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Reaching Out to Today's Women Monthly



A passion for music

The singing academician

When Premeela was a baby, and bawling as all infants do, her mother's younger sister started playing the *veena*. The crying stopped instantly. This was no coincidence. Music invariably calmed the child down, particularly the aunt's *veena*. It became quite clear to Premeela's parents that their daughter's future was going to be connected with music. Both were lovers of Carnatic music, and were willing to go to any length to help their only child. Today, Dr. Premeela Gurumurthy, with Masters in Music and Philosophy and a Ph.D. in Music is the Professor and Head of the Department of Indian Music in the University of Madras. She is also the Chairperson and President of the School of Fine and Performing Arts at the University and a member of the Syndicate. (Feb 2008-2011) feb

Dr. Premeela wears all this lightly. She is not just an academic but is quite multi-dimensional. She is a performing musician and a thinking musician, a musicologist, a capable and creative administrator, and an expert in musical discourses (*harikatha-s*). Her doctoral thesis, *Kathakalakshepa - A Study*, includes a fund of information gathered



Dr. Premeela

over years of hard work, research and learning under legendary exponents.

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Premeela was born in Colombo and went to school at St. Bridget's Convent. Her parents were professionals with a great love for music. Premeela's father,

S. Cunjithapatham, was a journalist who covered parliamentary affairs and who later did simultaneous translations of the proceedings. Her mother, Mohini, graduated from Madras's Queen Mary's College joined Radio Ceylon and became head of the school programmes division. Their home reverberated with music all the time. The couple organised concerts in Colombo and also hosted many stalwarts from India who came to perform.

Young Premeela, however, was riveted by the film songs of that period (mid 1950s and 60s). At age

four, she could reproduce whatever she heard over the radio and was constantly invited by her neighbours to sing in their houses. When she was about seven or eight, all she wanted to do was to open a beeda shop and listen to film songs on the transistor radio. But Carnatic music was also part of her life and musical sensibilities. Her mother, who had done Music for her degree taught her *varnam's*.

Premeela recalls T.K. Rangachari, a singer from the Musiri school and who was also a

Premeela poses at her vocal arangetram in Ceylon with her mother; the eminent vocalist Musiri Subramaniya Iyer who presided over the function (extreme left) and Chief Guest Prime Minister Dudley Senanyake (on right).



lecturer at Annamalai University, singing *ragam, tanam, pallavi* late at night in her house when she was a child. She was enchanted.

Hers was a magically musical childhood. She started learning under P.S. Mani Iyengar in Colombo. She came under the influence of many musical greats. Prof. P. Sambamurthy was in Colombo in 1953 to conduct the orchestra at festivities arranged in connection with Queen Elizabeth's coronation. "My parents were closely involved with the festivities and attended all rehearsals. My mother was expecting me then. So my exposure to great music began even before I was born," smiles good-humoured Premeela. Musiri Subramania Iyer, a close family friend who used to visit often, Sabesa Iyer (Musiri's guru), Prof. Sambamurthy and Mani Iyer (of Syama Sastri lineage) were all encouraging and were inspired the young singer. She was also a regular at the Chennai music festival from 1959. When she was 12, she sang in the annual Tyagaraja Utsavam in Colombo and won the third prize. The next year she had an opportunity to sing in Thiruvaiyaru.

Her parents made it a point to bring her to Madras as often as possible. She naturally fell in love with M.S. Subbulakshmi's music. When M.S. was being given the

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most prestigious 'Sangita Kalanidhi' award by the Music Academy in 1968, Premeela was watching K. Balachandar's iconic film *Edir Neechal*. She was fetched half way through the movie to witness this historic event. M.S. was the first woman to receive this award.

Although she was resentful then that she could not see the film (she wanted to show off to her friends in Colombo she had seen it before them), she is grateful today that she had that opportunity to be at the Music Academy on a historic occasion.

Premeela had a grand musical vocal arangetram in Colombo in 1969. It was attended by many musical luminaries, including Musiri. He told her parents that Premeela should come to Madras and focus completely on music. Her parents decided that that was what they wanted for their daughter. They gave up their careers, sold all their property and moved to Chennai.

* * *

Did Premeela want to take up music as a career? She loved the thought of moving to Madras. She was feeling quite isolated in Colombo. But she wanted to study medicine. She had dreams of becoming a doctor. But her mother was firm. Her daughter was going to study music. "We listened to our



Performing a harikatha kalakshepam.

parents those days," laughs Premeela. As it happened, listening to her mother worked out quite well. Once she discovered that she had to dissect cockroaches as a first step to studying medicine, the desire to become a doctor disappeared.

There was no time for regrets. She joined Q.M.C. to do a B.A. in Music after completing her pre university class. While she was studying, she was also singing and learning from various masters. Her gurus were T.K. Govinda Rao, Mudikondan Venkatrama Iyer, T.M. Tyagarajan, K.R. Lakshmi, Mukthamma and Mahadeva Bhagavathar. The idea was to learn from such masters and, while doing so, evolve her individual style. Her mother took her to meet stalwarts

like Papanasam Sivan and Chemba Vaidyanatha Bhagavathar. "Chemba was a golden hearted man. He taught me five songs and called me 'Isa Selvi.'"

S. Rajam (who was to become her father-in-law) used to come home and took a lot of interest in her career. For years, Rajam was a mainstay at the *akhandam-s* of Tyagaraja songs organised by the Sadguru Sangita Samajam of Purasawalkam. With repetition of songs not being allowed, his vast repertoire came in handy. Premeela was one of the people who participated in singing the *pancharatna kritis* in Purasawalkam. Rajam also got her the opportunity to sing in the annual Music Academy festival in 1975.

Premeela graduated, winning the first prize for practical music. She wanted to do her Masters. Other than Music, next subjects for her B.A. were Philosophy and Psychology. She felt a great affinity to philosophy — and it made her to rebel for the first time. Premeela was determined to do her Master's in Philosophy, that too in Pune. The Pune University had a very good Philosophy Department. The head of the department was the renowned scholar T.M.P. Mahadevan. "There was such an aura about him," recalls Premeela. She loved the university

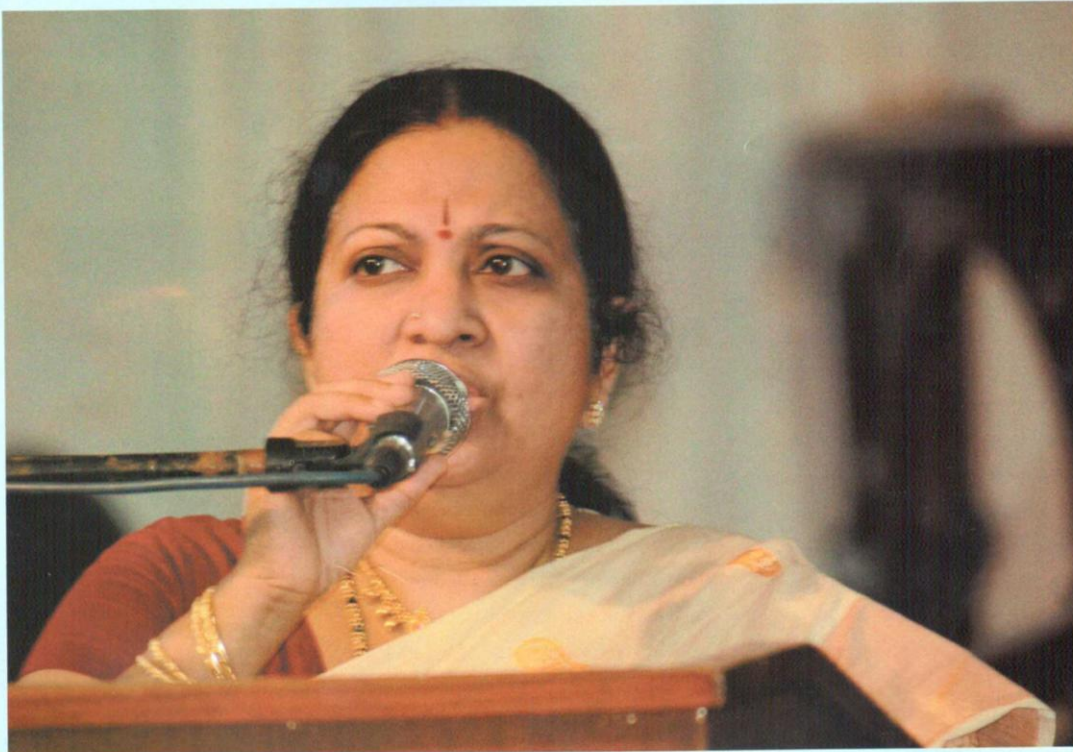
atmosphere, the distinguished professors and the subjects she studied.

1974 -
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When she returned to Chennai, she continued to learn and perform. Her musical horizons kept expanding. Her father was working with Sakthi N. Mahalingam who was not only the chairman of the Coimbatore-based Sakthi Group of industries but also an educationist, philanthropist and a noted Tamil scholar. Thanks to him, Premeela got exposed to Tamil composers. She

attended the symposiums (many spiritual in nature) organised by the Chairman and developed an intellectual approach to music and words. She also learnt Hindustani music from Krishnanand and *bhajans* from Prof. Srinivasa Rao (who had taught. M.S.). Then there were lecture demonstrations with scholar T.S. Parthasarathy. "He instilled a sense of *sahitya*, pronunciation and enunciation in me." He lectured and she sang. "I learnt 15 new songs."

Premeela used to take the bus to go to one of her classes and used to



Dr. Premeela at an University meeting.

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sing *swaram-s* softly to herself while waiting for the bus. A woman used to listen to her singing. One day, a mutual friend told Premeela that the Madras University was starting a Department of Indian Music and the Head of the Department wanted to meet her. The H.O.D. was Dr. D. Seetha who used to listen her at the bus stop. She asked Premeela to join the postgraduate course. So Premeela ended up doing another M.A., this time in Music. The next step was to do a Ph.D. in music.

Dr. Seetha wanted Premeela to do her doctoral thesis combining music and philosophy. While grappling with choosing the right subject, a chance meeting with Dr. Rangarajan, Maths Professor Mathematics, Loyola College, opened the door. "He approached me while I was talking to Dr. Seetha, and mentioned *Katha Kalakshepam* in some context. I didn't know anything about it. But I decided to take it up for my thesis." She has said in another interview "It was a marathon task - 1979 to 1984 - as there was not much of documented material for my research. I made a deep study of this art form as practised in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Maharashtra and Karnataka."

She had to track down the legendary *Harikatha* exponent Banni Bai, which took some doing.

It turned out to be a beautiful association. She also stayed with the other doyen of the genre Embar Vijayaraghavachariar. "They took me to a different world. Banni Bai's style was such that she would become an *avatara* of Rukmini when she performed Rukmini Kalyanam - shedding tears, emoting. Embar was in fact a revolutionary and brought suitable subtle changes to gel with the subject chosen."

After some early reluctance, Premeela has started giving *harikatha kalakshepams*. In 1990 as Banni Bai watched, she presented her first solo *kalakshepam*. It was "a great moment." On a 28-day tour of Malaysia with students and colleagues, she wrote scripts on the greatest composers of India, sang their songs and narrated their stories.

She performed in Singapore with an English narration for a mixed audience. In Malaysia it had to be a different story each day.

* * *

Premeela was toying with the idea of pursuing higher studies in the U.S. under Professor Mantle Hood, the pioneering ethno musicologist. As it happened, after she got that job in Madras University in 1984, academics and music took up all her time. In her busy and crowded life, marriage was taking a low priority. But others around her were getting

concerned. Banni Bai taught her the Rukmini Kalyanam *harikatha* so that she could get married soon. Mentor Sakthi Mahalingam was also telling her parents that it was time she got married. She knew she had to marry someone who shared her passion for all things musical. Then Premeela met Gurumurthy, an audio-visual professional who was also the son of S. Rajam, through a close friend of her father's.

When the two met, Premeela asked for three things. That she should be able to continue giving concerts, that male accompanists would not trouble the man she married, and there should be no resentment if she got a lot of recognition. None of these conditions bothered Gurumurthy and they got married in a simple Arya Samaj ceremony. He is a very supportive husband and theirs is a happy marriage. With her husband she took the initiative and converted her father-in-law's monumental work on *Melakartha raga-s* into CDs as soon as she got married.

* * *

In 2003, Premeela was appointed the Head of the Indian Music Department at Madras University. With the support of the then Vice Chancellor S.P. Thyagarajan, she was able to bring in several innovations. She invited veteran performing artists like S. Rajam,

Suguna Purushotham, and T.K. Govindarao to come and give guest lectures. She introduced a stepping-stone course of six months' duration to cater to a wider circle of interested students who are not professional musicians. It is user-friendly and has classes only on Saturdays for four hours in the afternoon. Many bankers and men from the corporate sector, a veterinary doctor and an astrologer (who is 70) have been among the students. She visualised an all-inclusive Music Department consisting of *geetham*, *vaadhyam* and *nrithyam* - and, hence, a course

in rhythmology for *laya* vidwans has been started.

Her passion for philosophy has led her in search of mystic and out-of-body and near death experiences. Interpretation of dreams is another interest. Death fascinates her and does not scare her. While this is another facet of her personality, she continues to remain grounded in music. She has had a wonderful relationship with her teachers and mentors. A moment she treasures is when on August 8th, Jayendra Saraswati, the head of Kanchi Mutt

conferred the title 'Sangita Sevamani' on her. She went prepared to give a concert. But he asked her to do a *harikatha*. She gave an extempore discourse on 'Guru bhakti'.

Premeela now wants to concentrate more and more on musical discourses. And explore unknown territories.

Your gets a feeling that nothing is beyond this articulate woman!

— SUSHILA RAVINDRANATH

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