

A conscientious teacher—and other stories

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In the mid-sixties I was very much involved with records (78s and later SPs, EPs and LPs), buying, hearing and, writing about them in Telugu and English. *Andhrapatrika* weekly in Telugu carried *Saragamala* (named by my guru Malladi Ramakrishna Sastri)—the first regular column in Telugu to review various aspects of gramophone records—including identifying the labels and giving record numbers.

Movieland weekly in English carried a similar column plus a studio round-up and reviews of Telugu films. This got me in touch with various people from all departments of the film industry, mostly Telugu, but with a sprinkling of notables from Kannada and Malayalam too. Curiously, it was much less with Tamil. Naturally music-directors, lyric-writers and choreographers predominated.

When I praised them I got smug thanks but when I criticised them, I got an earful. I learnt more from that reaction, what to overlook, when to emphasise and at what to throw the stick. Arudra dinned into my head that praise should be precise and criticism, air-tight. Thanks to that, my bullets could not and cannot ricochet. Saraswathi Stores located in Mount Road just opposite LIC head office—the first multi-storeyed building in the city—was my haunt. This organisation distributed all records made by the Gramophone Co. of India Ltd. There I met H.M. Mahesh, a Kannadiga in charge of the Kannada section. I liked his dedication and he admired my feel for music. He quit later and started his own The Master Recording Co. marketing music under the Sangeetha label. His hard work resulted in an

enormous repertoire not only in Kannada but in other languages too. He would come to me whenever he had a dance-related music in hand. Through him I met Sulochana Pattabhiraman, who was instrumental in bringing out two cassettes of tillanas sung by a group of young women trained by her. I think Priya Sisters were a part of this group then. I heard the group's effort and found it flawless. Generally I don't like group singing of classical music as many voices singing together lack clarity. But this lot was so fine-tuned by Sulochana that my apprehension vanished into thin air. I was surprised as she did not have a smooth voice. I wondered how she could train others to sing so clean and clear when her own voice was such an uncooperative one. Dedication creates rainbows out of clouds, no doubt.

I would drop in on her house in Eldam's Road often and if I found her busy I played with her dogs Diana and Steffi, Great Danes the size of small ponies. Their size was daunting but behaviour totally lovable. If she was handling a class, she would ask me to sit in. When six

or eight women were singing, she would locate the tiniest discrepancy in one voice, stop the group, correct that fraction and only then proceed. My rapt attention led her to believe (only for a time though!) that I was a connoisseur of Carnatic music. She would explicate the nuances. As I recall (the faults can only be mine) these were some of the points made by her.

◆ The Hindolam being sung now is actually Varamu. Years earlier I asked my childhood idol Chittoor Subramanyam whether it should be sung with a suddha dhaivatam or shatsruti dhaivatam. I ear-spotted the variation in the singing of *Manasuloni marmamulanu* by mother and daughter M. Lalithangi and M.L. Vasanthakumari and a musician who heard these records in my house, identified and named the difference. Chittoor said that it should be sung according to the intent of the composer and if you did not know that, as per your guru's teaching.

◆ Sulochana elaborated that the Arabhi being heard now is actually Karnataka Devagandhari. I was immediately reminded of the show-stopper from Kalakshetra's magical *Rukmini Kalyanam*, *Gokula jalanidhi rakasudhakara* sung by the fortunate brahmin who takes Rukmini's urgent plea to that 'stealer of hearts' (milk products and sarees too). She did not know this song, but hummed snatches of Arabhi and Karnataka Devagandhari ragas to make the differences clear. Earlier Veena Chitti Babu dinned into my head the differences between Shanmukha-priya and Simhendramadhyamam,

Sulochana Pattabhiraman



Reetigaula and Anandabhairavi. Immediately I challenged him to sing *Madhura nagarilo* in Reetigaula. He did too, spontaneously. As I was very familiar with Chittoor's record, I could grasp the difference.

On rare occasions, Sulochana would ask me about the meaning and import of a Telugu word, not from a Tyagaraja keertana which she knew like the face in her mirror, but from a javali or padam. If I was not dead certain, I would rush home, refer to the dictionary *Sabdaratnakaram* (my helpmeet in tracking the import of Telugu for the past 65 years) and convey it to her by phone. My principle is: It is okay if I make a mistake but I should never-ever mislead another into one.

Whenever I dropped in, no matter what hour it was, she would have her Man Friday (who looked after the dogs with stern command and loving touch) get me something to eat. If I tried to beg off, she would not agree but bait me by saying that she would tell me something new about a kriti. That is how I renewed my acquaintance with Jayamanohari through *Nee bhakti bhagya sudha* sung superbly by Madirimangalam Natesa Iyer on disc (from Sagar Movietone's Tamil film *St. Thyagaraja*, 1937).

Sulochana's husband Pattabhiraman was in the committee of the Music Academy. Daughter Tara Murali was taught music when young but chose to become an architect, I wish I had more time then with her to solidify my nebulous adoration for the American master architect Frank Lloyd Wright (I was familiar with the more sensational aspects of his life through the Hollywood biographical *The Girl on a Red Velvet Swing* (1955), directed by Richard Fleischer) and the French architect and town-planner Le Corbusier who built Chandigarh brick by

brick. Her house was next to N. Pattabhi Raman's house which was the old *Sruti* editorial office, and I would make eyes at her little pug romping by the gate. Tara's brother P. Vasanth Kumar emerged a veena player of studied softness. His veena sounded like a veena, not some strummed, string instrument. I attended a concert of his with a friend who expected fireworks and not getting them, was disappointed. "How much of softness and sweetness can you take?" he asked. Well, I could take it and enjoy it.

The feature in *Sruti* (November 2018) on the golden jubilee celebrations of Bharata Kalanjali brought back memories. V.P. Dhananjayan and his wife Shanta taught me dance for a long time. Years later, he was presiding over a dance performance at Bharat Kalachar. I was then the dance reviewer for the *Indian Express*. He spotted me in the audience and said: "If V.A.K. Ranga Rao criticises you in his reviews, don't get annoyed. Pay attention and change if you think his opinion is valid. We have not benefitted by his praise but by his criticism."

Some years earlier, he presented the ballet *Ramanatakam* in which he essayed many roles—Dasaratha, Manthara, Rama. I pointed out that

Dhananjayan



his entries of old Dasaratha and adolescent Rama were alike. He was obviously referring to that. In the next staging he changed the entries suitably. It was not a gathering felicitating me, I was not sharing the dais. It needs self-confidence to pay heed to criticism and come out with such an encomium. Only the pure of heart are capable of such things.

I had an affaire de couer with Kuntalavarali when I was five or so, through the heavenly Kanipinchitiva narasimha sung by Kolanka Rani R. Balasaraswathi Devi in the film *Chenchulakshmi* (Telugu, 1943), tuned by R.N. Chinniah & C.R. Subburaman. When I heard Balamuralikrishna's tillana in it, 25 years later, I was in the seventh heaven. Thinking it "a made for Bharatanatyam piece", I immediately got in touch with my Guru Sodari (she was a senior student of Vazhuvoor Ramiah Pillai when I was learning the adavus) and raved about it. She heard it and dismissed it: "Each line starts on a different finger (tala structure). Unsuitable". I respected her dance but not this judgement.

I then took this to my guru at that time, Dhananjayan. He liked it and gave it a choreography that rainbow-lit every nook and corner of it. This was in 1969 and I think the first M. Balamuralikrishna tillana to be taken up for dance. Since then, many have danced it into popular success with their own hue and heft. Which proved that the intuition of an adavu student was more penetrating than that of a first-class dancer. Balamuralikrishna fashioned the sahitya both in Telugu and Tamil, Asamanamaina tillana. His claim was never truer; it is an incomparable tillana.

Over the years, there must be at least a hundred pada varnams taken up by dancers. Another like number of tana varnams, and miscellaneous texts would have been given a varnam treatment. Sakhiye (Tamil, Anandabhairavi), Manavi chekonarada (Telugu, Sankarabharanam) are exquisite in their Triveni Sangamam—the confluence of Ganga, Yamuna and the invisible Saraswati standing in for the lyric, music and suitability to dance exposition. A close third is Nee inda mayam (Tamil, Dhanyasi).

Dhananjayan created choreography for two varnams by contemporary vaggeyakaras: Varanamukha va (Tamil, Natakurinji) and Ninne neranamminanura (Telugu, Athana). The first by T.V. Gopalakrishnan is a brief eulogy of Vinayaka. The choreography is a densely detailed brocade in which the warp and woof

are the details of the god's derring-do and devotion to his divine parents. In the second, Turaiyur Rajagopala Sarma wrote about Krishna, perhaps the hundredth man to do so as far dance repertoire is concerned. But his simple, affectionate treatment of the child Divine, is endearing and enchanting at once. Dhananjayan's dance just follows it like perfume does a parijatam flower. Two varnams to treasure.



Intrigued by my oft-repeated admiration for Mani Krishnaswami, my mother wanted to meet her. Mani came home along with me happily. Noticing a veena in my mother's pooja room, Mani asked her to play. My mother played a devotional and sang along. Then Mani took the veena in her hands and went up and down the scale. She told my mother,

“The frets are all out of kilter. And you are producing correct notes by unconsciously adjusting your fingering!” It took my mother a while to understand the implication. Her explanation: “I always played it by the ear, without looking at the frets”. True. In childhood when I asked to play Hindi film songs, she would close her eyes, bring the tune to her mind and play. And catch the melody.

Finally, getting Veena Chitti Babu's advice, I took the veena to M. Natesan, the famous tunesmith then having a place near the Royapettah Police Station and got it repaired. This made no difference to my mother. She continued to play by the ear! When I mentioned this to Mani, she was all admiration.

(The author is a dance critic, film historian and collector of gramophone records)