

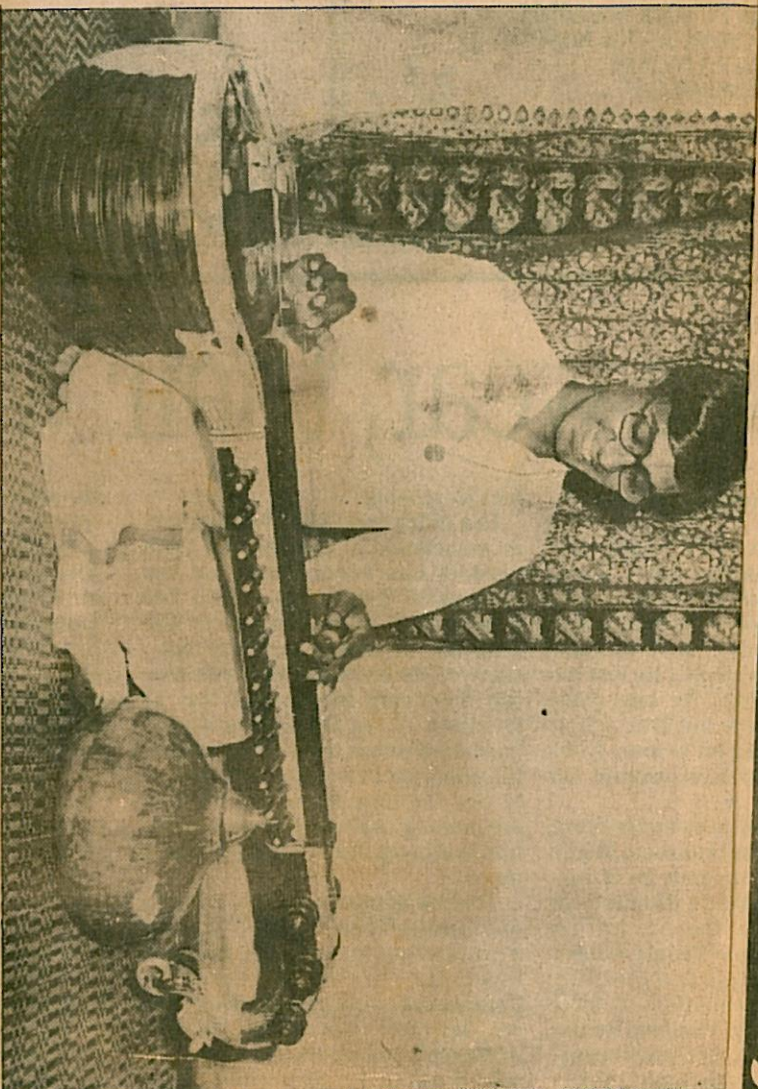
"If you don't believe in God, look at Ravikiran ... said Pt. Ravi Shankar about this gottuvadyam (chitraveena) player. In 1969, the whole world was stunned by the phenomenon of a two-year-old boy who could identify 325 ragas and 175 talas of Carnatic music."

The charm and ease of manner belie the genius. To him, "Music is a part of the whole affair of living. It is a thing more of the subconscious, a state of creativity, a merging with the atmosphere. It doesn't really weigh on me. And about my feats, I do not know exactly what happened. I know mostly what others have told me and what has been published." At that time, it created a furore – no two-year-old had ever performed on stage before. And to make it all the more astonishing, "by the time I was five, I knew up to 600 songs, over 50 varnams and was giving concerts."

Behind the extraordinary feats, he says, was his father, Narasimhan, himself a performing artiste, who gave up his career to promote his children, and who believed and proved repeatedly that child prodigies could be made: first it was Ravikiran, followed by his brother Shashikiran, sister Kiranavali and cousin Ganesh, all of whom performed on stage by the age of two. He adds: "Father would spend 24 hours of the day with the baby playing the role of a father, mother, nurse, helper, playmate, guide, philosopher and teacher. He would create an atmosphere of music, for he believed that music could be learnt like language, through exposure. He would come in singing a phrase of music and catch the attention of the playing child; then whisper the name of the raga in the child's ear. If you wanted to know the time at say 4.50, he would say 'vanaspathi' which is the fourth Melakarta raga and Naamanarayani, which is the 50th," he explains. Such exposure has resulted in his stupefying feat, he adds.

When Ravikiran was too busy performing, his father tutored him in various subjects. After an entrance exam at the Central School, he was enrolled in Class IV. "I was initially very good but couldn't maintain my position as I missed too many classes for concerts," he recounts. Has life as a musician affected his schooling? "We tried to ensure that didn't happen. I enjoyed school; learnt to play cricket too. Of course, I played so much that it people began to worry that it would affect my music practice," he says engagingly. In fact, Semmangudi Srinivas Iyer made me promise that I would not play with the cricket ball as it would affect my hands," he adds.

At eight, Ravikiran took to the gottuvadyam. "My father was a great player and I would try playing on it whatever he taught me to sing. Since I showed interest, my father had a small one made and I began to learn to play it seriously." His practice hours were severe – up to six hours a day, sometimes through the night. "On



Prodigy of the 21 strings

At five, he knew up to 600 songs and at eight, took to the gottuvadyam as a challenge. Ravikiran continues to make news with his extraordinary feats.
Soumya Aji met the young artiste

ing a cylinder of teflon or ebony over six of the main strings plucked by the right hand. "Many people feel it is the most difficult instrument to play. There are 12 points exactly at which you have to keep the cylinder and hence, there is ample scope for error. You have to be extremely accurate. You'll get a discordant note if you move by a millimetre, which has earned it the nickname 'Apsawara vadya,' he says wryly.

Why, did he take it up then? "It was a challenge! There are hundreds of vocalists but I wanted to be able to play the chitraveena," is his bouyant reply. "Besides," he adds, "it runs in my family. My grandfather, Narayana Iyengar, was the only player in his time; he even performed abroad. I managed to get hold of some of his antique three-minute records. He and my father are musicians of calibre. I wanted to be one too."

He says he has always striven for professional standards – the extent to which one can emulate the vocalists. What the mind has conceived can be

But these frets themselves have become a barrier; the continuity is reduced. In the chitraveena, there is more scope for expression."

Ravikiran says there are three ways of expression. "You can state it straight, which is almost not art. You can just suggest it. You can exaggerate and dramatise it. When suggested, it is considered more refined, but more elite. I feel there should be a percentage of dramatisation and refinement. It needs to reach society. Evolution of a society is reflected in its culture. Artistic activity affects it at the subconscious level; to what sort of art society is exposed to. It has to reflect all sections but it needs to have a higher element. Go to a classical music concert and a rock music concert and see the difference in audience behavior. In both cases, the expression of art is good but the content? The least any artiste can do is to ensure that the content is positive. It's his social responsibility through his art, his profession."

For him, social responsibility does not stop at art. With

bin on our road, but in vain. Then I bribed an official and we got our dustbin. The next day it vanished! The official had brought the dustbin from the next street and on receiving more money from the people there, had taken it back! Anyway, for our street, I footed the bill for a bin, which was later destroyed."

Older and wiser now, Ravi Kiran plans music-related schemes towards social responsibility. "There are various sections of our society which are not exposed to music." Plans to inculcate a love for Carnatic music among children from Corporation schools are under way, with government funding sanctioned. The main problem is adjusting his tight concert schedule to make room for all these activities. "I cannot leave anything half-way. I feel too intensely about it," he says.

In 1985, he played the gottuvadyam for 24 hours on the trot at a temple. "It was a prayer, a sort of thanksgiving," he says. "Along with my father's and my own efforts, all this has come naturally. It was my way of expressing gratitude."