

# friday Review

THE HINDU

**The tale of a devadasi**

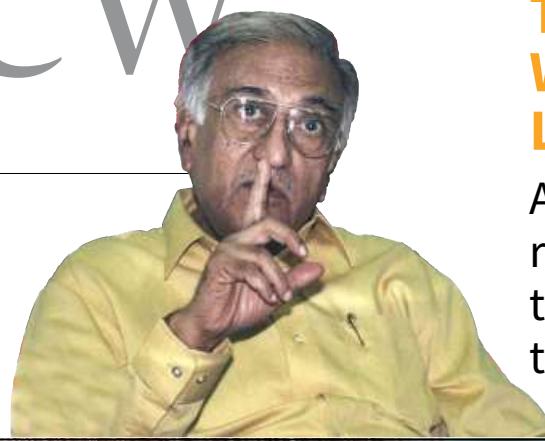
Kamalakshi by the Madras Players combines music, dance and drama p2

**Unboxing new ideas**

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**THE VOICE THAT WON A MILLION LISTENERS**

Ameen Sayani's song ratings set a new trend in the days of the radio p4



Chosen for the Jnanpith award, the poet has been uniting hearts through his words

## An emotion called Gulzar

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**E**ighty-nine autumns later, Gulzar retains the spring in his step and method in his writing. He devotes six hours every day to his literary pursuits.

None can match the poet's choice of metaphors to convey love, loss and longing. Effortlessly plucking at the heartstrings, Sampooran Singh Kalra has, over the years, transformed into the emotion called Gulzar. He was recently selected to be conferred with the Jnanpith, the country's highest literary honour, for 2023.

Be it the celebration of a progressive thought not bound by ideology or conventional idiom, a reflection on changing social mores, a chit chat with children or a deep dive into romance, Gulzar has given us a *potti* brimming with elegant verse.

Even recently, he was motivated to select and translate 365 poems from different languages in his latest work, *A Poem A Day*. During a conversation, students complained to him that they could not relate to the poetry in their syllabus. "Poetry

is a living medium, as alive as the headlines of a newspaper. The problem is that in schools and colleges, we teach only classical poetry when the focus should be on contemporary writing. I promised to give them a poem a day that is relevant to the times we live in," says Gulzar.

**Cinema and literature**  
A decade after the prestigious Dadasaheb Phalke Award for his contribution to cinema, when Gulzar was named for the Jnanpith, it signalled recognition of his genteel yet resilient struggle for acceptance. "Sometimes, I felt that if I had not found success in cinema, nobody would have picked up my literary writing. But I kept at it and the prestigious award proves that I was wrong," he says.

Purists might have taken time to give Gulzar his due, but his cinematic expression always possessed literary merit. "My work always had individuality. I don't think anybody before me teased the moon with a phrase like 'tohe rahu lage bairi,'" he says, referring to his first creation, 'Mera gora ang laile' for Bimal Roy's *Bandini* (1963), where the protagonist, who is willingly getting sucked into darkness, strikes a

conversation with the moon playing hide-and-seek with the clouds. She playfully curses it with a conjunction of Rahu – the shadow planet is supposed to bring ill-luck and cause eclipses.

"I had to feel like the character, but without the *riyaaz* of literature, this thought could not be expressed. Literature was my ground, literature was my soil where I ploughed my imagination and experiences. And the award feels like a farmer has found his *kosha-e-gandum*, the sheaf of wheat, or *bajre da sitta*, the pod of the pearl millet," says Gulzar.

The lyricist who famously didn't go to receive the Oscar statuette for 'Jai Ho', because "I didn't have a black coat," is keen to hold the Jnanpith's bronze Saraswati.

Reflecting on his long journey, Gulzar says: "Like my moustache and beard, at a certain age, *shayari* also grows on everybody. People learn to swim, I drowned myself in literature." He insists there was no catalyst as such. "I studied in a school where the medium of instruction was Urdu. Our teacher Mahmood ur Rahman used to organise *bait baazi* competitions, where students had to recite the couplets of noted poets. At times, I would cheat by changing the first

letter to meet the challenge given by the opposite team, but the master would intervene. It was his way to make us go beyond the prescribed text. The *chura* (flakes) of that poetry stayed somewhere inside me," he elaborates.

Gradually, Gulzar learnt to separate the good couplets from the ordinary ones, and then started introducing his own. "When the teacher asked whose creation it was, I would feign ignorance." That passion for literature soon turned Gulzar into a bookworm. It meant he would read not just Tagore and Shakespeare but also Jibanananda Das, Nazim Hikmet and W.H Auden.

"The fact that I studied poetry in different languages and from varied cultures helped me come up with words to express myself with confidence. For instance, a line of T.S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock* – the streets that follow like a tedious argument of insidious intent – stayed with me and when I was writing a *naazm* to introduce Mirza Ghalib's abode in Old Delhi, it came out as, *Ballimaran ke mohalle ki woh pechida dalilon ki si galivyan*.

When he starts writing, hundreds of idioms that Gulzar has read on the subject pass through the mind, he says. "The challenge is to keep them

**For book lovers**

- **Mirza Ghalib: A Biographical Scenario** is an Urdu connoisseur's delight.
- **Footprints on Zero Line:** Writings on the Partition.
- **Samay Ka Khatola.** A collection of poems and songs for children
- **A poem A Day.** Chosen by Gulzar, it features the works of poets from across Asia
- **Baaghbaan.** Gulzar translates Tagore in this book.
- **Because He Is...** By daughter Meghna Gulzar is about her bond with her father



aside and say what you exactly feel. For instance, every poet sees the sunset differently. Fascinated by the colour of twilight, I would imagine if I could take that colour and rub it on the cheeks of my beloved."

Gulzar also possesses a deep, soulful voice. He is aware of it and says he could have been a classical musician, but did not venture in that direction, because his family took time to understand his aesthetic makeup.

**Association with authors**  
In Bombay, he came in touch with progressive authors such as Krishan Chander, Ali Sardar Jafri and Rajinder Singh Bedi, whose writings he admired as a student. However, he stayed away from any political umbrella. A humanist does not need one, he would say.

Gulzar feels Indians do not stop with practising religious secularism; harmony among languages is also a part of their collective consciousness.

Gulzar also believes in speaking his mind. He urges decision-makers to not be afraid of Firaq, Faiz and Dushyant. "Why are we not talking about Partition even 75 years after Independence? If we don't, its ghost will continue to haunt us. *Padhaiye!* So that they live through it, understand better and let prejudices go out of the window."

Government awards and recognitions are often seen as a barter to buy the silence of the poet, but Gulzar says even if the entire world turns silent, poets will continue to speak their heart. "Yes, they might temper their choice of expression in the face of physical threat. That's why I once said about the seemingly double-faced aspect of the poet: *Bada bogla hai shakhs ye, koi aitaaba bhi kare to kya, naa to jhooth bole kavi khabi, na kabhi kahe wo khara khara.* (Neither does the poet lie, nor does he talk straight. When he cannot speak the bitter truth, he indulges in similes and metaphors.)"

On the relevance of poetry in this post-truth age, Gulzar says civilisation is replete with this constant tension between the right and wrong, between the truth and falsehood. "So, don't give up hope. Like the blade of grass that needs just a crevice in the rock to sprout, poetry will find its way."

**Shailaja Tripathi**

**C**enturies after Kabir shared his humane philosophy, the mystic poet remains as popular as ever, with many musicians undertaking Kabir yatras. One of them is writer and singer Vipul Rikhi, who passionately shares the soul-stirring works of Kabir with people.

Last year, Vipul launched the book *Drunk on Love: An Essential Introduction to the Life, Ideas and Poetry of Kabir*. The book delves into Kabir's life through folklore and poetry, and his vision, which is explored through important ideas such as 'Jheeni', 'Raam', 'Guru', 'Sahaj' and 'Shoonya'.

Vipul has been travelling with the book and performing in different parts of India. Last month, the Goa-based singer was at the Bangalore International Centre for a performance.

Over the years, singing Kabir's *dohas* to the sounds of the tanpura for curious listeners, Vipul has discovered Kabir for himself.

"Kabir constantly keeps calling



## On a Kabir yatra

Singer-author Vipul Rikhi wants people to discover the world of *dohas*

us back to ourselves. We know a few songs here or a few *dohas* there. When I started singing, I felt the power of what he was saying. He's constantly urging us to look within to find out what is actually going on," says Vipul.

Vipul's association with Kabir began after he joined Shabnam Virmani's 'The Kabir Project' in 2008. That opened up a whole new world and oral folk traditions in different parts of the country. I was with The Kabir Project for six years," recalls the singer.

In 2018, Vipul conceptualised a concert called 'Ishq Mastana'. The idea behind the concert was to introduce the 15th century Bhakti-Sufi poet to people through storytelling, commentary, poetry and songs. The songs were rendered in Hindi but the narration was in English to cater to a diverse crowd. "I started researching and came across many stories and legends in the oral tradition. I decided to present Kabir as he is understood in the oral folk tradition. How do people, who sing Kabir, relate to him? That's the Kabir you find in the book,"

says Vipul. The concert paved the way for *Drunk on Love*. "The audience asked for a book that shares his life story, writings and translations of his poetry," he adds.

**Dedicated website**

With the similar intent of showcasing the life and mission of mystic poets, Vipul created a website called 'Ishq Fakiri'. It is populated with his performances and songs by Kabir, Meera, Baba Bulle Shah, Gorak Nath, Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai and Sattar Das.

Each song has been presented with complete lyrics and translations in English.

"These are not just songs; they carry a deep message. And so, whenever I present concerts, I always explain the lyrics before singing and people find that really helpful. So, this website, this album is also a similar effort," explains Vipul.

Vipul says Kabir's layered poetry revealed itself to him over the years. He cites the example of his famous song 'Mohe sun sun aave hasi, paani mein meen pyaasi' which means

"I laugh when I hear that the fish is thirsty in water".

"What he says is that even though we are surrounded by love and joy, all human beings experience this sense of incompleteness, which is what drives us to look for this or that. After I discovered the deeper meaning, the song came alive for me. The way I sang it also changed the way I connected with it," says the singer-author.

Some of Vipul's favourite Kabir songs are 'Moko kahan tu dhundhle re bande' and 'Chadariya jheeni re jheeni', which describes the journey that a finely-knit cloth goes through. In this case, the cloth is an allegory for a human body that has been created with care by the almighty.

It's interesting that Vipul's concerts can be hosted at home as well as in an auditorium.

"That's part of the whole point, because Kabir was a man of the people. He was a weaver who lived in Varanasi – he had a wife and children, and he lived an everyday life. Kabir talks a lot about being grounded. And that's the spirit in which I like to share Kabir as well," says Vipul.

**V.V. Ramani**

The auditorium at Narada Gana Sabha reverberated with applause as the curtains rose to reveal an artistically crafted temple on stage for the play *Kamalakshi*. Shanmugham (stage decor and props) and Victor Paulraj (lighting) need to be complimented.

The English play written by Sujatha Vijayaraghavan and directed by P.C. Ramakrishna is set in the late 19th Century. It deals with the story of Kamalakshi (Sumitra Nitin), a devadasi dancer, and Sivaguru (Sikkil Gurucharan), a singer at the famous temple of Tyagesa in Tiruvarur.

The play opens with festivities in a temple. The men and women of the village await the arrival of Kamalakshi for her 'Potukattu' ceremony (being dedicated to the temple for *seva*). She is decked up in finery and arrives dancing in front of a palanquin carrying the idol of Tyagesa. Those assembled there, especially Sivaguru and mirasdar Sugavanam are charmed by her beauty and dance. Kamalakshi performs two songs – 'Tyagaraja yoga vaibhavam' and 'Theruvil'



# Heart in the right place

*Kamalakshi* movingly narrated the story of a devadasi but needed a little more attention to detail



# The symbolism of Shiva

Uma Ramesh chose to highlight both bhakti and beauty

**V.V. Ramani**

It was a thematic margam and the chosen deity for the evening was the lord of dance Shiva. Uma Ramesh, in her performance for Brahma Gana Sabha, chose to make this thematic presentation more meaningful by conceptualising a recital that moved from the physical to a philosophical state.

The introduction to Shiva began with a brisk Mallari in raga Gambhiraa Nattai and a padigam by Karaikal Ammaiyan in Kalyani. This padigam eulogises the dance

of the lord of Thiruvalangadu kshetram, where he dances inspired by the sounds of the saptaswaras and musical instruments. Uma's choreography of the physical structure of the temple in the Mallari began with a description of the temple pond filled with lotus, and the architectural details, the shrines of Vinayaka and Murugan, and the grand procession of the deity on his vahana.

**Meaningful sancharis**

Then, there was a transition from the descriptive mode to an emotional state of love, with a nayika asking her confidante to go and fetch the lord, whose absence is making her heart feel heavy. 'Samiyai azhathodi va', a Thanjavur Quartet varnam in Khamsa, offered a fine display of meaningful sancharis and nritta patterns.

Moving deeper into the feeling of bhakti and surrender, Uma presented Gopalakrishna Bharathi's 'Varugalamo aiyya' in Manji. Nandaraj requests the Lord to cast his benevolent gaze on him so that he can get a glimpse, and asks if he could come in. Uma's abhinaya captured the poignancy in the lyrics.

'Parashiva', a poem composed by Subramania Bharati in raga Sarasangi, dealt with the philosophical idea of the union of the body and soul, leading to an exalted state where the devotee merges with the almighty.

Uma concluded with a thillana in Nadanamakriya by K.S. Balakrishnan, who also did the nattuvangam. The orchestral team consisted of S.R. Praveen (vocal), Vedakrishnan (mridangam), Kalaiaraslan (violin) and Sujith Naik (flute).

*pettarae doraku* in Bhairavi. After an elaborate and bhava-laden delineation of the raga, Vivek rendered the kriti with due dignity and appropriate ornamentation. In this Utsava Sampradaya kriti, Tyagaraja sings about placing an auspicious mark (raksha) on the forehead of Rama to ward off evil eyes. (In many houses, this used to be a regular ritual during twilight. That is why this time is referred to as 'sayaraksha'). Tyagaraja takes the liberty to treat Rama as a small child who needs to be protected. In the same kriti, he enumerates the greatness of the Lord too. The niraval for 'Sangeetha priya Tyagaraja' had flashes of briga-laden sangatis, delivered with effortless ease.

Keshava Mohan Kumar followed the vocalist faithfully through his soulful performance on the violin. Mridangam by Sunada Krishna Arna spread 'sunaadham' (pleasant sound), and he supported the artiste with sensitivity. During the thani, along with Balakrishna Hosamane (morsing), Sunada wove enjoyable rhythmic patterns.

The lighter session comprised Purandaradasar's padas, 'Mandha mathiyu nanu' and 'Rama nama payasake'. While both of them were lyrically rich, the latter

delighted the listener with its metaphorical beauty, describing the process of preparing *payasam*. The devotee mixes the sugar named Krishna and ghee named Vittala with kherner named Rama, serves it on a plate and enjoys it till he gets two burps of bliss.

Vivek concluded his well-planned concert with a thillana.

**Promising talent**

In the earlier session, young flautist Pranav Adiga from Udupi (disciple of Varijkshi Bhat and K. Raghavendra Rao), delighted the rasikas with his mature performance that was far beyond his age. With brief alapanas he presented 'Sudhamayee sudhanidhi' in Amritavarshini (Muthiah Bhagavtar) and 'Tatvameruga tarama' in Garudadhwani (Tyagaraja). After a satisfying alapana of Simhendramadhyamam for his main piece 'Needhu charanamule', (also by Tyagaraja), Pranav showcased his talent in swaraprataras and concluded with Purandarasar's 'Govinda ninna namavae chanda' in raga Jana Sammodhini.

The young flautist was ably supported on the violin by Gowtham Bhat P.G. and on the mridangam by Shailesh Rao.

## Celebrating Tamil verses

Veda Agama Deiva Tamilisai Mandram, Sri Krishna Gana Sabha and SPSKC Trust have jointly organised the five-day Paniru Tirumurai festival, to be held from March 6 to 10, at Sri Krishna Gana Sabha, Maharajapuram Santhanam Salai, T. Nagar. The festival, in its 18th year, will have up-and-coming artistes and Odhuvars presenting Thevaram verses, devotional songs, discourses and harikatha. Events will take place from 3 p.m. to 9 p.m. on all days. The inaugural day's programmes will begin with Vadapalani Karthik Arun Odhuvar's Thevaram rendition at 3 p.m. This will be followed by M.K. Prabhakaramurthy's discourse (4 p.m.). J.B. Keerthana's concert (5 p.m.), and Udayalur Kalyanaraman's rendition of Thevaram and other devotional songs (7.30 p.m.). Dr. Sudha Seshayyan, former Vice-Chancellor of Tamil Nadu Dr. M.G.R. Medical University, will preside over the function. Programmes on the last day (March 10) will include Bhavatharini Anantharaman's Thevaram rendition (3 p.m.); Suryanarayana murthy's dance performance along with his students (5 p.m.); and Sargunatha Odhuvar's Thevaram rendition at 7 p.m.

**B. Ramadevi**

Vivek Moozhikulam presented a spirited Carnatic vocal concert under the auspices of Mangaluru's Sangeetha Parishad, in association with Karnataka Government's Department of Kannada and Culture, and Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Mangaluru. This is the Parishad's 30th anniversary (Thrimshath Sambhrama) and it has been organising monthly concerts featuring both young and established artistes.

Endowed with a majestic voice, Vivek began with the Saveri varnam, 'Sarasoodaa ninne' by Patnam Subramanya Iyer and quickly moved on to 'Swaminatha paripaala aashu mam' in Nattai by Muthuswami Dikshitar. He presented Papanasam Sivan's masterpiece 'Kaa vaa vaa' in Varali with impeccable diction. Saint Tyagaraja's compositions monopolised his concert.

His delineation of Sarathmathi was full of fresh phrases, and, as expected, he presented 'Mokshamu galada'. As a contrast, 'Shobhillu saptaswara', in praise of the seven notes, followed briskly in Jagannohini.

The central piece was 'Raksha

# Well begun is half done

Vivek Moozhikulam's concert showed why good planning matters



Vibrant Vivek Moozhikulam and Pranav Adiga. PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



## Notes of purity

The music of D. Seshachary, who passed away recently, was guided by patantaram

**H. Ramakrishnan**

The renowned vocalist D. Seshachary (of Hyderabad Brothers) believed that the prime objective of music was to create happiness. A musician can make rasikas happy only if he or she experiences joy when performing, he used to say.

Born into a family deeply rooted in music, Seshachary, along with his elder brother Raghavachary, learnt music from their father Daroor Ratnamacharyulu, who belonged to the fifth-generation lineage of saint Tyagaraja. Their father would teach them a varnam or a kriti and would ask them to sing it repeatedly for a week to perfect every nuance.

If they made a mistake while practising a composition, they would be made to sing it again from the beginning. This rigorous training helped them uphold the patantaram when they began performing on stage.

Though the brothers initially sang individually, they came together at a concert in 1980 in Tiruvarur as Hyderabad Brothers. Since then, they only performed as a duo.

During the next four decades, the brothers toured all over the world and won accolades. They made it a point to participate without fail in Chennai's December Music Season. They won the Music Academy's best vocalist award

consecutively for three years, from 1990. The brothers also received the Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer Award for rendering rare Tyagaraja kritis.

Duo singing has always received special appreciation from music lovers. No wonder, the Hyderabad Brothers achieved phenomenal success. They sang in perfect unison and could largely fill the void left by the Alathur Brothers. The deep, resonant voice of Seshachary and the softer, mellow voice of Raghavachary blended beautifully to create a melodious effect.

A stickler to tradition, Seshachary insisted on preserving the heritage of classical music. "Some distinctive prayogas cannot be produced by magic. One has to contemplate on them to capture their beauty," he had once said before a concert.

Seshachary was also a mridangam exponent. He learnt the art from his uncle K. Sudarsanacharya and was a staff artiste (mridangam) in AIR.

Delhi P. Sunder Rajan, who has accompanied the brothers several times on the violin, remembers Seshachary's astounding prowess in writing notations. He said Seshachary would listen to a piece just once and effortlessly transcribe the sahitya and swaras simultaneously.

Unable to recover from the shock of his younger brother's passing, an emotional Raghavachary said, "I have lost my right hand."





**Curating chartbusters**  
Ameen Sayani.  
Photos: The Hindu  
Archives and  
Special  
Arrangement



# The original RJ

How Ameen Sayani made Geetmala as popular as America's Billboard rankings

**Mini Anthikad Chhibber**

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Ameen Sayani's passing brought the usual flood of reminiscences on social media, accompanied by the mandatory compilations of songs from 'Binaca Geetmala'. It is fitting that a tribute to Sayani should be in the form of a musical countdown of popular Hindi film music.

The legendary radio broadcaster, despite doing a bunch of other stuff, including acting in movies, is practically synonymous with 'Binaca Geetmala'. Incidentally, that is one marketing wizard who hit the jackpot

tying the toothpaste to the countdown show.

Everyone has their particular Geetmala memory, whether it was painstakingly keeping a record of the songs every week in the back pages of an exercise book, or walking home down a dimly lit village lane. It would take three songs to cover the 15-minute distance and hearing the song from the radios from the shops on either side of the lane gave one a rudimentary sense of surround sound!

Thursdays (Geetmala aired on Wednesdays at 8 p.m.) was a time to compare notes where everyone brought out their lists and jumped for joy or were crushed by

disappointment, depending on whether the favourite continued to reign or was toppled by an usurper.

The countdown show aired on Radio Ceylon, between 1952 and 1988, and on Vividh Bharati till 1994. When the Union Minister for Information and Broadcasting B.V. Keskar banned Hindi film music from All India Radio on the grounds of it being vulgar and westernised, Radio Ceylon swooped in on the chance to fill the gap and reaped rich rewards.

'Binaca Geetmala' did not start as a countdown show. According to Wikipedia, it was just seven popular Hindi songs in no particular order. It later morphed into a countdown show (the first for Hindi film songs).

In an interview, Sayani had said the popularity was decided by the number of records sold. Listeners' clubs were set up to send in their top 10 songs of the week. As the show became exponentially popular, it was looked upon as a barometer of success. This proved problematic for some composers, said Sayani as they felt their careers were affected by the ratings. After running the show without ratings for a year, an ombudsman was appointed to ensure there was no bias.

There was also an annual edition presenting the most popular songs of the year, which was arrived at based on the song's performance on the show through the year. A look at the winners of each year is like a rapid fire trip through the history of popular Indian cinema. Considering popular culture is a mirror to society, it is also a ready reckoner of the seismic shifts in the Indian psyche.

If the inaugural winner in 1953 was 'Ye zindagi usi ki hai' from the historical *Anarkali*, 1955 saw 'Mera joota hai japani' from Raj Kapoor's *Shri 420* take the crown. The song that swelled the 'Hindustani' hearts of all was a sweet paean to national pride.

The following year, it was the turn of that love letter to Mumbai, 'Ae dil hai mushkil jeena yahan' from Raj Khosla's *C.I.D.*, with Dev Anand playing the dashing inspector. Though the song that gave Shammi Kapoor his sobriquet of 'Yahoo' (much before it became a search engine but after *Gulliver's Travels*), did not make it to the top, 'Ehsaan tera hoga mujh par' from *Junglee* was the top song of 1962.

Ten years later, it was the time of flower power, the gorgeous Zeenat Aman and 'Dum maro dum' from *Hare Rama Hare Krishna*. A year later, in 1973, the 'Angry young man' punched his way into our consciousness with *Zanjeer* and 'Yaari hai imaan mera yaar meri zindagi' was the hit of the year. 'Dafli wale dafli baja' in 1980 from *Sargam* signalled the Sridevi-Jaya Prada ascendance while 'Papa kehte hain' in 1988 from *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak* announced the arrival of Aamir Khan. The other Khan Salman, starred in the final annual hit of Binaca Geetmala with 'Didi tera dewar' from *Hum Apke Hain Koun..!* in 1994.

Through this journey of pop culture, thumkas and thumris, we were guided by this cheery voice that would put us in a happy state of mind. Thank you for all the music, Ameen Sayani saab.

## Celebrating Nataraja

Mathashivaratri, the festival that celebrates the divine union of Shiva and Shakti, is considered significant. To mark the occasion, many cultural performances take place at various shrines dedicated to the Lord of dance. This year, Mathashivaratri is being celebrated on March 8.

Aalaap, in association with Narada Gana Sabha, presents 'Chidambara Rahasyam - An Ode to the Heart Space', a thematic production on March 7, 6.30 p.m., which is themed on Chidambaram. The programme, organised as part of Narada Gana Sabha's Smt. Valliammal Endowment programme, features both senior and up-and-coming artistes. Created and conceptualised by Bengaluru-based storyteller/artist Vinay Varanasi and choreographed by dancer Gayatri Sriram, it brings together artistes such as Spoorhi Rao (vocal), Sruti Sarathy (violin), Adanya Ramanand (mridangam) and dancer Varun Shivakumar (Bharatanatyam). Through the medium of dance, music and storytelling, this production highlights many interesting snippets about Chidambaram and its significance.

Tickets at <https://www.mdnd.in/newevent/viewevent/> or write to ops.alaap@gmail.com with 'Chidambara Rahasyam' in the subject line. For further queries write to aalaap.concepts@gmail.com

## Music, discourse and play

As part of the 27th annual dance, music and drama festival, Nayaki Cultural Association will showcase the following programmes from today to March 3 at Abirami Chidambaram Community Hall, Kotturpuram. Details: Today, 6.15 p.m.: Harikatha by Vishaka Hari; March 2, 6.15 p.m.: Vocal concert by Trichur Brothers. March 3, 6.45 p.m.: Gurukulam Old Boys' Tamil play *Andrum Indrum*.

of dramatic theatre to create somewhat more truthful expressions of our lived realities as actresses and women."

*Project Darling* is also a research of sorts into the "bawdy" women or "sexual" clowns from the Kannada nataka genre. It also indirectly highlights the status quo of women in the Indian entertainment industry, where they are objectified and looked down upon. It also brings back memories of late artistes such as Gulab Bai, nautanki performer from Agra, Jaddanbai (mother of actor Nargis) of the Hindi film industry and Silk Smitha of Tamil cinema, and how they are still treated as sex objects.

With the help of her eclectic stagecraft and a terrific ensemble of actors, Sharanya deftly presented the complexities of traditional and contemporary theatre, vis-a-vis society. In the play, the perfect female character (as defined in the Natyasastra) is created on stage. And, she bear the massive weight of cultural baggage! When an actor questions about consent, another retorts, "What consent? We have culture".

The director successfully balanced serious documentary sources with hilarious and brilliant theatricality – which the audience enjoyed.

The scenography and stagecraft were innovative. Props such as cameras, photographs, a typewriter, a whiteboard, screens, puppets and masks and a chair did justice to the script. The musical score featured the apt *Game of Love and Kiss Me Tight*. The brilliant team of actors included Shrunga BV (last seen in Mansore's searing film *19.20.21*), Surabhi Vashist, Shobana Kumari, Shashank Rajshekar and Matangi Prasan.



## A search for answers

Theatre director Sharanya Ramprakash poses bold questions about female sexuality

**Girish Shrivastava**

Sharanya Ramprakash's *Project Darling* is an incisive study of female sexuality at the crossroads of censorship and culture in India. Presented by actor and director Prakash Raj, it was recently staged at Adishakti and Indianostrum Theatre in Puducherry.

The play, supported by the India Foundation for the Arts (IFA), brought alive on stage some bitter, uncomfortable social realities about female sexuality that are deeply rooted in our society. But the format allowed for humour and punchlines amid everyday life and social engagements.

Based on the stage life of veteran Kannada theatre actress Khanavali Chenni, who ruled the Kannada stage in the 1970s with her rib-tickling dialogues and

sexual innuendo, the play traces the journey of a group of performers that set out on a search for Chennai.

While trying to find her, they stumble upon several other actresses who have their own stories to share. The seriousness of the play was appropriately balanced with some slapstick dialogues and bold questions pertaining to the societal attitude towards male and female sexuality.

"Women and female bodies have been central to Kannada's cultural imagination, from Igappa Hegede's *Vivaha Prahasana* (1897) to Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala* (1990). Theatre uses female sexuality to define cultural agency. However, Kannada theatre's actual relationship with women as performers has been fraught with anxiety," says Sharanya Ramprakash, adding: "I want to deconstruct the conventions



**Social realities** The play is a strong commentary. PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

