



INDIA DEVI (VINDHIYA)

(12 April 1927 – 7 October 1999)

S. Naranan

This is a personal account of some glimpses into the life of my elder sister India Devi who was a distinguished short story writer during 1947 to 1960.

It was 15 August 1947 – the Independence Day – when India was liberated from British rule, a day of national rejoicing. For the family of Sundaresans in Berhampur, a small town (now in Orissa) there was one more reason for rejoicing: a short story by their eldest daughter, India Devi had been published on the same day in the prestigious Tamil magazine *Kalai Magal* (*Avani* 1947). She was only 20 years young.

India Devi had no formal schooling in Tamil. Our father taught all his five children Tamil at home at an early age. Reading Tamil was nurtured by a steady stream of Tamil magazines of the day like *Ananda Vikatan*, *Kalai Magal*, *Swadesamitran* and *Kaveri*. India Devi's second language at school was Telugu. She passed the SSLC examination and was soon married at the age of 15. For a few years she lived with her husband and in-laws in a joint family in Coimbatore. In the next five years she was exposed to all facets of middle class Brahmin joint family life, a vastly new experience

after her sheltered life far away from Tamil Nadu. Perhaps this triggered an outpouring of emotions that found expression in her short stories.

None in our family had any inkling of India Devi's talent for Tamil writing. Until she left her parents' home in 1942, she was well known in the town as an accomplished vocalist and violinist in Carnatic music. She gave concerts regularly in temples and *sabhas*. She was beautiful, often compared to beautiful film actresses of the time. But there was no indication of even a latent talent for writing.

The first story *Parvathi*, dealt with a delicate theme rarely talked about in public: the girl child's coming of age as a woman. The saga of Parvathi overcoming her trauma to assert herself to gain her rightful place in her family, seemed to echo the spirit of a new resurgent India heralded by the Independence Day. Incidentally, Parvathi was the name of her mother-in-law whom she greatly admired.

Soon after, India Devi moved to Cuttack (Orissa) – only about 200 km from Berhampur – with her husband V. Subrahmanyam (1919 – 2001) who was a Professor of Economics. They had no children and lived in Cuttack the rest of their lives. During the next 13 years Vindhiya was a regular contributor to *Kalai Magal*, *Swadesamitran*, *Kaveri* and other Tamil magazines. She had many admiring readers especially among women of all ages. Ki.Va.Jagannathan (Ki.Va. Ja) the eminent Tamil scholar and author and editor of *Kalai Magal* had a high opinion of her work and constantly encouraged her to write more. He published 13 of her stories in *Kalai Magal* each after critical review. He returned one of her stories – written at his invitation for the “double story” feature (*Irattai Kathai*) titled *The New Month (Madham Piranthathu)* – with the comment that the story did not measure up to the usual excellence expected of Vindhiya stories and requested her to write another. The letter ended with an apology for returning the story. The new story she wrote and submitted to *Kalai Magal* is regarded as one of her best. Our father Sundaresan admired it for the skill of story telling and its unusual theme. Soon after the publication of *The Folded Palms (Kooppiya Kai)* in 1954, Ki Va Ja wrote asking for a “similar story” for the special *Deepavali Malar* of *Kalai Magal*. Another story highly praised by Ki Va Ja was the prize-winning story *A Loving Heart (Anbu Manam, 1949)*. Another distinguished Tamil writer and Vindhiya's contemporary

complimented her: “you should change your name from Vindhiya to Imayam.” (an allusion to the small mountain range Vindhya Hills and the lofty Himalayas)

India Devi was greatly influenced by her father K.N. Sundaresan (1899 – 1983) a gifted and prolific writer of plays and poems in English and Tamil. A gold-medallist from St. Joseph’s College, Tiruchirappalli in M.A. (Maths), he was forced to seek livelihood outside his native Tamil Nadu in his twenties, like thousands of Brahmins who were affected by the “communal G.O” of Madras Presidency in 1920’s. He became a lecturer in Berhampur, a thousand miles away in what is today Orissa (on Andhra Pradesh – Orissa border). As a Sanskrit student he had no formal education in Tamil. But his love for Tamil was so great that he considered himself an exile from Tamil Nadu and was determined to immerse himself in Tamil studies. He mastered Tamil classics (especially Sangam literature) aided by English commentaries by famous English and European missionaries like Rev. G.U. Pope and others. His early writings were in English, but he switched almost exclusively to writing in Tamil after meeting C.F.Andrews who advised him that he should emulate Rabindranath Tagore whose contribution to Bengali literature was even greater than to English literature. In his profession as a teacher of undergraduate Mathematics he taught with distinction for nearly 50 years and is fondly recalled and admired by his students. But he liked to be remembered as a Tamil playwright and poet.

Our mother Thaiyal had little formal education but was an avid reader of Tamil. She was a pragmatic woman with lot of common sense and a perceptive critic of both her husband’s and daughter’s writings. My father often sought her opinion and valued it highly. She encouraged and disciplined her daughter in her musical training to become an accomplished artist.

A staunch nationalist, ideologically steeped in the freedom struggle from the 1920’s, my father named his eldest child ‘India Devi’ – to the consternation of many traditionalists. India Devi was proud of her name. Her real name was novel enough to serve as an author’s name, but she chose the pen name Vindhiya. Vindhiya wrote 100 short stories in all from 1947 to 1960.

Readers can guess that most of her stories are autobiographical. But there are stories in which she is only an observer (for example *The Warmth in his Eyes*, *The*

Folded Palms and *The Forgotten Word*). These are true-life stories from her experience and rate highly for narrative skill. India Devi started writing a long novel around 1950 but did not complete it. I read the early parts of the novel and immediately recognized it as a story of her life. I had the privilege of reading it because I was asked to type it! My father had acquired a Tamil typewriter manufactured in Germany in 1939 and it is still a prized family heirloom. At the urging of my father I had learnt typing at the age of 12 and a year later I devised my own typing lessons to learn typing in Tamil in blind touch. There is an interesting background to the typewriter. The German firm (Bijou) decided to manufacture typewriters in all languages whose alphabet can be accommodated on the standard English keyboard. Tamil was the only Indian language for which this was possible because of its compact alphabet.

Smt Rajam Krishnan has written an insightful analysis of Vindhiya's stories in her Foreword. I will add a few random comments I consider noteworthy.

Vindhiya's stories are based on a mix of her own real-life experiences, enriched, enhanced, enlarged and embellished with imagination, creativity and narrative skills in different degrees. *The Warmth in his Eyes* is a straightforward faithful rendition of actual events in the life of the blind child prodigy violonist Marella Kesava Rao, disciple of the celebrated blind violonist Dwaram Venkataswamy Naidu. In contrast, I guess *Parvathi* is mostly fictional. *A New Month*, *A Loving Heart*, *A Childlike heart* are based on real incidents greatly padded and enhanced in content. *A Loving Heart* explores the psychology of childhood and *A Childlike heart* delves into the psychology of old age, the second childhood. Most stories are centered on problems and dilemmas women face in life; for example *Cupid's Alarms*, *Intuition*, *Sweet Remembrance* and *A Loving Heart*. But the dilemmas get resolved in the end in a delightful way by compassion and clear thinking overcoming prejudice and petty-mindedness. An extreme example perhaps is *Sweet Remembrance* in which the dilemma is "To wear or not to wear the sari". It is said that there are no villains in Vindhiya's stories. This is largely true although her characters span a wide spectrum of hues and shades. The closest to a 'villain' is perhaps Seshan in *Cupid's Alarms*.

Not all Vindhiya's stories are women-centered. *The Warmth in his Eyes, The Folded Palm and The Forgotten Word* have all a O Henrian twist in the end, testimony to author's art of story telling.

Every major character in a story usually has a name, perhaps to facilitate author's narration. In *The Folded Palms* the businessman's name is not mentioned, although it is a crucial element in the story at the end. The reader is forever clueless about the name. This sounds like a riddle and it is unraveled only by reading the whole story. This is an example of the 'art of suppression', which Vindhiya practised skillfully. In this story based on a true incident related by me to my sister, the 'extraordinary act' of the hotel waiter Subramaniam acquires a new dimension by making the character a non-believer. This is a brilliant embellishment of raw facts. The story is my favourite, perhaps because as one who gave Vindhiya the seed for its blossoming and unfolding, I can appreciate fully the beauty of its creation. I have read the story many times, every time with a lump in my throat as I read the last sentence.

India Devi's life acquired a new direction in early 1960's, towards religion and rituals. It is a moot point, if this was partly due to her not having children. Both she and her husband disclaimed it was a lacuna in their lives. They indeed felt that their numerous nephews and nieces were like their children. But one can perhaps glean in Vindhiya's stories a tinge of disappointment of not having a child of her own. In Cuttack, she was the prime mover, the driving force and mainly instrumental in building a Murugan temple with lot of help from her husband and many influential friends. As a great admirer of my father's works, most of which remained unpublished until his death in 1983, India Devi took up in earnest the task of publishing them. Again, with lot of help from her husband she published several books of poems by our father in the genre "Sangam poetry clothed in modern raiment". In early 1990's she got the rest of the entire poetical works (of over 2000 pages) in digital format on computer discs and laser prints at a time when computers were just beginning to be used in India.

Many have asked me: "Why did Vindhiya stop writing at the peak of her career as a successful short story writer at an early age of 33?" Whenever I put the same question to my sister she would say "Nobody asked me to write and I had the urge to write then (for 13 years). Now, I just don't have the inspiration to write". Her

detachment from the early literary phase of her life was strikingly revealed to me in 1994. I had gifted her a two-volume collection of xerox copies of 82 of her surviving stories (out of a total 100). At that time she showed little interest even in perusing it. Some years later she expressed her appreciation of my efforts and said, “I cannot believe I wrote them”.

Although she stopped formal writing, India Devi was a prolific correspondent and an ardent diarist. Daily she recorded in meticulous detail her thoughts and events of the day before going to bed, usually around 1 or 2 A.M. The diary format was ‘free’ unfettered by ‘page a day’ formula. Other routines before bed included music (singing, violin) for which she had renewed interest, a reading of her father’s poetry and prayers. Her last diary entry was on 6 October 1999, the day before she died in a tragic accident at home. All her diaries are preserved and someday may serve as an invaluable resource for anyone interested in documenting the story of her life.

Due to the dedicated efforts of our younger brother Andy (Ananda Rangan) Sundaresan, who has translated Vindhiya’s stories in this book, the book is appearing on the occasion of her 80th birthday, nearly coincident with the 60th anniversary of her debut as a short story writer in 1947. Although the book is mainly the handiwork of Andy, 12 years younger than India Devi, he succeeded in making it a family enterprise involving his two brothers and a sister, all senior citizens today! The family, and hopefully the readers as well, will welcome translations and publication of the remaining 90 % of Vindhiya’s works in the near future.

Chennai,

S. Naranan

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Dr. S. Naranan (b. 1930) was an experimental cosmic-ray physicist and X-ray Astronomer based mostly in the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, Bombay (India) in a career spanning 42 years. He is a firm believer in the interdisciplinary character of science and has diversified his interests to other fields such as mathematics, statistics, computer science, biology, genetics and linguistics. He lives with his wife Visalakshi in Chennai, India.