

Drumming up fema

THE CLOSED-DOOR policy of not letting women take up certain kinds of music has not changed. One has to persistently knock to be allowed entry. A group of women percussionists, who, despite all odds, have come together and are determined not to settle for anything less than "making it big". Stree Tala Tarang — an all-woman percussion ensemble, led by Sukanya Ramgopal, the only woman ghatam artiste who plays it professionally — are all set to release their first album, 'Rainbow'. The album, conceived and composed by Sukanya Ramgopal, will be released tomorrow (July 28) at Gayana Samaja, Bangalore.

Sukanya is a revolutionary of sorts. Regardless of stiff opposition and criticism in music circles, Sukanya has kept up the ghatam tradition and is today recognised as one of the leading ghatam players. "When I decided to learn the ghatam, my Guru Vikku Vinayakram was unwilling to teach me. But his father, Harihara Sharma, was very open-minded. He insisted that I should be taught the ghatam. It so happened that my Guru had to leave for America. He came back after a year to be surprised to see me play the ghatam and with a fair amount of expertise," she laughs, recalling old times.

Ever since 1990, Sukanya had

nurtured dreams of having her own percussion group, comprising only women. She was also resolved to have only "upa tala pakka vadyas" (secondary rhythm instruments) in her group. In 1999, she, along with other like-minded women, formed Stree Tala Tarang. "Nobody gives us any importance. We are invariably expected to adjust to the main artiste. In some concerts we do not even get a microphone," explains

Latha Ramachar, daughter of the country's renowned Khanjira player, H. P. Ramachar. "Our intention is not to hurt anybody. But we find the need to overcome these problems. We want to have a 'voice' of our own," says Sukanya.

In this group of seven members, except Sukanya, the rest of them come from a family of musicians. Ask them what they had to go through to learn an art that was not defined

"feminine" and you do not get definite answers. "It was only by accident that I started playing the instrument," says Latha. Once, while in Tiruvayyar, Latha started playing khanjira and discovered that her father was encouraging. Her brother had found folk instruments more fascinating, while Latha took to serious learning of the khanjira. Sukanya's father disapproved of the idea, but her mother was more than supportive. Bhagyalakshmi's father Bhimachar, a morsing artiste, never had the idea of teaching her morsing. But H. P. Ramachar is supposed to have coerced him into teaching her.

The performing space is a very important factor for every musician. Even women from performing families who took up music faced considerable opposition from male artistes. Though times have changed, male artistes continue to be the determinants whether they can be accompanied by a woman percussionist. There are occasions when the main artiste does not seem to have a problem but the artiste on the primary percussion instrument refuses to play with a woman playing ghatam or khanjira. "We have worked so hard to learn the instrument. We need to put four times the effort to get a concert. Money is not our focus at the moment. We need recognition and space," insists Latha. "We want



The Album cover of 'Rainbow'.

le prowess

to forge a new identity," asserts Vasavi, who recites konnakol for the group.

Bhagya feels that now they have more strength as a group. "Even in terms of music there is an exchange of ideas and in the process we discover new dimensions," feels Bhagyalakshmi. Jayashree Mahesh is a veena player and provides melody support for the group. The other person who plays melody for the group is Geetha Gopal who plays the flute. "Working with Sukanya has given us all a sense of direction. She is a motivator in the true sense of the word," adds Jayashree.

The group has put in more than six months of practice for the album. Ask

them why they chose such an English name, "Rainbow", for their album, and they say: "We are seven. Music has seven notes. A rainbow has seven colours and is seen rarely."

The cassette they claim is unique in many respects. It is produced by an all-woman ensemble. All instruments used in the album such as ghatam, morsing, konnakol and khanjira are secondary rhythm instruments. They have worked on complicated rhythm cycles such as Ardha Jaitaal, played by Hindustani musicians, set to six and a half beats. For the first time even a ghatam tarang (ghatam being played in six different shrutis) has been tried. One piece is a ghatam tarang

accompanied by another ghatam. Sukanya stresses that even their fusion piece, "Rhythmic Rhapsody", is unique. "All instruments are not played simultaneously, but each instrument individually plays a pattern," she says. Drums played by Durga is essentially Western in this piece, but has been adapted to the Carnatic tradition in the other pieces.

On the day of the album release, there will be a live concert of the group, which is to be followed by a unique violin recital that will have only two ghatams as accompaniment. Sukanya is going to accompany her guru, Grammy Award winner Vikku Vinayakram in this concert.

This confident, young group is all set to make a mark. Sukanya has many dreams for her group. She wants to have a grand show inclusive of instruments such as mandolin, saxophone, tabla, dholu and nadaswaram, all played by women. "We want to prove that we don't stand inferior to any man. Anyway, on which instrument does it say 'Men only'?" questions Sukanya.

A patriarchal society will continue to look up for specific meanings of what is "feminine" to limit its movement. But the "feminine" itself is on the move as the group makes it very clear.



Stree Tala Tarang, the all-woman percussion ensemble.

— Pic. by K. Bhagya Prakash.

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