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SRI NATANAGOPALA NAYAKI SWAMIGAL  
THE BRIDAL MYSTIC  
(INTRODUCTORY THESIS)

“ Achyut and Govind—Thus sing, O mind!  
Shed thy shame, come out and sing.  
Aloud and ever sing Hari’s name,  
No other way is there for Release.”

This was the song with which the streets of the holy city of Madurai were ringing about a hundred years ago. Men and women, young and old, the learned and the unlettered—all joined in chorus and followed the saint as he, in Gopibhaava, sang and danced out of love for Krishna, the cowherdboy. He, we may as well say ‘she’ was dressed in a saree like a Gopi; her beautiful locks of hair were beautifully plaited and bedecked with flowers; her face shows with the tilaka on the forehead, nose-screw in the nose and ear-rings in the ears, necklace around the neck and bangles on her hands. There was a bejewelled belt around the waist and tinkling anklets around the ankles. That was Natanagopala Nayaki Swamigal, a saint and a bride at once—a saint because he was devoted to Sri Krishna, a bride since ‘she’ was wedded to Him. The holy streets of Madurai bore the footprints of the saint as he moved about from house to house. The houses of the Sourashtra citizens were echoing with his sankeertans, couched in Sourashtram or

Tamil. The songs of this bridal mystic are being heard ever more now and there is a renaissance, as it were, of those songs. We shall also join in this spiritual renaissance and make ourselves blessed with some thoughts about the life and songs of this bridal mystic—Sri Natanagopala Nayaki.

It was divine dispensation that sent out about a thousand years ago from the old Sourashtra kingdom hundreds of Sourashtra families to the distant Vijayanagar in the east. There they stayed till the fall of the Vijayanagar Kingdom five centuries after. Then they migrated to the Tamil Kingdom and settled in Thanjavur, Tiruchirapalli, Madurai, Salem and other places. The Sourashtras had a culture of their own and they willingly assimilated the culture of Andhradesa when they were there, and Tamil culture when they came here. They mixed with all freely maintaining at the same time their individuality. Generally all of them were of fair complexion and well-built body and their main occupation was spinning and weaving.

'Koppaan' is one of those families of Sourashtra Brahmins that had settled in Madurai and made it their home. Towards the beginning of the last century, in that family there was one Rangarya, and his wife was Lakshmibai. They were carrying on their vocation of spinning and weaving. They had two sons and five daughters and the younger

son was Ramabhadrā. Even from birth, there was something strange and uncommon about him. He would often be found in solitude in silent meditation when the other children of his age would be laughing and playing with toys and dolls. At the age of five he was put in school, but there he was like a fish out of water. He was stopped from going to school since he could not make any progress.

Rangarya put him in the shop for writing accounts. But Ram-nam was the only entry made by him in the account books. Rangarya then wanted Ramabhadrā to try the hereditary profession of weaving. The dutiful son obeyed and sat before the loom. But the clap of the moving shuttle put him in mind of Ram-nam japa. Japa continued and the loom stopped. The father saw that Ramabhadrā was unsuited to that work also. The loving parents were in a fix not knowing what to do with that problem-child of theirs. To give a change, the family shifted their residence to Tirubhuvanānāthapuram near Kumbakonam in Thanjavur District and pursued their profession. But Ramabhadrā was attracted more by the imposing towers of Sarangapani and Oppiliappan than by anything else. After some time they came back to Madurai and settled permanently in Palmal Cross Street.

Now Ramabhadrā was eight years old. One night he left home, wandered in the streets brooding over his own thoughts and slept on the pial of a house near Periya Vilakkuthoon