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THE HINDU











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THE HINDU

Pushing the boundaries
Surjit Nongmeikapam explores dance for a contemporary expression **p2**

Call of Koothu
Social issues become part of Kattaikuttu Sangam's repertoire **p3**

THE ANGST OF A MALE CLASSICAL DANCER

How G. Narendra made the most of the few opportunities that came his way **p4**



Call them by any name — *salangai* or *ghungroo* — they are a dancer's best companion

Gayathri Iyer

The clouds create a blanket of darkness as the rain pours. Covering her head, the abhisarika nayika traipses through the woods, lit only by occasional flashes of lightning. A snake attempts to wrap around her ankle, but she bravely shakes it off. Nothing can stop her from meeting her beloved. Her only companion — the anklets.

Ankle bells, also known as *gejje*, *salangai*, *muuva*, or *gejjalu* in South India and *ghungroo* up North, have captured the fancy of poets and kings alike. The ornament, in its most delicate form as a *golusu* or *payal*, is indicative of femininity and is a prescribed ornament for women in ancient texts such as *Tiruvempavai* of Manickavasagar.

While history may give it several prescriptive uses, how do we gain a practical sense of the anklet? Temple sculptures may contain the answer. The earliest documented anklets emerge from the repertoire of Buddhist terracottas and sculptures, with a representative example found on the famous Mauryan Didarganj Yakshi, dated to the 3rd century BC. This stunning sculpture, now at the Patna Museum, sports thick, tyre-like anklets that are more reminiscent of ankle weights at our local gym than of the delicate *nupura* described in the texts. In fact, foot ornaments as depicted in temple sculpture across India seem to contrast their delicate and artistic descriptions in the literature and scripture. Even in photographs of courtesans from Tanjore and Mysore, we observe multiple, stacked anklets.

The sound of dancing

feet



Some scholars are very particular about the distinction between ornaments. If one were to collate all of the words used in Sanskrit alone for the anklet, it is likely that it would yield more than 24 terms for different nuances of the ornament. If vernacular languages were to be considered, the count would sail well over a hundred. What was the function of so much variation within the concept of the anklet? Why was it important to distinguish between a *salangai*, a *golusu* and a *silambu*?

Perhaps the answer lies in the intended effect of the ankle ornament in the Indian imagination. Each of the varieties of anklets certainly had a different aesthetic value, but, more importantly, each had a different sonic value. In his book *Nupura*, S.P. Tewari suggests that it was the chiming of anklets that indicated female quarters in the palaces of yore. Epigraphs from the Edilpur Copperplate of Bengal clearly delineate the enjoyment of the “dulcet music arising from the anklets of courtesans every evening” by the 12th century Sena monarch, Lakshmanasena. It is well-documented that



favoured courtesans would often receive anklets in precious metals, sometimes studded with gems, as gifts. The ethereal sound of the *ghungroo* wasn't restricted to the court. Literature often uses the sound of the anklet as a character in itself. In Jayadeva's 12th century magnum opus, the *Gita Govinda*, Radha says to her friend, “Take off these dangerous enemies, your ankle bells. They talk loudly when you walk or enjoying union.” Saint-poet Meera refers to dancing in abandon (possessed by her affection for Krishna) with anklets on in the famous song ‘Pagh ghungroo baandh Meera nachi re’. While these stories were

told from the perspective of having an intimate relationship with the divine, the temple was a crucial site of the anklet's history too. An essential aspect of the devadasi tradition was the *gajjala puja* or *salangai puja*, which marked the preparedness of a young dancer to takeover the ritual performances at the temple and consecrate her formal dedication to the patron god. While the context of this ritual was rooted in an ancient system that has little relevance to classical dance today, many believe that they are continuing the tradition of anklet puja by making it a mandatory part of a dancer's debut (*arangetram*). Furthermore, the devadasi tradition documented the fashioning of anklets out of

Balasaraswati frequently discussed the need to tune her ankle bells. The sruti, she said, was an important aspect of the performance

several different materials — namely gold, silver and bronze. Dancers of today rely on brass bells to serve a metronomic function on stage. In an exhibition by the Museum of Performing Arts, legendary dancer Balasaraswati's ankle bells rested within a glass case. Tiny motifs were engraved on each brass bell, and the viewer could get a sense of the weight of the ornament just from looking at it. Balasaraswati was one of the last hereditary dancers to practice the form in its authentic context. She frequently discussed the need to tune her ankle bells. The *sruti*, she said, was an important aspect of the performance. She hailed from a tradition where the dancer provided vocal support for her own performances and thus we must ask whether the original purpose of the ankle bell was to serve as an instrument in its own right. From classical dances to regional traditions such as the Bhagavatha Mela, the ankle bells emerge from Indian dance history as one of the most striking visual and sonic elements. With all of its myriad shapes, sizes and tones, the ankle bell traverses social, metronomic and ornamental realms to bring us a soundscape peppered with heritage. There is virtually no dance culture on the Indian subcontinent that exists without a foot ornament.



As a young Bharatanatyam dancer, I feel I am my biggest challenge. You have to prepare your mind before you set out on the journey. But there certainly are issues, most importantly financial, which need to be addressed. Concerns over expenses often come in the way of creativity. While financial stability is the yardstick of success in other fields, not so in performing arts. A monetary system, which works well for both artistes and organisers, should be put in place.

MEERA SREENARAYANAN



The one quality that I have imbibed from my Kathak gurus, Aditi Mangaldas and Jaikishan Maharaj, is honesty. During my training phase I did not understand why they insisted on it. But over the years, I realised honesty creates a beautiful bond with the art and the audience. It reflects in your movements and expressions. Open-mindedness is another trait of a truly creative person. It helps you evolve as an artiste and engage with your art in newer ways.

GAURI DIWAKAR



I have trained in Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi and Odissi, yet I was keen to learn Kalari. Once I got into the clay pit, I was completely drawn by its energy. While classical dances allowed me to enjoy the beauty of movements, the martial form endowed me with physical and mental strength to take on the rigours of practice and performance. There is a growing awareness among dancers about keeping themselves fit and healthy. If young dancers realise its importance early on, it would prevent injuries and keep the mind positive.

VYSHNAVIE SAINATH



Being a Sattriya performer, every time I go up on the stage, it is not just for myself but more for the art form. The aim is to create a larger audience for this beautiful dance style from Assam. Though it was given a classical status in 2000, it is only in the recent past that prominent festivals across the country have begun to feature it. I am also now creating new choreographies without diluting the core to create awareness about Sattriya's philosophy, technique and sahitya.

KRISHNAKSHI KASHYAP



What's new? This is a question dancers are often asked. As an Odissi artiste, I respect the creations of legends in the field. I look at innovation as an organic process. You cannot create something just to prove a point. It has to come from within. Whether music, dance or concept, you want to bring in changes only when you feel it is right or warranted. Anyway dancers are constantly re-looking at the traditional repertoire to lend a fresh perspective and a contemporary touch to their performances.

ARUSHI MUDGAL



Surjit Nongmeikapam broke away from restrictive forms to create his own movement vocabulary

Charumathi Supraja

There is a stillness in his dance. Even as he is moving he seems like he is not. Between those fleeting pauses and subtle movements, you become intensely aware of your own body, for, this dance demands that you watch it from deep inside. You may not make sense of it but can sense it. This is a dance, not boxed in by definitions. It is raw, sometimes broken and tells a story on its own terms.

On a new path

Surjit Nongmeikapam wanted to be a stuntman in films but went from Manipur to Dehradun to study Hotel Management. He soon realised it was not quite for him. Having been an athlete and badminton player, he wondered what he would become. He loved to move and often could be found dancing to Bollywood numbers in his hometown, Imphal. Seeing his proclivity for dance, his parents

decided to enrol him in a BA Choreography course all the way down south, in Bengaluru.

“They thought the course would help me earn a livelihood. I hated it initially and wanted to run away,” says Surjit, who was a mentor and part of a panel discussion at the annual Prakriti Excellence in Contemporary Dance Awards (PECDA) held recently in Bengaluru.

“It was frustrating. I had thought I would learn to dance. I did not want to learn theory or Kathak.” The fact that he did not have any training in a dance form made it worse. “I came from nothing. I knew nothing about what is dance or what is theatre,” he recalls. It was the “trust and patience” of guru Maya Rao, alongside support from some of his co-learners that kept him going. In the two years that followed, Surjit went back to Imphal to train in Manipuri dance and martial arts. Before long, he was back in Bengaluru as a dancer in the Natya STEM Dance Kampni. The restriction he felt with

the form grew stronger. “I wanted to experiment, and know myself through dance. I did not want to dance fixed items,” says Surjit, recalling that even as a child he would make up his own stories at play.

“I am still a dreamer,” says Surjit, adding that though he understood the value of the training he had received, he was eager to find his “own movement vocabulary.” Attending the Gati Dance Residency in 2011 opened up possibilities in that direction. “I interacted with several contemporary dancers. I could finally experiment. Contemporary dance gave me space.” Surjit could discover and express movements



rooted in him. Interacting with dancers from varied backgrounds inspired him to believe in his own emerging language as a dancer.

Surjit was 24 when dance became a way of life for him. From there, his journey was about unravelling strictures and structures. His collaborations with international dancers helped him learn and unlearn. He travelled to Kolkata and completed a course in dance and movement therapy. He worked with

people with mental disabilities, people with HIV, sex-workers, children orphaned by conflict and HIV/AIDS, displaced people and more. “They knew only Bengali and I knew only Hindi and Manipuri. So we had to resort to movement and expression to communicate,” says Surjit. This experience would later help him work in his home state with children and adults from relief camps. It also enabled him to recognise that his role would always be that of an artiste, not an activist. “There were

activists doing their job. I had to do mine and that was creating art, sometimes with people going through a lot of pain but can still feel the joy,” says Surjit.

While pursuing his course in Kolkata, he also learnt “the power of being weak”. “Surjit believes that you do not have to be a good dancer to dance. “You do not have to show that you are strong. You keep doing what you do and one day you will be strong, so there is no need to force it. You simply have to be fully present and offer that

presence.” He thinks that this will make people connect more with the dancer and the dance. Though Surjit had strongly felt the need to shake off form, the more he travelled and won recognition for his work, the more he became rooted with his Manipuri identity.

Space for youngsters

“Wherever in the world you put me, everything about me will be Manipuri. So I chose to work from Manipur and also created the Nachom Arts Foundation as a common platform for local artistes. I wanted youngsters to have a space to find their footing in the arts,” says Surjit. “I never wanted to go to Europe and work there or even live in any other Indian city.”

Speaking about the importance of making art in conflict zones, Surjit says, “There is art that comes from a peaceful mind but also art that comes from darkness – and this does not mean it will be more negative. As an artiste, you have to receive the darkness and accept it. New perspectives will emerge.” Surjit adds that working together in difficult times is what brings emotional sustenance and, possibly, change.

Conversations on costume

NCPA's Mudra Dance Festival is back with a series of performances and workshops. The annual thematic festival is on till April 29 at Dilip Piramal Art Gallery in Mumbai. Usually held close to the International Dance Day, this edition focusses on Aharya - jewellery, costume and make-up used in different Indian classical dance styles.

The following artistes feature this year in the festival.

Piyal Bhattacharya, a researcher on Natyashashtra, will conduct a workshop on ‘Aharya and Natyashastra’ today, 2 p.m.- 5 p.m. and tomorrow, 10 a.m. - 1 p.m.). The participants will learn how to reconstruct the dance and music traditions with an emphasis on aharya.

Prof. Radha Kumar will deliver a talk on ‘Aharya - Capturing the many facets. A study through historical sources’ on April 27, 3 p.m. Radha is an assistant professor at St. Xavier's College, Mumbai, and works with the Department of Ancient Indian History, culture and archaeology.

Costume designer Sandhya Raman's workshop ‘To Stitch or Knot - a dialogue between fabric and form’ will be held on April 28, 11 a.m. - 4 p.m. Sandhya is an alumna of the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad. The evening (5 p.m.) will include Kathak and Odissi performances by Aditi Mangaldas and Sujata Mohapatra.

Sujata Mohapatra's workshop on ‘Soundarya -make up and more’ will be held on April 29, 1 p.m. - 3 p.m. This will be followed by Aditi Mangaldas' session ‘Reimagining Dance Costumes’ at 3 p.m.



When classical meets martial

Ileana Citaristi found a connect between her two loves – Odissi and Chhau

Malabika Majumdar

Italian by birth, Ileana Citaristi has been living in Odisha since 1979 to be in close contact with the people, language and culture associated with the dance form she is passionate about. She took to Odissi after practising traditional as well as experimental theatre in Europe. Ileana has performed across the globe as an Odissi and Mayurbhanj Chhau exponent. She has been conducting workshops, writing on dance and working on documentaries to popularise the art forms.

Sitting in her aesthetically designed house, overlooking lake Bindusagar in Bhubaneswar, Ileana describes the joy of finding herself in dance and how it also helped her find a home away from home.

Question: How did you decide to make Indian classical dance your calling?

Answer: I first came to India in 1978 to learn Kathakali in Kerala for three months because I wanted to include some of its movements in my theatre work. I came back the very next year with the same intention – to stay in Odisha for six months to learn Odissi. After meeting guru Kelucharan Mohapatra, six months became six years. Finally, I decided to stay on forever.

Q: You have settled in Bhubaneswar. What made you make the city your home?

A: I was in Cuttack for 11 years. I moved to Bhubaneswar only because guruji had also shifted. Initially, I did not like the city much. I was missing Cuttack. But once I knew Odissi was going to be a



lifelong pursuit, I purchased a land in the old part of the city near Bindusagar lake and built a house-cum-studio and a dance hall.

Q: How was it training under guru Kelucharan?

A: I was lucky to get the best gurus for both Odissi and Chhau. Kelubabu was a taskmaster, for whom only

perfection mattered. He was able to clarify all my doubts because he was teaching. He was extremely creative and was always keen to discover and learn new things. There was so much to imbibe from him. My Chhau guru Sri Hari Nayak was always ready to teach and share his knowledge without expecting anything in

Melange (From left) From Ileana Citaristi's production ‘Sharira’, Ileana performing the Shiv Tandav; and the dancer at Perur Patteeswara Temple. PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT AND S. SIVA SARAVANAN

return. He was proud of me since I began to be known for the Shiv Tandava piece that he gained expertise in as a young dancer.

Q: How different is Mayurbhanj Chhau from Odissi?

A: I think the two forms are complementary to each other. They are both from the same soil and their basic stance, the tribhangi as it is called in Odissi and dharan in Chhau, is based on the same triple bending of the body. But the purpose for which the two styles were developed is different. Odissi was meant for the closed enclave of the temple as a form of prayer to Jagannath, whereas Chhau was seen as a way to keep the body fit for battle and was practised in the open space of the *akhadas* in the villages of Odisha. One can acquire strength and a sense of balance by learning Chhau, and grace and a sense of rhythm from Odissi.

Q: Where do you see the classical arts in the present scenario?

A: There's now renewed enthusiasm with more youngsters taking to classical arts.

They bring with them new ideas and a contemporary sensibility, which are essential for a tradition to evolve.

Q: You are also known for your enriching and well-designed workshops. Are they a way to reach out to youngsters?

A: Nowadays a lot of children are sent by parents to learn dance just for the sake of it. There is no proper motivation or knowledge about the training. Some of them discontinue unable to handle art and academic pressure. I would like parents to be more involved in the process so that they can encourage their children in the right way. Classical dance is a complete system of education, it does not relate only to body movement. It includes study of literature, music, mythology and philosophy. Unless there is proper understanding of its value, there is no point in wasting time learning it.

Q: Tell us about your current choreographic work.

A: Usually, I present a new choreography every year at the Sangam festival held from September to October. I bring both my western and eastern sensibilities when I create a new work. I am now in search of a subject. You need to get inspired by something to create. I am looking around for that inspiration.



Experimental (From below) Surjit Nongmeikapam in ‘All in 1’; from his choreographic work ‘Folktale’; and from ‘Nerves’. PHOTOS COURTESY: PRAKRITI FOUNDATION AND SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



Parshathy J. Nath

The effort should not show. Sing with a smiling face," says P. Rajagopal. The man, known for his raging Dushasana vesham, and a voice that carries the still night air around the villages of Kanchipuram, sings a song of unfulfilled desire.

I sit transfixed watching the 71-year-old actor-singer deliver a nuanced demonstration of sringara bhava. I am at Kattaikkuttu Sangam to train in the form to devise a solo play, as part of Foundation Project implemented by India Foundation for the Arts (IFA) under the Arts Practice programme, with support from Sony Pictures Entertainment Fund. Our classes take place in the indoor theatre of the Sangam's sprawling green campus at Punjarasantankal village in Kanchipuram.

Art is labour, according to Rajagopal, who took over the Perunkattur troupe from his father, Ponnucami Vattiyar at the age of 19, when the senior artiste passed away. A typical Koothu goes on for eight

The class of *Koothu*

Kattaikkuttu Sangam opens its doors to new ideas and learners

hours. The actor must build stamina and will to perform in a heavy attire with wooden ornaments on shoulders and the crown. Rajagopal has even put his health at stake for the love of the art form. A fall from a bench while enacting the role of Keechakan, as part of a 18-day long Mahabharata Koothu in the late 1970s at Avalur village, left him with a permanent knee injury.

One of Rajagopal's most memorable roles is the Dushasana vesham he performed in the 1970s. "Before the performance, there was another group waiting to get the thamboolam

(contract) from the village heads. If we were not performing well, the villagers had every right to call us off stage and ask our competitors to take over.” But, a few minutes into the performance by Rajagopal and his uncle, the crowd knew the other team did not stand a chance. He divulges the secret of his craft to me: making variations in the rhythm while dancing adavus. “That keeps the audience entertained,” says the veteran.

Rajagopal and his wife Hanne M. de Bruin, an independent researcher from Amsterdam, co-founded the Kattaikkuttu Sangam in 1990.



Restoring the dignity of this art form, shunned by the mainstream classical arts world as 'folk', has been their mission. "Hence, we started a gurukulam in 2002. I wanted to keep Koothu's intrinsic quality alive, the way I was taught by my father," recalls Rajagopal.

The gurukulam, which they had to close down during the pandemic due to financial reasons, has moulded a new generation of

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A stylized line drawing of a person in a dynamic dance pose, possibly a breakdancer or a person in a traditional Indian dance pose. They are wearing a headband, a necklace, and bangles. The person is in a crouched position with one leg extended upwards and the other bent, with arms in a dynamic pose.

Koothu performers, who are also trained in classical music, acrobatics and clowning by the country's finest artistes and international theatre practitioners. When I

travelled with the present company to different villages to perform in all-night Koothu, I could sense the rigorous training they have gone through. It is evident in the precision of their steps and emotional dexterity. "When people see my students perform, they tell me they are reminded of me. I have taught them exactly the way I have learnt. There has been no dilution," says Rajagopal.

Rajagopal and Hanne's interventions have also encouraged young rural women artistes to perform a

form that was once male-dominated. "It was a challenge for me to prove to my parents I am as capable as a boy. Today there isn't a thing that I can't do," says Venda, a student.

Expanding the repertoire has been another contribution of Rajagopal to Kattaikkuttu. It was during a bus journey from Puducherry to Kanchipuram when the idea to write new stories dawned on him.

"Hanne and I met a programme officer to book a show. The lady asked me, 'Apart from gods and mythologies, do your plays address social issues?' That got me thinking. On the way back home, a story of talking trees emerged. That's exactly when from an actor I also became a writer." And soon followed other plays such as *Magic Horse* on aliens, *Milky Ocean* about a dystopian world, *War Games* on Pandavas and Kauravas, and *RamaRavana*, a critical take on the Ramayana and more.

Steeped in their performance tradition, the Sangam, however, has never been insular, thanks to the innate openness of its founders. Rajagopal and Hanne have always been welcoming of new ideas. In their annual festivals, they have hosted performances such as Kathakali and Koodiyattam, and contemporary plays.

Rajagopal says they plan to make Sangam a space where multiple art forms converge. During my last few days of training, I realised how Rajagopal or *thaatha*, as he is endearingly called by his students, has offered me lessons on finer aspects of Koothu, which I will carry through my life as an actor. He says most troupes are hesitant to share their knowledge with outsiders. “If you are ready to learn, I am ready to teach you,” he says with a smile.



Finding the right teacher

Young aspirants should learn the art in a methodical and disciplined manner

Lavanya Iyer

*Sahitya, sangeeta kala viheenaha
sakshat pashuhu, pucha vishanaha
heenaha*

It means that a human life without an initiation into literature, music or any art is akin to a cow without horns and tail. Hence every human being is entitled to learn the arts without which life loses its meaning. Having said this, one has to understand the difference between casual association with art and deep engagement with it.

Classicism is about methodical and disciplinary approach. Unfortunately, these values are being manipulated for ease of learning and popularity. It is a disheartening trend. We need to put in place a safety regulation to ensure the genuineness of the trainee.

Since Bharatanatyam is my field, I will talk about it. I have coined the term 'art-quacks' to

refer to those so-called teachers, who seem to be manipulating the system to their advantage. In the process, they are permanently damaging the perspective of the learners. Dance needs both physical and mental conditioning, which the 'art-quacks' definitely cannot bring about.

Both veteran artistes and scholars can help solve this problem. Young enthusiasts rarely have a good understanding of what a mentor should be like. Their expectations are akin to what a tuition teacher or hobby class can provide. They should not get carried away with the promises of performance opportunities. Parents and children should realise that substandard learning

When it comes to dance training, there cannot be any shortcuts. Learners should have an understanding of what a mentor should be like.

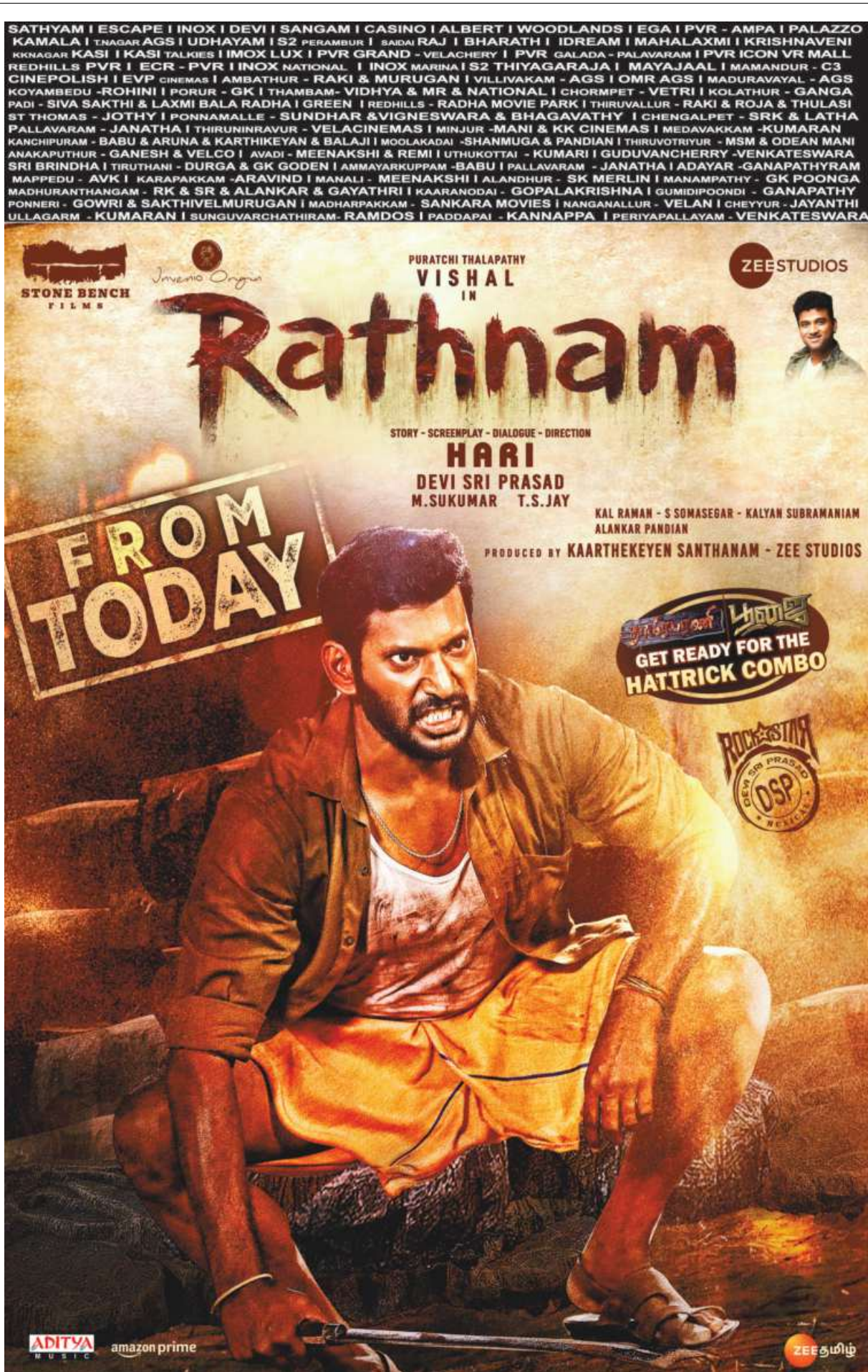
cannot take them far. The same effort that they put in while selecting the school for education should be made when selecting the dance school. A little bit of homework could help.

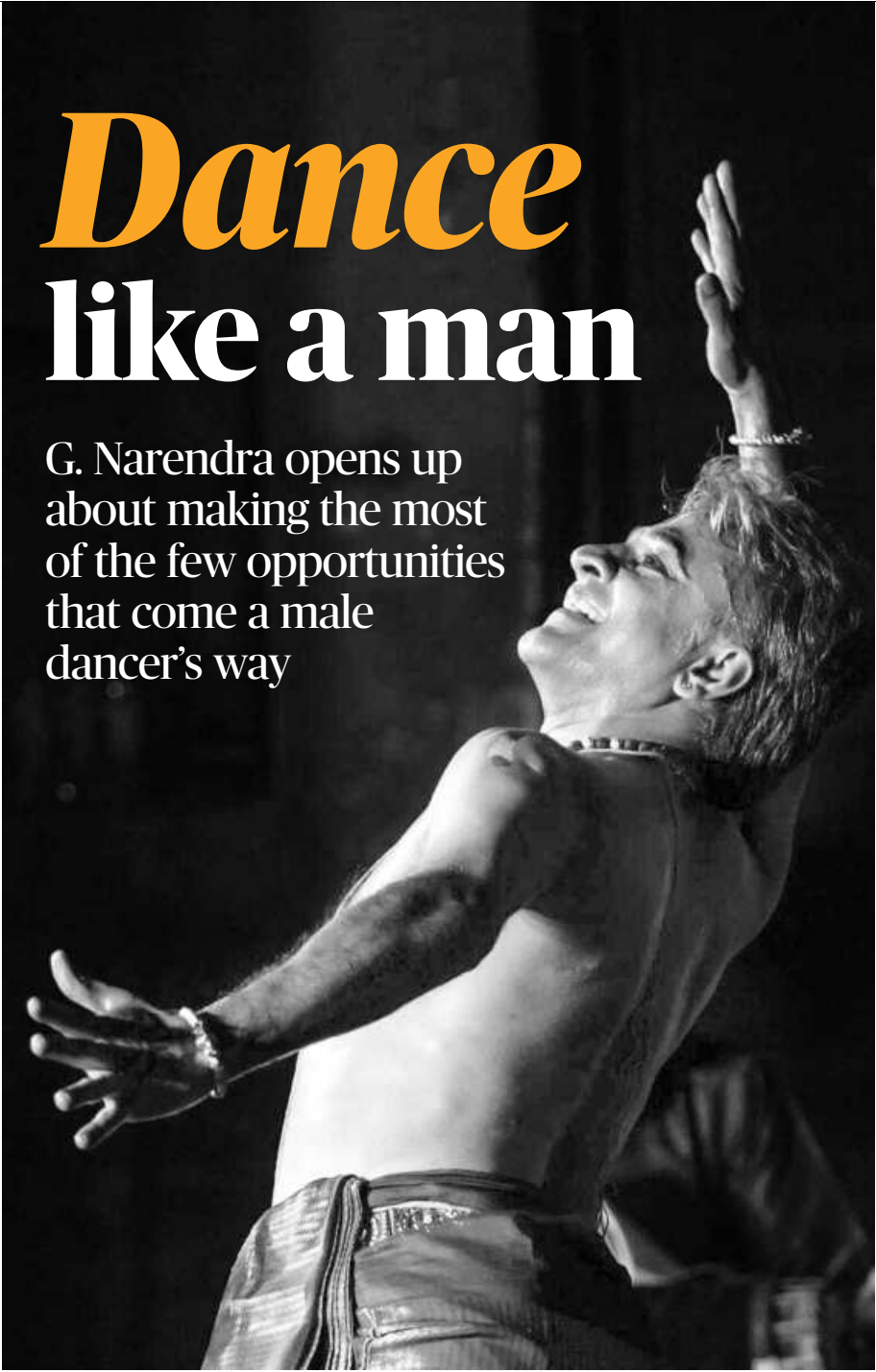
When a learner applies for Central or State scholarships and Doordarshan auditions and recordings, he or she will realise the significance of being trained by a knowledgeable guru.

The concept of *salangai pujai* or arangetram are not what they were in the past. What is the value of a formal debut in today's times when digital platforms offer an easy access. Yet, arangetrams are being conducted with immense fanfare. Huge expenses, including *guru dakshina* are incurred by parents. The great nattuvanars of yesteryear intensely trained a few talented and promising sishyas, whose patronage was their sole source of income.

The 'art-quacks' also indulge in creative plagiarism. They have no qualms about reproducing well-researched and aesthetically formulated compositions and choreographies. A reason why many well-known artistes do not want their work to be made visible on social media. We need a tighter copyright policy.

Mediocrity has no space in classicism, whether it is in teaching, performing or in promoting arts and artistes. It has to be understood that if authentic art has to thrive, we need to rid it of quacks.





Dance like a man

G. Narendra opens up about making the most of the few opportunities that come a male dancer's way

Hema Iyer Ramani

“My life has been like the *sikku pulli kolam*”, says Gundurao Narendra . I liked the imagery he placed before me. A *sikku kolam* is a winding line, seemingly entangled, but not quite, for

it journeys around the various dots in a sequence best known to the line, but somehow when it is over, a beautiful pattern has been created. The phrase also to me was a preamble to the artiste's journey and where it led him. Thanks to his father, who was extremely fond of the arts, Narendra found himself learning

dance at the young age of eight. He trained under a few teachers and was 15 years into dance before he reached the portals of Kalakshetra, where he had to unlearn to re-learn all over again. He says, he was fortunate to have been chosen by Yamini Krishnamurthy when he was but a young man to be her dance partner and do the

His own space G. Narendra.
PHOTO: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

nattuvangam as well. Narendra says Kalakshetra was the place where male dancers had a role to play in several of their home productions. But, once he left the institution, he suddenly found himself lost, if only briefly, in the vast world of art. But as luck would have it, the Dhananjayans were touring a production, and Narendra became Rama and here too, he grabbed attention. He calls it a “lucky break”. But there was a lull until he was invited by Uma Ganesan, this time to be the director of the Cleveland Cultural Alliance (CCA), which won him the nickname of ‘Cleveland’ Narendra. But after a few successful productions, he had a fall out out with CCA and once again was on his own. He recalls the support of Mrs. YGP and Mr. Subramaniam in providing him opportunities. “In an artiste's journey, many people have a role to play – parents, teachers, and even journalists. Journalists I realised can either make or break you. I had performed the role of Duryodhana and the critic had to only write about my skinny built with ribs showing. This is all you saw in the performance, was my angst.” He says there were very few male dancers then. People did not look kindly towards the profession and when they found he was a dancer, the remark would be: “That would make you appear effeminate. like a female then. Dancing is for girls.” Narendra says he had to live with this constant

stereotyping. While Kalakshetra was the perfect place which provided ample scope to the male dancer, he often found himself at wits' end seeking solo opportunities. While there was never any dearth for group productions, being a soloist was a big challenge. In 2018, Narendra presented four performances but was paid much lesser than the amount he actually spent. That is when he began to rethink spaces. He sought alternative venue such as temples, where he felt comfortable dancing. Narendra says like most artistes, he too had many ambitions. He wanted to be one of the best dancers but soon was disillusioned because male dancers do not get opportunities as they should. Yet, in that period , there was never a moment when he did not dance. Whether there was a performance in the offing or not, he was in his studio each day practising. Group productions and corporate shows came his way. He also trained several young male dancers, creating opportunities for them too. Narendra says in all these years never did he stop taking care of his body and diet, because together they contributed to his dance. His passion for cricket kept him going too. He got into acting in a bid to reinvent himself and keep the artiste in him alive. When he was invited by the Music Academy for an evening slot in 2023 , he felt he had finally got his due. “For me, the icing was when I was voted the Best Dancer of the year.” It is definitely a validation for an artiste who is not really in his prime. He feels, there are miles to go... Narendra had it all mapped out he thought when he started the journey and the dots represented the efforts he put in at various stages. Yet, it was destiny which drew the final *kolam* amidst the *sikkal*.



In sync Shijith and Parvathy during a performance.
PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

V.V. Ramani

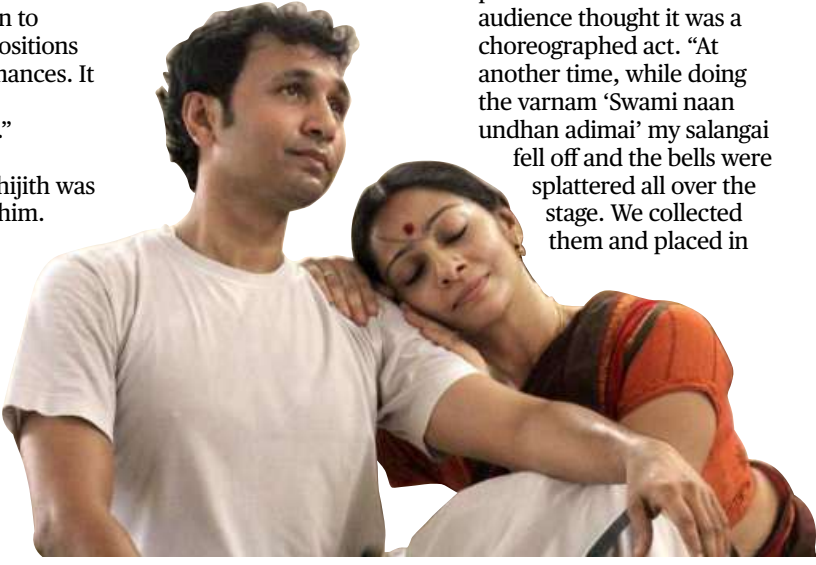
The young lad from Payanoor, who was being interviewed for admission in a prestigious cultural institution, was asked if he could sing. Much to the surprise of the interview panel, he promptly sang the film song ‘Kaadhal rojave’, instead of a classical composition. Any doubts that assailed him after that were put to rest when he found his name on the list of selected candidates the next day. Thus, Shijith Nambiar entered the portals of Kalakshetra, beginning a journey into the world of Bharatanatyam. He not only found his life's calling here but also his soulmate, Parvathy Menon. Together they slowly made a mark in the world of dance. Initiated into arts at a

For the love of art

Shijith Nambiar and Parvathy Menon on the joys and challenges of sharing life and stage

young age by his father, Shijith was a regular participant in cultural activities in school and college. Ridiculed for his penchant for dancing, Shijith felt demoralised. It was then that his father brought him to Chennai. But the going was still not easy. Shijith was initially disheartened by the lack of opportunities for male dancers. Soon his talent and hard work brought him the much-needed recognition. After his training in Kalakshetra, Shijith realised the need to explore the art to find his own space and

expression. “I began to choreograph compositions for my solo performances. It gave me immense satisfaction and joy.” An admirer of G. Narendra's work, Shijith was keen to learn from him. “I was delighted when Narendra invited me to play the role of Kovalan in his production *Silapadthikaram*. More such memorable experiences came his way when he worked with the Dhananjayans and



Leela Samson. Even as he performed as a soloist, his career embarked on a new path with Parvathy. Speaking of the many changes that they had to adapt to, Parvathy says, “I was always a part of the Kalakshetra repertory and had never performed as a solo artiste, so I could take to his ideas easily, but for him, after experiencing the freedom that solo performances offer, dancing as a duo was challenging. Over a period of time, we became comfortable sharing the stage.” Shijith and Parvathy have devised ways to handle choreographic productions together. They have their roles clearly cut out. Ideation, music and lighting are handled by Shijith while Parvathy works on costumes. The two feel their training at Kalakshetra has helped them manage various facets of a performance. Talking about how they go about choreographing movements, Shijith says, “Earlier, we focused only on synchrony in our movements. But as we evolved as artistes, we realised the need to accommodate each other's ideas and make it appear seamless.” Recalling anecdotes from their performances, the duo share how once while playing the roles of Radha and Krishna, Parvathy's bindi fell down, Shijith picked it up and placed on her forehead. The audience thought it was a choreographed act. “At another time, while doing the varnam ‘Swami naan undhan adimai’ my salangai fell off and the bells were splattered all over the stage. We collected them and placed in



Earlier, we focused only on synchrony in our movements. But as we evolved as artistes, we realised the need to accommodate each other's ideas and make it appear seamless

SHIJITH NAMBIAR

front of the Nataraja idol. This spontaneous move appeared part of the sequence,” says Parvathy. The two believe in constantly analysing their work and improvising. “You have to keep observing and imbibing. Both are essential to keep up the creative spirit,” says Shijith. ‘Punarjani’, which premiered in Chennai as a solo piece at Kalaavahani's festival last December, will now be presented by the two in Canada. According to the couple, they are now at a phase when the pressures of performance have taken a backseat. It's more about finding contentment and joy in the process and presentation. “We are also focusing on nurturing our creative space ‘Sakhi’. We always wanted such a space, where artistes could engage with each other and the art in a holistic environment. It is also where the new generation of performers can confidently embrace creativity”.

CALENDAR

Vocal solo

The Music Academy has organised Preeti Sethuraman's vocal concert as part of the HCL concert series. She will be accompanied by Parur M.K. ananthalakshmi onthe violin and N. Anirudh Raj on the mridangam. The concert will be held at the Kasturi Srinivasan Hall, on April 30, from 6 p.m. to 7.30 p.m.

Music recital

Arunachala Ramana Sangeetha Sabha has organised the vocal concerts of Dhanya Rudrapatnam (4.30 p.m.) and Madurai T.N.S.Krishna (6.30 p.m.) on April 26 at Arkay Convention Centre, Mylapore.

On Rukmini Devi

Niyogi Books and Madras Book Club will jointly celebrate the launch of the book Rukmini Devi Arundale – Arts Revivalist and Institution Builder by presenting the author V.R. Devika in conversation with Vidya Singh. The event, taking place today, 7 p.m., at C.P. Arts Convention Centre, Alwarpet, will also include Shantha Dhananjayan's brief demonstration of the Shringara padam, taught to her by Rukmini Devi. RSVP: masbkclub@gmail.com.

Sita kalyanam

Following the Ramanavami utsavam, Sri Varasiddhi Vinayakar temple, Hindu Colony, Nanganallur, has organised Sita kalyanam on April 27 and 28. Thodayamangalam followed by bhajans will be rendered on day one. Unchavritti at 7.30 a.m. on day two will be followed by the celestial wedding. In the evening the idol of Rama will be taken out in a procession at 7 p.m.

Lecture on temples

Tattvaloka has organised an illustrated lecture by historian Chithra Madhavan on the ancient temples of Tamil Nadu tomorrow, 6 p.m. The event will take place at 76, Eldams Road, Teynampet.



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<p>CATEGORY - 1 SENIOR - (6th STD to 8th STD)</p> <p>Competition Date - 27.04.2024 (Saturday)</p> <p>Topic - Natural Scenery (Duration - 1 Hour) Competition begins @ 02.00 PM</p>	<p>CATEGORY-2 SUPER SENIOR - (9th STD to 12th STD)</p> <p>Competition Date - 27.04.2024 (Saturday)</p> <p>Topic - Your Hero (Duration - 1 hour 30 Minutes) Competition begins @ 04.00 PM</p>
<p>CATEGORY - 3 SUB JUNIOR - (1st STD to 3rd STD)</p> <p>Competition Date - 28.04.2024 (Sunday)</p> <p>Topic - Vegetables or Fruits (Duration - 1 Hour) Competition begins @ 10.00 AM</p>	<p>CATEGORY - 4 JUNIOR - (4th STD & 5th STD)</p> <p>Competition Date - 28.04.2024 (Sunday)</p> <p>Topic - Animals or Birds (Duration - 1 hour) Competition begins @ 11.30 AM</p>

NOTE :-

- Students should produce their School ID and Aadhar Card.
- Please arrive 1 hour before competition time.
- A3 Chart will be provided. Students are required to bring all the necessary drawing materials.

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