

Raga platter with a seasoning of memories

Can you tell an Alankari from a Gangeyabhushani? Sound like an expert on rare Carnatic ragas, with some help from Vidya Bhavani Suresh's latest book

By PARSHATHY J NATH

What is the connection between the price rates of varying quantities of gold and the raga Alankari? You might ponder on this when you read the first page of *50 Rare Ragas of Carnatic Music*, authored by Vidya Bhavani Suresh, a Bharatanatyam exponent and musicologist. Read further and you'll realise that she is trying to drive home the point that even the slightest increase in weight impacts the rate of gold. This theory works perfectly when it comes to rare ragas like Alankari, which changes into a different raga with the slightest structural change.

The book, unlike conventional treatises on Carnatic music, does not intimidate the lay reader with a serious, authoritative voice. Instead, Suresh weaves in personal anecdotes and episodes from her childhood, to initiate us into the quirks and unique traits of these ragas. There is technical detailing as well, where she explains to you its structure by dissecting the *avarohanams* and *avarohanams*. But, the voice is more of a friend's than that of a teacher's.

"We began writing books on demystifying arts in 2000. Initially, we brought them out as 32-page booklets. But later, we decided to expand the works into a proper book format. And, we are encouraging schools and corporate companies to buy them in bulk, and use them as gifting options as well. We call this venture 'A book instead of a bouquet'," says Suresh.

The author resides in an old-world,



Making art accessible Vidya Bhavani Suresh and BA Suresh have dedicated their lives to decoding classical arts. BY PARSHATHY J NATH

blue apartment in Mylapore, decked with several such tomes that she has authored in the last 18 years. These cover different classical art forms, such as Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi and Koodiyattam.

Painting a picture

Some of the books are picture-intensive, like the one that features a photo essay on how Kathakali artistes do their face and head gear for a performance.

They make sure they set up pho-

toshoots for the artistes and click pictures.

"We want these pictures to come under the Skanda Publications brand. We have travelled to Kerala to set up a photoshoot for images for our work on Koodiyattam and Mohiniattam," she says. Her husband, BA Suresh, a former journalist, edits all her works, which are then published under the brand name of Skanda Publications. The couple quit its respective professions in media and the corporate sector in 2000, and decided to invest all

its time in publishing. "I was performing till then and holding lecture demonstrations in schools and Rotary Club events. There would be question hour sessions, where I would interact with the audience." That's when her husband noticed the technical knowledge on the arts she had acquired over the years. He suggested that she invest her time and energy in making this knowledge accessible to the world, by writing books. "Rare ragas is my pet subject. AP Komala, my teacher, was an expert and had a penchant for decoding these rare ragas."

Much underrated

She realised there are just one or two songs composed in these rare ragas, unlike the popular ones such as Shankarabharanam or Kalyani. "So, it was difficult to write an entire chapter on some of them. That's when the idea to link them with personal experiences struck me. I wanted to treat these ragas like an experience. And, then I continued to write in a flow and finished the work in 11 months. Incidents came pouring out."

She talks in detail about vivadi ragas like Gangeyabhushani that can be tricky, because one variation of notes changes the raga. There are the vakra ragas, like Chintamani, whose *avarohanam* and *avarohanam* are set in a zig zag order. "Then, there are ragas like Niroshtha, whose *svaras* have been chosen in such a way that your lips do not touch while rendering them. The lyrics of the song, 'Raja Raja Radhite', are written this way."

Suresh feels this information needs to be in the open for people from all backgrounds to understand Carnatic music better. "And, musicians should be transparent about the ragas so that pressure is taken off from the audience and they don't spend their time cracking the raga." The raga universe, which she has created in this book, is definitely one step closer to this ideal.

The book, priced at ₹1,330, is available for order at skandapublications.in and in outlets in the city. For queries, mail vidyabhavanisuresh@hotmail.com

GRAND MASTER

The 16th Century composer Parandara Dasa is widely considered the 'Pitamaha' of Carnatic music as it stands today.



