

SEPTEMBER 2002

New Woman

SHE'S JUST LIKE YOU

RS THIRTY

Saffola Tasty blend
RECIPE BOOKLET
FREE WITH THIS ISSUE

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EMOTIONAL ABUSE: THE HURT WITHIN

WHEN YOU WANT TO

REBEL

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HE WAS LOOKING FOR A SPECIAL WOMAN WHO WOULD IGNITE A SPARK IN HIM. SHE WAS JUST HERSELF - PLAIN, SIMPLE AND INTELLIGENT AND IT WORKED. DANCER, SCHOLAR VIDYA BHAVANI MET HER LAWYER HUSBAND TO NOT JUST UNITE IN LOVE BUT TO ALSO GO ON TO BUILD A VERY SUCCESSFUL PUBLICATION HOUSE. THEY TELL AMEETA AGNIHOTRI ABOUT WHY LOVE MEANS KEEPING THEIR EGOS AT BAY.

SHATTERING MYTHS



“I hope you don’t mind if my husband wears a *dhobi* for the shoot,” Vidya Bhavani Suresh enquires over the phone. “You see, we have a very different sort of set-up here,” she adds. Yes, it is indeed a refreshingly different scenario. In fact, their home doubles up as the office too. Their bed is strewn with papers, books, a dictionary and whatever else they need. Everything is there, within grabbing distance. The drawing room houses Vidya Bhavani’s fine arts school. It is here that students come to learn Kathakali, Bharata Natyam or classical singing.

GETTING CLASSICAL

Today, Vidya Bhavani Suresh and B A Suresh own a publishing house - Skanda Publications and the fine arts school. Vidya has an assistant to help her out, and all seems to be hunky dory. Despite the apparent chaos, their entire machinery seems to be working on well oiled wheels. Yet, when they started out, all they had were a deep conviction and the genius that is Vidya Bhavani.

Starting early, at the young age of three or so, Vidya Bhavani found that she was deeply interested in the fine arts and classical dance and she was passionate about singing.



"I WAS ACTUALLY LOOKING FOR SOME BEAUTIFUL GIRL, AN AIRHOSTESS OR SOMETHING, WITH BRAINS"

As she progressed, gaining knowledge and growing up, Vidya found that there was a yawning chasm as far as knowledge on the

subject was concerned. The arts were shrouded in mystery, and that by itself was a deterrent. It discouraged people from learning about classical dance and music. "After regular and frequent interaction with people in the Rotary and Lions Clubs where I gave talks and held workshops for kids, I found that there is a lot of interest in the arts. People have this unquenchable thirst about the fine arts and want to know more but they do not know where to look." That revelation comes as a surprise, as one thinks it is the Indians living abroad, away from home and hearth who are deeply interested and passionate about the art scene back home. "That is completely untrue," Vidya Bhavani's experiences tell her.

DUAL WORK SCHEDULES

Several of the parents who enroll their children in her classical dance or singing school, say that although they have very little knowledge of the arts, they would like their children to learn. That does not really serve the purpose. "You cannot thrust something on your child just because you did not have an opportunity to learn it. Making your child learn it is not going to help you as an individual," says Suresh, who is the strong silent one. He sits quietly admiring his wife, adding little gems of wisdom as she goes into the details of their shared passion.

While Vidya Bhavani spent mornings at her job as a Cost Accountant in a very well known company, her evenings were spent giving talks and performing. Her growing popularity paved the way for a stupendous change that later took over her life. It was a classic case of everything hap-

pening for the best. As her fame grew, each performance and each review, the pressure on her husband mounted. Suresh the time had come for him to quit his job. He had to nurture this genius and polish to perfection. "I had no choice. Staying would have been torturous. Vidya's photographs were appearing in the newspapers with amazing regularity and she was getting rave reviews. I was the Circulation Manager with a newspaper but was forced to leave because we had to handle her affairs professionally," he says, in a forthright manner. The massive male ego was never an issue in their marriage.

MEETING OF TWO SOULS

The story of their love began much earlier. It started with Suresh with whom answering the classifieds was a weekly chore. He was in search of a soul-mate who would simply 'perfect'. "I had inserted advertisements in almost all the newspapers," he confesses. He found not a single girl suitable. A carton full of photographs and horoscopes belonging to prospective brides sat in his room. Most of them were perfect but none of them had that special something he was seeking in the woman who would be his life partner. "My relatives were confused, and wanted to know what kind of girl I had in mind. All I could tell them was that she had to look like Jaya Prada." "What he meant was that he was looking for that single spark," Vidya Bhavani interrupts. "But he could not quite describe it."

SPOTTING THE SPARK

Suresh's frantic search ended one day, when he spotted Vidya Bhavani. There she was, the girl of his dreams. He knew she was the one, the instant he saw her. She was bespectacled, plain Jane, with no pretense, who did all her shopping from the roadsides and as far removed from Jaya Prada as was possible. Yet, he saw in her that special something that had eluded him for so long. He was sure that she was the woman he had looked for since his marriage had begun. It was love at first sight.



Suresh fell hard. "I don't really remember anything much from that first meeting, except that we sat and talked for two entire hours," confesses Vidya Bhavani.

Ask her what they talked about and she does not know or even remember. Suresh does. "It was mainly about dance." During that first encounter, Suresh knew nothing about dance. "I saw this extraordinary genius in her, this passion that was not there in any other girl I had met before. And her charm, which was secondary, attracted me." Suresh speaks with a pronounced Malayali accent. "I was looking for some beautiful girl, an airhostess or something, with brains." He actually met 101 girls, and saw thousands of photographs, but in vain. That was till he met Vidya Bhavani and the rest is romance all the way. Vidya confesses that it was the way he speaks that attracted her to him. "I simply adored his accent. I lost mine when I moved to Chennai and studied here."

GETTING TO KNOW EACH OTHER

The next day, Vidya received a call at work. In one of her interviews, she had said in simple terms, that the man in her life had no licence for an extra marital affair. "I must have been 21 or 22 at the time and was very passionate about such things," she laughs.



Suresh wanted to know more about that, especially since he had all those pictures and horoscopes stacked in piles on his floor. "I did not even remember what I had said," Vidya Bhavani racks her brain trying to recall. It was time to shatter bigger myths. With Suresh entering her life, Vidya Bhavani gathered the strength she needed. Before marriage, she was rebellious. For example, she performed on stage with the minimal jewellery and make-up. Vidya wanted the world to notice her dance, not the decorations she wore while performing. Suresh was the one who led her gently towards conformity, especially where it would enhance her personality.

A much better groomed person today, Vidya claims that the way she looks now is all thanks to her husband. It was he who insisted she go to a beauty salon, get her eyebrows shaped, and her hands manicured. "He spoils me, but I enjoy it," the lady dimples, looking at her husband, unable to hide her adoration.

BREAKING CONVENTIONS

In normal Brahmin families, when a daughter gets married, both parents are needed to perform certain rituals. Since Vidya Bhavani lost her father when she was barely five years, her mother brought her up single-handedly, going through a lot of hardships and pain. A traditional marriage would have meant having another couple to perform what her parents would have, in normal circumstances. The very thought of that happening was bothering her mother tremendously. Knowing the rituals, and sensing her mother's sadness about it, Suresh, a lawyer by profession and an atheist, told her not to worry. He promised her that she would be the one to give her daughter away in marriage. True to his word, the marriage was performed at the registrar's office, and Vidya Bhavani's mother was right by her daughter's side throughout. The marriage began a partnership that was to see many more unconventional moves.

THE MEGA LAUNCHES

Vidya and Suresh felt passionately about spreading awareness about the arts. They knew that just talks and performances wouldn't suffice. It was necessary to do something more concrete like a book. The couple went through sleepless nights to make their dream a reality. Crossing the first hurdle is always tough, but when that's done, the next one gets easier. With their first book, *Appreciating Bharatha Natyam*, their publication house, Skanda Publications was formally launched, in December 1999. The couple managed to rope in 30 sponsors. Around the same time, *Rajini 25*, a programme to mark actor Rajnikanth's 25th anniversary in the film industry, was being celebrated on a very large scale. One of the guests, Padma Subramaniam commented that after *Rajini 25*, the maximum sponsors were at the Skanda launch. But, the going was tough. Both Vidya and Suresh were working at the time, and had

to conduct their book-related activities during their spare time. "We would get one day off, and would try to catch up with 10 people, go from one meeting to the next," they recall. Naturally, they met with a lot of skepticism.

Even when the first publication hit the shelves and it got picked up faster than they ever imagined, the advertisers were not completely convinced, because the couple had 25 titles planned. Everyone wondered how they would go about bringing out so many titles. Their dedication paid off. One title after the other

began to get published and the Skanda watchers were impressed. Their books became popular, and even went into reprints. Today, the couple has eight titles to their credit, and many more on the anvil. "Our advertisers are booking space in advance," they say.

RECREATING DANCE

While the marketing is handled by Suresh, the writing, the proof reading, etc. is done by Vidya Bhavani. For, it is she who has the insights into dance, the way it was and the way it is today. It is she who plans the themes that her students will follow and who will compose the songs they will dance to. Vidya even sings them herself. "In the past, during the times of the *devadasis*, the woman was always made to grovel and cringe. She was treated very badly by the so-called hero in the dance. He would use her and abuse her, while his wife watched in a jealous helpless rage from the wings. That is simply not the way life is today. And dance according to her should reflect the times. I do touch on the origins of dance, though," she says. She is the lady who has choreographed her own dances. They are based on themes of nature, love, etc. "Although the themes are similar, the entire treatment is different. It is fresher, more positive."

STUMBLING BLOCKS

There have been lots of hardships in the couple's lives, but nothing that they could not deal with. In fact, it is the challenges that keep them going. The couple always keeps their books very visible. "Any time we feel low, we just look at the books and feel charged and satisfied about having done so much," Vidya says, and Suresh nods wisely - something he has been doing a lot of ever since he started. Suresh and Vidya dote on their daughter Mahita. Even their hectic schedules haven't prevented them from spending time with her. In fact, most of the time when they work, their daughter, Mahita is away in school. When she isn't, they simply take their five-year-old along to appointments. "I carry paper and crayons in my purse. Mahita understands that she has to sit quietly when a meeting is on, and she is quite cooperative," Vidya reveals. At times when she simply cannot accompany her parents, like when Vidya Bhavani and Suresh go for her programmes, she stays with her grandmother. "I am very lucky to have a network of support."

With the second baby on the way, many good things are happening in their lives. A brand new car, waiting advertisers, work-related trips abroad, and of course, their growing togetherness.

