RAMA KAUSALYA

Transforming young lives through art

Dr. Rama Kausalya, set to receive the Musicologist Award from the Music Academy, Madras this season, is a musician, teacher, musicologist and propagator of culture and traditional values. A model of selflessness, she devotes all her time to inspire and transform lives in rural Tanjavur through music and other arts. She hails from Tillaisthanam, near Tiruvaiyaru, a village known for its music and musical lineage. Kausalya's grandmother was a disciple of Panchu Bhagavatar—along with Narasimha Bhagavatar, one of the Tillaisthanam Brothers, who were Tillaisthanam Rama Iyengar's prime sishyas.



ANIL RAMAN

Born to N. Ramachandran and Rukmini on 28 May 1949, Kausalya belongs to the Jatavallabhar family of Tillaisthanam. From her childhood she has been a voracious reader and equally interested in the theory and practice of music, leading to her becoming a musicologist. A scholar par excellence, she propagates music holistically through her Marabu Foundation, which aims to promote peace and harmony through the fine arts, literature and traditional arts. Conducting workshops and classes free of cost, she has through her foundation, shattered the barriers associated with caste in her hometown.

The Marabu Foundation has been the local partner in organising the Sacred Music Festival in a very aesthetic way in Tiruvaiyaru in collaboration with the Prakriti Foundation, Chennai and INTACH. A former senate member of the Bharathidasan University, Kausalya has also served as a member of the Advisory Committee of All India Radio, Tiruchi.

Rama Kausalya in conversation with Sukanya Sankar

My musical journey

My guru was Venkatasubramanian (Appu vadhyar as we fondly addressed him), grandson and disciple of Narasimha Bhagavatar. He was the most sought-after teacher in those days. I don't recall my first class, but I vividly remember all my classes after the varnam phase. I only learnt vocal music then and continued learning from him till I was 15. After I passed my SSLC exam, I joined the Tiruvaiyaru Music College which was started around the same time. I owe a lot to K.P. Sivanandam and his wife Sarada, the founding pillars of the institution. I was adamant to learn the veena and my gurus Sivanandam Sir and Sarada teacher who were very fond of me and treated me like their own daughter, never denied me my desire to learn anything new. Music became a positive addiction and I did '*asura sadhakam*' as everyone described it. While at college, I had the opportunity to learn from Chittoor Subramania Pillai, T.V. Namasivayam, Srirangam Krishnamurthy Rao and Srivanchiyam Ramachandra Iyer.

I completed the Sangita Siromani course at the Madras University, aced the class and also bagged the A.L. Mudaliar award. Everyone was pleased with my performance and from then on there was no looking back. I decided to pursue my career in music. The college offered me a job the very next year and it was an honour to serve my alma mater.

Kausalya (L) compering a concert by the Sikkil trio at the Sacred Music Festival



AKIRA IO

I somehow preferred teaching and research to performing and my students always referred to me as a passionate teacher. My thirst for knowledge and music was unending. In any given 24 hours, I would be playing the veena, singing or reading. I retired as the principal of the Tiruvaiyaru Music College in 2007.

Passion for research

I was a voracious reader from childhood and my inquisitiveness steered me into research as well. With the able guidance of Tiruvaiyaru Chellam Iyer, T.S Parthasarathy and Prof. R.V. Krishnan, my penchant for research grew and inspired me to author many books.

I wanted to explore 'bhakti ilakiyam' or devotional literature and under the able guidance of Tanjavur T.N. Ramachandran, I was able to study the *Tevaram* and *Divya Prabandham* in depth.

Folk music is another area close to my heart, and I undertook some projects like tracing the influence of folklore in *Tiruvachakam*, and reviving marriage songs. We have formed a group which, when invited, renders songs to suit the various marriage rituals. I also did extensive research on ancient musical instruments in the temples of Tamil Nadu and published my findings as a book—*Alayavazhipattil Isaikaruvigal*. It is saddening that most instruments which used to be a part of the temple culture in my younger days, no longer exist. We often hear the media lament lost or stolen temple idols, but never have I heard anyone lamenting the loss of our ancient musical instruments. I appeal to individuals to donate any small music instrument to a temple, the same way that we offer abhishekam and archanai to the Lord.

The Marabu Foundation

My life as a child was a celebration. Our lives revolved around the temple and all its cultural activities. Be it kolattam, Margazhi bhajanai or playing by the Kaveri, I cherished every moment of my childhood. Education was never a burden, learning was integrated as part of our daily routine and a connected collaborative environment was built. But somehow I felt that these aspects were missing in my hometown and children were glued to the television. I wanted to break that drudgery.



Teaching students at the veena workshop

Two years before I retired, I started the Marabu Foundation on my mother's 80th birthday. The activities of the foundation are twofold. The first is working with the underprivileged children of the village. We wanted to reach the unreachable. We broke the caste barrier and accepted children from all walks of life. They are encouraged to play our traditional games such as pallankuzhi and daayakkattam, to name a few. I also taught them our traditional arts like kolattam and kummi. Every year we conduct a 48-day kolattam festival known as *Javandharai*.

The second activity of the foundation is the revival of music compositions which were once popular. We conduct regular classes on *Tevaram*, *Tiruvachakam* and *Divya Prabandham*. We also conduct workshops in the gurukula style, but I do not believe in one-day workshops. I handpick the candidates so that we have a group of serious learners who are taught these compositions with authentic notation with the help of eminent resource persons. It is heartening to see some of my students include these compositions in their concert repertoire. Some of our recent workshops have been on such topics as the compositions of Vallalar and Ramalinga Swamigal.

Training village children in kolattam





Leading the Javandharai procession



Kausalya and her mother with Bombay Jayashri and participants

Bombay Jayashri called me one day and expressed her desire to teach music to our children. *"Enta Bhagyamu*!" What a privilege it would be for my children to learn from Bombay Jayashri! They had never heard a musician live or experienced a live concert. Assisted by her senior disciples, it was overwhelming to see Jayashri take these little children under her musical wing.

Another technological advancement at our centre happened when Infosys came forward and donated computers. An expert from Tiruchi comes every weekend and conducts classes for the children. We also use these computers for Skype classes with Jayashri.

Impact of Marabu's activities

Although we face many challenges regarding punctuality and attendance, our small yet sustained activities have made a huge impact in the lives of these children. Playing traditional games and learning music have helped them to improve their concentration and coordination. The programmes are devised in such a way so as to make their lives happy, which in turn is reflected in their academics and they are enthused to fare well. Cleanliness, hygienic living, and basic etiquette are all taught to them and I can proudly say that my children stand out as shining examples of what we can achieve in society. Recently, the children sang the *Siva Puranam* during Adi Amavasya at the Panchanadeeswarar Temple in Tiruvaiyaru. My next project is to make them sing the *Nachiyar Tirumozhi* for the next Adi Pooram. ■

The lady bountiful

In conferring the musicologist award on Dr. Rama Kausalya, the Music Academy is honouring itself. An acknowledged expert in Carnatic music in general and in the Tamil works that are sung in particular, she has since retirement from the Tiruvaiyaru Rajah's College of Music, made it her life's mission to propagate music in rural areas. Strange though it may seem, our music, which celebrates its Tanjavur roots, is more or less completely disconnected from the areas where it began. Her efforts in bringing it back to its roots are therefore highly commendable. Her Marabu Foundation, set up with her personal funds and helped by a few musicians such as Bombay Jayashri Ramnath, takes in children from the neighbourhood of Tiruvaiyaru and Tillaisthanam irrespective of caste, economic status or gender. They are taught not just music, but also the import of our Tamil and Sanskrit lyrics, their impact on day-to-day life and the necessity to follow their tenets. The positive influence on the children is there for all to see.

Kausalya's home is not open to just these students. Any scholar interested in the arts is assured of her (and her mother Rukmini Ammal's) hospitality, served up with love and affection. I have been a fortunate recipient of all this from 2007 or so, when I was researching the life of Bangalore Nagarathnamma. Dr. Kausalya got me to interview Nagarathnamma's coachman Krishnan and tambura artist Seetapathy who were in their nineties. Without her, I would not have even known about their existence. Seetapathy followed a peripatetic lifestyle and in order that he be available when I came to interview him, she had him as a houseguest for three days so that he would not go anywhere else!

SRIRAM V.