

Shivanna's tune a universal melody

By KAYODE JAMES

SHIVANNA Ragoonanan was too young to understand why she'd been banned from playing her favourite instrument in a schools' talent competition.

"She would ask us if she was doing something wrong," said her father Dinesh. The five year-old had no choice but to abandon her pan and enter the competition with a less glamorous keyboard as her

medium of choice.

Just days earlier, as she explained, a pundit who held considerable authority had prohibited the playing of pan in Hindu schools despite rather vocal protests by many teachers and parents against the move.

Few must have predicted the impact that the commotion would have on the life of this young East Indian girl who was intent on mastering what had up to that point been seen as a black man's instru-

ment.

Eleven years later, Shivanna stood triumphant behind her pan at the Mastana Bahar finals, a stunning testimony to the spirit of perseverance and cultural integration.

"I love the pan," smiled the 16 year-old in a recent interview. In the background, other members of Shivanna's small pan-side, Nada Sangama, practised several verses of a Hindu religious

song.

Hearing me comment that the song sounded like "just another pan tune", she laughed and agreed that the steelband creates a universally appealing melody.

While Indian music (with its many variations in rhythm and tone) is slightly harder for the average pan player to perform, she thinks it's easier for her since she's been an avid fan of both genres for all her life.

Shivanna started to play the pan when she was four years old. Her father, whom she cites as her biggest inspiration and motivator, brought his instrument home from the Tunapuna All-Stars yard to practice, and her curiosity soon turned to compulsion.

It wasn't long before her father recognised her skills and entered her into competitions, starting with her infamous efforts at the Baalkivaas competition

Spotlight



SHIVANNA RAGOONANAN performs on Mastana Bahar, where she won the grand prize.

at primary school level, and then continuing onto 12 and Under and Mastana Bahar.

"I'm not in her standard and I will never be," he said proudly.

Shivanna also attained relative success in the Schools' Pan Festival solo division, placing third in 1999 and 1998. Less rewarding were her stints in the Tunapuna All-Stars and Songbird in the Panorama competition, but she is simply happy to be a part of the festival every year.

She eventually left Trinidad's shores as part of a contingent to West Indian Week in Hartford, Connecticut in 1997.

Shivanna was elated with her success at Mastana Bahar. "Perseverance pays off," she said. Still a Fifth Form Student in St Augustine Girls' High School, Shivanna was too young to drive away with her prize, but was full of thanks for her sponsors, Statesmen Cricket Club, her friends at school and her father.

"My Dad is the wind beneath my wings. Without him I don't think I could reach anywhere."

Shivanna commented on Sat Maharaj's efforts to prohibit the playing of pan in Hindu schools and the whole stigma attached to her love for the instrument by saying that Maharaj doesn't speak for everyone.

"I don't see anything wrong with playing pan in Hindu schools. I play

Hindu music and Indian music. I love the instrument.

"My family is not the kind of people to deal with race," she said. Neither was most of her audience. "But there have been some bumps along the way. We've been to some places where they don't really acknowledge the pan," said Shivanna.

"I was getting pressure for it...but you don't fight those kind of forces. You just go with the flow, and something will work," shrugged her father.

Shivanna cited playing pan as a stress reliever and a hobby, but can't see herself pursuing it as a career, opting instead to study engineering.

Just weeks ago Shivanna opened the Divali Nagar playing the National Anthem on pan, an accomplishment that she will always hold close to her heart. It was a defining moment in the acceptance of Trinidad and Tobago culture as an overriding and integral component of a single indigenous identity.

The performance was so well received that for a few minutes, the pestilence of detractors and separatists was totally forgotten.

"They associate pan with African music, but it's a Trinidadian thing. It's the national instrument. I don't see why they have a problem with it," said Shivanna, as she stepped behind her pan to continue playing.