

From the Hindu, Sunday, May 04, 2008

True to the original

HARIHARAN BALAKRISHNAN

These stories mirror the society of emerging India early in the last century.



Glorious moment

It was a glorious moment for the family when India Devi presented them a copy of the August 1947 issue of the prestigious magazine *Kalaimagal* when India won her independence. Her first short story was published in that issue. Truly, the 20-year-old had justified her name, and vindicated her father.

India Devi went on to write more than 100 short stories for magazines like *Kalaimagal*, *Kalki*, *Sadashamitran* and *Ananda Vikatan* — many of them prize-winners. She wrote under the pen name "Vindhya" — maybe subconsciously aware of the inevitable "question mark" whenever her real name was pronounced or spelt.

Her brother Andy Sundaresan has now translated selected stories into English and brought out the book *Cupid's Alarms and Other Stories* (published by Kurinji Publications, in the U.S. (www.kurinjipubs.com)).

These stories mirror the society of emerging India in the first half of the last century. Some are from real life and reflect the author's sensitivity.

The first story "Parvathi", published in 1947 is about the delicate subject of a girl coming of age and her mother's anxiety, and reassurance by a neighbour who goes into an autobiographical mode relating how blind faith in the Almanac could damage an individual.

"The warmth in his eyes" is a moving true story of the blind violinist Marella Kesava Rao and his doting father who accompanied the talented youngster wherever he went to perform and guided him through life. It speaks of the courage and wisdom of a talented artiste whose father died on the railway platform of Vizianwada when they were returning home after a performance for AIR.

"Cupid's Alarms" is the story of doubt and distrust of a woman towards her professor-husband's close friend whom she intuitively suspects of philandering.

"A Loving Heart" possibly speaks of the author's own life and psyche. It is about the innocence of a child's responses to events in early life. It is the story of a childless couple agonising over the apparent hatred of a niece who was beaten by the uncle in a thoughtless moment.

India Devi's last story was published in 1959. This is again based on a real-life incident where an old man on the banks of the Cauvery who had visited Benares in his youth. He often expressed his latent wish to "spend four months" there and asked his grandson who had joined the BHU to find him accommodation in a lodge or chowtry every time the young man came home for vacation.

Finally, towards the end of his course, the young man rushes to the platform to receive his grandfather, only to be greeted with his ashes in an urn.

Vindhya's output was amazing for one who spent all her 72 years in Orissa that had less than a sprinkling of Tamil population. Her grasp of the Tamil ethos and middle-class mores of Tamil society of the day was uncanny.

For some reason not clear even to her family, she stopped sending her stories to magazines for the rest of her life. But she continued writing — often past midnight.

India Devi and Prof. Subrahmanyam had no children of their own, but were a warm and ever-smiling couple till the end.

India Devi died tragically in 1999 due to a short circuit in the immersion heater at their home in Cuttack. Her husband, who had retired as Principal of Christ College there, followed in a couple of years.

All in all, the book is a fitting tribute to a gifted author who was truly "home-grown".
