

RATAN DEVI: INDIAN SINGER

*Originally published in the May 1916
edition of Vanity Fair.*

THE following exquisite prose poem by the celebrated Rajut singer Sri Paramahansa Tat, who is now in New York, was inspired by the charming and distinguished lady who crowns the existence of the great Buddhist scholar and art critic, Dr. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, and who is at present singing in New York while her husband is lecturing on Indian Art and other matters. He is a member of the old warrior or Kshatriya caste, a Tamil of high rank and dignity, and a cousin of the Solicitor-General of Ceylon, the Honorable P. Ramanathan. His lady, Ratan Devi, has created a vogue for Indian songs which she executes with utter naturalness and a most convincing charm. Bernard Shaw, W. B. Yeats and Sir Rabinranath Tagore have acclaimed her as the Isis revealer of the soul of India. If India be the tongue of Asia, surely Ratan Devi is the tongue of India! Her success in New York has been serpent-swift.

I WALKED through Manhattan in the snow. Then I came into a dim-lit room, a room of Rembrandt shadows, where rose and gold were veiled so deeply that they were felt, not seen. I sat down in the old position of Siddhasana, mindful of the days when, as a holy beggar, I meditated without the gates of Madura.

Then I became aware of a white face, of the lotus face of Bhavani, or so it seemed, that distilled itself like strange perfume through the gloom. It was beautiful, almost terrible by reason of its beauty, but calm and strong. Yet it was soft as the full moon upon the Nilgherries, and pale and sweet as honey in a secret bower.

Under the ray of the champak flower that was her face the Indian jungle dawned about me. Great banyans writhed like serpents in mysterious shrines. Suddenly the fierce and subtle scent of nargis smote me, and I knew that she was singing.



Ratan Devi, Singer of Indian Songs

Through the boughs of the great tree under which I was huddled I could grasp the stars. One by one they budded from the breast of the velvet-footed night, the great cat that stalks the deer of day through the glades of Eternity. And then I saw that the tree was the Bo-Tree, whereunder Buddha sat in the great Hour of his emancipation.

The song was over.

Stunned by the intensity of the vision, I saw but a still ocean, waveless and tideless. Shoreless it lay beneath the sun—and almost I sensed the Dhatu of Nibbana from afar.

AND then she sang again. Love, like a king-cobra, struck his ruby fangs into my pale heart. Never had such glory fashioned itself in me. I took wing—, And then— Time passed . . . perhaps . . . who knows? And she sang again.

The voice was frail as a tear and strong as space. The flowers, the fireflies, the very rocks became song. The elements were refined and enraptured into music. All things declared their nature; they were eternal, they were beauty, they were love. Nothing fades. Spring, not winter, is the truth of Life; yet only through winter is spring made perfect. Death is but the handmaiden who braids the tresses of her lady Life. Fainter and fainter, yet ever more persistent grew the drone of the music.

Life . . . life . . .

I walked through Manhattan in the snow.