

SUMANADASA MEDDEGODA, SRI LANKA, AND HIS MUSICAL LIFE

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Abstract

An example of reflecting on the social environment is the musical life of this man, who was constantly alert to modern developments that might assist him with his professional duties. He was a teacher by profession, mainly focused on teaching Hindustani music. He learned in the most rigorous way, mastering the violin by observing peers and taking occasional lessons that never fully satisfied him. Compared to his contemporaries, he successfully trained a variety of singers and musicians. All his descendants are involved in music, either in performance or teaching. Thus, his musical life reflects the society of his time. Even the slightest change in behavior could unsettle him, as he tried to fully adapt. In the end, he chose not to conform anywhere and instead placed his trust in nature, which for him meant staying out of the country's political or economic affairs during wartime.

His attachment to older models was not merely a musical preference for Hindustani music over other types of music he listened to. It also reflected a deep-seated conservatism. This biographical study is based on autoethnography and biographical writing, interviews with his wife, children, friends, and relatives, as well as direct observations.

As a result, the differences in the current musical lives of Sri Lankan musicians and singers can become clearer when examined in further comparisons.

Keywords

Biography, behavioural sciences, Sri Lanka, Hindustani music, professional seriousness

INTRODUCTION

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design to examine the musical life of Sumanadasa Meddegoda within its broader social and historical context. The research is conducted as a single-case biographical study, employing autoethnography as a central methodological approach, given the researcher's close personal and cultural connection to the subject. The life history of the musician is reconstructed through biography writing, supported by in-depth qualitative interviews with key family members, including his wife and children, who serve as primary informants. In addition, direct ethnographic observation of musical practices, teaching activities, and everyday behaviour provides contextual depth and supports triangulation of data sources. The collected narratives, observations, and reflexive accounts are interpreted to understand how individual musical choices, professional practices, and conservative aesthetic orientations reflect and respond to the social, political, and cultural conditions of the time. Together, these methods allow the study to present an integrated, context-sensitive account of Sumanadasa's musical life as a mirror of broader societal processes.

Sumanadasa Meddegoda's life was deeply intertwined with music, Buddhist philosophy, and nature, all of which profoundly shaped his worldview. He was born and raised in Angammana, a small village in the Ratnapura district (Figure 1), where he grew up in a household located along the banks of the Kalu Ganga with his parents and three sisters. The Kalu Ganga is one of the four major rivers of Sri Lanka and originates in the region of Sri Pada—also known internationally as Adam's Peak—a sacred site in Buddhist cosmology associated with the Buddha's footprint and centuries of pilgrimage practice (Holt, 2017; Deegalle, 2021). Ratnapura is characterized by rich alluvial soil that supports agriculture and gem deposits, earning it the title **City of Gems**. At the same time, this geographical setting makes the area highly vulnerable to environmental hazards such as flooding and landslides, particularly in riverine and slope-side settlements (Widger, 2015; Silva, 1999). Dense forests, lateritic and clay-rich soils, and frequent river overflow together shape a landscape marked by both natural abundance and recurring risk.

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Sumanadasa lived in an area that was not prone to landslides but was highly exposed to severe flooding, as his home was situated directly along the banks of the Kalu Ganga. He grew up in a house constructed with clay walls and a clay floor, covered by a roof of palm leaves. Each year, with the onset of the monsoon rains, the house required repair, renovation, partial rebuilding, or, at times, complete reconstruction, depending on the severity of flood damage. Such annual cycles of loss and rebuilding were a familiar part of domestic life in the area and contributed to a sense of impermanence embedded in everyday experience (Widger, 2015).

Gem mining formed a central livelihood practice among the people of Ratnapura. Income from mining was irregular and unpredictable, often arriving in the form of a single substantial sum earned only a few times a year. This economic pattern shaped local attitudes toward work, risk, and time. Many residents spoke of gem mining as a pursuit that held the promise of sudden transformation—a hope that sustained them through long periods of uncertainty. Daily life was frequently organized around the expectation that one significant discovery could support household needs and social obligations for several months. When funds were exhausted, borrowing within kinship and community networks became a common strategy until the next mining opportunity arose. In contrast to gambling or formal betting, gem mining was locally understood as a practice grounded in labor, skill, and chance, offering the possibility of financial gain without substantial initial capital investment (Silva, 1999).

Neither Sumanadasa nor his parents were involved in gem mining. His father earned a livelihood by collecting timber from forested upland areas and selling it within the village for house construction; larger logs were occasionally sold to timber factories in town. He was described as fair-complexioned, tall, physically strong, and sporting long hair and a beard, qualities that made him a well-recognized and admired personality in the village. Sumanadasa's mother was a skilled cook who supported the household by preparing sweets and *kadayappan* (the term for Sinhala fast foods) for sale at tea shops near junctions. She was also frequently employed as a cook at local ceremonial and festive events where meals were prepared for large gatherings. In addition, she produced *kithul* jaggery from *kithul* toddy, which Sumanadasa's father supplied through his daily work climbing *kithul* palm trees. The family also cultivated coffee plants, betel, and raised chickens within their approximately sixty-perch home garden. Enriched by flood-borne alluvial soil, this garden provided modest but periodic income. Together, these interlinked livelihood practices sustained Sumanadasa, his three sisters, and their parents.

Sumanadasa's mother played a central role in supporting his daily needs and, when possible, his education. However, the family's modest economic circumstances often required him to seek income from a young age. For example, while in Grade Seven, he collected and carried river sand up steep banks to sell, making numerous trips each day to earn small amounts of money to support school-related expenses or religious pilgrimages. Such forms of child labor, while physically demanding, were not uncommon in rural Sri Lanka and were often understood as necessary contributions to household survival rather than as formal employment (Widger, 2015).

According to Sumanadasa's wife, Ratna Meddegoda, and based on accounts from his mother, Sumanadasa exhibited an introverted disposition from early childhood. He often avoided the company of his siblings and preferred solitary activities. While other children played group games, he spent long periods making and playing bamboo flutes, often seasoned in river water and imitating the calls of birds. He was also remembered for his distinctive manner of wearing a sarong, sometimes draped over one shoulder in an unconventional style. His favorite place was beneath a coconut tree leaning toward the river, where he would play the flute while his mother prepared *kadayappan* for sale in the early mornings. Such solitary, sound-oriented engagements with nature reflect forms of informal musical development rooted in embodied listening and experimentation, commonly observed in non-institutional learning environments (Rice, 2017; Wong, 2019).

Living among communities largely oriented toward gem-seeking and short-term economic aspiration, Sumanadasa appeared markedly different. He showed little interest in material speculation and instead demonstrated a sustained thirst for knowledge in areas such as literature, Buddhist philosophy, and music—particularly Hindustani music, toward which he developed an enduring and intense passion. This orientation distinguished him socially and culturally from many of his peers and laid the foundation for his later musical life, shaped less by economic calculation than by intellectual and aesthetic commitment (Rice, 2017).

A LIFE OF LEARNING AND MUSICAL GENIUS

Sumanadasa (Figure 3b) developed a deep attachment to the natural environment through his childhood along the banks of the Kalu Ganga. Growing up beside the river, he swam daily, experiencing its white sands, stones, fish, and freshwater flowing from the region of Adam's Peak (Sri Pada), a site revered in Buddhist cosmology as bearing the Buddha's footprint and venerated in Sri Lanka since at least the early historic period (Holt, 2017; Deegalle, 2021). He often explored the river several kilometers upstream, swimming and walking along its banks, immersing himself in what he later recalled as largely human-free natural landscapes. Such close engagement with rivers and forests is characteristic of rural childhoods in Sri Lanka's wet zone, where nature forms a key space for play, learning, and sensory development (Widger, 2015).

Sumanadasa took particular pleasure in imitating bird calls, sometimes deliberately confusing birds through sound mimicry. He also collected bamboo from nearby forested areas and brought it home to fashion simple flutes. Anthropological and ethnomusicological studies note that such early experimentation with sound, materials, and the environment (Lazarus & Cohen, 1977) often forms the foundation of musical sensibility in non-institutional learning contexts, where music emerges through embodied interaction rather than formal instruction (Wong, 2019; Rice, 2017).

Each year, the ritual procession associated with the Diya Kapeema ceremony passed along the Kalu Ganga. This ritual, dedicated to Sri Sumana Saman Deviyo, the guardian deity of Sri Pada and the principal deity of the Sabaragamuwa region, remains one of the most significant religious events in Ratnapura (Deegalle, 2021). The annual Saman Devalaya Perahera, held in September, attracted large crowds who gathered along roads and riverbanks to witness traditional dance, drumming, and ritual performances. Participation in such processions has long served as a key site for cultural transmission and artistic exposure, particularly for young musicians and dancers (Reed, 2011). Sumanadasa thus gained early and sustained exposure to Sri Lankan music and dance traditions through these public ritual events.

At the village level, Sumanadasa interacted with local musicians, including a harmonium and tabla player known as John Master, who regularly performed at community functions. He also visited Piyasena Premakeerthi of Eheliyagoda, a respected guru who trained several musicians in the area. Like many rural musicians, Sumanadasa learned primarily through observation, imitation, and self-directed practice rather than systematic instruction, reflecting a widespread South Asian pedagogical mode rooted in informal apprenticeship (Qureshi, 2018). His musical learning was further shaped by listening to Hindustani classical music broadcasts on the radio, a medium that played a crucial role in disseminating North Indian music across Sri Lanka during the mid-twentieth century and beyond (Manuel & Morelli, 2021).

Through attentive listening and imitation, Sumanadasa taught himself to reproduce complex musical structures. He was able to play, with striking accuracy, the theme music of the popular radio serial *Muwan Pelessa* on the violin, originally performed by B. Victor Perera, one of Sri Lanka's most prominent violinists of the period. He also relied on Sinhala-language textbooks on Hindustani music to learn ragas and compositions, combining textual knowledge with aural observation. Lacking the financial means to purchase a *śruti pēṭi* (drone box), he improvised by striking a tin to produce a reference pitch while singing—an example of adaptive musicianship shaped by material constraint, a phenomenon well documented in recent ethnomusicological studies of economically challenged artists (Rice, 2017; Stock, 2018).

According to his second elder sister, Sumilawathie (Sumilawathie & Meddegoda, 2025), Sumanadasa's mother encouraged his musical interests from an early age by purchasing toy instruments such as drums and flutes from stalls at the Saman Devalaya Perahera. He would enthusiastically play, sing, and dance with these instruments while walking home, embodying music as play and everyday expression rather than formal performance. After completing his Ordinary Level examination, Sumanadasa became actively involved in popular music, performing as a singer and instrumentalist at musical shows in Ratnapura town and its surrounding areas. These engagements provided modest income and increased his visibility as a local musician.

However, like many artists in rural Sri Lanka, Sumanadasa was frequently invited to perform without monetary compensation. His willingness to perform without negotiating fees reflected both his personal disposition and broader social expectations, whereby artists—particularly those from non-

elite backgrounds—were often rewarded with food, drink, or travel expenses rather than fair payment (Widger, 2015). In some instances, alcohol was offered in place of payment, which he initially refused, as he did not consume alcohol during this period of his life. The broader political economy of the time placed limited value on the arts, a condition that persists in many forms today. Wealth and power in rural areas were largely concentrated among high-caste landowners, gem traders, transport owners, and other business elites whose social standing dated back to the colonial period. Within this hierarchy, artists occupied an ambivalent position—celebrated during ritual and entertainment events, yet structurally marginal in terms of economic security and social recognition (Silva, 1999).



Figure 1 The Road leading to the Angammana village in Ratnapura. Photo by the author (2025).

Sumanadasa's passion for learning and dedication to education deepened during his time at Dharmashala Piriven Vidyayathanaya in Ratnapura (Figure 2). While still a student, he began teaching, as he was able to grasp lessons more quickly than many of his peers. His period at Dharmashala provided him with an intellectually fertile environment, particularly through access to its library, which he used extensively. Pirivena education has historically functioned as a key site for advanced learning in Sri Lanka, fostering not only religious instruction but also literary, historical, and aesthetic knowledge, especially among students inclined toward scholarship and teaching (Deegalle, 2021; Holt, 2017).

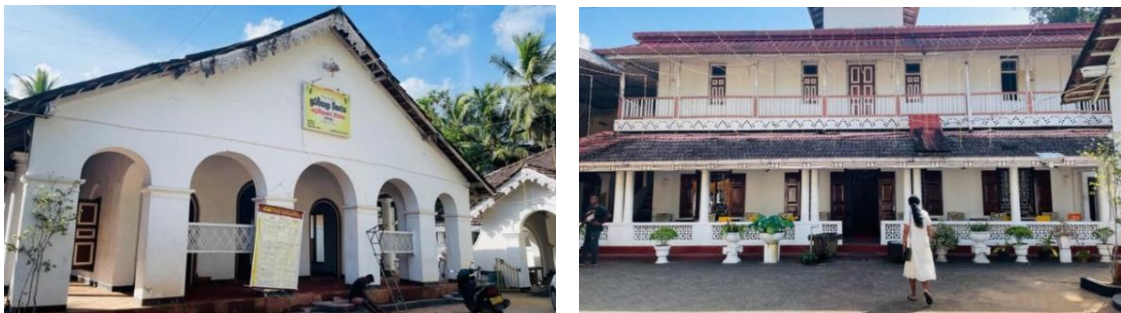


Figure 2 Dharmashala Piriven Vidyayathanaya, Ratnapura. The image on the left shows a building originally constructed as a Catholic church and later converted into a pirivena. The image on the right shows the residential quarters of the Buddhist monks; the figure dressed in white is my cousin Chandrani. Photographs by the author (2025).

In addition to music, Sumanadasa taught Sinhala literature, history, and economics at Dharmashala Piriven Vidyayathanaya—an experience he often described as the happiest period of his life. His teaching role reflects the polyvalent nature of pirivena education, where disciplinary boundaries are often fluid and where intellectually gifted individuals may assume pedagogical responsibilities at an early stage (Deegalle, 2021). Although pirivena institutions are primarily monastic spaces, lay instructors and students have historically played important roles in sustaining broader cultural and educational practices, including music (Holt, 2017).

When I visited Dharmashala Pirivena with my cousin Chandrani, the institution was undergoing renovation and expansion to increase its annual intake. Although Dharmashala remains a Buddhist monastic educational institution, music instruction—once offered during Sumanadasa's time there—is no longer part of the curriculum. Such curricular shifts reflect broader transformations in

Buddhist education in Sri Lanka, shaped by institutional reform, state regulation, and changing priorities within monastic training (Deegalle, 2021).

One of Sumanadasa's closest companions during his studies at Dharmashala was Campane Hamuduruwo (Figure 3), a Buddhist monk and classmate who deeply admired Sumanadasa's exceptional talents. He was among the few individuals who truly understood Sumanadasa during their years of shared study. When I later visited Campane Hamuduruwo, he received me with warmth and evident astonishment. At present, he is a highly respected and influential monk within the Buddhist community of Ratnapura, possessing considerable material resources. Yet, despite his status and wealth, he appeared largely disengaged from material comfort. As I observed during my visit, his living quarters were marked by minimal furnishings and basic necessities, suggesting a deliberate orientation toward simplicity and mental discipline rather than material accumulation.

Both Campane Hamuduruwo and Sumanadasa belonged to nearly the same generation, shaped by similar educational, cultural, and socioeconomic conditions. From an interpretive biographical perspective, one may speculate that had Sumanadasa lived longer, Campane Hamuduruwo might have remained his closest companion, sharing a life oriented toward intellectual engagement, ethical discipline, and minimal material attachment. Such trajectories resonate with broader Buddhist ideals that privilege mental cultivation over worldly success, ideals that continue to shape personal life choices within Sri Lanka's monastic and lay intellectual cultures (Holt, 2017; Widger, 2015).



Figure 3a (left): Campane Hamuduruwo (a Buddhist monk), the chief monk of the Mihindugama Abhayaraja temple. Photo by the author. Figure 3b (right): Picture of Sumanadasa. It was taken in the Perera Studio, Ratnapura, in 1965. Reprint with courtesy of his wife Ratna.

When asked how he remembered Sumanadasa, he responded:

He was born for art. I remember him performing theatrical roles—especially the Pothegeura character—nearly sixty years ago. Sumanadasa could play almost any musical instrument. I personally witnessed him perform on several instruments spontaneously, without prior learning, and I was astonished by his abilities. Another remarkable talent was his memory. Even though I, as a monk, have practiced memorising Buddhist śloka, I could never compete with him—he could memorise with extraordinary speed. The head monk (Nayaka Hamuduruwo) often scolded or punished students for misbehaviour, but he never shouted at or punished Sumanadasa, because he never did anything wrong. He was an unbelievably disciplined person.

According to Campane Hamuduruwo, Sumanadasa was consistently gentle and never hurt or shouted at anyone, even in jest. He was described as deeply attached to the temple and monastic environment, yet not as a blind follower of religion, nor as someone who engaged in unethical or harmful behavior. Campane Hamuduruwo also noted a sudden change in Sumanadasa during the 1970s. Having spent nearly five formative years with him between 1961 and 1965, he found the transformation in Sumanadasa's character and habits difficult to comprehend. He was careful not to disclose details regarding the personal rupture that occurred around 1970, but implied that Sumanadasa may have lacked close companionship or support during this particularly difficult period of his life.

RELATIONSHIPS

During his youth, Sumanadasa developed several personal relationships that reflected both his musical sensibility and his social positioning within the community. His first significant emotional attachment emerged during his student years at Dharmashala Pirivena, where a close bond was formed through shared learning, cultural interests, and frequent interaction. Even later in life, he occasionally reconnected with individuals from this period, maintaining cordial and respectful relationships. Accounts from family members suggest that these early relationships were marked by affection and idealization, with his flute playing and artistic expression leaving a strong emotional impression. His first love recalled that he would play the flute on one bank of the river while she listened from the opposite bank. “We were like Radha and Krishna,” she remarked, invoking a well-

known devotional metaphor of idealized love and longing. Dayawathie Mathotaarachchi, remembered for her beauty and presence, stated that the relationship continued for nearly 7 years after they first met in 1963. During this period, they visited each other's homes with parental awareness and developed a close bond.

However, her mother later decided that the marriage should not proceed. When I visited her in 2025, she explained that this decision was driven largely by concerns over economic instability and the material insecurity associated with Sumanadasa's life as a musician. She was compelled to marry a man with a stable income rather than pursue a relationship with an artist whose profession was perceived as economically precarious. As the eldest daughter in a family of seven siblings, she felt obligated to prioritize financial security and familial responsibility over personal desire. She stated that had Sumanadasa held a government teaching position at the time, no one could have prevented their marriage. Such accounts resonate with broader sociological and anthropological analyses of marriage decisions in Sri Lanka, where economic stability, caste, and livelihood security often outweigh romantic attachment, particularly for women bearing significant family responsibilities (Widger, 2015; Silva 1999). She described Sumanadasa as an empathetic and deeply romantic partner whom she was never able to forget, noting that memories of him continued to evoke sadness throughout her life. Her testimony reflects the emotional costs of structurally constrained choices, especially in contexts where artistic labor is undervalued and economically insecure (Widger, 2015).

Following the dissolution of this first relationship, Sujatha Piyaseeli (Piyaseeli & Meddegoda, 2025), a niece of Sumanadasa, observed that he experienced a period of emotional distress. According to her account, this included changes in his habits, such as the consumption of alcohol during a particularly difficult 2-week period immediately after the separation. While such behaviour should not be over-psychologized, ethnographic studies note that emotional rupture combined with economic uncertainty often manifests in temporary disruptions to routine and self-care, especially among artists whose personal and professional identities are closely intertwined (Rice, 2017; Wong, 2019). It appears that Sumanadasa struggled to fully recover from this emotional loss until he met Ratna Samaraweera toward the end of 1972.

Additional relationships developed later during his teaching career and domestic life, particularly with female boarders who stayed in his village household. Some of these interactions evolved into closer personal connections. Although varied in outcome, these relationships illustrate the porous boundary between Sumanadasa's personal and professional spheres—a condition common among rural musicians and teachers whose homes function simultaneously as sites of instruction, hospitality, and social exchange (Rice, 2003, 2017; Deegalle, 2021).

MARRIED LIFE AND FAMILY EXPERIENCES

Ratna Madhavi Samaraweera (b. 1947) became Sumanadasa's wife in June 1973. She came from a comparatively affluent family; her father was a prosperous landowner in the Lellopitiya area of Pelmadulla, possessing rubber and tea plantations, agricultural vehicles, and a private car. Ratna first encountered Sumanadasa in 1971 at Horana Vidyarthna Pirivena, where both were studying for the General Arts Qualifying (GAQ) examination affiliated with Vidyalankara University of Ceylon (now the University of Kelaniya). Their relationship developed into a close and romantic bond over approximately 18 months, despite sustained opposition from Ratna's father. Although she successfully passed the GAQ examination, she was prevented from pursuing further higher education due to this relationship. The couple eventually married in 1973 after Ratna reached an agreement with her father, relinquishing any claim to property or financial support. Such familial negotiations reflect broader Sri Lankan patterns in which marriage, education, and inheritance are closely entangled with class expectations and gendered responsibility (Widger, 2015; Silva, 1999).

Between 1975 and 1976, Ratna undertook professional training under Indrapala Abeweera, who had studied early childhood education in Japan. She completed an intensive preschool teacher training programme covering 10 subjects—two more than the standard teacher training curriculum—alongside artistic training in music and dance. Her instructors included Sujatha Attanayake (vocal music), Neela Thewarapperuma (Kathak dance), and teachers of violin, vocal music, and sitar. After completing her training in December 1976, she returned to Angammana and taught music and dance until May 1978, the year of my birth.

Their married life included moments of warmth, humor, and moral action. On one occasion, during a minor domestic disagreement, Ratna jokingly asked Sumanadasa not to “behave like a cow.” That

same night, he returned home imitating a cow to make her laugh. On another occasion, he rescued a child who had nearly fallen into the Kalu Ganga from Ratnapura bridge. Bringing the child home initially alarmed Ratna, but Sumanadasa subsequently contacted the police and safely reunited the child with the parents. Such incidents reflect a moral disposition grounded in care, responsiveness, and practical ethics, often emphasized in Buddhist-influenced domestic life (Holt, 2017).

Sumanadasa also demonstrated notable resourcefulness. During periods of flooding, large logs from illegal upstream logging would drift downstream along the Kalu Ganga. He developed the skill of capturing these logs and selling them as a supplementary source of income. Despite such adaptive strategies, Ratna observed that he often felt socially out of place, particularly among individuals of higher social or intellectual status. This sense of misalignment occasionally produced frustration, reflecting broader structural tensions faced by artists and teachers operating across class boundaries in Sri Lanka (Silva, 1999).

After completing his GCE Ordinary Level examinations, Sumanadasa continued his studies at Dharmashala School for GCE Advanced Levels and later enrolled at Vidyaratna Pirivena in Horana for the GAQ. During this period, he resided at Meewanapalana Temple, where he curated the temple library. This role granted him access to a wide range of literature, including philosophy, Buddhist texts, and musical treatises. Pirivena education has long functioned as a critical site for intellectual cultivation beyond formal monastic training, particularly for students inclined toward literature, music, and pedagogy (Deegalle, 2021).

Following the successful completion of the GAQ, Sumanadasa was appointed in 1976 as a government school music teacher at Gilimale Primary School in Ratnapura. Due to the advanced nature of his musical skills relative to his students, he was transferred within the same year to Dharmapala School and subsequently, in 1977, to Hidellana Central College. That same year, a major flood completely destroyed his family home in Angammana. He later joined Pelmadulla Central College, where he gained recognition for forming orchestras, training capable students, and improving examination performance. These activities align with ethnomusicological observations of schoolteachers as key cultural mediators in Sri Lanka's regional music ecosystems (Rice, 2017).

During this period, Ratna was transferred to Narangoda School, and the family resided in the teachers' quarters. However, in 1980, Sumanadasa participated in the nationwide July general strike, which resulted in the loss of his salary and ultimately led to approximately 3 years of unemployment. This period coincided with widespread political repression and economic restructuring, which disproportionately affected public-sector employees and cultural workers (Uyangoda, 2019). Ratna assumed additional teaching responsibilities to sustain the household. Unfortunately, this prolonged period of insecurity marked a decline in family life. Sumanadasa's frustrations increasingly manifested in harmful coping behaviors, including alcohol consumption, poor social companionship, hunting, and irregular returns home, placing strain on his relationships with his wife and children (Samaraweera & Meddegoda, 2025).

FAMILY MEMORIES AND MUSICAL UPBRINGING

During a visit to Angammana, I spoke with Chandrani (Chandrani & Meddegoda, 2025), the daughter of Sumanadasa's second elder sister. She recalled that village life was marked by poverty and occasional hunger, yet people remained relatively healthy due to reliance on locally grown food. She contrasted this with the later introduction of chemical fertilizers following the open economic reforms initiated in 1977, a shift that has been widely critiqued for its long-term environmental and health consequences (Widger, 2015).

Chandrani also recalled the severe hardships of the early 1970s (Chandrani & Meddegoda, 2025), particularly during the economic restrictions under Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike. Wheat flour was rationed to 1 kilogram per household per week, and rice to half a kilogram per person per week. Long queues at government-run **Sathosa** (abbreviation of Samopekaare thogewelände salle) cooperative wholesale-shops were a routine feature of everyday life. Such memories align with historical accounts of scarcity, rationing, and everyday endurance during this period (Uyangoda, 2019). She further noted that Sumanadasa was the first person in Angammana to wear trousers—a marker of education and modernity at a time when most men wore sarongs or amudaya (some traditional cloth to wrap a thread around the hip and then the cloth will cover all private parts). Chandrani lived with Sumanadasa's family for several years to assist with household responsibilities and remembered that during a later period in Raigama, he regularly consumed beef, reflecting shifting dietary practices associated with mobility and changing social environments.

As the author of this paper, I aim to present my experiences of my father with reflexive awareness. Sumanadasa regularly sang Hindustani rāga music, Sinhala theater songs, folk repertoire, and popular songs—particularly those of Amaradeva and Victor Ratnayake. He often accompanied himself on harmonium or violin, seeking to convey textual meaning through melodic nuance and vocal expression. When sober, he spoke little and maintained a serious demeanor. Although he never engaged in violent punishment, both his children and students feared him due to his strict discipline, which occasionally included corporal punishment in accordance with educational norms of the time. Simultaneously, he was respected and admired for his musical knowledge and teaching ability, illustrating the ambivalent authority often exercised by artist-teachers (Rice, 2017).

Large groups of schoolchildren frequently visited our home on weekends to rehearse for concerts and competitions. These sessions allowed my siblings and me to participate as accompanists, accelerating our musical learning. We were also invited to accompany performances at nearby schools and received small payments, which constituted much of our pocket money and supported everyday needs. In this way, we grew up immersed in his musical world. My earliest memory of musical instruction is a bamboo flute he crafted for me—cut from a stalk near the river, carefully drilled, and used to teach me the seven tones.

RESIDENCES

Sumanadasa lived in Angammana, Ratnapura, until relocating with his family to Panadura in 1980. Following his marriage to Ratna Samaraweera, he resided at the locations listed in Figure 4.

Period	Place	Duration/Notes
1973	Ayagama	(3 months) Short stay
1973	Near Saman Dewalaya	(2 months) Temporary residence
1973–1977	Angammana, Batugedara	4 years
May 1978–1979	Narangoda Guru Niwasaya	1 year
1980	Angammana	Short return (4 months)
1980–1981	Wadduwa	1 year; Kapila Meddegoda (son, 1st child) enrolled at Panadura Royal College
1982–1983	Raigama	2 years; Chamila Meddegoda (son, 2nd child) enrolled at Panadura Royal College
1984	Panadura, near railway station	1 year; Chinthaka Meddegoda (son, 3rd child) enrolled at Panadura Royal College
1985–1988	Panadura, Gunathilaka Road	3 years; Nishadi Meddegoda (daughter, 4th child) enrolled at Suman-gala Balika Vidyalaya; Rasika Meddegoda (son, 5th child) enrolled at Panadura Royal College
1989–present	Kurusahandiya, Panadura	Long-term residence Sumanadasa passed away here in 2004

Figure 4: Residences of Sumanadasa and his family, showing periods of residence and key life events.

SELECTED MUSICAL CONTRIBUTION OF SUMANADASA

Sumanadasa Meddegoda's known musical contributions across educational, religious, and performance contexts are listed in Figure 5.

Activity / Work	Type	Location / Institution	Notes
Kuveni Gita Natakaya	Musical drama	Mawala School, Moronthuduwa; Pinwatta Maha Vidyalaya; Palayan-goda Kanishtha Vidyalaya	Script written by Sumanadasa
Kalagola	Drama with music	Dharmashala Pirivena	Directed and performed; included original musical elements
Bhakti Gita Concert	Religious music concert	Temple of Ven. Vajirabuddhi Thero	Organized and performed
Bhakti Gita Concerts	Religious music	Schools where he was employed	Presented at annual and special events
Buddhist Carol Tours	Musical–religious tours	Various locations across Sri Lanka	Choir-style Buddhist carol performances
School Anthems	Musical composition	Dharmashala School; other schools in the Sabaragamuwa and Western	Composed both music and lyrics

Activity / Work	Type	Location / Institution	Notes
		Provinces	
Daham Pasal Anthems	Musical composition	Various Buddhist Sunday schools	Composed and introduced

Figure 5: Table of Sumanadasa Meddegoda's known musical contributions across educational, religious, and performance contexts

FINAL THOUGHTS

An examination of Sumanadasa Meddegoda's life reveals a complex interplay between exceptional artistic talent and persistent structural constraint. He was highly gifted in music and literature and demonstrated remarkable ability as a singer, instrumentalist, actor, and creative practitioner. His musical formation—shaped through both local traditions and Hindustani influences—emerged largely through nonformal modes of learning. Despite these abilities, he remained dissatisfied with his achievements and continuously sought further intellectual and artistic growth. This aspiration was repeatedly curtailed by limited financial resources, uneven access to mentorship, and broader political and economic conditions that restricted opportunities for rural artists. The mentors he encountered were often themselves constrained by institutional hierarchies and economic pressures, resulting in limited recognition of his contributions within formal systems of cultural administration.

Much of Sumanadasa's contribution remains undocumented. While his musical abilities and artistic presence are remembered fondly by those who knew him, large portions of his creative output have been lost due to the absence of systematic archiving and preservation. This loss was shaped by material insecurity, repeated displacement, and environmental vulnerability, particularly flooding (Oliver-Smith, 2009) along the Kalu Ganga. The difficulty of recovering even basic photographic records of his life—many damaged or destroyed by floods—highlights the fragility of artistic legacies in ecologically and economically precarious settings. Born in 1944 and passing away on June 6, 2004, Sumanadasa lived for 60 years, moving across multiple locations in Sri Lanka and inhabiting various roles—as an educator, musician, composer, husband, and father—unevenly and contingently, according to circumstance.

In the final years of his life, Sumanadasa withdrew from family and social responsibilities and developed a dependency on alcohol. He died on June 6, 2004 following a fall at his home. While this ending is tragic, it should not be isolated from the broader conditions that shaped his life. His struggles cannot be adequately explained through individual disposition alone.

Sumanadasa's life and artistic trajectory must be understood within the wider socio-environmental, political, and economic contexts of twentieth-century Sri Lanka. Recurrent flooding in Ratnapura structured everyday life through displacement, disrupted livelihoods, and chronic uncertainty. For communities along the Kalu Ganga, environmental disruption was not episodic but cyclical, shaping cultural orientations toward impermanence, adaptability, and survival. Sumanadasa's upbringing in Angammana was embedded in this landscape, where long-term economic stability and conventional domestic continuity often carried limited practical or symbolic value.

These environmental conditions intersected with broader political and economic instabilities from the late colonial period through the post-independence decades. Born at the threshold of independence, Sumanadasa came of age amid cultural nationalism, economic austerity, uneven development, and prolonged political conflict. Shifting state policies, limited cultural infrastructure, and the concentration of patronage within urban elite networks restricted sustained support for rural artists. As a result, despite his wide-ranging abilities, he remained marginal within institutional frameworks of cultural recognition.

From an ethnomusicological and cultural-biographical perspective, Sumanadasa's limited engagement with economic accumulation or conventional family stability should not be interpreted as personal failure. Rather, his life reflects a socially situated response to intersecting forms of precarity—environmental, economic, and institutional. Ethnographic scholarship demonstrates that in such contexts, artistic practice often functions as a mode of resilience and continuity rather than as a pathway to material security. Sumanadasa's eventual social withdrawal must therefore be understood within a framework of structural neglect and fragile support systems rather than individual deficiency.

In this sense, Sumanadasa's biography offers a critical lens on the costs of systemic failure to recognize and nurture artistic talent in postcolonial Sri Lanka. While he may not have reached the artistic destination he envisioned, his life stands as a testament to the entanglement of talent, place, and structural constraint—and as a reminder that cultural loss often occurs not through lack of ability, but through the absence of sustained care, recognition, and equitable opportunity.

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