

Sarma Mama, the polymath

The year was 1989, the city Paris. The French were celebrating the bicentenary of the revolution. I had accompanied Sarma Mama (as I called him) to France and we lived in a serviced apartment in the suburb of Chatelet for two months. Sarma Mama performed along with nagaswara vidwan Mambalam Siva and dancer Shantala Shivalingappa in an opera choreographed by the world renowned opera director Maurice Béjart. This was my first journey abroad and, unfortunately within weeks of reaching Paris, I developed chickenpox. It was Sarma Mama who helped me recuperate, taking care of the healing wounds. Our relationship was not that of a guru and sishya; he was a father to me.

In the late 1970s, my mother was looking to revive her music lessons. She was a graduate in music and a student of Thediyyur Narayanaswamy (a student of Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer). My uncle T.T. Vasu introduced Sarma Mama to her. Vasu Chitya was an amateur singer whom Sarma Mama taught. In fact they rendered the *Durgashtakam* together on All India Radio. Sarma Mama began coming home to teach my mother and when I was six years old, he decided that I must also have music classes. My first ever musical utterance was only because he saw music in me.

The relationship between our families was much deeper than that of a music teacher and a student's parents. He became a very dear friend of my parents and, in the ensuing decades, Sarma Mama was at our home every evening discussing everything under the sun with my father. We were one family.



Krishna with Sarma Mama

In the classroom, Sarma Mama was a hard taskmaster. I had to be prepared for class and any sign of lethargy or casualness was put down with a leonine roar. It always amazes me that children adored him even though he was such a tough teacher. Amid the scolding and uncompromising teaching, there was always laughter and fun and this endeared him towards almost everyone who entered his classroom. He was one of those rare teachers who could teach students of all levels. Whether it was a student who had just begun singing *sa ri ga ma* or an advanced student did not make a difference to him. Every class was treated with equal intensity, sincerity and affection. I have never seen him bored in a class irrespective of the number of errors the student made. He would keep at it until the student got it right. He loved to share and he did so with a large heart and absolutely no inhibitions. But if Sarma Mama got angry everyone ran for cover. In fact my Telugu vocabulary includes some colourful words thanks to his generosity!

**T.M. Krishna
remembers his guru**

I still vividly remember the day he asked my father if he would allow me to perform for the Spirit of Youth festival conducted by the Music Academy. It was 1988 and I was just 12 years old. My father was very sceptical and unsure if I was ready. Sarma Mama had no such doubts and it is because of his insistence that I got on to the dais. But, after that concert, he did not rush me into performing many more concerts. He knew that I needed time and, in the next few years made sure I had the wherewithal for the long haul.

We keep talking about the lack of voice training in Carnatic music. Anyone who has learnt (seriously) from Sarma Mama will know how much he insisted on the proper use of the voice. He himself was a baritone, a voice that was sensual, clear and arresting. Singing came easily to him and, when he was singing for a Bharatanatyam performance, the dance by default became a notch better through his music. A lot of time in class would be spent on sitting posture, breathing and open-throated singing and he would never compromise on vocalisation. He would chide us for sounding like a trapped mouse.

I have learnt from him many rare voice-training swara passages that were specially structured to help a student develop sruti, sthana, and gamaka suddham. He would always speak about tonal continuity in the voice. Every singer's voice undergoes aural changes as she or he renders the higher notes. If we were to begin at the mandra sthaya panchama, the first change could be noticed around madhya sthaya gandhara, the second

around the madhya sthayi nishada and then another sharper textural transformation at the tara sthayi gandhara. Sarma Mama would insist on seamlessness in the voice and lead by example. He was fastidious about rendering kritis with discipline and enunciating lyrics with clarity. We often got lectured on pada-chhedam. I have been reprimanded on numerous occasions for mispronouncing a word or taking a tiny breath at a wrong place. “It is not baje, it is bhaje,” he would scream.

Sarma Mama came to Chennai in the 1960s and dedicated about twenty-four years of his life to Kalakshetra. It was Rukmini Devi who recognised his prowess as a composer. Tunes just came to him and his innate understanding of dance allowed him to compose music that danced. For him, coming from a Bhagavatula family, music and dance were part of the same narrative. And unlike the tight divisions that Madras had by then established, for him each overflowed into the other. In the years after he left Kalakshetra, I was his composing assistant. Seated on

a cane chair, he would pick up the lyrics, music just happened and my job would be to notate all that he sang. And then late in the night he would write down the notations beautifully in Telugu. Let us not forget that he was one of the premier teachers of nattuvangam, probably the first person to create a syllabus for teaching this art. His wrists were supple and as he taught, his hands would perform a ballet with the *tattu kazhi*.

Irrespective of the unfair circumstances under which he resigned from Kalakshetra, he continued to worship the ground on which Rukmini Devi walked. He left Kalakshetra with a heavy heart and a lot of bitterness but Rukmini Devi remained beyond fault, his ishta devata. It was after his departure from Kalakshetra that he and my mother started Kalapeetham, an institution that he nurtured until his very end.

Sarma Mama was a singer, nattuvanar, teacher, composer, and choreographer. His understanding of sangeetam and natyam was holistic and he was an aesthete in the

complete sense. But in a world where every person needs to be slotted, Sarma Mama was difficult to pigeonhole and hence lost out on many recognitions and opportunities. Though he rarely expressed it, I know he was disappointed that he was not given his due at the right time, a feeling that was entirely valid. Award committees and institutions found it convenient to express regret that they did not know how to categorise him. Instead of celebrating his versatility, they penalised him for being a polymath.

Heart of hearts, Sarma Mama wanted to be a kutcheri singer, something he lost out on due to economic compulsions. He took the job at Kalakshetra because he needed financial security, a decision that his guru T.R. Subramanyam warned him against. If I tried the nattuvangam out of curiosity he would immediately chastise me and say “You should become a kutcheri musician.” He did not hold any grudge against his dance music/nattuvangam profession. But he did feel that the mainstream Carnatic music world did not recognise him as an exemplary musician only because he composed and sang for Bharatanatyam. We are at fault for this sadness that many like him feel.

In me he saw his dream of becoming a front-ranking Carnatic musician fulfilled. Though he never directly expressed it to me, I know he was unhappy with many decisions that I have made in my life. He would tell friends and the message would reach me. Like any relationship between father and son, ours was also complex with its ups and downs. But every time we met, everything was forgotten; after all I was his *chella pillai*.

(The author is a leading Carnatic vocalist)

The guru and his sishya

