam saying that my mother was very ill and admitted to Dr. Mahadevan's Nursing Home. I took a bus the same night to Tiruchi and reached the Nursing Home at about 4 P.M on the following day (1 December 1977). Dr. Mahadevan said that both the kidneys had failed and the only hope for my mother's survival was dialysis, three or four times a week. He suggested we take her to the famous hospital CMC (Christian Medical College) in Vellore. He had talked to Dr. Sastri, a leading nephrologist at CMC and arranged for the treatment.

Ganesaratnam and I, with my mother, reached CMC, Vellore in the early hours of the next morning (2 December, which happened to be my father's birthday). In the following few days my father, sister India Devi, her husband V. Subrahmanyam and Rangan's wife Kamali joined us. While India Devi spent all the time with mother, I stayed in the Hospital Guest House with others and spent all day (7 A.M. to 9 P.M) at the hospital. Soon my brother Seenu too came and then my sister Selvi, both from the US. Visalam also came and stayed for some time until she had to return to Bombay to take care of our three young daughters. For company we also had two small children, Rangan's daughter Anu and Selvi's son Hari.

The dedication of the nurses, the junior doctors and Dr. Sastri in treating my mother is clearly etched in our memories. Dialysis three or four times a week was not only expensive (Rs. 400 per session) but also a great ordeal as my mother was strapped to instruments for several hours continuously with no movement possible. Mother used to dread the procedure.

After about a month, I took a short break to return to Bombay, leaving my brother Seenu in charge at Vellore. The transition from the tension-ridden life at the CMC to the normal life of Bombay remains an unforgettable and unique experience in my life. At CMC, I was exposed to families of patients waiting for kidney transplants; even a hint of a hope was an occasion for celebration. Returning to Bombay was like being transported to another world.

Soon I returned to CMC to relieve Seenu who had to return to the US. On 18 January 1977 my mother had her last dialysis. She did not survive the ordeal and died around 6 P.M. We did not expect the sudden end and had already planned for taking my mother to Chennai, where arrangements for regular dialysis were being made by my father-in-law A.R. Sundaresan.

My mother was not allowed to take water because of renal failure and she was constantly thirsty. But we could not give her more than a few drops of water at a time. Just before she was taken for dialysis around 4 P.M, she cried out aloud for water and Kamali thrust a cup of water to her lips. Mother said “*maharajiya iruppe*”. It meant that Kamali would be blessed for life for her compassionate deed in satisfying her ‘*marana daham*’ (thirst of death). Those were the last words of my mother. As I write these lines I am choked with tears. But when she died on 18 January after an ordeal that lasted 49 days, the feeling was one of great relief rather than sadness. I am not ashamed to say that I was grateful to providence for ending the suffering of my mother. Mother had received the best medical help for renal failure, available in India. The day before she died (17th Jan) was *Kanup Pongal*, when women seek the blessings of elder women. Both my sisters and Kamali had the blessings from my mother that day in the traditional manner.

The same night we brought my mother’s body by taxi to K4. The funeral rites lasted 13 days as per custom. As the eldest son, I performed the rites. But we were all very conscious of the fact that it was Ganesaratnam and his family who served and took care of my mother and father during the decade mother spent in K4 before her death. He was like another son to my parents.

Reading what I have written now - a few days before the birth centenary of my mother (18 May 2010) - I sense that only a small part deals with ‘weighty’ matters about my mother’s life. Being the head of the family, my father is mentioned often. The rest recounts events in my life with mother, which may be regarded as trivial and not of general interest. But I ask myself: why do I clearly recall the events such as the ‘watchman episode’, ‘demonstration of making *upma*’ or ‘*aviyal* for *Marella* family’? I think I know the answer. These seemingly trivial incidents somehow epitomize the character and even perhaps capture the essence of the person that my mother was. To

elaborate: the watchman episode shows her insightful understanding of child psychology and ‘*upma*’ illustrates how much she cared to satisfy her children’s whims and desires. Although she was an acclaimed cook (the *aviyal* episode) she took the trouble of learning how to make *upma* from a professional cook. I believe the reader would be able to build a mental picture of the character that was my mother, after reading this article.

Most of his life, father did not possess land or house he could call his own, and he considered it a lacuna in his life. So it was a moment of great pride for him when he got his own house in K4 in 1968 when he was almost 70 years old. The house is now tenanted by a caretaker. However, there exists a small piece of land called “*Thailamma manai*” in the village Katuputur. None of us know where it is, but we hear that every year the site is cleared for *Radhakalyanam* festival that is performed for several days by the local organizing committee.

I wish to conclude by adding that the *kolam* articles, which are dedicated to the memory of my mother, have been recently acclaimed as “beautiful” and “deserve to be published” by Martin Gardner in a private correspondence. Gardner is the world’s leading exponent of recreational mathematics. I regard this as a compliment, as much to my mother as to my work on *kolams*.

Chennai, 15 May 2010

S. Naranan