

# KAMALAM

Judge Ramalingam Pillai was having his morning filter coffee. It was a big day - he had to be in court at eight, much earlier than the usual ten that the government job required. The anti-nautch campaign against the Devadasi community had pulled some strings with higher authorities and the decision today was going to be in their favor. What did that mean to him? Nothing, just more work for an already busy district high court judge.

Ramalingam was sitting in his verandah overlooking the Temple pond of the Tyagarajasvami temple. Ah! How nice the coffee was, wasn't he lucky to have Kamalam for his wife? And what a name she had, same as his great grand aunt, one of the greatest musicians of this district once upon a time when the nayakas ruled. She was an ideal anchor and support for him, they both knew they would be incomplete without each other. It was more subtle and real, unlike a lot of descriptions of love in poetry he had read. Small steps led out to the street with vendors already busy preparing for visitors to the temple, the day wouldn't start without an early morning visit to the deity of Tiruvarur. And then Ramalingam hear that sound that scared the wits out of him. It came from his house.

"Kamalam! What happened?" He rushed into the house and there his wife was, safe and sound.

"It came from the attic. How many times have I told you to clean up that mess? Something is going to fall on our heads very soon." Ramalingam went up to check. He didn't have the time to clean it up! His ancestral home had too much of junk. As he entered the place and his eyes got adjusted to the dim lighting, he saw the culprit. The old Veena (a piece of junk now) had fallen down. He went to check, no major damage except for the fret board coming off. He would fix it later. As he was turning away his eyes he noticed something on floor. A piece of paper, yellow and brittle with age - must have come from inside the fingerboard. What a nice hiding place! Ramalingam picked it up and unfolded it with care.

*My beloved,*

*What could my mother be to yours?  
What kin is my father to you anyway?  
And how did you and I meet ever?  
but in love,  
Our hearts are like red earth  
and pouring rain.  
mingled  
beyond parting.*

*Isn't it beautiful? I read this in the Kuruntokai, how perfect it is in describing you and me. Since that meeting with you by the pond, my heart is longing to meet you again. Write me, my dear, tell me how much you miss me.*

*Your love,*

*Kamalam.*

Oh God! It was getting too late, Kamalam had to run to catch that boy who would pass on her message to Ramalingam. Ah! How he had played Nattai Kurinci in the temple procession today, Kamalam was as much in love with his music as with his young face, his masculine gait, his gentle but strong self and his sweet words.

"Will it you give it to him tonight, when you go to learn to play from him?" Kamalam said.

"Where is my sweet first?"

"Here. Save some for your brother too, you greedy fellow!" Kamalam had to bribe him every time she wanted her message delivered.

"Selvam, you wont tell anyone about this, will you, Selvam?" she said as the boy ran away with the letter.

And then Kamalam went straight with her Veena to Govindasamayya's house. She liked being there, today she was going to learn a padam in Surati. Govindasamayya had the honor of being with Varadayya himself till his samadhi ten years ago, and there had not been a composer and musician in the whole of the remnants of the Vijayanagara empire before and after him. As she entered, ayya was sitting in the courtyard tuning his Veena.

"Ayya, Ayya, I saw him again today! And did you hear that Nattai Kurinci he played, I have never heard the *prayogams* he played today! Oh, I wish I could sing like his Nagaswaram some day!" Govindasamayya was the only man to whom Kamalam had confided her love for Ramalingam, the temple Nagaswaram player. He was almost like her father, also her guru.

"Yes, my dear. Ramalingam is living up to his family tradition, I am proud of the young boy." Kamalam came and sat by him, he had never seen this girl so happy. Every part of her face was glowing, her eyes had the clarity of a clear pond, her curly hair on her brown face was with a certain beautiful abandon and her perfect teeth were in a smile. Seeing her so lovely and happy, a pang of sadness shot through Govindasamayya.

"What happened ayya, why are you looking at me like this?"

“Uh, Nothing. Why don’t you sing that padam I taught you yesterday, the Nayaka would be very happy to hear you sing that.”

*Chellabo Tanjavuru Vijayaraghava ViDu komma!*  
Woman! He is none other than the Vijayaraghava of Tanjavur!

*Ella lokamu litaDeelu nanaga vinava?*  
Haven’t you heard? He rules the worlds!

Her singing made Govindasamayya wonder. Here is Kamalam, the most beautiful of all devadasis of the temple, in love with the temple Nagaswaram player? The Vijayaraghava himself would bathe her in gold coins for her dance and music. On the other hand, this commoner who could barely earn enough to make ends meet. How would this ever work out? Kamalam was a *Samanya*, a woman who could choose to be unmarried and untied to any man all her life, live a life of dance and music and still be as rich as the richest man in Tanjavur. How could she want to live as a *Sviya*, a married woman not allowed to do anything but cook and take care of children? And worse! Not permitted to sing or dance! Would the Pillai family let her do that? No! Kamalam was too young to understand this. Or was she?

“Ayya, what are you thinking? Are you listening, was my gamaka on the rishabham too much for the Sankarabharanam?” Kamalam had stopped singing.

“Uh, What?” Govindasamayya was old.

“Ayya, I want to marry him. I know what you are thinking. I will become a *sviya*, I cannot be without him anymore. He asked me if I could convince the Nayaka.”

“Convince the Vijayaraghava? My God! You really want to be a married woman, Kamalam?” Did Kamalam know what that meant? She would lose the big house by the temple, all the wealth that was to be hers soon, and most important, her freedom! What love is this?

“I am sure Ramalingam can earn enough to make a family, ayya. Poor thing, do not doubt him too much. After all, he is powerless in this issue. Please!” Kamalam was right, being a nagaswaram player, Ramalingam could not marry Kamalam without the permission of the Vijayaraghava. And this only she could get.

“Then go tell the Raghava, that you do not wish his riches and the glory of a devadasi. Tell him that you want to be a *Sviya* with Ramalingam.” He pretended to be angry, but when Kamalam heard this she jumped and kissed him and he couldn’t help but smiling at her happiness!

Nagaswaram Ramalingam had saved all the letters they had exchanged before their marriage. This one with the verse from the *Kuruntokai* was very special, and he put it under the fret board of Kamalam’s Veena. After all, wasn’t it the music that had brought them together? How much she had given up just to be with him..

“Judge saar! You are getting late.” Oh my God! Ramalingam realised he had to be court in ten minutes! He kept the yellow letter in his pocket and climbed down the attic to his wife who was ready with his tiffin.

“What happened up there, what were you doing?”

“Uh, Nothing, just checking the old Veena.”

Ramalingam left home in a hurry. On his way to court he saw some Devadasi women outside the temple, begging for alms. Whose fault was it? Later that day he signed the Tanjavur Devadasi Act. “Dancing by a woman...in the precincts of the temple...is hereby declared unlawful.” Signed - Ramalingam. In his pocket he felt the letter Kamalam had written 250 years ago.

*Disclaimer: Purely fictional. Mostly accurate chronologically but some errors may exist. Translations from A. K. Ramanujan and original telugu text from B. Rajnikanta Rao. Names have no connection to real people, and there was only a Madras Devadasi Act.*