

Trailblazing traditionalist

V. Ramnarayan

When Dr. N. Pattabhi Raman started *Sruti*, a “south Indian classical music and dance magazine” in October 1983, it was by and large a family affair. His two elder brothers Sundaresan and Venkatraman (my father) were publisher and financial adviser, my maternal uncle S. Ramaswamy was senior editor, my fellow assistant editors Anandhi Ramachandran and Gowri Ramnarayan were closely related to me, ‘research staff’ was Kamakshi, Gowri’s cousin, business manager Ravi Rajagopal was a nephew of Pattabhi, T.A. Narayanan, the printer, was his cousin’s son-in-law, and photographer Pat Raman was, well, Pattabhi.

Pattabhi was by no means the first journalist or writer in his family. His great-uncle A. Madhaviah had been one of the early Tamil novelists. An uncle, P.N. Appuswami, had been a well known science writer. Madhaviah’s son M. Krishnan, an eminent wild life expert, photographer, columnist, author and aesthete, became an early contributor to *Sruti*. Pattabhi’s father V. Narayanan had been an MABL by qualification, but also an unhonoured genius of a writer in three languages — English, Tamil and Sanskrit. His contributions to the Tamil lexicon and sloka books of the Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham were as considerable as his role as editor of the *Indian Express*. Sundaresan retired as *The Hindu’s* sports editor. Pattabhi himself had dabbled in journalism in his student days, bringing out a magazine he had grandly called *The Societarians*.

A polio victim, Pattabhi did not allow his physical disability to hamper any of his activities, playing cricket and table tennis as enthusiastically as any normal young man, much to the consternation of my father who constantly ran after him trying in vain to protect him from injury. Losing his mother as an infant, and his father when barely a teenager, Pattabhi graduated with an economics honours degree from Vivekananda College, Mylapore, going on to acquire an M. Litt. from Madras University and set sail for the US. There he obtained a doctorate, researching the trade union movement in India, and served the UNDP with distinction for many years. While in the US, he also cut his teeth in journalism, eventually writing for the *Indian Express*, *Financial Express*, *Commerce*, *Deccan Herald* and the *Illustrated Weekly of India*.



Dr. N. Pattabhi Raman (1932-2002)
 Founder & Editor-in-Chief, *Sruti*

By 1981, it was time for Pattabhi to take premature retirement from his position as a director in the UNDP, and try to settle down to the quiet life in Madras. He became a patron member of the Madras Music Academy and started listening to his own impressive collection of tapes and LP records of Carnatic and Hindustani music — when he was not indulging in bathroom singing in the best Mylapore apaswara tradition — but the peace and quiet did not last long. He had only himself to blame for it, because he stirred things up when he decided to put to use his journalistic experience and try to change the way classical music and dance were promoted, performed and appreciated in his home state.

Over the decades, Pattabhi, exposed to the sophistication and professionalism of Western classical music, had come to expect a certain level of decorum, style, and customer satisfaction as an informed follower of the performing arts. Eager to reacquaint himself with the south Indian art scene as a *rasika*, he was in for a rude shock — in fact, several rude shocks. Poor acoustics, absence of concert etiquette on the parts of performers and audience alike, lack of professionalism, poor taste

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in stage décor and auditorium aesthetics and negligible remuneration for the artists were among the many irritants preventing unfettered enjoyment of the artistic experience. The modern concert format attributed to Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar, an innovation of the 20th century, was one of the few remnants of what was now presumed to be tradition. The contemplative aspects of Carnatic music were relegated to the background by an increasing preoccupation with speed and razzle-dazzle, the elaborative components of erstwhile kutcheri-s like the ragam-tanam-pallavi were endangered species, and fidelity to sruti was fast turning into a major casualty of the widespread craze for virtuosity at the expense of depth and grandeur.

With his first major preoccupation in Madras completed — the construction of his home in the heart of Alwarpet aristocracy and right next to the Hindu's family estate — Pattabhi found the *raison d'être* of his post retirement life: a crusade for the preservation of tradition and promotion of innovation in Indian classical music and dance, starting with Carnatic music and Bharatanatyam.

Once he decided he would start an English language monthly to carry out his agenda, he turned to two of his young relatives interested in both these fields as well as writing — Gowri Ramnarayan, a trained amateur classical vocalist, Ph.D scholar and English teacher, and me, a company executive and former cricketer with an interest in music. We were his chief partners in crime in the early days — though Gowri needed a bit of convincing that she had it in her to write anything other than scholarly material — as he began to put his ideas into practice at breakneck speed. The *Sruti* mob soon grew, gathering in its fold many other members of the extended family and numerous friends. (Pattabhi's encouragement and the work experience at *Sruti* later helped people carve a niche for themselves elsewhere. An example was Gowri who played a major role — her work at *Sruti* led to her subsequent career in *The Hindu*).

Gowri belonged to a family steeped in journalism, music and dance and she had access to some of the top musicians and dancers of Madras. Her background helped our cause when we approached D.K. Pattammal requesting her to be the subject of our first major story.

She happily gave us exhaustive interviews which led to Gowri's two-part profile of her.

Pattammal was on the cover of the first issue of *Sruti* and so was 13-year-old U. 'Mandolin' Srinivas, thanks to his mastery of the tiny instrument hitherto better known in film music orchestras than in the kutcheri scene, where the lad was making waves.

Trail-blazing Traditionalist was the title of the DKP profile which *Sruti* carried on its cover on 16 October 1983 — a title that *Sruti* can well adopt as its baseline, for it has fought hard to conserve artistic tradition while at the same time blazing a trail of urbanity, fearless honesty and modernity in the manner it has covered the arts.

The early editorial board and contributors' list were impressive, including as they did the likes of C.V. Narasimhan, S. Rajam and M. Krishnan, yet nobody gave the magazine a chance in hell of surviving beyond a few months, but survive *Sruti* did, shaking up the worlds of music and dance out of their comfort zones, setting standards perhaps no other publication of its kind has approached. It has tirelessly campaigned for good taste and accountability in the fields it covers, heavily treading on many celebrated toes. It has played a key role in the revival of ragam-tanam-pallavi, in the documentation of the often selfless work done by several men and women to keep their art alive, as well as particular schools of music and dance, it has unearthed several devoted custodians of our heritage and writers of merit who have helped record their endeavours, it has created a band of devoted and capable contributors. Arudra, Avinash Pasricha, V.R. Devika, Gayatri Sundaresan, P.C. Jayaraman, S. Krishnan, Lakshmi Devnath, Lakshmi Sreeram, S. Muthumeenakshi, K.S. Muthuraman, D. Narendran, T.T. Narendran, Nirmala Ramachandran, Dr. N. Ramanathan, Ranjani Swaminathan, T. Sankaran, Sarathy, Sujatha Vijayaraghavan, Sulochana Saralaya, Sunil Kothari, V.S. Sundararajan and his son V.S. Kumar, Vimala Sarma, the Waran Brothers Mani and Raman ... the list is long and impressive. It has also developed a superb constituency of readers and well wishers in places high and low. The Sangeet Natak Akademi has, for instance, been a strong pillar of support throughout.

The *Sruti* Alliance, a brilliant idea conceived by Pattabhi, consisted of a number of organizations which extended

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financial support collectively, in effect underwriting the cost of production annually. The composition of the alliance varied from year to year.

To Pattabhi, the magazine was always only one of the activities, if the central one, of the Sruti Foundation, a trust formed a few years into the life of the magazine. Documentation and research—in the teaching methodologies of the various schools of music and dance in particular—were areas in which he was keen to make a major contribution. A ragam-tanam-pallavi revival series of concerts, a national seminar on dance, books on Thakur Jaidev Singh, Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, and Balasaraswati, and seminars on the GNB bani and Lalgudi Jayaraman's music, had all been *Sruti* activities over the years.

Samudri (The Subbulakshmi-Sadasivam Music & Dance Resources Institute), kickstarted by a Ravi Shankar concert as fundraiser, was Pattabhi's ambitious project to set up a mega archival centre that would enable researchers and teachers to record the oeuvre of their parampara for posterity. It became an obsession with Pattabhi in the last years of his life, though the way he went about it, there seemed no doubt in his mind he expected to live long enough to achieve his dream. He drove himself and his associates towards the achievement of seemingly impossible objectives, which included investment in considerable real estate a long distance away from the city to house Samudri. For the first time in years, *Sruti*, which had been put on a sound financial footing, began to feel the pinch as funds were diverted to the new project. The worst fears of Pattabhi's friends and well wishers came true when he fell ill in November 2002 and died soon afterwards.

No succession plan had been made and *Sruti* was suddenly without an editor. Its indefatigable team however carried on the fight and brought out two issues of the magazine before Pattabhi's successor as editor-in-chief was identified and took over in February 2003. K.V.Ramanathan, executive editor S.Janaki and her assistants Sudha Narayanan and Co., kept the magazine going against overwhelming odds. In this, they were greatly supported by *Sruti* trustee M. Subramaniam, who, among other things, mobilized funds by garnering life subscriptions, publisher P.S. Narayanan, and manager



Ramnarayan - Editor, *Sruti*

E.R. Viswanathan. *Sruti* continued to come out month after month, at least partly because of the availability of material accumulated over the years and held over. Sriram V, with his profiles and Sangeeta Sthalam-s, Lakshmi Devnath, Manna Srinivasan, S. Rajam, P.C. Jayaraman, V. Karpagalakshmi, Pappu Venugopala Rao, Deepak S. Raja, S. Sankaranarayanan, Sujatha Vijayaraghavan, and V.A.K. Ranga Rao were some of the regular contributors during those difficult days. The hard work put in by all these people not only helped *Sruti* keep its head above the water, if only just, but also made a seamless transition possible when two years ago the Sanmar Group took over the magazine.

I come now to how I came to be back in the *Sruti* team. Soon after Pattabhi's death, a number of people connected with *Sruti* asked me to assume the responsibility for the magazine, as I was related to Pattabhi, had been part of the team during the magazine's beginnings, continued to be its friend, had been a practising journalist, and was doing similar work in the Sanmar Group. I felt very uncomfortable with the idea, as the *Sruti* parivaar had been doing a splendid job of the magazine while I was away doing other things, and my entry would seem such a nepotistic thing to do. Moreover, my day job did not permit me to take on the assignment. Still, I continued to be a friend of *Sruti*, dropping in every now and then, and taking part in several brainstorming sessions with the parivaar on the way forward for *Sruti*.

As a fallout of one of these sessions, P.S. Narayanan

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came up with the suggestion that we approach the Sanmar Group with a request to take over *Sruti*, an idea strongly seconded by M. Subramaniam. Narayanan, in fact, made the first move by discussing his proposal with a member of the Sanmar family. It was left to me to take it forward. By this time, it was pretty much agreed within the *Sruti* parivaar that I take over from KVR, who, past 75, was keen to retire, now that he had put the magazine on an even keel. I had by now retired from Sanmar service, though still a consultant to the group, which meant I was no longer prevented by the rules from joining *Sruti*. I had a few discussions with Sukanya Sankar of Sanmar, and after a few hits and misses it was eventually agreed that I first assist KVR and at some point take over from him. Things moved quickly thereafter, and soon there was a new *Sruti* Foundation, headed by Sanmar Group chairman N. Sankar, with Subramaniam and Narayanan continuing as trustees along with new trustees V. Vaidyanathan and Sukanya Sankar.

My first innings at *Sruti* had lasted a year and I came back to it a full two decades later. In the interregnum, the magazine had gone from strength to strength, celebrating its 10th, 15th and 20th anniversaries with joy and optimism, despite the several obstacles it faced along the way, inevitable in the career of a magazine. On one of these occasions, the talented artist Revathy Sankkaran gave a brilliant kathakalakshepam exposition of the life of *Sruti*. Two annual awards given away by *Sruti* — the E. Krishna Iyer memorial award for dancers and the Vellore Gopalachariar award for musicians (instituted by veteran mridanga vidwan Vellore Ramabhadran in honour of his father's memory) have added lustre to the magazine. Throughout the period, *Sruti* stood firm in its convictions. It has all along stressed the art and

science of music and dance, determined to dispel the notion that these are essentially devotional in nature. It has consistently tried to distinguish fact from fancy, history from myth, checking and double-checking the accuracy of stories. It has by and large steered clear of hagiography. It has aimed to establish objective standards of evaluation, critiquing men and matters from an impartial, well-informed, disinterested stand-point after due consultation with experts in the field. Even if the magazine has not achieved its objective every time, it has generally left no one in any doubt as to its intentions.

Sruti might sometimes have gone overboard in its criticism of artists and administrators, even crossed boundaries of responsible journalism on rare occasions, making enemies along the way (One feature, *The Whispering Gallery*, was popular in some circles but *Sruti* dropped it after Pattabhi's demise). Yet it has informed and illuminated for the most part and retained its crusading spirit. In the process, it has become an important source of information and expertise in its chosen fields for researchers and journalists around the world.

Led by young Sukanya Sankar, the new management has kept the *Sruti* flag flying as it enters its 25th year on 16 October this year. Sukanya has been responsible for the technology upgradation of the magazine, its larger reach and its improved advertisement revenues. She and Sanmar have not only ensured professional remuneration levels for the staff, they have also helped maintain a happy atmosphere at *Sruti*, despite inflexible monthly deadlines. On a personal level, it's been an unexpected pleasure for me to come back as editor to the magazine some of us helped Pattabhi launch, back in 1983. ■