

DECCAN
Chronicle

THE LARGEST CIRCULATED ENGLISH DAILY IN SOUTH INDIA

A singer, dancer, researcher, author - indeed a lot for one to carry on the shoulders, especially in a culturally rich city like Chennai. To be able to stand out for what you do is not easy, but Vidya Bhavani Suresh seems to wear all mantles with ease.

While there is passion for dance, it is music and publishing that are making her world go around. Formally trained as accompanist, she is also trained in dance form since she was five-and-a-half-years-old.

"I learnt Bharatanatyam under the Dhananjayans and K. J. Sarasa and in music from A. P. Komala. A masters in folklore from St Xavier's College, Tirunelveli she is a recipient of a fellowship from the department of culture, Government of India, for research in Kaniyankoothu. And then Bhavani Suresh decided to embark upon a project to demystify Carnatic music and Bharatanatyam in 1999. That is what changed the course of her life!

Along with her husband Suresh, who is also her editor, Bhavani started self-publishing monographs on Bharatanatyam and ragas in Carnatic music under Skanda Publications. The popularity of the titles prompted them to tackle bigger books, including *Maths In Music And Dance, A Comprehensive Dictionary Of Carnatic Music, and 50 Evergreen Ragas Of Carnatic Music*. The latest, which is called *50 Rare Ragas Of Carnatic Music*

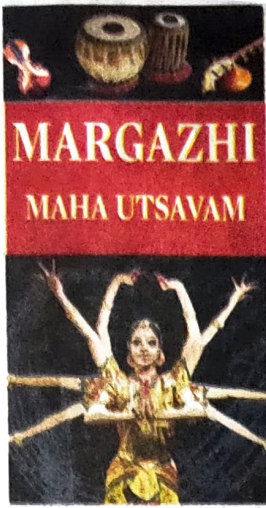
In an interview she explains

What is your project about?

We conceptualised the series 'Demystifying Fine Arts', with the theme 'Simplifying without diluting'. The aim is to take Indian performing arts to the general reader in an easy and user-friendly style."

How did you take this up and why?

I was always passionate about creating awareness about our performing art forms. While conducting lectures and demonstrations on Bharatanatyam and related subjects, I would leave the floor open to questions after the conclusion of the talk. Sometime in 1999 after one such talk Suresh (my husband) felt all this information need not be restricted to live programmes. He



suggested I write a book that can reach across to more people. The first book, *Appreciating Bharatanatyam* was released in December 1999.

And the response?

The excellent response convinced Suresh that well-written and well-produced books on our traditional arts were greatly respected and well-received. So how were we to go about it? Option 1 was to treat this as a great personal achievement and get back to our respective lucrative professions. Option 2 was to quit our professions and take a big risk and start this as a full-time activity, focussing entirely on bringing out equally well conceived books on all other traditional performing art forms of the country. Guess what we chose? Skanda Publications was born shortly thereafter.

How long have you been doing this?

For nearly 20 years. Our early monographs in this series were 32 to 40 pages long, covering features of performing art forms in small capsules. After 25 such titles in 2005, we changed to the 300 to 400 pages per book format, (starting with Volume 26, *A Comprehensive Dictionary of Carnatic Music*), which we are continuing. Our latest release, *50 Rare Ragas of Carnatic Music*, is our 39th book and runs to 336 pages.

What is the motivation for all this?

Many are so in awe of Indian traditional art forms. They would love to sit through a Carnatic music, a Bharatanatyam or a Kathakali performance like they would a movie. But they hesitate to walk into an auditorium, not sure that they will understand these forms. The awkwardness of being a novice among

knowledgeable rasikas, is a big put-off. We therefore seek to create well-researched and at the same time, user-friendly books which people can read and understand.

How has it been received?

Very well. In fact, it is the excellent support and warmth from readers that actually inspired us to continue on this difficult journey. We are now reaching our 40th title.

Where do you go with this?

We have documented Bharatanatyam, Mohiniyattam, Koodiyattam, Ottanthullal, Kathakali, Kuchipudi, Nangiar Koothu and Chakkir Koothu. We have also



B. A. Suresh and Vidya Bhavani Suresh

done substantial work in Odissi, by travelling to Bhubaneswar even understanding minute aspects of the dance form.

And from here?

Our latest book - under print, focusses on the life lessons which Bharatanatyam teaches for the busy executive.

This is a totally new offering from us. We are already working on a detailed exposition on Kathak. We plan to release this by the 2019 end.

(The writer is a seasoned music and dance critic who has written on fine arts for more than three decades)

DEMYSTIFYING

THE FINE ARTS

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