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# ENTERTAINMENT

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## A Song for the Dead

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Lakshmi R with disciple Antony Janagi during her performance at Khoj Studios.  
(Source: Express Photo by Amit Mehra)

Written by **Debesh Banerjee** | Posted: February 3, 2015 12:00 am

Lakshmi R has not not had the best marriage. Running away from her violent and abusive husband, Lakshmi turned to singing about her sorrows for a living. A professional Oppari singer from the Thiruvannamalai district in Tamil Nadu, she practises the dying art form from the coastal parts of the southern state. “I am able to connect with people when I sing about my sorrows. It makes me feel alive,” says Lakshmi with

the help of an English translator, who was accompanying her on her maiden visit and performance in Delhi. Dressed in a traditional silk sari and jewellery, Lakshmi is the guardian of Oppari, a sacred art form.

On Friday evening, 57-year-old Lakshmi, along with her young disciple Antony Janagi, demonstrated this folk form at Khoj Studios in Khirkee Extension. “Through Oppari, I saw that people were able to connect with me and through their sadness, I could channel my own life’s experiences,” she says, sitting on an elevated stage, clutching a small towel to wipe away tears, which she breaks into every now and then.

Meant to pay respect to the departed, Oppari singing dates back more than 200 years according to unofficial estimates, says Amitesh Grover, a theatre artiste and assistant professor at the National School of Drama. Grover has been conducting research on the Oppari singing tradition for over a year, and organised the performance in Delhi as part of his project, “On Mourning”. “When Khoj invited us, the performance became an opportunity to be curated with a larger narrative. How does mourning and trauma relate to each other,” questions Grover.

Though mourning is a very personal emotion, Oppari lends itself to a community level exercise. In it, an outsider is invited to mourn on behalf of a stranger’s passing. For Lakshmi, it was never about earning a living from being a mourning singer. Rather, she was initiated into it after the funeral ceremony of her best friend’s mother.

“The person’s mother passed away and I started singing in a way which was pleasing to others. The family members took me to the local village drummers and I gradually started

performing for other families,” says Lakshmi, who charges anything between Rs 50 and Rs 2,500 for an hour-long performance.

A professional for over two decades, Lakshmi’s poetry is drawn from her own life, her six children, epics such as the Mahabharata and Ramayana and the Bhatta kuthu genre of music and dance. “When I am invited to sing at the death of someone, I interact with their neighbours to get to know that person. I try to gather their friends, relatives and family members to sing with me,” says Lakshmi, who travels across Tamil Nadu. Currently, she is mentoring 31-year-old Janagi, a theatre actor *continued...*

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