The Perumals; Nurturing South Indian Arts in South Africa
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"One day I was reading a message on a lavatory wall. It read: I often have a dream walking along the shoreline and see two sets of footprints behind me. But during the difficult times of my life, I see only one set of footprints in the dream. I asked, 'Why Lord do you leave me alone then?' God said, 'My son, when you see two sets of footprints, I am walking beside You, but when you see one set I am carrying You in your most troubled times.' Although I have always turned to Shiva for help, I too have, during rough times, wondered a little if maybe He had neglected me."

These are the candid words of Manogaran Perumal, 29 - one of the South African Hindu community's most beloved and acclaimed young religious singers, happily married to talented dance artist Kalayvani and already a proud daddy. Since childhood, the intoxication of music kept him oblivious to what most people call "problems." Feeling with God, not separated, was his blissful reality, and sharing that feeling with others his unending joy. But adulthood, with its pleasures, also brought its sobering karmas, even into the devonic orbit of "Dino," as friends tagged the melodic songster.

It all subtly began in 1989 near the time of one of the most wonderful high points of his life, becoming engaged to Kalayvani. Suddenly, the ground started to shift. Just three months before their nuptial vows, his career overturned, flipping 180 degrees. "And then about three weeks before our wedding," he recounts, "the hospital detected cancer in my mother. I had planned to live alone with my wife - I have my own house - but had to quickly arrange to have them to move in with me." Though challenging, it was still nothing his cheerful disposition, music revelry and supportive bride couldn't surmount. "But 1990 brought the worst time in my life, very trying. With Nelson Mandela being released, political instability and so much change, there was no financial investment during that time. And my work is with

financial investment and life insurance. Also I was totally involved in music performances all over the country that took up a lot of time in preparation and I was not concentrating on my job. It turned out to be a financial disaster for me, and embarrassing." On the surface, it appears to be the typical "all artist, no businessman," scenario bur, actually not quite. The reason he changed occupations mid-life was directly related to apartheid discrimination, which forced him to abandon an excellent but futureless post as an instructor in the telephone company teaching pupils how to install fancy communications systems. In the first full-time year in his new insurance firm he won three performance awards, proving his business mettle. But the "all artist" label isn't all wrong either. Manogaran has always had a hard time saying "No" to the long list of Hindu temples, charities and ashrams demanding his soulful voice to loosen up the generous flow of bhakti, or flow of donations. And in 1989 he simply overextended his musical big-heartedness.

Back to Normal

But 1991 brought a return of peace - as he balanced his love of music, wife, daughter and job responsibilities with seasoned grihastha skill. "I think the music was a form of meditation that calmed everything down and gave me a lot of help during those trying times." And despite occasional nostalgic references to the simplicity of being single, Manogaran loves married life. "My daughter Bhavapriya, one year and two months, already says 'Aum.' She accompanies us when we go out to sing or dance and if you let her loose among the musicians, she runs to the mridangam and tabla. And when I sing, she dances and twirls her body like her mother. That sends a thrill that nothing else could give me in this world."

Though under control, his life plays to a fast raga. "In just the last couple weeks we've been to Johanessburg, 300 miles from here. Last weekend we performed at the Divine Life Ashram in Pietermaritzburg. This weekend I was on TV on a half-hour special, Ragas and Rhythms. Performing basically every weekend, anywhere in the country whenever our services are needed, sometimes free of charge depending on what the cause is for." The uncommercial aspect is important to him. He remains one of a small breed of artists determined not to sell out to a life of lifeless recording studios, churning out canned playback CD's, only to be composted over each year by the next new layer of pop hits. He's a live artist. "I only sing religious music and prefer singing in temples. If anyone phones me, and would like me to sing I will go out and sing, regardless if I am going to get money or not. "I've the love for music." In 1988 he was a member of a troupe that toured Mauritius and was selected as the only Indian singer for the 1987 Dias Festival.

At Home With the Perumals

Kalayvani, 23, already marshals the mature duties of a mother with prematurely seasoned grace, lighting their oil lamp, a Kamakshi-kuthuvillaku morning and evening. A trained bharata natyam dancer and gifted performer, she has remained at home for the last two years with her baby daughter. "Motherhood means everything to me," she shares. "My daughter is my life. I have sacrificed a lot of my dancing when it comes to my baby. But once my daughter is old enough, I intend to pursue my dreams and be an Indian classical dance teacher."

On stage the Perumals are a portrait of classical Indian artistic beauty. Even at home, they keep the steady tal of their marital lives in sync - with one small trick beat. She eats meat. He's vegetarian. "Though we joke about it, she would prefer I ate meat," Manogaran confides. "Still, I go ahead and preach to her vegetarianism in a subtle way, but ultimately it must come from within her. One challenge is that she is from Capetown where there are not so many vegetable varieties, so she forgets certain vegetables even exist," he laughs. "Also, I must be quite honest. I do have a problem with the challenges of being husband and father. Being a single musician, if somebody called me I just made the decisions myself. But after getting married, I found that making these decisions became very difficult. Whenever I had to make the decision on the spot and then went home, sometimes I was in a spot of trouble."

Manogaran credits his parents for giving him the religious footing in life that floods out so fluidly on stage. But another source of spiritual sunlight is there too-the Saiva Sithantha Sungum, one of South Africa's most industrious and influential Tamil Saivite institutions. "When I first joined it. I met a Mr. Roy Pillay and remember the saying he put on his gravestone, Do good and be good. My message to all Hindus would be just that: "Do good and be good.' Keep it in their minds like a mantra, like Om Namasivaya. It will prepare one for anything."

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