

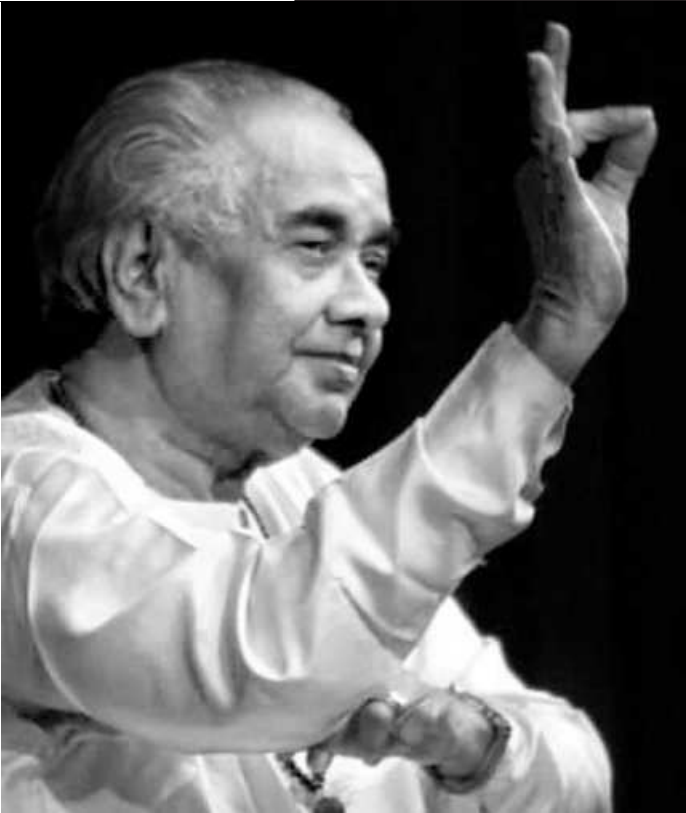
The revivalist

Remembering Guru Mayadhar Raut, who codified Odissi for the proscenium

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When appreciating an art, we often forget to acknowledge the contribution of those who strived hard to draw the world’s attention by giving it a form and structure. Odissi owes its existence to the now-fading Gotipua tradition, which is considered a precursor to the classical dance form. Most of Odissi’s celebrated gurus were once Gotipua performers. And Guru Mayadhar Raut, who passed away recently at the age of 92 in Delhi, was no exception. In

fact, he was the first to present Gotipua on stage in the 1940s. He, Kelucharan Mohapatra, Debaprasad Das and Pankaj Charan Das are referred to as the architects of modern Odissi. They redefined and codified the dance for the proscenium. Mayadhar Raut moved to Delhi in the late 1960s to teach Odissi at Nritya Niketan, a dance school, before joining Shriram Bharatiya Kala Kendra, where he taught for 25 years. Delhi’s famous Kamani Auditorium was inaugurated in 1971 with his performance. With his expertise on ancient treatises such as *Natyashastra*,



Abhinaya Darpana and *Abhinaya Chandrika*, he drew immensely from them to enhance the appeal of the

dance form. He is credited with introducing *sanchari bhava* in Odissi and choreographing the *Gita*

Govinda ashtapadis for performances.

Ranjana Gauhar, an Odissi exponent and one of Mayadhar Raut’s foremost disciples, remembers him as an affectionate person who always welcomed his sishyas with a smile. “That image of guruji with a childlike smile will remain etched in my memory.”

Ranjana, who began learning from Mayadhar Raut in 1977, trained under him for almost 13 years. “He was so scholarly and creative that you could not merely stop with learning – you observed and imbibed. He was extremely spontaneous and versatile. The years he spent in Kalakshetra seemed to have lent a new dimension to his approach. He was trained in Kathakali and Bharatanatyam too. He insisted on perfection, be it pure dance (he introduced Mudra Viniyoga) or expression. The depth he

brought to his abhinaya expositions by analysing the characters was unimaginable. He would often say ‘abhinaya is the ocean and sanchari bhava is the wave, which ultimately settles down in it’. For instance, while explaining to me the emotions in the Ashtapadi ‘Nindati Chandana’, he remembered the line ‘jal bin machali’ (fish out of water) from Meera’s poetry and used it as sanchari to depict Radha’s desolate state. As young learners, we were often awe-struck by his nuanced and refined choreography.”

Natyacharya V.P. Dhanaanjanayan, paying tribute to his Mayadhar *anna*, says, “I knew from the day he joined Kalakshetra in 1955. While teaching at the Kala Vikas Kendra in Cuttack as the first teacher of Odissi, he got a scholarship from the Orissa Sangeet Natak Akademi to pursue Bharatanatyam and Kathakali at Kalakshetra. *Anna*

used to share his expertise in Odissi with us while we taught him the fundamentals of Kathakali and Bharatanatyam. He was part of the Kalakshetra productions such as the Ramayana series. The Kalakshetra training enabled him to choreograph dance-dramas such as *Tapaswini*, *Meghdoot*, *Brij Leela*, *Singhala Kumari*, *Krishna Charitam*, and *Gita Govindam*.

According to Kiran Seth, the founder of SPIC MACAY (Society for the Promotion of Indian Classical Music And Culture Amongst Youth); “the one aspect I will never forget about guru Mayadhar Raut was his simplicity and the honesty he brought to his craft. His sessions for SPIC MACAY were enlightening. A guru in the real sense, he was always eager to share. The Odissi we see today on stage is thanks to gurus like him. The dance world will remain indebted to him.”

Right steps

Sivashree Kumar performed for Sri Parthasarathy Swamy Sabha’s Bharat Nritya Utsav 2025

Manasa Vijaylakshme C

Sivashree Kumar, a disciple of R. Vijay Madhavan, began her solo recital at Sri Parthasarathy Swamy Sabha’s Bharat Nritya Utsav 2025, Chennai, with ‘Sadashiva Kumara’, a composition by Papanasam Sivan, in raga Suddha Saveri and Adi tala.

The highlight of her recital was the varnam ‘Senthil Mevum’. Set to raga Nilambari and Adi tala, this composition by Lalgudi G. Jayaraman saw her portraying Muruga, the lord of Tiruchendur. With her expressive eyes and flowing gestures, the dancer brought the nayika’s longing to life. Her soft glances and delicate movements reflected her search for Muruga through the changing seasons. As the music built up, her steps became more intense, showing her growing impatience and deep desire to see him. The performance reached its peak when she called upon Muruga to arrive on his peacock. Sivashree embodied the beauty of a peacock in her performance.

The next piece, ‘Maasil veenaiyum’, a Thevaram in Purvikalyani and Adi tala, depicted the bliss of surrendering to Shiva. The dancer maintained a restrained approach, with minimal expressions and measured movements. The composition spoke of divine refuge and serenity. The piece unfolded with a quiet steadiness, staying true to the theme.

The concluding piece, ‘Chinnanjiru penpole’, set in raga Sindhubhairavi and tisra nadai Adi tala, depicted the radiance of Durga, comparing her cheerful presence to that of a young girl. Composed by Ulundurpettai Shanmugasundaram, it was popularised by the renowned singer Sirkazhi Govindarajan. However, while the composition celebrated Durga’s aura, Sivashree’s performance didn’t quite convey it.

The orchestra featured Sivashree’s guru R. Vijay Madhavan on the nattuvangam, Kaushik Champakesan on vocals, P.K. Sivaprasad on the mridangam, and Anantharam Balaji on the violin.



Graceful
Sivashree. PHOTO: S.R. RAGHUNATHAN

An ideal sishya

‘UnEkalavya’ showed the tribal warrior’s love for learning and devotion towards guru Dronacharya

V.V. Ramani

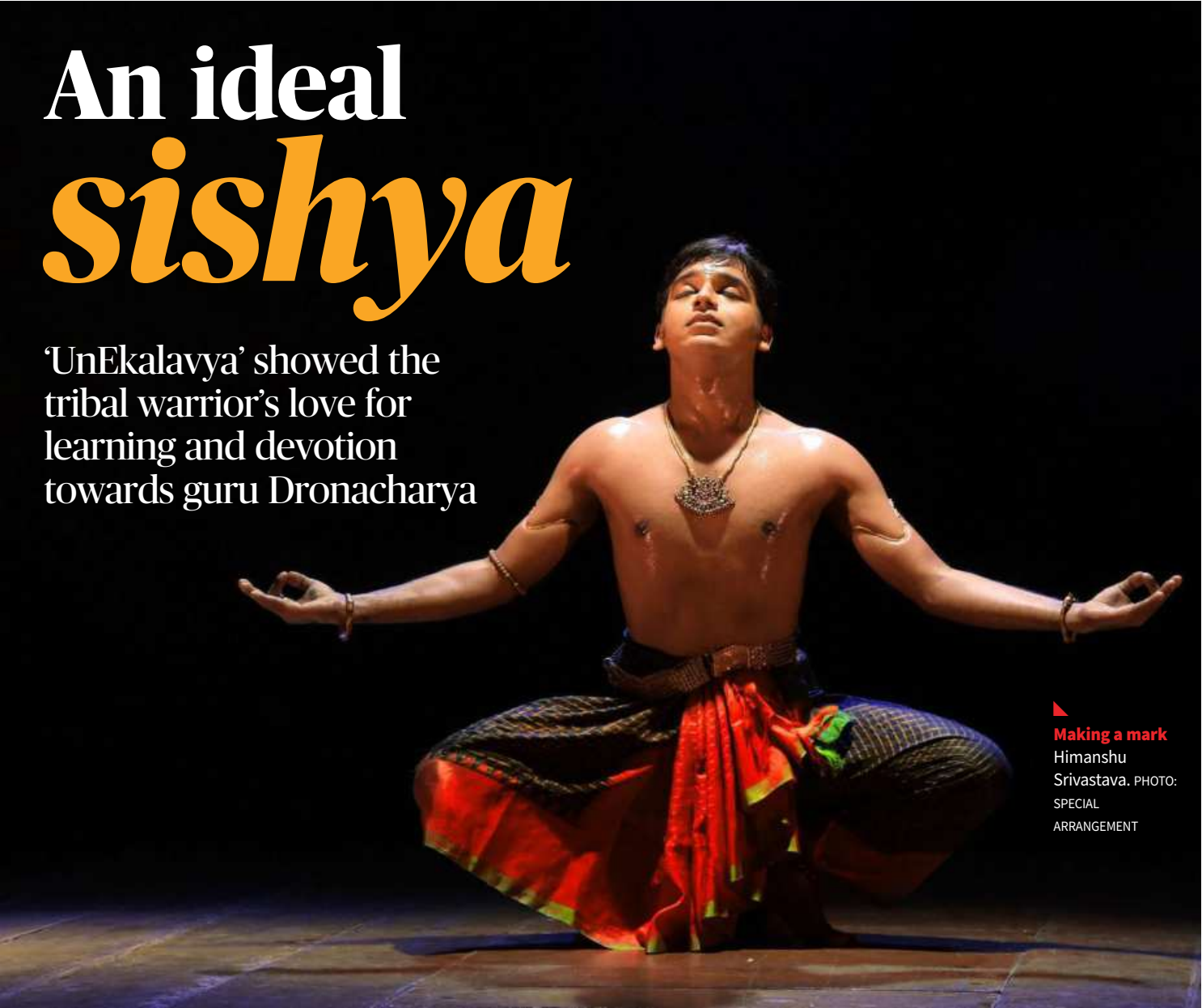
Jharna, a festival of dance curated by Bharata Kalanjali, is slowly gaining momentum as a platform for

young, talented dancers to share their art with the connoisseurs of Chennai. In its fourth edition this year, the line-up featured dancers who had been shortlisted based on their applications, and a few guest performances.

The idea behind ‘Jharna’ is that dancers are given an opportunity to conceive, choreograph and create an original work.

Himanshu Srivastava presented ‘UnEkalavya – The riddle of the thumb’ about

Ekalavya. Attired aesthetically like a forest dweller, Himanshu began with a sequence showing Abhidhyumna being killed in the battlefield. The narration then went into a flashback mode, into his past life as Ekalavya.



Making a mark
Himanshu Srivastava. PHOTO: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

The dancer immersed himself into the character with sincerity. His eagerness to train under Guru Dronacharya, facing rejection, learning archery by observing his guru in secrecy, and slicing his thumb as *gurudakshina* were dealt with clarity.

Himanshu’s expressions ranged from admiration and eagerness to melancholy and disillusionment. The process of creating a sculpture from the soil his guru walks on and his devotion and worship were handled with sensitivity. His depiction that laid emphasis on the use of four fingers for archery after losing a thumb was dramatically visualised, but the most poignant moment was when he removes the feather from his head and places it at his guru’s feet in total surrender. A noteworthy aspect in Himanshu’s performance was the *sthayi* bhava, wherein the space between himself and Dronacharya was consistently maintained.

The idea of bringing in a clay doll ‘Antaram’ as an alter ego was an interesting addition, which could have been explored better for a greater impact. The introduction of jathis at intervals, especially to show Ekalavya’s archery practice, disturbed the flow of the narrative.

The musical team comprised Sridhar Vasudevan on vocals, Sarvesh Karthik on rhythm inputs, Tiruvara Veeramani on the violin and T. V. Sukanya on the flute. However, the violin and flute overpowered the vocal rendition. The soundscape should be reworked to match the dance.

Old-world charm

At his concert for Sunaadalahari, Alleppey Venkatesan took listeners back in time

Renuka Suryanarayana

The theme of Devi kritis added lustre to veteran singer Alleppey Venkatesan’s recent concert for Sunaadalahari at Indira Ranganathan Trust in Chennai.

Alleppey Venkatesan celebrates 60 years as a performing musician, and his impactful presentation reflected his guru Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar’s style.

Venkatesan filled his recital with viruttams, an astonishing repertoire of compositions and manodharma segments. Particularly impressive to today’s generation were his swaraprastaras, full of intricacies learnt from the great mridangist Palghat Mani Iyer.

B.U. Ganeshprasad on the violin, Shertalai Ananthkrishnan on the mridangam and Suresh Vaidyanathan on the ghatam enhanced the performance. Venkatesan’s disciple Shruti Jayaraman provided vocal



Wide repertoire
Alleppey Venkatesan. PHOTO: B. VELANKANNI RAJ

support. The initial part of the veteran vocalist’s concert stood out for ‘Sri kanchi nayike’ (Asaveri, Annaswamy Sastri), in which he laced the kriti with swara segment at ‘Navapallava komale’.

Next came ‘Lalithe mam pahi’ (Yadukula Kamboji, Cheyyur Chengalvaraya Sastri). This piece was emotionally binding and elegantly paced.

Following this, a viruttam on Karpagambike preceded

‘Himachala tanaya’ (Anandabhairavi, Syama Sastri). The line ‘Uma hamsagamana tamasama brova dikkevaru’ was chosen for niraval.

The vocalist then launched a Mooka Pancha Sathi viruttam

before the composition ‘Kamakshi nannu brovave’ (Varali, Syama Sastri), which has a beautiful swara sahityam. The niraval enchanted the audience as it highlighted the words ‘Saswata rupini’ in the charanam that describes the goddess.

The other compositions presented by the vocalist included ‘Sarasijanabha sodari’ (Nagagandhari, Dikshitar); ‘Kavave Kanyakumari’ (Sahana, Balamuralikrishna); and ‘Shankari neeve’ (Begada, Subbaraya Sastri).

Venkatesan next launched a Kalyani raga alapana in two stages, which the violinist matched in every manner possible. The kriti chosen was Tyagaraja’s ‘Sive pahimam’ with niraval at ‘Kaverojattara teera vasini katayayani.’

The last part of the swaraprastara, which anchored on ‘ga’, came off with verve, and there was a korvai before the tani began.

Mridangist Shertalai Ananthkrishnan and ghatam Suresh were at their best in this percussion suite.



G. S. Paul

Among the choreographers of Mohiniyattam, Nirmala Panicker of Natanakaisiki, Irinjalakuda, stands out for her contribution in reviving certain aspects of the desi repertoire of the dance form.

For example, the forms of Polikali, Esal, Chandam and Kurathy were excluded when Mohiniyattam was revived in Kerala Kalamandalam in 1932, because of the degeneration of

the dance form due to certain abominable practices during the previous century.

However, Nirmala maintains that Kurathy has been an intrinsic character in all the dance forms of South India.

In the Mohiniyattam recital staged at Kottichetham Studio Theatre in Natanakairali recently, Nirmala's disciple Hridya Haridas staged 'Mala Kurathy'. This was presented as part of Mohiniyattam Sandhya. The kurathy is an adept palm-reader from the hills, and arrives at Valluvanadu, a region on the northern banks of Nila

River, a treasure trove of cultural traditions.

The choreography was unprecedented as the classical dance form of Mohiniyattam was dovetailed to the centuries-old folk theatre of Tholpavakoothu (shadow puppet theatre). Truly ingenuous of Nirmala.

Kurathy's entry as a Mohiniyattam dancer was noteworthy for how she introduces herself. But her histrionic talents were revealed through a picturesque portrayal of the different types of folk art forms peculiar to Valluvanadu, such as 'Poothan and Thirala',

'Kaala kali', 'Thullal of velichappadu' (shamanic priest) and 'Kuhthira kali'.

Thereafter, she invites people interested in palm-reading. A childless couple shares their sorrow, and she advises them to offer Tholpavakoothu as an offering in a temple of Bhadrakali to propitiate the goddess.

But why, Tholpavakoothu that narrates the story of the Ramayana? That's because Bhadrakali is disheartened that she missed seeing the ferocious fight between Rama and Ravana, and this shadow puppetry, performed only in temples dedicated to Bhadrakali, recreates it for her.

Traditionally performed by scholars of the Vellalachetti caste, the play is presented in a koothu madam, a specially built performing space in the temple precincts. A white cloth spread on the front serves as the screen on which the shadows of specially designed puppets are cast.

Kottichetham, the Rama-Ravana fight and the coronation of Rama were showcased by artistes, led by Lakshmana Pulavar. The recital concluded with the re-entry of the dancer and mangalam.



CULTUREBRIEFS

Art showcase



DakshinaChitra presents the 10th edition of Utsavam, the annual festival of music and dance, on March 1 at DakshinaChitra, Chennai. The day-long event, themed Legacy, features the following: 11 a.m. - 1.30 p.m.: 'The Burden of Legacy - Power, privilege and Exclusion in Classical Dance', a presentation and discussion by senior dancer Yashoda Thakore. 3 p.m.: 'Future of Tradition: Reinventing Legacy', a discussion by panellists Savita Narasimhan, Hanne M. De Bruin and A.L. Aparajithan with Preethi Bharadwaj as the moderator; 4 p.m.: Kalavantulu performance by Yashoda Thakore; 5 p.m.: Kattaikoothu Sangam presents 'Tavam', a production about what it means to be a woman on the Kattaikoothu stage. The day-long festival also showcases products and services by women entrepreneurs in 'Sandhai by Women', to be held from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Celebrating a milestone

Saradhi Academy of Art and Culture marks its silver jubilee, Rajatotsav, with a year-long celebration to be inaugurated on February 28, 4.30 p.m., at Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Mylapore. The inaugural event, titled Gana Manjari, presents a series of performances by students, teachers of past and present, and eminent artistes from the field of music, dance and theatre.

Stories on strings

MOPA launches *The Sound Alchemists*, a docu series on instruments. The first episode focusses on the veena



Aishwarya Raghunathan

What makes the veena captivating? Is it the way its long neck seems to stretch toward the heavens, or how the kudam vibrates with a subtle intensity, as though it holds centuries of unspoken melodies? It exists in a realm where sound and spirituality intertwine. Each string, when plucked, not just produces a note but an emotion.

Over the years, masters of the instrument have developed distinct styles, while modern-day players continue to explore the instrument's possibilities. This balance between heritage and innovation is the pulse of *The Sound Alchemists*, a documentary series curated by musician Savita Narasimhan and produced by the Museum of Performing Arts (MOPA). Ambitious in scope and intimate in execution, the debut episode was devoted to the veena. The series is an ode to South Indian classical instruments not as artefacts but as living, breathing entities.

Through the artistic lens of Ramana



The balance between heritage and innovation is the pulse of the series.

Balachandran, *The Sound Alchemists* takes us deep into the heart of the veena. The documentary took over a year's research, and curates an experience. We see the meticulous craftsmanship behind each instrument, from the selection of aged jackwood to the precise chiselling of the kudam. We hear the quiet intensity of Ramana as he speaks of his relationship with the instrument, how each pull of a string, each slide across a fret, is a dialogue between the artiste and the instrument.

The series also sheds light on the less visible but equally vital contributors to the veena's legacy – the artisans. In Nelamangala, near Bengaluru,

generations of instrument makers have passed down their knowledge about jackwood's resonance, the importance of beeswax in holding the brass frets, and the balance between tradition and adaptation.

Yet, what sets *The Sound Alchemists* apart is its refusal to romanticise the past at the expense of the present. The series dares to ask: How does the veena stay relevant in the modern soundscape? How does it assert its voice in an era dominated by louder, and more amplified instruments?

Ramana Balachandran answers these questions not through words but music. The soul of the series lies in the music itself. His performance is an intricate balance between honouring tradition and embracing evolution. His gamakas are intricate and nuanced, his rhythmic experiments are bold and unrelenting. The series reminds us that music is not confined to what we hear. It lives in the silences, in the spaces between notes, and in the resonances that linger long after the last string is plucked.

Watch *The Sound Alchemists* on MOPA's YouTube channel.

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Utsavam

Date: 1st March 2025 - Saturday
Venue: DakshinaChitra, Chennai

Theme: Legacy

11:00 AM - 1:30 PM
The Burden of Legacy
Power, Privilege and Exclusion in Classical Dance: A presentation and discussion by Dr. Yashoda Thakore

3:00 PM - 4:00 PM
Future of Tradition: Reinventing Legacy
Panelists: Savitha Narasimhan, Hanne M. de Bruin & A. L. Aparajithan
Moderator: Preethi Bharadwaj

4:00 PM - 4:45 PM
Kalavantulu Performance
by Dr. Yashoda Thakore

5:00 PM - 6:15 PM
Tavam
A Kattaikkuttu performance by five female Kattaikkuttu artists on what it means to take the stage, by Kattaikkuttu Sangam

10:00 AM - 6:00 PM
Sandhai by Womxn
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