

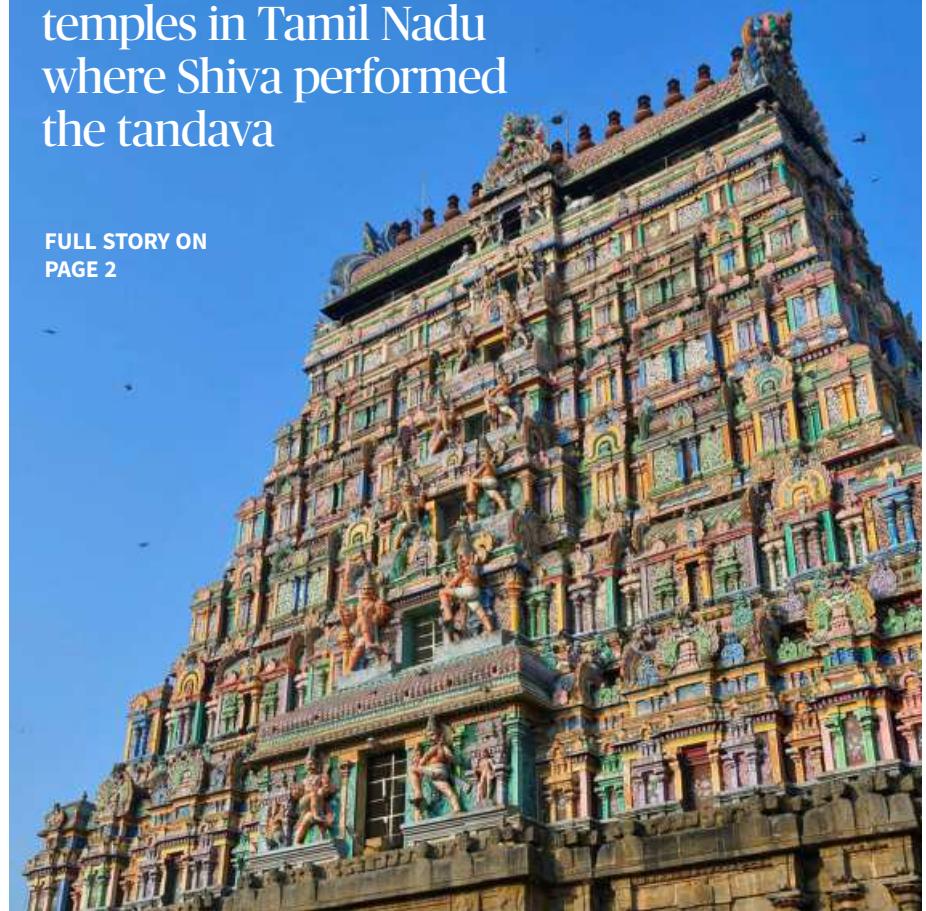
# friday Review

THE HINDU

## The cosmic stage

Revisiting five ancient temples in Tamil Nadu where Shiva performed the tandava

FULL STORY ON  
PAGE 2



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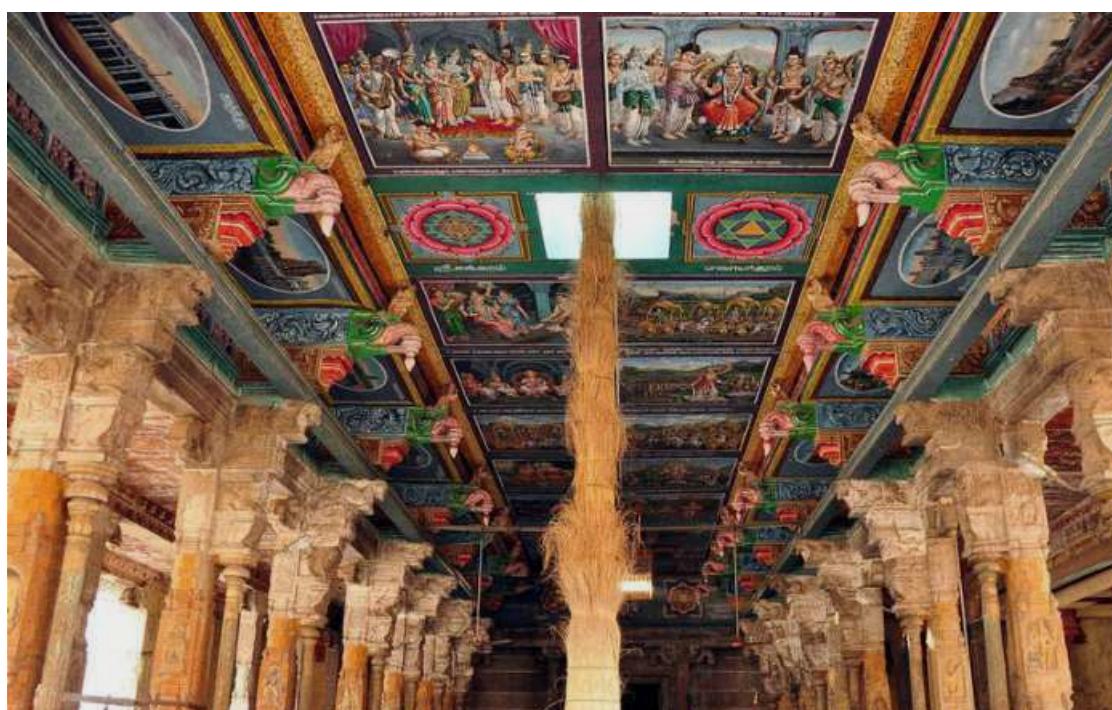
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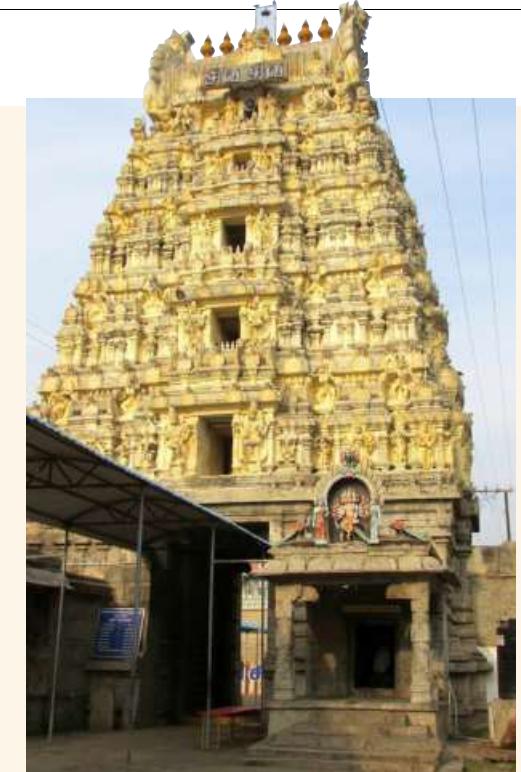


### Nataraja Temple, Chidambaram

Chidambaram, home to Nataraja, is known as Kanaka Sabha or Ponnambalam (Hall of Gold). There are five sabhas namely the Chit Sabha, Kanaka Sabha, Nritta Sabha, Deva Sabha and Raja Sabha inside the Chidambaram temple. The most important is the Chit Sabha, where the images of Nataraja and Parvati (Sivakami) are enshrined. The famous Chidambara Rahasyam (secret of Chidambaram) is the empty space within the sanctum indicating space or akasha. Close by is the Kanaka Sabha. Both the Chit and the Kanaka Sabhas are sacred and were gilded by kings of many dynasties, including the Cholas. Sivakamasundari (Parvati) is enshrined in a separate large sanctum.

Each of the four eyecatching gopurams have sculptures of the 108 karanas or dance movements mentioned in the Natyasastra by sage Bharata. The East and West gopurams also have the relevant verses from this text inscribed on top of the karana sculptures. The sanctum called Nritta Sabha is for Urdhva Tandava Siva where Nataraja dances with one leg lifted vertically.

This temple has a famous shrine for Vishnu, worshipped as Govindaraja Perumal, which is one of the 108 Divyadesams or Vishnu temples praised in the Tamil hymns of the Azhwars or Vaishnava saints.



### Vataranyeshwarar Temple, Thiruvalangadu

Thiruvalangadu, a village near Arakonam, has the large and ancient Vataranyeshwarar temple. This place was once full of banyan trees as indicated by the Tamil name Thiruvalangadu (sacred banyan jungle) and by the Sanskrit name of the presiding deity Vataranyeshwarar (God of the banyan forest). According to traditional accounts, Nataraja and Kali had a dance competition here, during which Nataraja's earring fell down. He picked it with the toes of his left leg and put it back in the ear-lobe without stopping the dance. Shiva won the contest as Kali did not want to imitate this pose. As Shiva lifted his leg vertically ('urdhva' in Sanskrit), the Nataraja image here is known as Urdhava Tandavamurti.

People visiting Thiruvalangadu usually go to the Kali shrine first and then pray to Vataranyeshwara. Of particular importance is the association of Karaikkal Ammaiyar, one of the three women in the list of 63 Nayanmars, with this temple. When she was young, she prayed to Shiva to give her an old and emaciated form. Karaikkal Ammaiyar visited many Shiva temples and finally went to Kailash, where she was directed by the deity to go to Thiruvalangadu.

This temple, which has five enclosures (prakarams) existed in the Pallava era and was subsequently expanded. Parvati is known as Vandarkuzhalai Amman and Brahmaralakamba. In the second prakaram is the sanctum enshrining eight-armed Nataraja in Urdhva Tandava with Karaikkal Ammaiyar playing the cymbals and Parvati is near the Cosmic Dancer. This Nataraja is unique and famous. This temple is known as the Rathna Sabha (Hall of Gems).

Inscriptions here mention the original names of the deity as Thiruvalangadu Udaya Nayyar, located in Pazhaiyanur. Hence, Thiruvalangadu was once known as Pazhaiyanur. Sundaramurti Nayanan of the 8th century refers to the main deity as Pazhaiyanur-Amma.



### Nellaiappar Temple, Tirunelveli

Situated in the heart of Tirunelveli is the ancient and historic temple of Shiva, who is worshipped as Nellaiappar. Adjacent to it is the niche for Parvati, worshipped here as Kanthimati. The two temples are connected by a long, beautiful corridor called Sangili Mandapam. It is said that Shiva was worshipped by sage Agastya in a bamboo grove (Venu Vana) and hence the name Venu-vana-nathar (God of the Bamboo Forest) by which this deity was once known. The sacred tree (Sthala-vriksham) of this temple is bamboo, seen in the second prakaram.

According to a tradition, a person named Vedasharma brought home rice grains and spread it on the ground to dry them. He prayed to Shiva to protect them from being washed away by rain. The

deity guarded the rice grains (nel) like a fence (veli). Hence the name Nel-veli-nathar (Lord of the sacred fence of rice). As this incident took place in present-day Tirunelveli, it got the name Nelveli with the prefix 'Tiru' (sacred) being added later. Shiva in this temple is therefore called Nellaiappar.

This huge temple has three enclosures (prakarams), the epicenter of which is the principal sanctum which enshrines the Linga worshipped as Nellaiappar believed to be a *swayambu* or self-manifested Linga. Inscriptions in this temple mention the ancient names of this deity as Thirunelveli Udayar and Thirunelveli Udaya Nayaran.

Of special interest in this temple is the sanctum for Vishnu called Pallikonda Perumal and Nellai Govindan. Here, Vishnu is seen reclining on the five-hooded serpent Adisesha with his head to the west. This Vishnu sanctum was constructed during the reign of Rajaraja Chola I (985-1014 C.E.) as also the mandapa in front, which is common to the Shiva and Vishnu sanctums.

The second prakaram of this temple houses the famous Tamra Sabha (Hall of Copper) with a sloping roof, one of the most venerated shrines in this temple. In the month of Margazhi, during Arudra (Thiruvadhirai) nakshatram, the images of Nataraja and Sivakami are worshipped. Behind the Tamra Sabha is the sanctum for Chandana Sabhapati. Viewing Chandana Sabhapati through the Tamra Sabha is divine experience.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

# The cosmic stage

### Chithra Madhavan

There are Shiva temples galore in Tamil Nadu, with some of them organised into clusters. The Padal Petra Sthalams are the temples wherein Shiva has been praised in the Tamil verses of the Nayanmars or the important Shiva devotees; the Pancha Bhuta Sthalams are five Shiva temples in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh associated with the five elements, and the Pancha Sabhas are the five Shiva shrines, which are the arenas of Nataraja, the Cosmic Dancer. The Panca Sabhas also happen to be Padal Petra Sthalams.



### Kutralanathar Temple

#### Kurralam

In the Pandya country, well-known for its waterfalls, is home to the Kurumpalaveeswar (Kutralanatha) temple. The deity is called so because this temple is associated with the Kurumpala or the jackfruit tree, traditionally revered as the Sthala Vriksham or sacred tree here. Parvathi is worshipped here as Kuzhalvai Mozhi Nayaki. This temple is known for its Chitra Sabha (Hall of Paintings). This hall, with a copper-plated roof, is full of beautiful paintings, especially of Nataraja, and others associated with Saivite lore.



### Meenakshi-Sundareshwarar Temple, Madurai

Madurai, originally known by many names such as Koodal and Kadamba-vana-kshetra (as it was situated in a forest of Kadamba trees) is home to the famous Meenakshi-Sundareshwarar temple.

Sundareshvara or Chokkanatha is believed to have performed 64 *lilas* or miracles according to literary works like the *Thiruvaliyadal Puranam*. It is said that Indra ordered Vishwakarma, the celestial architect to build the sanctum (vimanam) and hence it is called Indra

Vimanam. A special feature of this sanctum is that it is held up by eight stone elephants which represent the Ashta Dik Gajas (guarding the eight directions).

While the main deity in the Sundareshwarar sanctum is the lingam, the Nataraja image here is unique. Unlike other Natarajas where the Cosmic Dancer lifts the left leg with the right one on the ground, here the right leg is lifted with the left planted on the ground. This rare pose is connected to a quaint story in the *Thiruvaliyadal Puranam* about King Rajasekhara Pandya who was a dancer and knew the difficulty of standing on one leg for a long time. The royal bhakta requested Nataraja

to relieve his stress by standing on the other leg and hence this pose.

Since Nataraja here is covered with silver, this place came to be called Rajatha Sabha or Velli Ambalam (Hall of Silver). This temple, with multiple sanctums, 14 gopurams and innumerable mandapams, has evolved over the centuries to its present huge size. The belief that goddess Meenakshi was the daughter of the Pandyan king Malayad�ja Pandya and his queen Kanchanamala, made the Pandyas lavish their attention on this temple. After the immense damage done by invaders to this temple in the 14th century, the Nayak kings of Madurai contributed substantially to its revival.

## CULTURE BRIEFS

### Musical celebration



Sargunathan Odhuvar.

On the occasion of Mahashivaratri today cultural institutions across the city are hosting music and dance performances and discourses. Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Mylapore, has organised a special line-up (non-ticketed) of events from 5 p.m. It opens with Sargunathan Odhuvar's Thevaram rendition. This will be followed by Ramesh Vinayakam's 'Sivoham' (songs on Shiva) at 6.15 p.m. He will be accompanied by Sharanya Srinivas and Manasvini Visagan (Vocal), Raghavendra Rao (violin), Chandrajith (tabla), Babu (guitar) and Pranav Ramesh Vinayakam (keys).

This will be followed by Subhashree Thanikachalam's presentation 'Sivasakthiyum Cinemavum' (7.30 p.m.). She will be supported by a team of musicians - Vinaya Karthik Rajan, Srivardhani Kuchi, Sai Vignesh and Santhosh Subramanian (vocal), Vigneswar (keys), Venkat (tabla), Harishankar (percussion), Durai Srinivasan (violin) and Venkata Narayanan (flute). This segment will feature popular film songs on Shiva and Shakti.



Purva Dhanashree Cotah and Paavani Cotah.

### 12-hour series

Naadbhabrahmam has organised a 12-hour concert series at Gowri Hall, Arya Gowda Road, West Mambalam from 6 p.m. today to 6 a.m. tomorrow. Justice P.N. Prakash, former judge of the Madras High Court, will inaugurate and present the 'Naadha Padhika Sevika' title to musician Valli Umapathy. Beginning with Charulatha Mani's devotional music, the series includes concerts by the students of Sukhi Niketan Arts Academy; namasankirtanam by Savita Sreeram; vocal duet by Cotah Sisters and Panniru Tirumurai rendition by Valli Umapathy. To watch the live streaming log on to www.dimamalar.com. For more details call 93810 43396/98411 40855.

### Singing till dawn

Madhuradhwani's Mahashivaratri festivities at Arkay convention Centre, Mylapore, will begin with a special puja at 3 p.m. today followed by Thirumeignanam Brothers' nagaswaram recital (3.15 p.m.). A series of concerts by senior and young musicians will take place till 6.20 a.m. tomorrow. Artistes to perform include Spoorthi Rao, K. Gayathri, Amritha Murali, Nisha Rajagopal, Shertalai K.N. Ranganatha Sharma, Anahita-Apoorva, Rithvik Raja, J.B. Keerthana, Ashwath Narayanan, Adithya Madhavan, V.K. Manimaran, Adityanarayanan Shankar, Vivek Sadasivam, Sruthi Shankar Kumar, and Swarthmika Srikanth. The line-up concludes with Archana-Samanvi's duet.



Thirumeignanam Brothers.



Geetha Raja.

### Akhandam notes

The akhandam concert at Sri Sundara Panduranga Mukunda Raghavendra Mandir, Dr. Ranga Road, Mylapore, begins today at 5 p.m. with K. Gayatri's performance and concludes at 5 a.m. tomorrow with Gnaneshwar Bhajan Mandali's namasankirtanam. The line-up features Akkarai Sisters (6.30 p.m.); Sadgurunathar Odhuvar's Tirumurai rendition (8.15 p.m.); Shruthi Shankar Kumar (9.15 p.m.); Geetha Raja (10.30 p.m.); Rithvik Raja (12.15 a.m.); Adithya Madhavan (2 a.m.); and Sri Sri Sisters (Sriya-Sreeja at 3.30 a.m.).



Promoting Holistic Health, where mental and physical health bloom together. On this special day and beyond, empower, inspire and prioritise the overall wellness of women.

SIMRAN KUMAR

In the broader context of societal health, women's empowerment emerges as a foundational pillar. Our journey pivots to a pivotal aspect: the holistic well-being of women. Envision a future where routine medical check-ups, screenings and vaccinations not only act as preventive measures but also form the bedrock of a robust and flourishing society.

#### Navigating the Harmony of Body and Mind:

Let's delve into the intricate balance defining an individual's overall well-being. The interplay between physical and mental health. Women today wrestle with a unique set of challenges, including ever-present biological elements, societal pressures and expectations. This is why we advocate for a holistic approach,

## EMPOWERING WOMEN'S HEALTH: A HOLISTIC APPROACH

peeling away the surface to explore the essence of well-being. This philosophy recognises the close relationship between the mind and body, akin to a tag team where mental health influences physical well-being and vice versa. Incorporating activities like exercise, yoga, or spontaneous dance, coupled with a nutritious diet, becomes the recipe for a healthy body. But here's the twist: it's not just about looking good; it's about feeling strong and energised. So, why not encourage women to engage in activities they genuinely enjoy? It's not just about fitness; it's about enhancing self-confidence and nurturing an all-encompassing sense of well-being.

#### Mental Strength:

#### The Basis of Empowerment:

Now, let's venture into the mind. In this empowering narrative, mental health isn't an afterthought. Daily stresses can significantly impact mental well-being, which is why we advocate for mindfulness, meditation and moments of introspection. These aren't mere practices; they are the pillars of maintaining a sound mental state. Our secret ingredient involves creating a welcoming environment and fostering open conversations about mental health. It's about dismantling the walls of stigma and establishing a secure space where seeking assistance is not just accepted but encouraged.

#### A Plea for Holistic Empowerment:

So, here's the catchphrase: championing proactive health management, breaking down obstacles to care, and nurturing a culture where women prioritise their well-being are all essential steps towards empowering women's health. This isn't just an investment in personal health; it's a blueprint for a future where resilience and vibrancy are displayed by everyone.



## ELEVATING WOMEN'S HEALTH: THE CRUCIAL ROLE OF ROUTINE CHECK-UPS, SCREENINGS AND VACCINATIONS



FOR A HEALTHY LIFESTYLE

- Drink warm water throughout the day
- Practice Meditation, Yoga and Pranayama.
- Increase the intake of Turmeric, Cumin, Coriander and garlic.
- Drink herbal tea or decoction of Holy basil, Cinnamon, Black pepper, Dry Ginger and Raisin.
- Avoid sugar and replace it with jaggery if needed.

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#### Routine Check-ups:

At the forefront of women's health, a simple yet potent technique takes centre stage - routine medical examinations. These appointments transcend mere check-ups. They serve as pivotal moments for prompt intervention, early detection, and preventive measures against potential health hazards. Inclusive of specialised screenings and comprehensive physical examinations, these routines are indispensable for women's overall well-being.

Gynaecological check-ups, incorporating screenings like mammograms which act as vigilant guardians for breast health, play a vital role in this proactive health narrative. Beyond reproductive concerns, these check-ups extend to cardiovascular health, bone density and overall physical fitness. Encouraging a culture of routine health monitoring instils confidence in women to actively participate in their health decisions, reaping benefits throughout their journey.

#### Inspire Inclusion: Transforming Healthcare for Women

Promoting inclusion is pivotal for achieving equitable healthcare. It's a long-haul process that requires change from community engagement, education and policy involvement, dismantling barriers hindering women's healthcare access. Addressing systemic inequities is the route to a world where every woman effortlessly thrives. This Women's Day, advocate for a diverse healthcare system to ensure all women receive the high-quality, comprehensive care they need. Together, we forge a society where women's health is esteemed and celebrated, inspiring a future where health knows no bounds.

#### Vaccinations: Guardians of Women's Health

Enter vaccinations - the unsung heroes of preventive medicine safeguarding women's health. From basic immunisations to HPV vaccines preventing cervical cancer, these shots act as robust barriers against diseases significantly impacting women's lives.

Educating women about the pivotal role of vaccinations, dispelling myth, and ensuring widespread access to immunisation programs are crucial steps toward a healthier future. Vaccines not only shield individuals but contribute to community immunity, creating a safer environment for all.



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# When the young get creative

At Bharata Kalanjali's 'Jharna', dancers got an opportunity to move away from the margam and choreograph new pieces

**V.V. Ramani**

Bharata Kalanjali's 'Jharna' was conceived to provide young dancers a platform to create original choreographic works, moving beyond the margam they perform regularly. The dancers are selected based on the videos they submit, and they perform for an hour each, over two weekends.

Madhumanti Banerjee, currently being trained by Indira Kadambi, was chosen for the inaugural performance. The first half featured a Dhandayudhapani Pillai varnam 'Mohamaginen' in raga Karaharapriya.

The nayika, besotted by Shiva, pours out her love and anguish to her sakhi. Madhumanti's abhinaya, a blend of sringara and bhakti, had many imageries that drew parallels to Nature. However, the impact of

this was lost in the overpowering nritta passages. By the time the first jathi concluded, weariness set in and one didn't feel much for the nayika.

The creative composition that Madhumanti explored was an excerpt from her ongoing full-length choreographic work on the theme of Ganga. The



sequence depicted Ganga's descent with fury, and Shiva controlling it by holding her in his locks.

Besides the normal narrative depiction, Madhumanti had looked at it with sringara bhava, exploring Ganga's feelings – due to her proximity – towards the masculine energy of Shiva. Certain sections captured the flow of the river beautifully, but incorporating nritta in the depiction disturbed the flow. Using a blue fabric to depict the river was a little outdated too.

There are innumerable

resource materials available to an artiste to explore creative ideas. And, when an artiste makes a choice, delves deep into it and owns the composition, the outcome often becomes a cherished experience for the viewer.

Keerthana Ravi's performance was one such, where the three compositions were not only diverse in range, but also remarkable in expression.

In the Kabir doha 'Udja, hans akela', which speaks of the cycle of life, Keerthana began her recital with a seed sprouting,

**Refreshing** Madhumanti Banerjee and (below) Keerthana Ravi. PHOTOS COURTESY: BHARATA KALANJALI

spreading its roots, growing in stature, and becoming a tree with leaf-filled branches that fall when a gust of wind hits them – all these were portrayed with intensity.

The deep philosophy of the doha came across in every sequence, be it the journey of a human from birth to death or other living species.

In 'Inquilaab zindabad', the helplessness of bondage and the thrill of freedom and empowerment were powerfully conceived using just rhythm. A brilliant multi-percussion soundscape by Satish Krishnamoorthy brought out both sensitivity and fervour, and Keerthana matched this step by step.

Who says ideas need to be restricted to romance, pathos and mythology? They can also be relevant to contemporary times, such as the impact of the flood of information in social media. This was conveyed with clarity and conviction.

'Soorpanakha-Navarasa Gadhyā', composed and sung by Karthik Hebbar, was explored through Navrasas and from the perspective of a woman. From the introduction, where she sees Rama and falls in love, Keerthana's abhinaya was filled with beautiful nuances. For instance, in the scene where she's getting ready with adornments in front of a mirror, the depiction was not that of a coy woman, but one with confidence and style.

To sustain the interest of the viewer, an artiste's presentation needs depth and honesty. Keerthana's performance had both.

## A medley of rasas

Niveditha Sankaranarayanan chose compositions that showcased diverse moods



**Confident** Niveditha Sankaranarayanan. PHOTO: M. SRINATH

**Manasa Vijaylakshmi. C**

For someone who has been actively dancing from a young age, returning to perform after a hiatus would be a cherished moment. Niveditha Sankaranarayanan, a disciple of Srekala Bharath, performed a solo Bharatanatyam recital after a gap of two-and-a-half years, under the auspices of Kartik Fine Arts at Narada Gana Sabha mini hall.

Niveditha comes with a list of achievements, including performing at the CID-UNESCO's World Dance Congress in Athens (2017). She is also a graded artiste of Doordarshan Chennai.

Niveditha commenced her performance with an Anjali in Valaji raga, followed by Oothukadu Venkatakavi's Nattai raga kriti, 'Ananda narthanam ganapathim bhavaye'. This piece showed how Ganesh used a serpent as a belt to hold his favourite modaks.

The centerpiece of the evening was the Navaramgamai varnam, a composition by K.N. Dandayudhapani Pillai, 'Swamiyai azhaihodai va'. This piece describes the beauty of Shiva, with the nayika expressing her longing for Shiva, and attempting to persuade her friend to bring him to her. In the piece, the nayika extols Shiva's magnificence. Niveditha brought alive the nayika's emotions through her abhinaya.

Next came a javali, a composition of Swati Tirunal in raga Behag (Rupaka tala). Here, the nayika tells Padmanabha, "Who else do I have but you, my lord?"

One of Niveditha's concluding pieces featured the timeless 'Chinnan chiru pen pole', composed by Ulundurpettai Shanmuga Sundaram in Sindhu Bhairavi and set in Tisra Nadai. This composition is an ode to the goddess. On the shores of Sivagangai, adorned in stunning attire, Durga manifests herself as a youthful maiden.

The performance ended with a Lalgudi Jayaraman tillana in Sindhu Bhairavi (Adi tala).

The orchestra comprised Chitrambari Krishna Kumar on vocal, Muthukrishnan Dhananjayam on the mridangam and N. Chintamani on the violin. Costume, nattuvangam, and choreography were by Srekala Bharath.

## Notes and neurons

Experts at a webinar dwelt on the mind-melody-rhythm connect



much as sound. The reason for this is that humans are mammals. As a result, they are known for their maternal behaviour. Professor Trimble explained how mothers introduce infants to rhythm through gentle rocking movements while cradling and how even a newborn becomes perceptive to music through the cultural practice of mothers singing lullabies, which exists across the world.

Another intriguing phenomenon relates to how many opera singers have died while performing on stage. In 1960, Leonard Warren, a renowned baritone died while performing an Italian opera by Giuseppe Verdi titled 'La forza del destino'. The last words he uttered on stage were part of an aria that began with the words 'Morir, tremenda cosa', which means 'to die, a momentous thing'!

Professor Nigel Osborne, a music composer and educator from England analysed this phenomenon through a new technology he co-invented known as the X-System. Delving deep into the texts of 50-60 librettos where the on-stage deaths of lead singers occurred, the team noticed that there

was a startling correlation between the pieces and the autonomic nervous system. He found that the characters in certain operas had autonomic instability written into them and this had a profound impact during performances.

The main aim of the X-System is to treat epilepsy and to eventually extend it to treat sleep disorders, anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It is fascinating to note that almost half a million tracks are used in the system to examine which types of music enhance overall well-being and creativity. The final playlist that was put together contains numerous classical music tracks including Indian classical music that is raga-based.

Classical music was found to be highly relevant to the biomusicological concept of entrainment which refers to the synchronisation of organisms to an external perceived rhythm such as humans responding to music and dance. Other topics of interest that were explored in the webinar related to how music can trigger memories and how music is powerful at stimulating emotional responses.

## An evening of calming music

T.M. Krishna's special Tyagaraja Aradhana concert sparkled with classicism



**Leisurely** T.M. Krishna with R.K. Shriramkumar on the violin, K. Arun Prakash on the mridangam and N. Guruprasad on the ghatam. PHOTO: K. PICHUMANI

always, moved from silence to whisper and murmur, and his imperceptible build to a crescendo in the charanam provided a joyous bounce to the lyrics.

Soon, high drama set in with 'Chede buddhi maanura' (O mind, give up the bad ways). Atana took on a stentorian countenance and every repetition of the word 'Chede' (bad) was a whiplash of censure. The fast-paced swarams carried the drama to its climax.

'Dwaithamukhama' in repeat Ritigowlai came as oil on troubled and turbulent waters. Krishna's commencement of a raga sounds like he's looking for a phrase that occurs at the moment, to latch on to. Often, the violin treads a cautious

**Sujatha Vijayaraghavan**

They waited. Silently. Patiently. With hopes that they could listen to the glorious music of yore. T.M. Krishna was going to sing at the Music Academy on the occasion of Tyagaraja Aradhana, after a hiatus. The homage concert was open to all and a capacity crowd filled the hall.

Accompanied by his friends of decades, Krishna opened the concert with the sombre strains of Mukhari followed by the rare kriti 'Muripemu kalige gada rama' ('Haven't you become a little proud, O Rama?'). While the raga was expansive at a leisurely pace, the niraval and the madhyama kala swara were capped by an upward spiralling movement. As this opening sequence lasted more than 30 minutes, with never a dull moment or a cliched phrase, the alapana of Varali that followed caused some uneasiness among the listeners. Was the evening going to be long and sombre?

Krishna's alapana was almost a soul-searching journey in its intensity, and at the top strains when he burst forth with the anupallavi 'Eti janmam ithi' (What kind of

birth is this!), it seemed a re-creation of the moment of inspiration that made Tyagaraja cry out in despair). The niraval for the phrase 'Sagara sayanuni' sustained the mood of the song and was not marred by an exercise in swaraprasthana.

A bright and brisk 'Chinna

made na cheyi batti thive' (Right in my youth you took

my hand and promised to take care of me) came as a fresh breath of air. A masterpiece in the hands of flute maestro Mali, this song is not often heard these days. In the charanam, Tyagaraja wonders if Rama is pondering on whether to abandon or accept him and he pleads with Rama to protect his honour. The brief alapana of the raga

Kalanidhi that preceded the song sparked in the deft and aesthetic weaving of the two disjointed halves of the arohanam.

Violinist R.K. Shriramkumar opened with the alapana of Mayamalavagowla as a prelude to 'Devi thulasimma'. Rooted in tradition, his exposition placed the raga on solid ground for him to build a classical edifice.

Krishna revels in Harikamboji, and the alapana found him in his element. A brisk paced 'Chani thodi theve' added pep and set the pace for the thani by mridangist Arun Prakash and ghatam artiste Guruprasad, who worked the tempo to advantage and indulged in a riveting dialogue. While accompanying the songs, Arun Prakash, as

path, never straying into any note that would suggest a raga. So it was, before Krishna chose to settle for Reethigowlam. The note-perfect rendering of Semmangudi's majestic patantaram sailed forth like a stately ship.

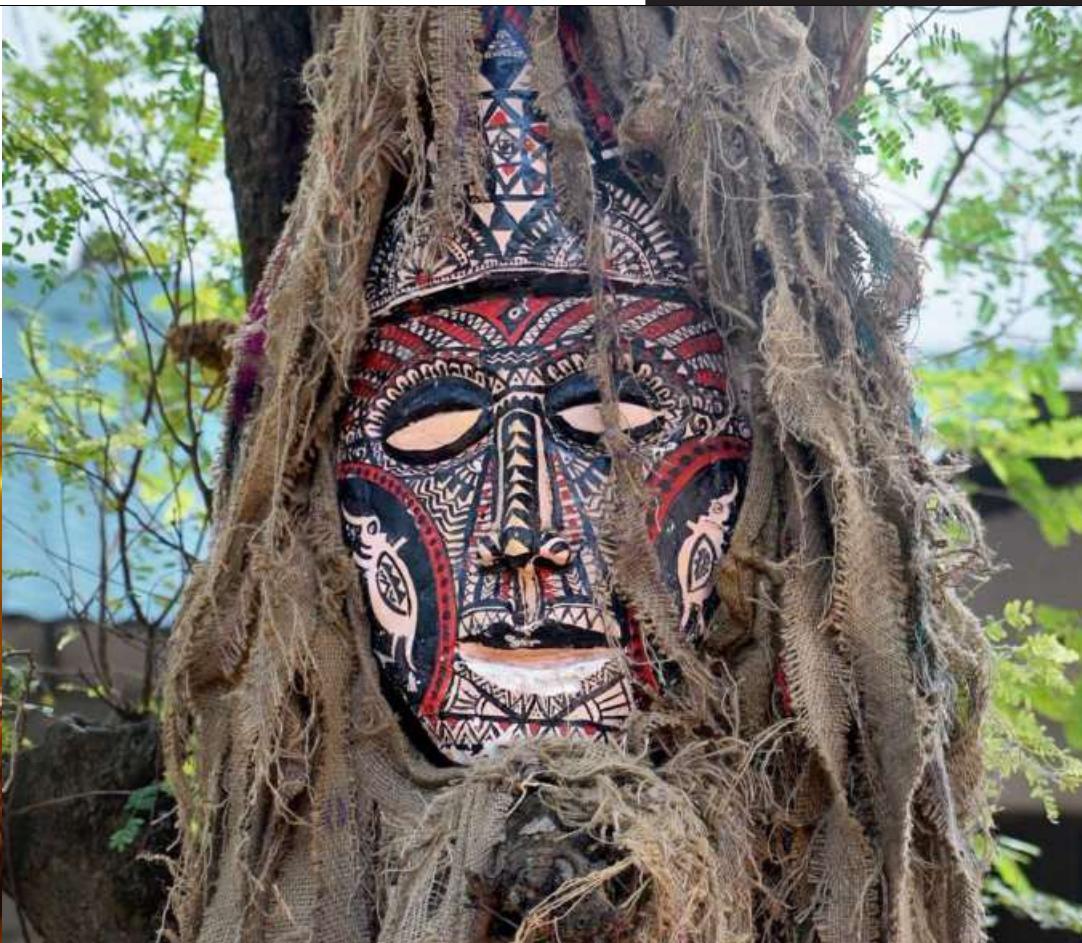
Tyagaraja's 'Narayana Hari Narayana Hari' in Yamuna Kalyani fell as gentle rain from heaven as the fleeting alapana prelude soothed the spirits. The pallavi of the keertanam is a chant in the namasankirtanam tradition, whereas the charanams denounce the materialism and petty mindedness of the people around. The composer declares that he has no desire for material wealth, nor would he flatter the affluent for favours.

After the Surutti alapana and 'Geethartham', the slow-paced rendering of the mangalam 'Nee nama roopamlaku', and its several stanzas reminiscent of M.D.Ramanathan, concluded the concert, which was an immersion in the compositions laden with the bhakti rasa of the composer.

The spontaneous rush of the rasikas to meet and congratulate the performers said it all. It was apparent that the artistes, the art and the sahridaya had converged.



**The woods beckon** An open-air festival that brought together theatre enthusiasts, audience and curators. PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



**Parshathy J nath**

**T**he man moved through the trees like an evening breeze. He mumbled chants to the leaves. His drum crooned melodies to the birds. "Feel free to move around," he urged the audience who shifted uncomfortably on the newspapers spread on the ground like mats.

Elikem Kunutsor, the performer of the night, almost blended into the woods on the sprawling School of Drama (SOD) campus in Thrissur, Kerala, that he chose as his arena. This site-specific work was one of the many unconventional performances to happen at the International Festival of Theatre Schools, a carnival of pedagogy, theatre and ecology, hosted by the school. In its second edition now, the event is an initiative to explore the intersection of theatre and ecology within the context of discourses around theatre training methodologies and praxis.

Malayalam theatre still has that romanticism with theatre from the 1940s to the 1980s, which is still considered the most revolutionary. There were a lot of social plays, but today the context of what makes a play social is being questioned, especially after the pandemic,

# Where Nature is the co-actor

International Festival of Theatre Schools in Thrissur explored the intersection of theatre and ecology

says Abhilash Pillai, the festival director, and director of SOD. "There were talks about why dinosaurs and certain animals and plants have gone extinct, and, maybe, something must have gone wrong. Also, with the growing number of viruses in this world, at any moment, we humans can disappear."

#### Under one roof

In this atmosphere, words and performances became one. A performance just appeared out of nowhere when Maya Rao, the participating pedagogue and practitioner, and Elikem met at the Ramanujam Studio Theatre the next day. Both just started

moving together from the chairs they were sitting on and the two performers started conversing with their bodies. There were workshops on breath-work, acting, performance making using physicality, and the art of costume making by not increasing carbon footprint.

Writer and philosopher Sundar Sarukkai, Sara Matchett, Associate Professor at Centre for Theatre, Dance and Performance studies at University of Cape Town, South Africa, theatre director Neelam Mansingh, and Jane Collins, Professor at Wimbledon College of Arts, initiated us into new realms of thoughts. These

included the paradigm shift in seeing nature and culture as binaries.

In this thought-provoking atmosphere that pushed contemporary performance practices, we also travelled back in time by watching traditional art forms such as Thirayattam and Padayani – they were not squeezed into a proscenium. Instead, they were given a natural open-air setting. We spent chilly nights watching the glow from the fire-sticks used by the padayani performers and the mornings were spent in Kerala Kalamandalam seeing how the traditional arts school functioned. Six-year-old

percussion students, with sleep in their eyes, practiced hitting wooden sticks hard on the stones to get their rhythm. Some of the overseas artistes found the ecologically sensitive setting and traditional architecture as moving as the art forms.

#### Befriending a tree

In the midst of all this, we also got to date trees. As part of the Winter Production camp, the students had developed a 'Y Not App' under the supervision of theatre professional Vishnupad Barve, the concept director. Like a dating app, one has to swipe right on a tree in the

campus.

This writer's multi-branched magnificent date for the evening was Haal, a gorgeous banyan that has witnessed many generations of the school. Upon reaching the spot, I could see a blanket placed on a stone and on top of it a greeting card with a leaf stuck on it reading "It's a connection we treasure". I took a while to warm up to Haal. But after 15 minutes, I could not leave the spot. My legs were on the branches, urging me to climb and explore Haal. The festival truly did attempt to make humans encounter Nature both outside and within.

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## CALENDAR

### Single Mike kutteri

Madhuradhwani will feature Abhishek Ravishankar as part of the Single Mike concert series on March 13. He will be accompanied by M. Shrikanth on the violin and Kishore Ramesh on the mridangam. Time: 6.15 p.m. Venue: Arkay Convention Centre, Mylapore.



### Vocal and violin

Hamsadhwani has organised a grand violin duet by V.V. Subramanian and V.V.S. Murai on March 9, 6.15 p.m. They will be accompanied by veteran mridangist Trichy Sankaran and K.V. Gopalakrishnan (kanjira). On March 10, Shertalai Ranganatha Sharma will perform at 6.15 p.m. with B.U. Ganesh Prasad (violin), Mannargudi Eswaran (mridangam) and K. Srivatsa (kanjira). Concerts will be held at Youth Hostel, Adyar.

### Veena recital

As part of the 'HCL Concert series', the Music Academy has organised the veena recital by Charulatha Chandrasekar on March 13, 6 p.m. at the Kasturi Srinivasan Hall. Sabareesh G Sreenivas (mridangam) and Murali Varadarajan (kanjira) are the accompanists.

### Twin treat

Narada Gana Sabha has organised the following programmes at its venue: Tamizharasan Theatres' Tamil play *Pattinathar* will be staged on March 10, 6.45 p.m. at Sathguru Granananda Hall; and Trichur Ramachandran's vocal concert will take place on March 11, 6.30 p.m. at Swami Haridhos Giri Hall.

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