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THE HINDU

The power of verses

Lyricist Muthulingam looks back at his 50-year journey in Tamil cinema **p2**

A master at work

How Pt. Ulhas Kashalkar brings the best of three gharanas into his music **p3**



SONAM KALRA AND HER SONGS OF ONENESS

The singer-songwriter recently won three medals at the 2025 Global Music Awards **p4**

V. Sriram

It's that time of the year again, when notwithstanding the heat of the Chithirai month, thousands flock to Madurai to witness the twin event – wedding of Meenakshi and Sundareswarar and Azhagar's procession from Azhagarkoil/Tirumalirumsolai to the Vaigai river and back.

Last year in this supplement we looked at a book published in 1932 that contains compositions by Senkamalavalli, wife of AK Srinivasa Iyengar, who was a Tamil professor at the Findlay College, Mannargudi. She has penned 54 songs that capture every little aspect of Azhagar's nine-day outing. Apart from Senkamalavalli's songs, there are a few other compositions, but they do not visualise the event the way she has done. In fact, formal description of the procession find mention only 17th century onwards. This is not to say that the event itself dates back to the time, it can be traced further beyond.

Description of Madurai and the temple can be found in the *pasurams* composed by five azhwars, *Silappathikaram*, Vedanta Desika's *Hamsa Sandesam* and Arunagirinathar's

Tiruppugazh. The last one that has a mention of Pazhamuthirsolai, situated in the same range of hills as Tirumalirumsolai, highlights the natural beauty of the place and the presence of the Nupura Ganga/Silambaru. The 17th century composition 'Chalu Chalu' by Raja Shahaji in raga Kanada and Ata tala is an ode to the deity.

Muthuswami Dikshitar makes passing mention of the festival in his 'Sri Sundararajam' (Kasiramakriya/Adi). The song states the festival is associated with the arrival of Manduka. Even today, one of the highlights of the procession is the seventh day, when Azhagar, on his way back, stops at Thenoor to offer salvation to rishi Sutapas, who owing to a curse, transformed into a frog (manduka). That night, at the rishi's request, Azhagar appears in all ten incarnations at the Ramarayar Mandapam. But only seven are displayed. Varaha and Narasimha avatars are omitted since they would require Azhagar's face to be changed. The tenth avatara is not of Kalki but Mohini.

The 19th century *Azhagar Kuravanji* by Kavi Kunjara Bharati though set in Sivaganga, imagines that the town is part of the procession and has songs describing it. One of them depicts the first eight avatars and the



Songs by the river

Discovering lyrical gems that describe Azhagar's annual procession to the Vaigai

subsequent song is dedicated to Azhagar as Krishna. There is one structured as a conversation among women mesmerised by the beauty of Azhagar. Legend has it that a princess is smitten by Azhagar's beauty and a fortune-teller (kurathi) assures her of union with the Lord.

In the 1950s, when Ambujam Krishna began composing, she dedicated several songs to Azhagarkoil. One of them being 'Azhagan bavani' (tuned by KR Kedaranathan in Kamboji/Rupakam), which has four charanam,

each beautifully describing important events in the procession. It begins with the composer inviting devouts to pay their respects to Azhagar as he sets out with a smile in a palanquin from the temple. His hair is tied in a knot, he wields a shepherd's crook and is dressed in sparkling gems.

The next stanza describes Azhagar in a golden chariot, which as the lines indicate, moves in a slow, swaggering manner. On reaching Madurai, by when it is a full moon night, Azhagar gets on a horse and prepares to cross the Vaigai, this being the highpoint of the festival. The third stanza describes the first part of the return, when the Lord is seated on Adi Sesha and then Garuda, and grants salvation to sage Manduka

Much-awaited outing (clockwise from left) Devotees surround Kallazhagar, seated on garuda vahanam, during the Chithirai festival; Kallazhagar entering the Vaigai river and the Meenakshi temple in Madurai PHOTOS: G MOORTHY AND GETTY IMAGES

enroute. The description of the 10 avatars comes next. The final stanza depicts Azhagar in a floral palanquin, surrounded by his devotees, reaching his abode in the hills.

This is a festival of the people and the folk songs on it are no less interesting. In his thesis on the temple, titled *Azhagar Koil* (Madurai Kamaraj University, 1989), Tho Paramasivan includes a few. The most absorbing section comprises songs belonging to the 'varnippu' genre that describes an event, in this case the entire procession, and episodes from it. The author lists 11 songs, of which five were passed down through oral tradition. He notes that this temple had an association known as the Bhaktar Varnippalar Mahasabai, which comprised these songsters. Founded in 1966, it aimed to preserve and propagate the genre. In various

interviews, Paramasivan has indicated that varnippu follows the ammanai format, which traces its origins to the *Mahabharata Ammanai*, sung by Sankaramoorti Konar in 1817. He had also composed varnippus.

Essentially long-format, multi-line pieces devoid of cadences, varnippus are sung at the Ramarayar Mandapam through the night when Azhagar changes his garb nine times. They play an important role in keeping audiences enthused and awake. The Mahasabai crowdfunded these performances.

Paramasivan has published one varnippu which had existed till then only in oral tradition. Comprising 189 lines, it describes Azhagar's journey from the temple to Madurai. The lyrics make for an interesting reading as they are sprinkled with Telugu, English and a couple of Urdu words as well.



A new beat

Chenda players Aswathy and Archana break the glass ceiling at this year's Thrissur Pooram

Sumitra Nair

Thunderous fireworks, parading elephants, kudamattom (display of colourful parasols), and more. The Thrissur Pooram that dates back to 1796 draws thousands of visitors every year at the famed Vadakkumnathan temple.

In the popular number 'Kaanta' by the band Masala Coffee, a woman asks her beloved if she can accompany him to the Pooram. The song goes on to describe what she would witness and do at the festival. One of the lines goes: *Thimila anikonne kaananam kaanthaa... Thimilayil athilonne kottanam kaanthaa* (I want to see the hour-glass-shaped drum, I want to play the hour-glass-shaped drum).

Now, two women – Aswathy Jithin, 35, and Archana Anoop, 42, from Poomkunnam – not only

played the thimila, but also were a part of pandi melam, one of the main percussion sets, becoming the first women to be part of a chenda melam at the Pooram.

Aswathy, a native of Thrissur, grew up watching the Pooram. Marriage to Jithin Kallat, one of the main percussionists at the event, piqued her interest in the chenda. Her 13-year-old son Adithya learnt the chenda, and when he was about to have his debut performance in 2018, Aswathy was inspired to start learning. After learning for a year, she made her debut in 2019.

Archana's story is similar. Three months into her son Udhav learning the chenda, she started training under Jithin, and made her debut in 2023, on Deepavali.

Says Aswathy: "My husband Jithin has been playing at the Pooram for 10 years now. This year, Archana *chechi* and I approached him and professed our wish to take part in it



Making a mark Aswathy and Archana performing at the Pooram. PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



too. He agreed. The Devaswom Board did too. And thus, we got to be a part of valamthala or the right hand side of the percussion, in one of the back rows. The duo was part of the pandi melam, which is part of the procession to bring in shasthavu or Ayyappan's idol via the southern gate, and ending at the western gopuram.

This isn't the first time women have been a part of the Pooram – in 2024, Hridya, a native of Thanikkudam, and Sreepriya, a

native of Mulankunnathukavu, played the kuramkuzhal or wooden wind instrument similar to the flute.

"Our families have been very supportive," says Archana, adding "My mother has been receiving congratulatory calls."

The duo has till now been a part of at least 10 chenda melams, including those at Shankarakulangara Bhagavathy temple and Kanimangala Shastha temple.

The chendas are heavy, weighing about 13-14 kg. "It is a bit difficult to become one with the chenda when you start out; you tend to suffer from shoulder pain and body ache, but you get used to it. And while performing you usually get immersed in it, which makes you forget about the pain," Archana says.

The day before their performance, the duo didn't think much of it. "But on the morning of the Pooram, it dawned on me that it is the first time two women will play the chenda at Thrissur Pooram, an event Malayalees across the globe watch. But, once we started the melam, all the nervousness was gone," says Aswathy. "All the other artistes were supportive as we joined the row of percussionists," adds Archana.

They both hope to be a part of poorams at other temples too.

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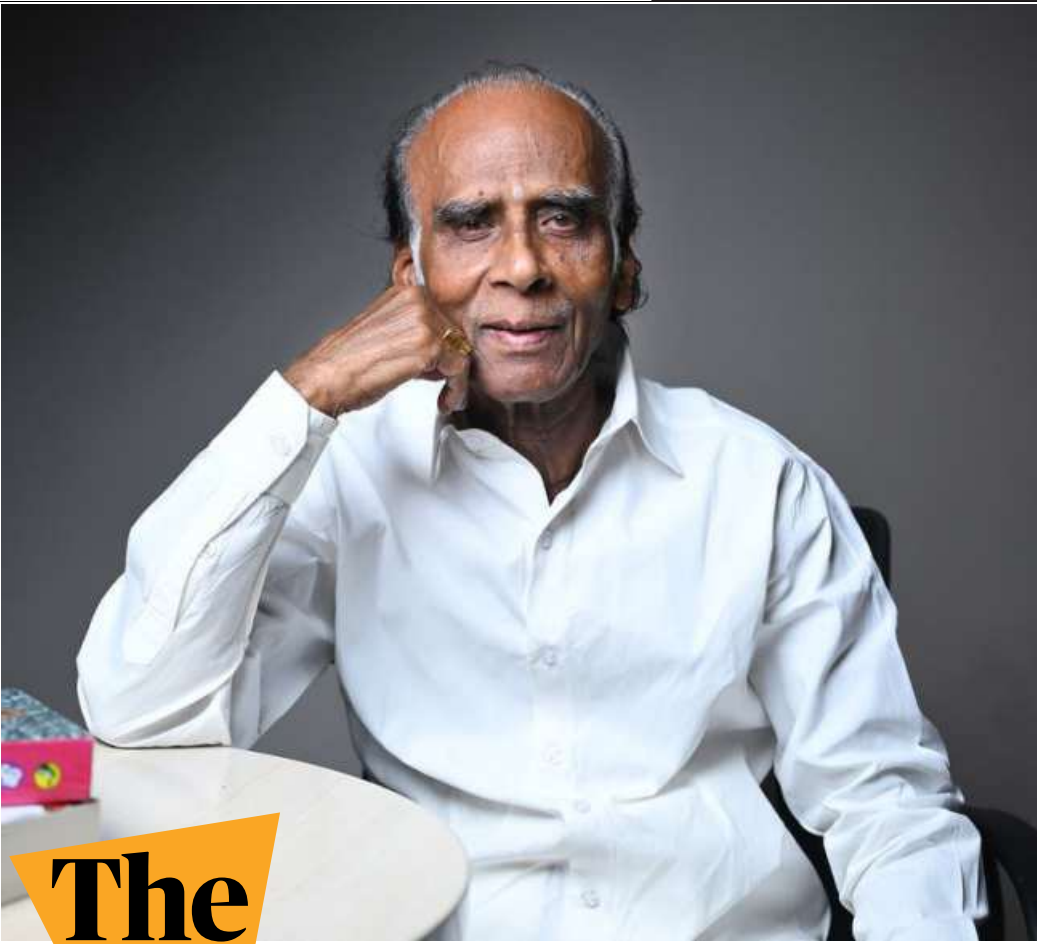
The run-up to the 1977 Assembly elections in Tamil Nadu was filled with fierce speeches and the air was heavy with political intrigue. After all, former friends M. Karunanidhi of the DMK and M.G. Ramachandran of the AIADMK were clashing head-on, and no one knew what would happen.

Amid all this, two songs ‘Anbukku naan adimai’ and ‘Ithu naatai kaakum kai’ played repeatedly from loudspeakers across the State. MGR sent the songs to Calcutta for conversion as RPM records, so they could be played during the campaign. Later, it was said that these songs were among the reasons that catapulted MGR and his fledgling AIADMK to power. The lyricist behind these songs, Muthulingam, completes five decades in the Tamil film industry.

“The songs may have caught people’s imagination. But, MGR’s groundwork was in place and he had that charisma. If songs can win elections, all actors will succeed in politics,” smiles Muthulingam.

Maduraiyai Meeta Sundarapandian, MGR’s last film also had two songs – ‘Thayagathin sudandiramey’ and ‘Veeramagan porada’ – packed with a strong political message by the same lyricist. When there was an apprehension that the lines ‘Kottaiyile namadhu kodi paranthidavendum’ (our flag should fly in the Fort) might face the Censor Board’s cut, Muthulingam convinced the filmmaker to retain the line. In his autobiography *Aanantha Then Kaatru Thalattuthe*, MGR refers to this and says: “Muthulingam did so because he is my dear friend.”

Born in Kadambakudi in Ramanathapuram district,



The power of a poet

From political campaign songs to hit film numbers, tracing Muthulingam’s five-decade journey as a lyricist

Muthulingam worked as a journalist in the DMK organ *Murasoli* and *Alai Osai* (run by Vellore Narayanan). He has written over 1,600 songs, and close to 250 are considered some of the finest in Tamil – ‘Manjola kilitthano’ from

Kizhakke Pogum Rayil, ‘Idhazhil kathai ezhuthum’ from *Unnal Mudiyum Thambi* and ‘Bhoopalam isaikkum’ from *Thooral Ninnu Pochu*. “The only person I’ve approached for an opportunity to write songs is MGR,” says

Muthulingam, explaining why he has not been as prolific as others despite having several hit songs to his credit. “He remembered, and asked me to write the songs for *Meenava Nanban*, even though the recording was over. He insisted my songs will be a part of the film – remember ‘Thangathil mugam eduthu santhanathil uyir eduthu’?”

But Muthulingam had his share of disappointments in Kodambakkam before he made a name as someone who excelled in writing songs for tunes. “Only K.V. Mahadevan could compose tunes for lyrics. Everyone else would get their tunes ready first and expect lyrics for that.”

Working with Ilaiyaraaja Muthulingam worked at a time when a new order was coming into play in Tamil film music. Ilaiyaraaja was assisting G.K. Venkatesh, who was composing music for the film *Ponnukku Thangamanasu*. Its

Rewind (Clockwise from left) Lyricist Muthulingam penned many songs for MGR; and from films *Unnal Mudiyum Thambi* and *Pattikada Pattanama*. PHOTOS: B. THAMODHARAN & THE HINDU ARCHIVES



scriptwriter Balamurugan had invited Muthulingam to write the lyrics. But, he was smarting from having already written two songs for *Nilave Nee Satchi* and Sivaji Ganesan-starrer *Pattikada Pattanama*, which were never used. “Balamurugan assured me the film would not release without my song. I had to write a song for this situation: three

rivers Ganga, Cauvery and Vaigai were competing, and a farmer had to pacify them.” His lyrics did not suit Venkatesh’s tune, and the film’s director P. Madhavan was unhappy at the delay. Venkatesh suggested Muthulingam sit with his assistant, who had plenty of tunes. The assistant? Ilaiyaraaja. The song? ‘Thanjavuru seemaiyile kannu

thavi vanthen ponniamma’. “I had the privilege of writing the first song for Ilaiyaraaja,” smiles Muthulingam.

This was the first of many collaborations between the two. One of their notable songs was ‘Idhayam poguthey’ for *Puthiya Vaarpugal*. Ilaiyaraaja has explained that the prelude of the song had the elements of a symphony. Incidentally, the maestro sang this song during the premiere of his symphony *Valiant I* in London.

A much-loved song of Muthulingam is ‘Sangeetha megham’ from *Udhaya Geetham*. A line goes thus: ‘Intha thegam marainthalam isaiyai malarven’ (Even if my body disappears, I will blossom again as music). When singer S.P. Balasubrahmanyam passed, this line was used as a tribute, and as a reminder that his voice is timeless. Considering Muthulingam’s contribution to Tamil film music, this line could well be applicable to him too.

In step with his rhythm

Mridangist Nellai D Kannan on his 50-year association with the world of dance



V.V. Ramani

It was a path ordained for Nellai D Kannan. Son of Nellai P.S. Devaraja Iyer, a well-known mridangist and namasankirtanam bhagavathar in Tirunelveli, Kannan grew up in a house that resonated with the sounds of the percussion instrument.

Sensing his interest, Kannan’s father began teaching him mridangam. Hearing the boy playing, their neighbour, Courtallam Viswanathan Iyer, also a mridangist, took him under his wings. This strong foundation paved the way for a long and successful journey. As Kannan

completes 50 years as a mridangam artiste, he shares his experiences.

“I started playing mridangam for dance at the behest of Karaikudi Krishnamoorthy, a close family friend, who convinced my father that I would have greater opportunities as a dance accompanist,” says Kannan. The family then moved to

Madras to help him pursue his interest. Kannan began accompanying Carnatic vocalists. His shift to the world of dance happened when he got a chance to play for renowned Bharatanatyam dancer Vyjayanthimala. Later, dancer-choreographer M.V. Narasimhachari trained him to understand the nuances of playing for dance. “I have been fortunate to have worked with the best in the field.”

He recalls with fondness his association with the Dhananjayans, who took him on his first foreign trip. “It was because of them that I got to work on legendary sitarist Pt. Ravi Shankar’s magnum opus ‘Ghanashyam’. This led to another fabulous opportunity – of being part of George Harrison’s album ‘Brainwashed’. These musical outings have had a great impact on my journey. I remember once when I had gone for a visa interview, the officer in-charge noticed in my portfolio a photograph of mine with The Beatles star. When I said I had played with him, he quickly approved my visa.”

Understanding early on the importance of being a team player, Kannan says, “I realised how I should embellish and enhance the performance. I play the *arudhis* and *kanakkus* according to a dancer’s movements and footsteps.”

Kannan, who has been bestowed with several honours, also conducts lec-dems and composes dance pieces. “Today, when I look back, I feel mridangam has filled my life with rhythm.”

Felicitation event

Jayanthi Subramaniam and Kala Darsana will celebrate Nellai D Kannan’s golden jubilee year as a mridangist on May 11 (4 p.m.) at R.R. Sabha (mini hall). Veteran dancer-scholar Nandini Ramani will be the chief guest and Vasanthalakshmi Narasimhachari (director, Kalasamarpana Foundation and trustee of RASOHAM) will be the guest of honour. They will felicitate the mridangist. On the occasion, students of Kala Darsana will present ‘Kapali Arupatthumooavar’.

Lacking a storyline

Reviews of two plays staged at Kartik Fine Arts’ annual Kodai Nataka Vizha

Suganthi Krishnamachari

One of the commonly heard complaints is that laws which were intended to protect women caught in bad marriages have become tools of offence in the hands of unscrupulous women. This was the crux of PMG Mayurapriya’s play *Ennadi Penne* (story, dialogues, direction P. Muthukumaran).

Vandana (Anu Suresh) is a lawyer, who, because she was wronged by her husband, harbours a deep mistrust of all men. In divorce cases, she always appears for the women, and says proudly that she has never had a male client. The pungent dialogues laced with humour resonated with the audience.

When Sundaram (Sai Prasad) and his wife Preethi (Divya Shankar) decide to separate, Vandana, for the first time takes up Sundaram’s cause, thus breaking her rule of no male clients. Preethi is looking to profit monetarily from the separation. Vandana tells both sides that in their own interest, it is best to part ways on the basis of mutual consent. If not, they must be prepared for protracted court proceedings. Here, the playwright showed how frustrating the legal system can be. As the Latin saying goes *factum clarum jus nebulosum* the simpler the facts, the more obfuscating is the law.

The play highlighted the fact that in many cases, marriage was nothing more than a business contract. Usually Tamil plays have very few women characters, but it was heartening to see that *Ennadi Penne* had seven women characters. The actors delivered their lines without a hitch and with suitable modulation. But the story of *Ennadi Penne* was threadbare. Nothing really happened in the play. The only eventful happenings were Sundaram’s marriage and his quarrel with his wife Preethi. Vandana’s diatribes against men and her lengthy monologues became tedious after a while. Belabouring a point detracts from its impact. The lack of a well-structured storyline in *Ennadi Penne* was a drawback. A story with a message is understandable, but a message cannot be a substitute for a story.



From *Ennadi Penne*. PHOTO: M. SRINATH



From Augusto Creations’ *Akhila Kitty*. PHOTO: M. SRINATH

The lost plot

Augusto is known for his scripts based on crime, and his latest play *Akhila Kitty* also has crime as its theme. The titular character Akhila Kitty (Usha Nandini) is a much sought-after writer of mystery stories. Her thrillers, serialised in a magazine, boost its circulation. Unfortunately, Akhila dies before completing her latest story. The editor of the magazine hits upon an idea to shore up sales. He invites submissions to complete the story, with a prize for the best submission. There is a deluge of responses, including an AI-generated story! Vannappan’s (Pothilingam) story wins the prize.

It turns out that Akhila’s story was based on facts. There is a criminal at large, who has escaped the legal dragnet, thanks to a police officer who suppressed crucial evidence. Akhila had clinching proof about the criminal mastermind’s modus operandi, and was going to expose him through her story, before she died mysteriously. How he is snared forms the rest of the story.

For a suspense play to be

appealing, the tempo is important. Augusto Creations’ *Akhila Kitty* had a promising start, but soon slowed down. The tenant Raju (Karthikeyan) served no purpose in the story. There could have been a lineup of suspects, all with possible motives, to keep the audience guessing till the end. Such a lineup would have been possible, if Akhila’s novel had been shown as half finished, instead of nearing its conclusion. The identity of the perpetrator was revealed midway through the play, and this took the edge off the excitement.

The rest of the play was a mere formality. Shakila cheerfully indulging in light-hearted banter with Vannappan, soon after her sister Akhila’s death was odd. The sudden mellowing down of the villain, who had been bumping off those who were inconvenient to him, was not convincing. There were some well-written lines, for which Augusto must be complimented. The theme stood out for its novelty, but it could have been handled better.

– SK

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“**K**ya shakhs tha Ray (What a man Ray was),” says Siddiqui, sitting in the study of his house in Mumbai’s Char Bangla area. Once a hub of activity, his study was where creative minds such as M.F. Husain and Yash Chopra met and spent hours.

Siddiqui, who left journalism during the Emergency to follow his passion for creative writing, has seen 83 summers, but his eyes light up like a youngster at the mention of Satyajit Ray. The legendary filmmaker introduced Siddiqui to cinema with *Shatranj Ke Khiladi* in 1977.

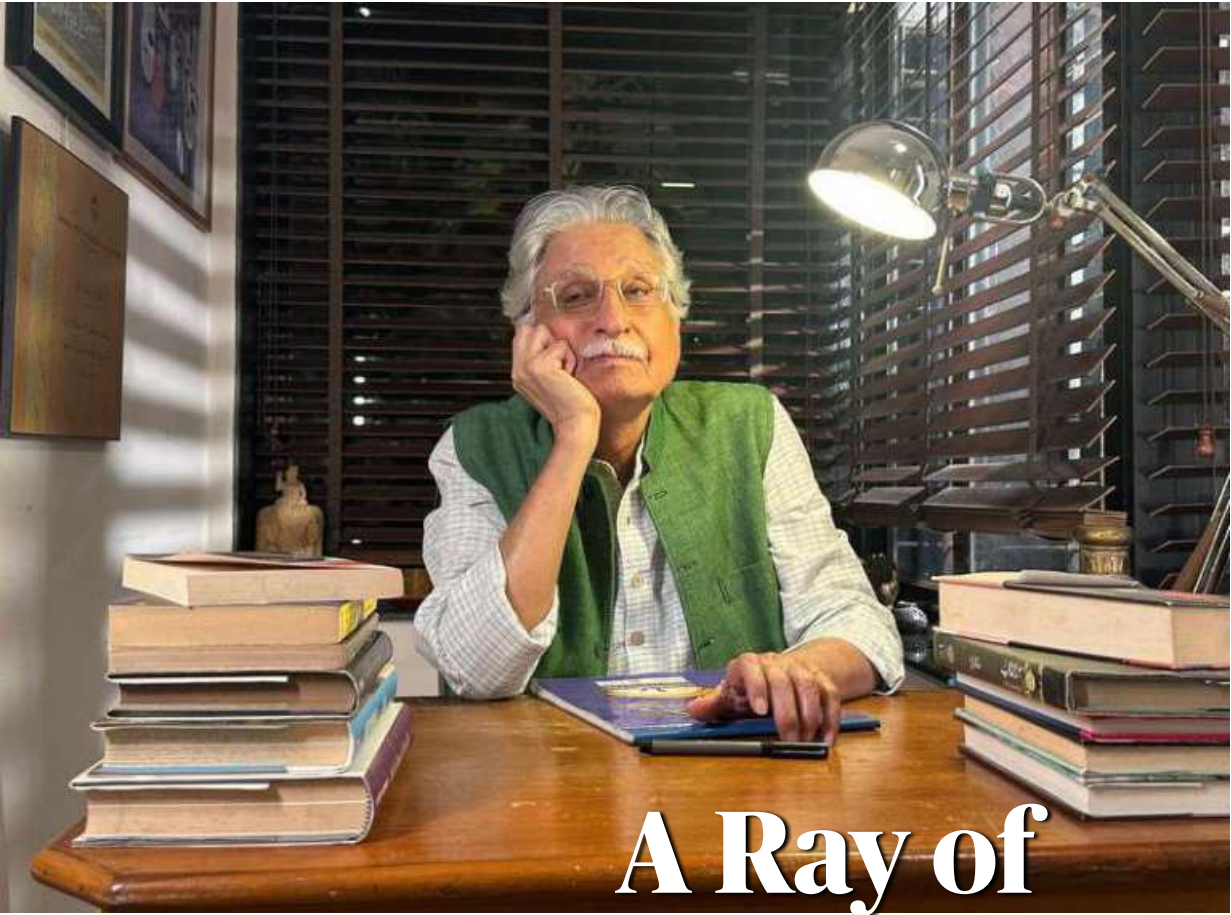
Ray had committed to producer Suresh Jindal to make a Hindi film. But he wanted a story that had its roots in the North, “He didn’t want to adapt a Bangla story as was the norm those days,” recalls Siddiqui. An admirer of Premchand’s writing, initially, Ray wanted to adapt *Kafan*, but when he came to know that Mrinal Sen had already decided to turn the short story into a Telugu film, he turned his focus to *Shatranj Ke Khiladi*.

“After writing the screenplay, Manikda was looking for someone from a non-film background with an understanding of Lucknawi Urdu of the 1850s. Shama Zaidi, who was doing the costumes, knew me because of our Rampur background and suggested my name to him. Ray was a towering figure, literally and metaphorically, for a newcomer it could be overwhelming, but my journalism background prepared me not to be overawed.”

Siddiqui formed a formidable team with Zaidi. “I verbalised the dialogues, and if she approved them, she would nod and type them in Roman on her Remington typewriter, as Manikda didn’t know Hindi and Urdu.” Once Siddiqui asked Ray if he knew any Hindi words, he replied, “Just one: *bas* (enough).”

As Ray had created Lucknow in Kolkata, Siddiqui says, he needed someone to check the cultural authenticity. “He wanted me to help his Bengali crew with the Urdu dialogues. That’s how I became his special assistant.”

“I haven’t seen a more meticulous



A Ray of light

Veteran writer Javed Siddiqui recalls his association with Satyajit Ray. May 2 was the legendary filmmaker’s birth anniversary

director than Ray. He had a red book that he called *khata*, much like the logbook of a trader. Everyday, when he entered the set, he would sketch every shot in the *Khata*, accompanied by the Urdu dialogue written in Bengali and its English translation.” For the scene where the East India Company forces enter Lucknow, Siddiqui reveals Ray sketched on an art paper the order in which the cavalry, elephantry, and infantry would move. It became our guidebook at the location.” Siddiqui has preserved that paper as a memento, and it shines on the wall of his study.

Siddiqui went on to pen the dialogues of Muzaffar Ali’s *Umrao Jaan*. Comparing the Awadh of Ray with that of Ali, Siddiqui says that while the latter had an emotional connection with the city, Ray had an objective approach. “He wanted to highlight how the upper middle class remained oblivious and indifferent to the British manoeuvres to seize control. The film remains relevant because the upper middle class’ indifference to politics remains.” He mentions the scene where the chess players are told how the British have tinkered with the rules of the game, such as Wazir being called the ‘Queen’. “Here, Ray

used chess to underline the political context.”

Belonging to the family of the Ali Brothers (Mohammad and Shaukat Ali), Siddiqui started writing at the age of 14 in *Khilafat*, the non-cooperation movement. From theatre and cinema to crime and politics, Siddiqui says there was a time when he was writing editorials as well.

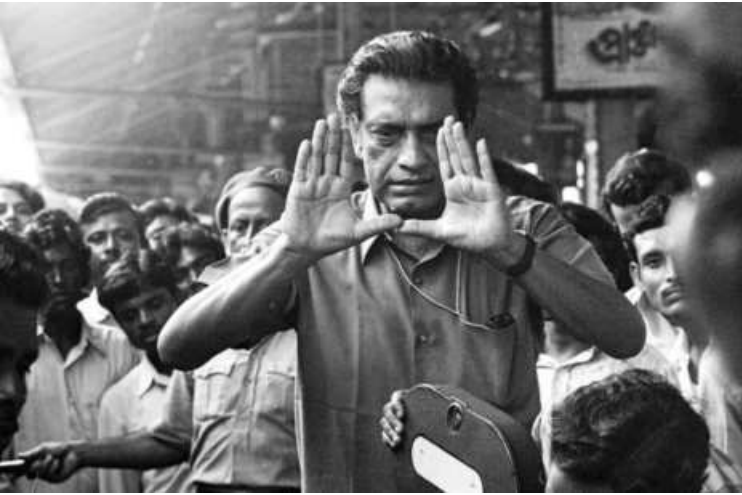
“When I came to Bombay, Kaifi Azmi, Ismat Chughtai, and Ali Sardar Jafri blessed and guided me. I reviewed Leftist leanings. When I reviewed plays in *Khilafat*, I would carry an announcement of the IPTA

plays. Once, Kaifi sahib encouraged me to write a play. I summoned the courage to translate Russian playwright Yevgeny Schwartz’s *The Dragon*, a subversive satire on the totalitarian regime of Stalin. That’s how I wrote *Rakshas*.”

During the Emergency, Siddiqui says, being an independent journalist was humiliating. “Every day, we had to take our stories to the Secretariat for clearance. On one occasion, I was detained for 24 hours for a story where I linked the looting of a ration shop in Bihar to the export of rice to Russia.”

Over the years, Siddiqui worked

Creative bond (Left) Javed Siddiqui owes his journey in cinema to Satyajit Ray. PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT & GETTY IMAGES



with a range of directors. From Shyam Benegal to Umesh Mehra and Yash Chopra to Rakesh Roshan, Siddiqui transcended genres without compromising the emotional depth and cultural context. He sees dialogue as a need of the characters and doesn’t write them to generate a claptrap.

“I try to understand the character’s psyche and the moment. When a film becomes a hit, even ordinary dialogue becomes popular. The one in *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* – ‘*Bade Bade Shehron Main*’ may be a cheesy line, but the situation demanded it. When former US President Barack Obama used it in his address (during his 2015 visit to India), I realised its popularity.”

Siddiqui rates Yash Chopra as the best when it came to understanding the requirements of a dialogue writer. “Having worked with stalwart writers such as Akhtar Ul Iman and Wajahat Mirza early in his career, Chopra understood the rhythm of the Urdu language.”

A good dialogue writer, says



I haven’t seen a more meticulous director than Ray. He had a red book that he called *khata*, much like the logbook of a trader. Everyday, when he entered the set, he would sketch every shot in it.

Siddiqui, also needs to understand the weak points of an actor. “For instance, Amrish Puri used to dramatise dialogues. In *Dilwale*...I deliberately wrote lines that didn’t allow him to do so.” Turning the weakness of the actor into his strength is also something Siddiqui learnt while working with Ray on *Shatranj Ke Khiladi*. Some actors give a new dimension to the written word. “As Shah Rukh did in *Darr*.”

Siddiqui strongly feels cinema has a moral duty, and that there is no place for profanity in film writing. He calls for restraint. “Realism doesn’t come by adding cuss words to the dialogues. Dilip Kumar used *kambakht* (*wretched*) with such impact that it worked like an invective.”

Be it *Sohini Mahiwal*, *Chakra* or *Mammo* on screen, or *Tumhari Amrita*, *Salgirah*, and *Hum Safar* on stage, Siddiqui is known for writing strong female characters. In plays like *Hum Safar* and *Gudamba*, which will be staged at the Prithvi Theatre in Mumbai next week, he talks of saving the institution of marriage without getting pedantic.

“See, it is not a conservative thought. I am all for exploring live-in, but what about the child, a product of a scarred relationship that has a limited legal sanction? I know a celebrity couple who started living together and adopted a child. After a few years, they parted ways, leaving the child in trauma. Someone has to take note of her dilemmas. Someone has to put society on notice,” Siddiqui signs off.



Songs of oneness Sonam Kalra (below) with her team of musicians. PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



Mind is Without Fear’ in the categories of Protest Music and Female Vocalist, and a third for her moving piece ‘Hallelujah - Allah Hoo’.

In both, Sonam’s music blends poetry, cultures and faith. Her interpretation of ‘Hum Dekhenge’ combines Faiz Ahmed Faiz’s revolutionary verses with Rabindranath Tagore’s call for freedom.

Speaking over the phone, Sonam says, “This recognition means a lot to me as it is peer-reviewed – by musicians and experts worldwide.”

She adds that becoming a voting member of the Grammy Recording Academy felt equally significant. “It is an honour because the global music community sees value in the kind of music I am trying to create.”

Sonam also sees the Global Music Award as a recognition of her The Sufi Gospel Project. “It is a huge validation,” she says. Recalling a recent message from Matt Koch, a Los Angeles-based symphonic composer, inviting her to contribute to a global music curriculum, she says, “To be recognised for music that goes deeper is a different validation. It tells me I may

not be on the mainstream path, but I’m on my path, and that’s what matters.”

Rooted in classical

Sonam’s musical journey began in childhood, inspired by her mother’s deep love for music. “She used to play the sitar and encouraged me and my siblings to pursue music. I began learning formally at age four,” says Sonam. While her sisters moved on, Sonam stayed immersed, later training under the Dagar Brothers, Shubha Mudgal, and Pt. Sarathi Chatterjee.

Though she pursued graphic design in art school and worked in advertising, music remained her calling. “I quit my job to sing professionally, and almost immediately lost my voice for a year. I felt like Saraswati was testing me,” she laughs. During this emotional period, especially as she cared for her ailing mother, Sonam found refuge in theatre: “Theatre helped me express myself when I couldn’t sing. It opened a different part of my soul.”

Sonam, who has released many well-loved songs, resists being boxed into any genre, choosing instead to let her music flow freely beyond boundaries.

The Smurfs get a desi tune

Indo-American singer Subhi’s Punjabi song ‘Higher Love’ is part of the Hollywood animated film

Neha Kirpal

It’s not every day that a Punjabi song features in a Hollywood animated film, but singer-songwriter Subhi has set a trend. The Indo-American artiste recently became the first South Asian to perform a Punjabi song in a Hollywood animated movie.

Subhi has collaborated with international musicians DJ Khaled and Cardi B for the song *Higher Love*, which features in the upcoming Smurfs film. “There’s something magical about fusing different worlds and creating something unexpected. I feel proud to bring my Punjabi roots to this international track,” Subhi says.

The collaboration came together rather organically. Subhi is signed to Desi Trill, both as an artiste and a songwriter. Ty Ty Smith, who co-founded the label, is also a producer on the Smurfs film. He believed in the track and saw the potential for something truly global.

“Natania (Lalwani) had already started working on the song with a few co-writers, and came up with this idea to infuse the track with Punjabi elements. Once the English portions were in place, she brought me in to write and sing the Punjabi section.”

Melange of styles

Subhi immediately fell in love with the concept. “The blend of cultures, languages and styles felt effortless in the studio. When DJ Khaled and Cardi B came on board, it elevated the whole thing. Cardi’s fun and witty verse brought swagger, and DJ Khaled brought his signature energy. Suddenly, we had something massive on our hands,” she shares.

Being on the sets of the song’s music video in Miami along with DJ Khaled and Natania - in what they jokingly called “Smurfland” - was a surreal experience. Incidentally, Subhi was nine months pregnant at the time. “Being part of something so significant, while nurturing a new life within me made the

experience more meaningful. It’s a memory I’ll always cherish,” she adds.

Subhi’s musical journey began in New Delhi. As a child, she trained in Hindustani music. Her grandfather used to recite Ghalib’s poems to her. “That’s really where my love for words and lyrical storytelling began. I realised that emotion lies between the lines, not just in them.”

When she was 16, Subhi moved to the U.S., where she broadened her musical horizon. She also trained with a Broadway vocal coach, and later with an opera coach, both of whom helped her understand vocal projection and body control. Later, moving to Chicago exposed her to jazz and blues. “That’s when I fell in love with artistes like Ella Fitzgerald. Her vocal phrasing and improvisation made me explore new territory,” she says. All of these influences reflect in this track. “I feel lucky to have walked through so many musical doors. Each one left something with me,” says the singer.



Fun with music The animation film which features Subhi’s Punjabi track ‘Higher Love’. PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Labels don’t matter

Singer-songwriter Sonam Kalra, who won three silver medals at the 2025 Global Music Awards, believes in music beyond genres and cultures

S B Vijaya Mary

“**I**n February 2010, I was invited to perform at the Urs of Sufi Inayat Khan’s dargah in Delhi. It proved to be a turning point in my musical journey,” says singer Sonam Kalra. “A Sikh girl singing Gospel music being welcomed into an Islamic space, that moment made me feel like the universe was trying to tell me something.” It was then that Sonam

thought about The Sufi Gospel Project. “I wondered why I can’t blend an Irish chant with a Buddhist chant or ‘Hallelujah’ with ‘Alla Hoo’ or ‘Abide With Me’ with Bulleh Shah’s verses. I also know the Gayatri Mantra by heart. So why not reflect this unity through music?”

Today, Sonam’s belief has found global affirmation. At the 2025 Global Music Awards held last month, she won three silver medals – two for her rendition of ‘Hum Dekhenge - Where the