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Story and interview by Choodie Shivaram, Bangalore

Rama Navami meant to me as a child newfound freedom--exams were just concluded and school closed for summer vacation. I would enthusiastically run to the Rama Mandira behind our house to be with the crowd. At age ten I couldn't comprehend what devotion meant. Yet I spent most of the day there with other girls of my age. After morning puja, we would draw colorful designs called rangoli in front of the sacred images. We would wait till people came for darshan in the evening, and eagerly looked forward to their comments and appreciation for our rangoli and then bask in the compliments. The evenings were aglow with brightly lit pandals (stages) erected at temples and playgrounds. Mellifluous music, both vocal and instrumental, rent the air. The characteristic feature of Rama Navami celebrations is the expression of devotion through classical music and harikathas.

When I went to the concerts with my mother, she would expect me to sit quietly and listen. The childish curiosity in me would ponder why this festival was celebrated with classical music and not dance or dramas, which we children would enjoy more. After childhood I became a serious listener of classical music. It's my children now who ask the same questions.

Numerous organizations in India celebrate Ramotsava, inviting musicians to perform. Sri Rama Seva Mandali of Chamarajpet, Bangalore, is perhaps one of the oldest and most noted in the country. This year, the Mandali is celebrating its 57th year of Ramotsava. Spread over a month and a half, it is the largest Rama Navami celebration in the country. It hosts over 150 celebrated musicians from all over India. It was here that young musicians like "Mandolin" Srinivas, Kadri Gopalnath, Ravi Kiran and Sashi Kiran, brothers who shot to international fame later, began. The living legend of carnatic music, Dr. M.S. Subbulakshmi, has enthralled the audience here with her devotional rendition for 35 years continuously. Veena maestro Dr. V. Doreswamy Iyengar says, "The Sri Rama Seva Mandali's Rama Navami celebration is one of the premier festivals in the country. This stage impels the best musicians to come forward and perform every year."

In April and May, the three acres of playgrounds of the Fort High School--built during the British Raj--are converted into a huge auditorium. The school is surrounded by Tipu's summer palace, a centuries-old Lord Venkataramanaswamy temple and Tipu's fort. The road in front of the school leads to the main bazaar named after King Krishnarajendra, of the Wodeyar dynasty. The market area is now congested with vehicular traffic, vegetable, fruit and flower vendors and roadside hawkers.

Amidst this hustle and bustle, the sleepy, dusty Fort High School grounds suddenly come alive in preparation for the music festival. Special pujas and little ceremonies surround the pandal construction, everyone anxious to impregnate every post, rope and crossbeam with a feeling of power. The massive

pandalis constructed out of casurina poles and zinc sheets. Once completed, it becomes an imposing open-air concert hall that can accommodate over 10,000 people. Sober advertisement banners carrying welcoming messages to the performers line every available space inside and outside the pavilion.

The sparkling, seven-foot-tall bronze mandapakept aloft at the center of the southern end of the pandalarrests attention as one enters. Big images of Sri Rama, Laxmana, Sita and Hanuman draped in silver outfits adorn the mandapa.The deities are exquisitely decorated with garlands of jasmine, fragrant lilies and bright orange flowers.

My first visit to these concerts fifteen years ago is still alive in my memory. Nothing has changed ever since. The road leading to the venue becomes a scene of increased confusion as a splurge of vehicles heads towards Rama Seva Mandali. The traffic policeman desperately blows his whistle to command some order. Restless drivers continuously sound the horn, impatient to get inside the auditorium before the concert begins. The scene repeats day after day. All at once, the cacophony quiets as the musicians saunter to the microphone.

There is a characteristic feature about the people who attend classical music concerts. Most of them are middle-aged and above. But of late, I have noticed more young boys and girls accompanying their parents to these concerts. I rejoice in this new trend. Women clad in traditional zari saris,diamonds in their ears and nose studs glittering--the heavenly scent of Mysore mallige worn in their hair--blend in fashionable

harmony to the classical pieces. The main concerts featuring renowned musicians begin at 6:30 evening time and last for at least three hours. At times, artists continue longer, responding to encore requests from the audience. Halfway through the performance, the strong aroma of south Indian sambar and rasam distractingly wafts through the air reaching those sitting in the front rows, tingling the palates. It's the smell of the piping hot food cooking for the volunteers and organizers at a makeshift kitchen behind the main pandal.

I have spoken to musicians who have been performing here, asking them how different it is to play on this platform. All of them are unanimous in their opinion. "The audience here is very receptive and it encourages the musician to excel. It gives us immense satisfaction and what adds to the whole thing is the spiritual atmosphere," says veena master Doreswamiengar. "There is some shakti in this place. I can feel it when I am performing. There are occasions when I have been unwell before a concert, but when I begin, I feel a new surge of energy in me."

Sarod maestro Ustad Amjad Ali Khan, who has performed for the Mandali, once wrote: "The sacred and spiritual atmosphere that prevailed in the thatched pandal, the soothing breeze flowing around, made the whole environment more conducive to the pleasure of the musicians and music lovers. It is difficult to imagine the gathering of more than 10,000 people in a music concert in Bangalore." Indeed, it is a huge number for a classical music concert. The crowd increases whenever a famous musician performs and many must listen from outside the pandal.

The unpredictable summer showers do not deter people from coming to the concerts. Last year people braved the rains at the prodigy U. Srinivas' mandolin concert. The buttery, golden voice of Begum Parveen Sultana silenced the heavy downpour. Her devotion-charged rendering of a composition on Goddess Bhavani mesmerized the audience, who could feel Her presence amidst the thunderclaps.

Besides hosting concerts of musicians of high repute, the Mandali affords opportunity to up and coming young musicians to perform. They call it the "Juniors Program" which starts an hour and a half before the main concert. Many child prodigies and beginners who made their debut here have achieved international recognition. "Unless we give a chance to the youngsters and encourage them, how will they get a break? Earlier, we would organize music competitions for youngsters and renowned musicians would judge them. But we scrapped that to give a chance to everyone rather than encouraging this competition spirit," says Narayana Swamy Rao.

The Mandali is not just a cultural organization. There is a religious side to it, which is in fact its true identity. Elaborate pujas are preformed three times a day to the murthis. A homa is organized every year. Every morning, a revered pontiff from one of the Hindu religious mutts delivers discourses on the great epics or Puranas--attended mostly by housewives.

The Rama Seva Mandali has been annually celebrating the festival for 57 years without one break. Petty fights and controversies have not dogged this organization.

The Mandali has been battling to secure a place of its own. Its future aspirations include a music academy providing training for youngsters, a library of music and dance and providing scholarships to deserving students for advanced training. The Mandali continues to enjoy the support of world-renown musicians who perform at very modest rates, their philanthropy inspired by their love of music and regard for the great masters.

Sidebar: Mandali's Main Man

My first visit to the Mandali was on assignment for a daily of South India, The Deccan Herald. When I arrived at the mandali stage that summer afternoon, it was dark and quiet. No one was around. I noticed an elderly man stretched out on a wooden bench, clad nonchalantly in a dhoti. I approached him and said I was looking for Narayana Swamy Rao. The man on the bench regarded me quickly and kindly, then stood up and said, "I am Narayana Swamy Rao." I was startled, and it took a few minutes to appreciate that this unassuming person was the intelligence behind this major event. As I began to talk with him, he narrated the beginnings of what is now one of the prized mandalis in India. It started 57 years ago on a village lane. Fourteen-year-old Narayana Swamy, a police officer's son in a middle class family, felt a sudden urge to celebrate Ganesha Chaturti. With two other friends he went house to house seeking donations. They raised a total of five rupees. Their success encouraged the boys to celebrate Rama Navami the next year. They collected fifteen rupees for this event, the birth of the Sri Rama Seva Mandali, in 1939.

Narayana Swamy Rao had become friends with the distinguished flutist, T.R. Mahalingam, and received an

introduction to the famous violinist A. Chandrasekariah. "My introduction to Chandrasekariah was a turning point. He introduced me to the Chowdiah, a legendary violinist, and there soon developed a rapport. These two great artists recommended other musicians to perform for a modest sum. This tradition has continued unbroken," says Narayana Swamy Rao.

Bringing the Mandali to this pinnacle of acclaim and popularity was an arduous task. Narayana Swamy Rao made many sacrifices in his career and personal life. "I never give up. Failures do not discourage me. I know Rama will always guide me," he says optimistically.

Narayana Swamy Rao sidelined academics to pursue the Mandali's development seriously. He studied up to the eleventh standard, then got a job with Aeronautics Limited. But his employers failed to understand his driving commitment to the Rama Navami celebrations, and refused to grant him leave for organizing the festival. He quit that job after two years and joined the Life Insurance Corporation, but again had to quit for the same reason. This cycle continued until he finally gave up trying to hold a job and serve the Rama Navami Mandali. He dedicated all his time to husbanding the Mandali's growth. "He would leave the house at seven in the morning and return only in the evening. He would go house to house collecting donations," says Narasamma, Narayana Swamy Rao's wife of 44 years.

Narayana Swamy Rao is now in his 70s and of late there have been minor aggravations of his health. Still, he doesn't leave

the pandal till the festival is over. He lives there, out in the open--a thin sheet on a hard wooden bench is his bed. His youngest son, Varadaraj, has started staying with his father now. Months before the Navami gathering, he commences his fund drive and organizing. Booking of musicians is done at least three months in advance. For three months after the event Narayana Swamy Rao takes his time finalizing the accounts, having them audited and submitting the audited report to the Mandali committee.

News In Brief

VEDIC CYBERSPACE NOW includes the Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies. Professor Michael Witzel, who chairs Harvard University's Sanskrit and Indian Studies Department, (the oldest such department in the hemisphere) is editor-in-chief. "Our aim is to disseminate our work quickly," says Witzel, who is equally dedicated to preserving the oral tradition of Vedic transmission, acknowledging its superior preservation of the original texts "because not even one syllable is allowed to be changed." Contact: "ejvs-list@arcadiax1.arcadia.polimi.it" On the World Wide Web: <http://www.ardacia.polimi.it/~ejvslist/>

A VATICAN-LIKE AUTONOMY is being suggested for India's richest temple town. The Tirumala-Tirupati Devasthanams Venkateswara Divyakshetram would allow autonomous political administration. The proposal

also recommends diversion of the Telegu Ganga waters to meet the demands of pilgrims. The temple earns over \$50-million annually from its hundi, gate collections and the sale of human hair.

"RAPID ACTION GROUPS" are being organized by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad in Britain to defend Hindus from harassment by Muslim radicals. The groups consist of up to 20 "strong-minded people," not necessarily VHP members, who are ready to deploy anywhere in Britain within 48 hours.

THE FIRST EUROPEANSadhana Conference of the Association of Teachers in Rishiculture Yoga was held in July on the island of Zeeland, in southwest Holland. Initiates of the late Yogamaharishi Dr. Swami Gitananda Giri came from throughout Europe for the three-day event which focused on Vedic and yogic rituals and practices from asana to puja, and from yogic childbirth to bharata natyam. The conference is to be an annual event.

KARNATAKA FARMERS are threatening "direct action" against the American fast-food chains, Pizza Hut, Kentucky Fried Chicken and MacDonald's, who are about to set up shop in Bangalore. They cite United States Senate investigations that processed "junk"

foods are a major cause of cancer. They also point out that increased production of grains to feed the hapless chickens-to-be-fried and cows-to-be-burgered will tax Bangalore's meagre water resources. Maneka Gandhi, India's former Environment Minister, is also opposed to the entry of fast-food chains into Bharat.

DADA J.P. VASWANI'S 77th birthday was celebrated at the Sadhu Vaswani Mission Campus in Pune, India, with the annual 24-hour-long Anand Akhand Kirtan Yagna and the presentation to Dada of nearly \$650,000 designated for acquiring equipment for the Mission's Cancer Institute.

KASHMIRI MILITANTS RESENT the influx of Afghan mercenaries. Locals say the "hired guest" militants have no ties to the land, no culture and no values, preferring to wield guns, loot, and take local girls. And many seem to be tiring of the violence. Press Trust of India reported a 50-year-old boatman saying wistfully, "How we wish the old times would return and the gardens be full of laughter and chatter."

THE TIBETAN PLATEAU Project, encompassing parts of Nepal, India, Bhutan, Tibet and China, is cooperating with the Muktinath Traditional Medical Center in Nepal to preserve medicinal plants while also generating

income-producing projects utilizing the native plants. Many of the 10,000 species included are threatened by habitat destruction and over-exploitation.

THE INTERNATIONAL Swaminarayan Satsang Organization of Southern California has finally won a lawsuit which will allow them to proceed with construction of their temple in Norwalk City. The three-year legal battle ended with a decision completely in their favor, with the judges even asking why such a fuss had been made since the temple fulfilled all requirements. The temple's location is adjacent to two churches. It was opposed by a neighbor and a few people in the community.

A 120-YEAR LIFESPAN, the Ayurvedic norm, is gaining acceptance as a realistic goal. Just ask the American Academy of Anti-Aging Medicine. Among the keys for long life: eating less, neutralizing free radicals, keeping the mind and body exercised, and as Dr. Dharma Singh Khalsa says in *New Age Journal*, "a diet rich in grains, beans, fruits and vegetables, with a daylong fast once a week to help in shedding the extra calories."

ANTI-TERRORISM LEGISLATION Under consideration by the United States Congress could severely curtail relief and fund-raising efforts for organizations abroad.

Supporters say legitimate relief groups have nothing to fear, and that the law is aimed at stopping the flow of money to terrorists disguised as charity--primarily in the Mid-East. But relief agencies fear the bill will discourage donations and eventually impact charities everywhere, including those serving India and Sri Lanka.

SRI CHINMOY'S LATEST milestone is musical, achieved in July by composing his 13,000th song. Entitled "Victory's Heart-Song," its lyrics read, "In the battlefield of life, we blow the Victory-Horn of our Lord Supreme. In our heart-sky we fly the Victory-Banner of our Father Supreme."

ANUVIBHA REPORTER, the journal of the Anuvrat Global Organization founded by H.H. Acharya Mahapragya of the Terapanth Jain Religious Order, is now available for subscription. Dedicated to human and planetary nonviolence, its "commitment to ahimsa is total, and it will work hard to popularize ahimsa as a way of life" writes editor S.L. Gandhi. Contact: Anuvibha, B-94 Saraswati Marg, Bajaj Nagar, Jaipur-302 015, INDIA.

INDIA'S POPULATION GROWTH is slowing toward a predicted halt by early in the 21st-century according to a population advisor to the World Bank. Now with

920-million people, India's goal is a rate of 2.1 births-per-woman. Between 1951 and 1992, that rate went from six to 3.6.

AYURVEDA DESERVES its own ministry, and India's Prime Minister, P.V. Narasimha Rao, is dedicated to getting it established. Press Trust of India reports Rao saying development of the Ayurvedic system of medicine hasn't received adequate attention in the past.

FORMER RAJNEESHIS Susan Hagan and Sally-Anne Croft have been convicted of conspiring to kill a federal prosecutor who was investigating allegations of sham marriage and immigration fraud among members at the Rajneeshpuram commune in Oregon, USA. The plot's alleged mastermind, secretary Ma Anand Sheela, remains at large.

THE SAMAVEDA, its ancillary text, the Gandharva Veda, Vedic recitation and performance, and oral transmission are some of the topics of focus at the upcoming Conference on Samaveda to be held at Harvard University by the International Foundation for Studies in the Vedas. Contact: Mr. Shastry L. Kambhampati, P.O.Box 318, Rahway, New Jersey, 07065, USA; or e-mail Prof. Michael Witzel at Harvard University:

Witzel@husc3.harvard.edu.

RELIGION REPORTERS CAN find sage advice in *Deities & Deadlines, A Primer on Religion News Coverage*, offered by the Freedom Forum First Amendment Center at Vanderbilt University. Author John Dart, religion editor of the Los Angeles Times, offers resources and tips on informative religion writing. Contact: 1207 18th Avenue South, Nashville, Tennessee, 37212, USA.

THE "SPEAK SANSKRIT" movement is exploding across India, with over 100,000 people attending crash courses in Sanskrit Sambhashana Shibira (Sanskrit Conversational Course), during the first quarter of 1995. The classes are lead by Hindu Seva Pratishtana, which has trained hundreds of sevavratis (missionaries) to teach a simple but effective course designed by Sri Krishna Shastry. Contact: Aksharam, 8th Cross, II phase, Girinagar, Bangalore, 560085, INDIA; or by e-mail, contact Venkatesh Murthy at: vmurthy@informix.com.

THE ROLE OF ART IN RELIGION was recently examined at the Graduate Theological Union of Berkeley, California, by over 300 artists and 60 religious scholars, including Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims.