

ART & CULTURE
**A WALK
THROUGH
HISTORY**
V. SRIRAM



"I do not know if I deserve this" says Venkatakrishnan Sriram modestly, on being told that he has been chosen as the Champion of Chennai for Art & Culture.

Spend the next few minutes reading about this most interesting man, and you will see why we believe he is highly deserving of this.

WHERE DID IT ALL BEGIN? WE HAVE TO THANK A GRANDMOTHER.

Sriram grew up in Delhi under what he calls the "dominating" influence of his grandmother for whom anything Indian had to be celebrated. Sriram started learning Carnatic music from age 6 and continued till he was 15, by which time he was totally smitten by the art, apart from becoming quite knowledgeable in it, as well as motivated enough to want to know more about it. That trait has influenced the various activities he has got involved in since, much to the benefit and joy of various Carnatic music aficionados from around the world.

Having grown up with learning Carnatic music from paatu vadhyaars, and shlokas from his grandmother, and having to compulsorily participate in school plays during the annual day and being critiqued by a very high standard setting grandmother about making eye contact, or fumbling at certain times while delivering dialogues, Sriram says by the time he was 15 he was molded to an extent that he couldn't shake off the highly evolved expectations from a stage performance and he just had to carry it forward from there. Thank God for that, we say, because those have produced one of Carnatic Music's finest critics today.

While his parents feared that he might end up becoming a musician or a journalist and forced him to cut down some of his extra-curricular activities and study engineering in college which he eventually did, the influence was clearly strong. Notwithstanding teenage peer pressure to conform in college in Delhi, Sriram continued his passion for attending Carnatic

concerts in the evenings after college while his classmates shook their heads in disbelief not knowing what all this was about.

The passion for Carnatic music never left and when he eventually moved to Chennai, now the home of Carnatic music, "it all burst out".

MARRIAGE. AND HOW CALCUTTA'S LOSS BECAME CHENNAI'S GAIN.

In 1993, shortly after Sriram got married to Sharada, he moved to Chennai from Calcutta and joined her family business in hydraulics. Sriram's father-in-law played a huge role in Sriram continuing to stay in Chennai. He constantly encouraged and supported his passion, felt it was an important part of Sriram's personality, and never wanted Sriram to be a uni-dimensional business focused person.

Even in 2009, when Sriram had a health issue and was contemplating giving up some of his Art & Culture related activities, it was his father in law who persuaded him not to, and urged him to find a balance, rather than make choices between the various demands on Sriram's time.

Sriram believes he is also very lucky to be supported by a great team who have also greatly helped him pursue and do justice to his various interests.

SO WHAT HAS BEEN HIS ART & CULTURE FOOTPRINT SINCE COMING TO CHENNAI IN 1993?

In '97 along with many others, Sriram started a website designing business. This was also the time when he and Sharada got very enamored of Sanjay Subramaniam's music. They did not know him then, but faithfully attended all his concerts.

At one time, Sriram called Sanjay Subramaniam with hesitancy. "I am shy", he says, "not like Sharada, who is bold", and asked to meet Sanjay Subramaniam. Sanjay was very welcoming, recognizing him as a regular at all his concerts, and agreed to



meet to discuss the idea proposed by Sriram – a website for himself. That meeting saw the birth of a close family friendship between Sriram, Sharada, Sanjay and his wife, that has grown over time and lasts to this day.

At the meeting however, Sanjay said he did not want a website for himself, but proposed a general one on Carnatic music. And so was born www.sangeetham.com with weekly articles on Carnatic music, profiles of musicians, a discussion forum etc and this ran from 1998 – 2005. Six months after it began, Sriram was running this pretty much on his own and by 2000, there was a regular readership. His readers, though, wanted more. Many of them were from out of Chennai, and would visit Chennai during the music season in December, and many wanted to just meet him. Sriram then suggested a heritage walk along the history, homes, and stories relating to famous musicians.

Having suggested it, Sriram also needed the information to be able to do justice to these walks. He turned to S Rajam, brother of Balachander, a painter inspired by Ajanta school, and a great musician in his own right. At the time Sriram was in his 30s and had in the 80+ year old Rajam a Guru and visited him often in his home in Nadu Street. And so when he went to Rajam asking

for information for his heritage walk, the old man proceeded immediately to take a walk with Sriram in the pouring rain, with both of them under the same umbrella, "like Raj Kapoor and Nargis in pyar hua ikraar hua", and walked down Mada Veedhi for 1.5 hours. At the end of that trip, Sriram had all the information he needed.

Come the day, Chennai online provided breakfast - Ramnarayan being a big source of support; Sanjay came along; Musiri Subramania Iyer's house was opened up with medals etc on display, and the heritage walk eventually was a spectacular success and started off a tradition of the same.

Subsequent heritage walks covered Georgetown, Triplicane, and later destinations outside Chennai - Thanjavur, Tiruvaiyaru etc... until one year the tsunami happened, and then the walks stopped for a few years, before restarting. Local walks kept continuing though sangeetham.com faded away after a while.

In Aug 2003, Mr. Chari of TAG Centre, who had already started the South India Heritage Lecture Series, asked Sriram to give a talk on Papanasam Sivan, which was very well received. The audience had two individuals who played a big role thereafter - Sri. Muthiah, the historian from Madras Musings



and Sri.Padmanabhan, of East West books, subsequently Westland Books, now owned by Amazon.

CONCATENATION OF CIRCUMSTANCES

Muthiah had been reading Sriram's articles on sangeetham.com, but it was Sriram's association with Shruti magazine that had impressed him a great deal. Shruti magazine was then being edited by Sri.K V Ramanathan, a senior IAS officer, and mentored Sriram while he started writing articles for Shruti. These were 5000+ words, requiring lots of research on facts, and needed a historical perspective as well. Muthiah liked the historical perspective Sriram was able to bring in, and so he met Sriram and asked him to start writing for Madras Musings. Initially, these were small articles on demand. In 2008, Muthiah formally asked Sriram to join the Board of Madras Musings, and thereafter began the Man from Madras Musings – MMM – references.

Meanwhile, Ramnarayan and Gowri Ramnarayan introduced Sriram to Ms.Sushila Ravindranath, Editor of Indian Express. Sriram started writing an extremely popular and humorous column every Sunday on Carnatic music, the quirks of the musicians etc.

Very soon, The Hindu also asked him

to contribute to their pages. And so, as strange and incredible as it may seem, Sriram was writing for both The Hindu and The Indian Express at the same time for a while, but now writes only for The Hindu. This started as a column once a month on Friday – Encore – referring, analysing and commenting on clippings from past editions of The Hindu on Carnatic music, but now Sriram is writing a 2 year series on Saint Thyagaraja.

On Muthiah's suggestion to Padmanabhan, Sriram was asked to write a 22 chapter book on his favorite Carnatic musicians of the last century. Having had access to his uncle's phenomenal collection of music, grown up with it, Sriram already had fixed ideas about who his favorite heroes and heroines of Carnatic music were, and thus came about his first book "Carnatic Summer" in 2004, followed by several other books, a few co-authored with others:

The Devadasi and the Saint – the Life and Times of Bangalore Nagarathnamma (2007) Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, Life & Music (2008)
Historic Residences of Chennai. Chandra Sankar (2008)
Fourscore and more - The History of the Music Academy Madras (2009, with Malathi Rangaswamy)
Championing Enterprise: 175 years of the Madras Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Karumuttu Centre (2012)
Brick by brick - The Vidya Mandir Story (2016 with Karthik Bhatt)

Sriram also wrote the history of, and then became a committee member of the prestigious Music Academy that he believes is doing a noble role in promotion of the arts for the last 90 years, with all of its records for that entire period neatly published and now digitized. For Sriram, the Music Academy is not just a sabha – it does not exist to record music and sell it, but is a serious organization that researches music and dance and has done a phenomenal job.

He has also lead the reformation of their library – 7000 books on music and dance, with their oldest & the first book on Carnatic music having been published in 1859! Working with a few others, now 150 books before 1900 are now fully electronic, the catalog digitized and will go on web, enabling research from around the world. Now he is working on digitization of photos from 1929 right from the first academy meeting.

TIME MANAGEMENT FOR ALL THIS RESEARCH

Sriram gives us a peek on how he is able to manage so many things. He has simply cut out everything that is not relevant to his pursuits. Thus he watches no TV, does not socialize, indulges in very little telephone chatting beyond required, and does not know about science fiction, fiction etc. He has a library of over 4000 books on Carnatic music, corporate history, madras history, and classical music history. These books and the internet are his world when he has to research. Plus, thanks to the Govt of India's digitization program, the University of California, the University of Chicago, and Google books etc there are now thousands of books on Old Madras. Not just books, but also correspondence of The East India Company, newspaper reports etc

The City itself has so much to offer, he says. There is a Madras History Group on facebook which has over 15000 followers, and gives him a lot of interesting info too.

WHAT MORE CAN BE DONE?

Sriram feels that while there is adequate awareness now on Chennai's history, the State Govt can and must do a lot more to support. He feels that Chennai's citizens have not fully gotten behind the preservation of its heritage and the Govt too does not seem to understand the tourism potential of guided tours across the various Heritage buildings and Govt departments, colleges, various sites and homes.

He feels that despite all these years of effort, there is very little to show as successes - some conservation done at the Chepauk Palace, national gallery Egmore, Royapuram Station being saved, and even Madras week celebrations... but he feels these are too little, too late and so much has already been lost. He feels sadly, that Chennai compares unfavorably to the other metros in India where there is a whole lot more pride and Govt support.

On the old buildings, while designs may be British, he points out that the work was all done by Indian kothanaars, sithaanaars, and now we have lost that art & technology of building.

He feels Private public enterprise has to come together and is the only way forward. Having said that, he also points out that partnership did save the University Senate House spending Rs 11 crores collected by private organisations, but curiously, after renovating it, it has been locked up!

LOOKING FORWARD

He describes Chennai as a mother who has given so much to its people, but is now an old mother and needs its people to look after her. He feels everybody must become a champion of Chennai to make this a great city. Sriram is optimistic about the future. He feels there are many youngsters who are knowledgeable and enthusiastic about heritage and conservation.

Through his works as a chronicler of Chennai's history, culture and trade, his research and books on Carnatic music, his unrelenting efforts in protecting the heritage buildings of the city and in pioneering the concept of heritage walks in the city, Sriram's contribution to the Art & Culture landscape of Chennai is unique and significant. He is a true Champion of Chennai!

R U Srinivas