



**English Translation of the article published in Dainik Bhaskar
(Hindi) and Divya Bhaskar (Gujrati) on 24th October 2016**

**Sheila Sri Prakash,
Founder and Chief Architect, Shilpa Architects Planners Designers**

In 1979, Indian women in architecture were confronted with the challenges of a nascent profession, societal conventions, and limited opportunities. The real estate industry then relied predominantly on men for thinking, deciding and acting on matters related to design, engineering and construction. Sheila Sri Prakash too started working as an architect in a Chartered Civil Engineer's office. It was necessary to work harder to prove her professional credentials, and over time her designs spoke for themselves. She says, *"as in all fields, women have gradually gained social acceptance because of their relevance and sensitive approach to problem solving and team building"*.

As a state and school topper, the Dean of the Architecture School asked at the interview if she was not depriving a male of his chance to be selected! She says that this was the first time she was confronted by gender bias. She credits her father, a World War 2 veteran for nurturing her penchant for design. Fascinated by arts and crafts, she would ideate with sketches and drawings plans to re-design her home and garden with him. When she was barely in her teens, her design was executed. She found that exhilarating and liberating. *"At that moment,"* she recalls, *"I knew that I wanted to study Architecture"*.

Dr. Vyjantimala's dance sequences in the 1958 movie classic Madumati had a profound impact on Sheila as a toddler. Her mother was an exceptionally talented Carnatic music vocalist, but orthodoxy would not let her sing in public. Perhaps this was the reason that made her enrol Sheila as a child of four and a half at Sri Rajarajeswari Natya Kala Mandir (Mumbai), the instant she noted her daughter's ability to move her limbs to the lilt of music. Guru Shri Kalyansundaram Pillai, was her first guru, and she his first student! He wanted to showcase his talent as a teacher to his illustrious father and brother who were themselves exceptional teachers. His confidence that he could teach Sheila to dance for 3 hours at an "arangetram" grew. At the age of 6 years, she made her debut on-stage at Shanmukhananda Hall, Mumbai to critical acclaim! Her mother would accompany her for her dance sessions in the midst of her schooling and exams. The family moved to Chennai, when her father was transferred, and Sheila came under the tutelage of Guru Dhandayudhapani Pillai. As she grew, she would perform at various sabhas (dance venues) and danced with wonderful artistes like Padma Bushan Smt. Kamala Laxman, and Padmashri Smt. Padma Subramanyam. Sheila learnt Kuchipudi from Guru Padma Bushan Dr. Vempatti Chinna Satyam, and played the lead role as a teenager in his dance dramas alongside Padma Shri Smt. Hema Malini, and others. Sheila was delighted with the sound of the veena, and signed up for lessons under the maestro Padma Bushan Shri Chittibabu. He was a phenomenal artist but an impatient teacher. Sheila's mother would take notes at the veena classes so that she could practice in the middle of her hectic schedules. Guru Chittibabuji and his disciples including Sheila recorded "Wedding Bells", which is considered a classic and still popular among Carnatic music aficionados. When asked about this incredibly frenetic period of her early life, she says *"it is important to cultivate the ability to apply oneself."*

In 1979, two years after her son was born, Sheila started her own design studio, SHILPA. Since start-up, the architecture, planning and design firm, is in business for the last 36 years! The firm has completed several projects in a range of typologies and scale. Individual villas, mass housing, townships, commercial and office buildings, factories,



hotels, educational institutions, museums and theatres are part of their portfolio. As a young architect Sheila quickly learned to balance the challenge between the requirements of clients and creativity. *"Architects have to interpret their clients' vision"*, she says.

The World Economic Forum, invited Sheila for her proficiency as a sensitive architect to the Global Agenda Council on Design Innovation for 2010 - 12. At the forum's Summit in Abu Dhabi, the Council expressed its support for her concept of the Reciprocal Design Index (RDI), which would rate the urban design of cities according to the criteria of holistic sustainability. She had the rare opportunity of spearheading this work at the meeting. It was the first time an attempt was being made to rank cities according to their design. The RDI would strive for a balanced approach to establish, document and incentivize sustainable design. It would also offer an objective accreditation system of reciprocity indices that can be monitored, compared, and recognized.

Sheila hopes that the global interest in India and appreciation of her Indo-centric solutions will gain momentum and the last century's western dominance would be reversed. Surrounded by design aesthetics that are synonymous with our region, heritage, art and ethnicity her designs strive for a subtle balance between them and modern technologies and materials. *"We should strike a subtle balance between the various factors we work with"*, she says. This year the Global Future Council on the Future of Environment and Natural Resource Security for the 2016-2018 term has invited her to working with a 25-member expert international team to develop current insights and collaboratively shape solutions to improve the state of the world.

She is a much sought after speaker on art, architecture and the future. *"I do it because it thrills me to connect with designers and professionals who want to contribute to the growth of our nation. There is so much hope for millions less privileged than many, and hopefully the next decade will see India reach higher on the global stage,"* she says. Often felicitated as a role model architect, she responds that *"it gives me the greatest of joy to see young women architects of today, because they have much to achieve in a field that is much more level than before. I rejoice at the next generation's willingness to experiment and their restlessness to challenge the status quo. I am amazed by their adaptation of digital technologies and scared by their readiness to embrace uncertainty"*.

Architecture is a responsible profession as the spaces Architects create can last a lifetime and have direct impact on people. The Indian Institute of Architecture presented the Honorary Architect Award to her last year. Getting recognized internationally and by peers is a testament to her work for the profession and country. The underlying theme for her architectural career has been around Indo-centric Holistic Sustainability and Reciprocity. **Indo-centric** - because the principles have been rooted in the traditions and cultures of India. **Holistic sustainability**, she explains *"is the balance I strive to seek in an edifice that is constantly tugged by forces of varying intensities and directions"*. On the announcement of the Smart City programs, she says, *"the primary objectives of any city is unique to it, and are inevitably interlinked with other requirements that need to be aligned to improve liveability. For instance, if connectivity is the primary objective, then other parameters like infrastructure, safety and cultural uniqueness become connected. They need to be balanced and augmented to achieve holistic connectivity"*.

In conclusion, Sheila Sri Prakash says, *"Young architects and designers must be aware that we are blessed to have a rich art, tradition and cultural heritage. They should be the inspiration for architectural solutions. Humans respond to spaces and modulate their behaviour as a response to the built environment. In that sense architects have a great responsibility; because we can really change the world and design destinies!"*