

First, I have to tell you about my family. I am the great granddaughter of Tamil Thatha Dr. U.V. Swaminatha Iyer. So, Tamil was very important to my family. My father looked after my great-grandfather's library. Ours was an orthodox family of those days. My sister and I would take singing lessons from a teacher who used to come home. After a few days, the singing classes stopped. After that I expressed my wish to learn the violin. Then, a violin master would come home to teach me. After a point, he told us he could not come to teach me, so I started learning the violin from T.H. Gurumurthy, brother of Vikku Vinayakram sir. However, since childhood I had been very fond of percussion. At that time during Pongal in Chennai, a *damuru* kind of an instrument made out of clay used to be sold. I used to buy two or three of those and try to play them. I would tell my elder sister to sing and would try to play beats on the table to accompany her. During concerts, I liked to sit at the front and keep the beat, the *talam*. I used to feel very happy and would attentively listen to the *tani avartanam* (the percussion solo) when parts of the concerts would be played on the radio. All my interests and desires were focused on the percussions. Opposite Gurumurthy Sir's violin class, *mridangam* classes used to be held. I used to look at the *mridangam* class longingly. One day I went to the *mridangam* class and Harihara Sharma sir, Vikku sir's father, was there. He had started a school called Jai Ganesh Thala Vathiya Vidhyalaya. I went to him and told him, 'I want to learn the *mridangam* mama; I am very interested.' He replied, 'Is it so? Today is an auspicious day. We shall start. Sit.' My *mridangam* classes started without us following any of the usual formalities like the gifting of betel leaf or nut, or any kind of *gurudakshina*. In three years' time, I started playing the *mridangam* in concerts. Then, once in a while, Vikku Sir would ask, 'Today there is a concert, can you come with me?' I would carry his *ghatam* and go along with him for his concerts. I would be mesmerised by the way he used to play. The *mridangam* and the *ghatam* together! It used to be like a *sawal-jawab* session between the instruments. I would think, 'Ayyo, how is he playing like this? He is playing the *ghatam* the way all the tunes are played in the *mridangam*. Aha!' Next day, I went to him and said that I was interested in learning the *ghatam*. He said, 'Oh right, first you came saying you wanted to learn the violin, then you started playing the *mridangam*, and now you are saying you want to play the *ghatam*! This is only sand. Can you produce sound from this floor? Look at my hands, they are full of bruises. You are a girl, child. You play the *mridangam* very well, continue doing that. I will teach you a lot about that instrument. Don't take up the *ghatam*. I am myself suffering a lot with it.' But I was not convinced with his answer. Next day, I went and said, 'You say it's difficult to produce sound in the *ghatam*. You say it's difficult to play the *ghatam*. I will simply try. Whatever I have learnt by playing on the

mridangam, I will try out on the *ghatam*. If I am not able to produce sound, I will give up my desire to learn it.' He said, 'Let it be. Tomorrow we will see.' He went and told his father, 'Sukkanya has been troubling me for the past two days, saying she wants to learn the *ghatam*. I don't know what to say.' His father said (even now while telling you this I feel great about him) – 'Does the *ghatam* know if a man or a woman is playing it?' The answer he gave, for me, I feel... According to me, he is a great person. He used to teach all his students like he would teach his own children. So, I was very happy about it. At that time Vikku Sir had just left for the USA to take classes. His father told Vikku Sir, in a challenging tone, 'You are going to the US for a year, see how I train her while you're gone.' He used to sit in an easy chair and teach me. There was a tune, *tharigidu tharigidu tharigidu*, which had to be played fast. He would say, 'Play *tharigidu*, ma.' I had to sit in front of him and play. I was a kid then, and I had just started learning the *ghatam*. So, my hands and shoulders used to pain a lot. I used to think, 'He is resting, so I can rest for two minutes and then resume playing.' He would immediately get up, and say, 'I am listening to your music. Did I tell you to stop?' Practice used to be that strict. I don't know if the current generation of students gets such training.

When I started performing, the audience was somewhat excited to see me I think – wearing the traditional 'pavada', 'satta', 'dhavani' a girl was playing the *ghatam*! – people were in awe! There was a happiness which resonated from their response and it was good to hear. As far as the audience was concerned, they were all very happy. But did I get the same kind of encouragement from the musicians? There is a question mark in that. However, I would not say that each one was the same, many have encouraged me too. For instance, Tanjavur Ubendran sir has encouraged me a lot, I have performed with many similar people who have encouraged me, for example, Dr. S. Ramanathan, and T. V. Gopalakrishnan. T. V. Gopalakrishnan would even take me along for his concerts. Some mridangists who had initially said no were ready to perform with me later. Once, I was supposed to perform at a concert in Bangalore after my wedding. The secretary stopped me at the entrance and said, 'Sorry, Sukanya Madam, you cannot participate today.' 'Why, what happened, Sir?' I asked. 'Nothing ma, the mridangist has said that he would not play with you. We cannot do anything. It's a music festival, the audience is already here and, the concert cannot stop. The main artist is not cooperating, so you have to. Please forgive us, it is not in our hands.' So, I went back home and cried. I had never cried as much as I cried that day. Watching me cry, my husband said, 'Leave her alone, let her cry, only she knows her sorrow.' After reaching the

place with the *ghatam*, I was told to not get onto the stage! I could not express that feeling openly, I could only cry. Then I thought, the talent that we have, should we not bring it out? Why did he say no? It was a three-hour concert, of which half the time was going to go for *alapana* and to collaborate with the violinist. During those three hours, I would have roughly played the *ghatam* for one hour, isn't it? Even this they could not bear! He was a good mridangist, and he played very well. I had performed with him many times before. After they reach a superior position, they decide not to perform with us. Ladies must not accompany them. Only exceptions were violinists. At the time, even now, there is no one who plays the *ghatam* like I do! I have achieved some standard. I would not say I have reached the pinnacle, there is still a lot left to learn, I am always a student and every concert is like an examination. (Still) If that was the case, I, who has almost reached his standard, why couldn't I perform? There was fire in my belly to do something, to prove myself! Then I had an idea! All of us who were students of Vinayagram Sir used to perform a program called *gadamel*. where, each one of us would have a *ghatam* comprising different *sruthis* and perform a *vinyasam*, a *laya vinyasam*. While performing, I wondered why different people should have different *ghatams*? If one person had everything, can it be played like a song? At that time, a women's festival was being held at the All India Radio studio. For that, they wanted each one with a different *ghatam* to perform. Then I thought, people are performing with individual *ghatams*, wouldn't it be beautiful if everything was kept together? After that incident, I wondered why we shouldn't do this. Then I took a keen interest in it, selected different *ghatams* and tuned them according to different *sruthis*. Then I slowly learnt *mohana ragam*, then, *sa ri ga pa da sa*. Even after learning the sargam I would play *sa ri ga pa da* and used to leave the *sa* out. The following developed gradually – different ragas, different beats, a separate composition. The aim of a separate composition for the *Ghata Tarang* was achieved step by step. Actually, this year is the 25th anniversary of my performance of the *Ghata Tarang*.

If there is a rule, for example, that we should not flout the traffic rules, if you break it, you would be caught and fined, right? But will these rules change the mind of a person? No, it will only happen when they themselves have a heartfelt realisation. Until then, whatever rules or fines are imposed, they are not going to have any effect; people who have money will pay the fine and keep going. If a lady is driving a car, the person driving behind her will be continuously honking, and passing sly comments and say things like “a lady is driving the car”. I wish to ask them what they are going to achieve by getting ahead of her? I want to tell them this – Even if you overtake her and go in the front, you will have to go and stop

somewhere or at a signal? A woman driving, is it wrong? Or is it that a woman will not drive properly? According to me, women have more will-power and the aim to achieve is stronger in them as compared to men. Men have a weak mind. In my opinion, women do not have a weak mind. When something happens in a family, it is the women who say, 'Remain calm, nothing will happen, everything will be fine,' whereas, the men are always worried.