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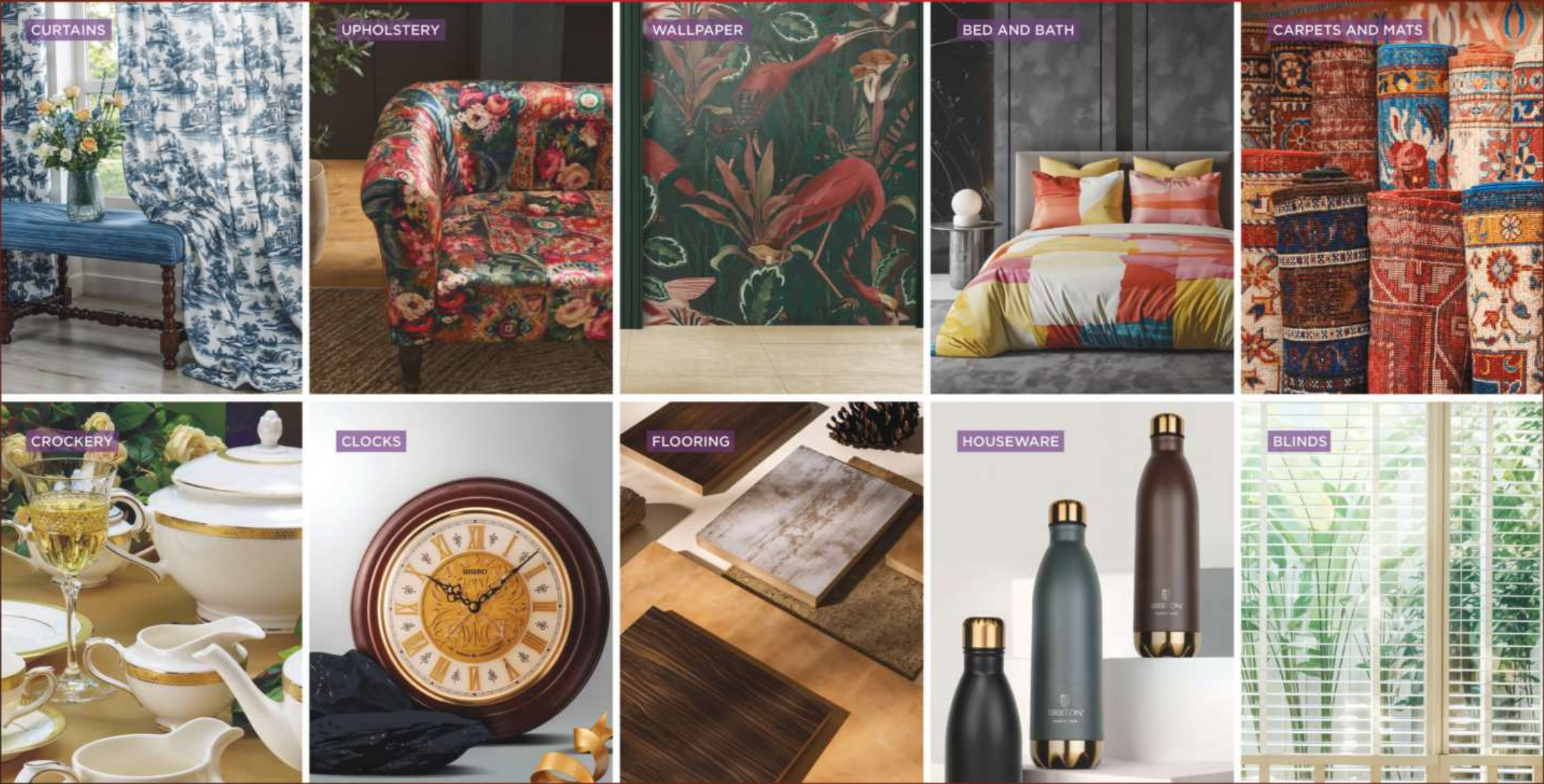
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THE HINDU



## WHEN THE MUSIC LINGERS

At 74, Begum Parveen Sultana's voice has not lost its sparkle **p2**

How Muthuswami Dikshitar described Rama in his compositions

# An ode to bhakti

V. Sriram

It is usual in Carnatic Music to associate certain deities with certain composers. The term frequently used is *Ishta Devata*, and thus when we speak of Rama, it is usually Tyagaraja who comes to mind. His illustrious contemporary Muthuswami Dikshitar has a small but significant corpus of songs on Rama as well. Given his association with Sri Vidya worship and the Navavarana compositions, Dikshitar is often termed a *Devi upasaka*. But rather like Adi Sankara, he was an exponent of Shanmatha – the worship of Ganesa, Skanda, Surya, Vishnu, Siva and Devi. He alone among the Carnatic Trinity has compositions for each of these deities.

Dikshitar's devotion to Rama was probably due to his association with Upanishad Braharendra Yogin, a savant who lived in Kanchipuram and where his math is still open to visitors. V. Raghavan's article in the *Journal of the Music Academy*, Madras Vol XXVII has details on him. Upanishad Braharendra Yogin enjoys a unique position in Carnatic music history, for he brought both Dikshitar and Tyagaraja to Kanchipuram, though the visits were almost 40 years apart.

Upanishad Braharendra Yogin was a devotee of Rama, and among Dikshitar's tasks was the setting to music of his *Rama Ashtapadi*. These are in no way connected to the *Jayadeva Ashtapadi* in terms of theme. They are named as such because, like the older and famed work, these too have eight charanams, well almost, for the first one has 13! Today, the lyrics of the work survive, though Dikshitar's tunes for them are lost. Also available are Upanishad Braharendra Yogin's *Divyanama Keertanams* on Rama. It is believed that these served as inspirations for Tyagaraja's eponymous set of songs.

A cursory glance at Upanishad Braharendra Yogin's works establishes how significantly they influenced Dikshitar in terms of lyrics. Several phrases emerge and Dikshitar has not used them just in his *Rama kritis* but in those on other deities as well. The *Rama Ashtapadi* also addresses the deity in all eight declensions, which may have been



the inspiration for Dikshitar's famed *vibhakti kritis*.

The *Sangita Sampradaya Pradarsini* (SSP) of Subbarama Dikshitar, published in 1904, has in it nine kritis on Rama, composed by Muthuswami Dikshitar. Among these, only two can be clearly assigned to temples where they were composed. The first is 'Sri Ramam' in Narayana Gowla where the *kshetra* name Darbasayanam is clearly mentioned. Rama here, contrary to all other shrines, is in a recumbent posture, on a bed of darba grass, awaiting the grace of the ocean before building a bridge on it. The second composition is 'Santanaramaswaminam' in Hindolavasanta, which mentions the town where it is situated in as Yamunambapuri. This is today Needamangalam and the temple to Santanarama here is famous.

However, the song as it appears in the SSP lacks the charanam and, therefore, the *mudra* 'Guruguha', an identifier that is needed for making it a Muthuswami Dikshitar composition. The book, however, says it is his work. Later publications have a charanam added, and The Music Academy's Tamil edition of the SSP accredits Sangita Kalanidhi Justice T.L. Venkatarama Iyer as the source. But it sheds no light on

where he obtained it from. The absence of the rishabha throughout this added charanam, while it is used liberally in the pallavi and anupallavi of the kriti as seen in the SSP, also makes it a puzzle.

The remaining kritis in the SSP on Rama are all addressed to the deity without any mention of location or shrine. In recent times, the kriti 'Kothadandaramam anisam' (Kokilarava) is attributed to the temple at Vaduvur, known for its utsava icon of Rama and its bewitching smile. However, there are no references to the place or this idol in the composition.

Perhaps, the grandest of the Dikshitar compositions on Rama is 'Mamava pattabhirama'. Composed in Manirangu, it is a stunning word picture of the Lord during his coronation. The lyrics seem inspired by, or served as inspiration

for, the standard Thanjavur paintings of Rama's coronation. Dikshitar mentions everyone – Sita, the brothers, Anjaneya, Sugriva and his entourage, Vibhishana, and the seven sages. While there is a legend that this was sung by Dikshitar and his disciples when they met with Tyagaraja at Tiruvaiyaru, it could well be a composition at the Ramaswami temple in Kumbakonam where the deity is in coronation mode. But then, this too is conjecture.

In later years, a Rama Navavaranam, attributed to Dikshitar emerged. This had a set of nine songs, of which just two, 'Ramachandram Bhavayami' (Vasanta) and 'Ramachandrena' (Manji) were in the SSP. The set had songs completing the remaining declensions. The provenance of these songs is unknown as it is impossible to identify the manuscript source for these. The term Navavaranam too is a misnomer – being modes of address, they can at best be considered *vibhakti kritis*.

# For the instrument's sake

'Nadotsavam' gave nagaswaram artistes the opportunity to be at their creative best

N.C. Srinivasaraghavan

Confining the nagaswaram and the thavil to weddings and religious gatherings does not augur well for these instruments as they represent a rich tradition of classical music that requires dedicated platforms for propagation. Nagaswaram festivals are important as they provide the much-needed visibility to this instrument that is steeped in antiquity.

The Music Academy recently featured several nagaswaram and thavil artistes as part of Nadotsavam.

Commencing their concert with the classic Abhogi varnam 'Evvari bodhana', Mylai

Karthikeyan and Koleri G. Vinoth Kumar took up the pre-charanam portion in two speeds. The chittaswaras were creatively paced by incorporating a trikalam element in them. 'Unnai thudhikka' is a lively kriti in Kuntalavarali composed on the deity Tyagaraja of Tiruvurur. It was a prudent choice before taking up Atana ('Anupama gunambudhi'), a raga that offered Karthikeyan ample scope for exploration. He brought out the distinct flavour of the raga by focussing on the nishadams during the alapana. Swift swaras in melkalam ending at the upper rishabham exhibited Karthikeyan's adeptness at handling the instrument. The final round of kalpanaswaras involved careful coordination

between both the nagaswaram artistes as they alternated avartanams, finally coming together during the kanakku. Suposhini is an Ekaika raga created by Tyagaraja. His composition 'Raminchuvarevarura' is rendered in a fast tempo and has similarities to Western tunes. The duo took up this piece next, much to the delight of the thavil artistes Nayudupetta E.M. Sanjeev Kumar and Mandaveli Mohanraj, who enthusiastically traced its patterns.

The evening's main piece was a Ragam Tanam Pallavi in Kalyani. The pallavi line in Tisra Jati Triputa tala was dedicated to Kapaleeswarar of Mylapore – 'Mayilaiyil vaazhum kapali unadhu thiruvadiyai panindhen'.

The recital ended with Thanjavur Sankara Iyer's Anandabhairavi thillana. Sanjeev Kumar and Mohanraj provided competent support.

In another concert from the festival, Chinnamanur A. Vijay Karthikeyan and Idumbavanam V. Prakash Ilayaraja chose to present a uniquely themed concert titled 'Tamizhum Naadamum'. Nangoor N.K. Selvaganapathy and Idumbavanam K.S.K. Manikandan accompanied the artistes on the thavil.

The theme also showed how exclusive nagaswaram festivals encourage these artistes to rethink their approach and presentation. A great way to turn the spotlight on the instrument. The compositions, all in

Tamil, highlighted the distinctiveness of the nagaswaram tradition. For instance, their first piece 'Rishabhashta ragamalikai' is a rare varnam composed by maestro Dharmapuram A. Govindarajan with eight ragas focussing on the rishabha swaras. The eight ragas are Kanada, Sahana, Saranga, Gowla, Sri, Surutti, Saraswati and Madhyamavati. The rishabha is the jeeva swara in these ragas and in its handling lies the beauty of this varnam.

Nagavalli is a janya of Karaharapriya and a rare composition of Ku. Sa. Krishnamurthi 'Vara venum velane' was presented next by the duo. The kriti 'Kadaikkan vaithennai' in raga Begada

followed. It was played commendably by Kavin, Prakash Ilayaraja's son, who continues the family legacy.

Chinnamanur Vijay Karthikeyan has composed several kritis. 'Unnaiyalla' in raga Gunavathi, which was taken up next, is one of them. This was followed by Dandapani Desikar's 'Anjezhuthina' in raga Vinodhini.

The main piece of the evening was in raga Dharardari, a janya of Harikamboji. The kriti 'Asaiyai uraikkindren' is written by Devakottai V. Ramanathan Chettiar and tuned by Thiruppamburam Swaminatha Pillai. After an electrifying tani avartanam by the thavil vidwans, the recital concluded with a thillana in raga Desh.



Sounds of tradition Mylai Karthikeyan and Koleri G. Vinoth Kumar and team. (Right) Chinnamanur A. Vijay Karthikeyan and Idumbavanam V. Prakash Ilayaraja. PHOTOS: K. PICHUMANI



Shaillaja Khanna

Ustad Ali Akbar Khan once said that when you have to play Marwa, a raag of twilight, you have to imagine stones crying in distress, waiting for the night. With that imagery, it's hard to think of playing Marwa in bright sunlight.

In the classical music tradition, predominantly in the North, it was spelt out when a raag should be rendered. The 24 hours of the day were divided into segments of three hours, and based on what mood the raag was supposed to generate, it was decided when to play it. The morning raags included pre-dawn, dawn and early morning raags. This time theory was called Raga Prahar.

But today concerts are mainly held in the evenings or late evenings. So post-midday, and post-midnight raags are rarely heard.



In the Carnatic tradition, around a century ago, it was decided to break the existing convention and render any raga at any time, to prevent them from going extinct. Says senior Carnatic violinist Lalgudi Vijayalakshmi, "The decision to sing all ragas at any time of the day was taken when music moved to concert platforms. Sometimes, we do sing morning ragas at morning concerts but, of course, they are also performed in the evening."

In the North, the time theory tradition still prevails, but musicians have tweaked the rules – a pre-dawn Lalit is rendered during a morning concert. Or a post-midnight Kafi is rendered after 9 p.m., as the last composition.

It is heartening to see musicians in both classical traditions

# Time-raag relation

Why is it difficult to follow the time theory rule?



Classic format (Clockwise from below) Ulhas Kashalkar; Alka Deo Marulkar; and Prabha Atre. PHOTOS: BHARAT TIWARI; SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT AND AVINASH PASRICHA

re-examining existing rules of performance.

Eminent singer and scholar Prabha Atre was against following the time theory. She was of the view, since concerts were no longer linked with Nature and time, and being held indoors, it made sense to relax the rules.

This came through at the day-long festival held in Pune in March. Organised by her disciples through the Dr Prabha Atre Foundation, it was titled Raag Prabha Sangeetotsav and had artistes singing raags originally not meant for the 'time' of their concert. The artistes included Pt. Hariprasad Chaurasia, disciple of Annapurna Devi, Ulhas Kashalkar, again known to be a stickler for tradition, Padma Talwalkar, Alka Deo Marulkar, Vinayak Torvi, Ram Deshpande and Uday Bhawalkar. It was interesting to see each of the major gharanas represented – Gwalior, Kirana and Jaipur Atrauli Agra.

Ulhas says the rules of rendering are already being relaxed. For example, late-night raags Kanhras and Kauns are rendered earlier in the evening. "To sing a raag a few hours earlier or later than the prescribed time is okay, but attempting one with a 10 or 12-hour difference would be a challenge, and I am not happy attempting it," he says.

Additionally, Ulhas points out, the time theory of rendering does not

apply to 'jor' raags, something Prabha Atre had also used in her argument against this system. For example, is raag Lalita Gauri to be considered a morning one for its Lalit component or early evening for its Gauri aspect? Hindol Bahar and Lalit Pancham are other mixed origin raags. These rules are for performance only, he says, because the rules are anyway broken when learning, practicing or recording.

How connoisseurs will react to music being performed at the 'wrong' time will be interesting to observe. Of course, the uninitiated will have no preconceived notions.

Singer and guru Alka Deo Marulkar wonders: "Will I be able to engage my evening listeners with an early morning raag? Will I be able to transcend the existing listening expectations? When I was approached to sing at the Raag Prabha Sangeetotsav, it got me thinking about the whole issue. The notes are the same but the mood is created by using each note differently, and in conjunction with the other notes. Of course, I have sung raags at unprescribed times during recordings, but a performance is different. Prabha Atre ji was never against breaking tradition for the sake of it. I respect her views, so I agreed to this experiment. I feel it's an attempt to explore, not break a system," says Alka.

If this experiment becomes the norm, it will be interesting to see how artistes are able to rise above what they have been trained in. For instance, one is taught that the rising sun's 'rishabh' of raag Bhairav has to be used differently than the setting sun's 'rishabh', of raag Shri. When this reference point is removed, how will one convey the difference to a learner?

**How connoisseurs will react to music being performed at the 'wrong' time will be interesting to observe. Of course, the uninitiated will have no preconceived notions.**

# Begum reigns

The veteran Hindustani vocalist's voice has not lost its sparkle



Deepa Ganesh

Begum Parveen Sultana is 74. Her cheeks may be less rounded but her smile remains intact. She is as graceful and strikingly dressed as always.

Performing for Bhoomija Foundation's *Holi Re!* in Bengaluru recently, the Begum said: "Is umr mein gaana... jaan nikal jaati hain!" (To sing at this age is exhausting) However, when she began singing to a full house at the Prestige Centre for Performing Arts (PCPA), one hardly felt any strain in her voice – it effortlessly traversed octaves.

Parveen Sultana visits Bengaluru at least twice a year, one of which is to perform at the reputed Sree Ramanavami Global Music festival in Chamarajpet.

Listening to her sing, I was overcome with nostalgia. It brought alive memories of those HMV recordings that introduced me to her stunning rendition of raags Salagavathi, Thodi, Lalith, Nandkauns and Mangal Bhairav.

Discussions after her concerts usually centre around her ability to sing at a high pitch. But there is much more to her voice, as seen in this concert – open-throated aakar, speedy taans and seamless modulation.

Parveen Sultana began with Puriya Dhanashri (bandish 'Laagi mori lagan'). In her characteristic style, she took the audience along right from the opening notes that had a solemn grandeur about them. She explored the lower octaves with conviction, lending the song a pensive quality even as her voice kept perfect pace with the sur. In the drut bandish, 'Payaliya jhankar more', the taans were brisk and marked by clarity.

**Moods of spring**  
She embellished the composition with tonal variations. Her flamboyant aesthetic is not merely a show of her prowess, it indicates her thought process.

Parveen Sultana followed this up with thumris, specially picked to invoke the colours and moods of spring. 'Kaise kari barjori shyam' was set to raag Mishra Kafi. It began with a slow exposition, capturing the reflective nature of the beautiful lyrics, but reached the climax too fast. Then came a Surdas bhajan – a complex composition with unexpected turns, again in raag Mishra Kafi.

Can there ever be a concert without the diva singing the evergreen, 'Humein tumse pyar kitna' composed by the inimitable R.D. Burman? She must have sung the song a thousand times, yet it sounded refreshing. That evening, she recalled the rehearsals and recording of the song in 1981 and was full of praise for the composer.

The musical values she brought into her singing made Parveen Sultana's rendition of 'Bhavani dayani' (raag Bhairavi) a gem.

The well-known Ravindra Katoti on the harmonium and Ojas Adhiya on the tabla provided unobtrusive accompaniment.



Flashback (Clockwise from above) Well-known drama troupes staged excerpts from their plays; Pammal Sambanda Mudaliar; and Nawab Rajamanickam. PHOTOS: S.R. RAGHUNATHAN AND THE HINDU ARCHIVES

# Scenes from the past

On World Theatre Day, Dharini Komal traced the history of Tamil theatre

Suganthi Krishnamachari

World Theatre Day has been celebrated internationally since 1962 on March 27. Despite the vibrant Tamil theatre scene in Chennai, celebrations here have generally been low-key. But this year, with the support of the Federation of City Sabhas, Dharini Komal of Komal Theatres documented the history of Tamil theatre in a programme titled 'Therukkoothu mudhal tharkaala natakam varai.' (From street theatre to contemporary plays). Adding value to this, some drama troupes presented seven-minute excerpts from their plays.

The evening's programme began with K.B. Sundarambal's song 'Gnanappazhathai pizhindu'. The lyrics were by Sankardas Swamigal, one of the pioneers in Tamil theatre. Krithika Shurajit and Balagurunathan presented *Satyavan Savithri* therukkoothu from the film *Navaratni*. Theatre and film actor 'Kallapart' Natarajan choreographed this dance for the film.

While early plays were musicals, the move towards dialogue-oriented ones happened in the time of Pammal Sambanda Mudaliar, who wrote more than 90 plays. He was the founder of Suguna Vilasa Sabha, which was dedicated to fostering Tamil theatre.

The event also showcased the history of Tamil theatre in a capsule, and served as a 'Did you know?' session – Cunniiah, whose Krishna Vinodha Sabha staged mythologicals and historicals, was known for the quickness with which he changed sets. Nawab Rajamanickam was also known for such perfectly choreographed transition. His *Sampoorna Ramayanam* became so popular, the bus stop near the venue



came to be called Ramayanam bus stop.

With the Independence movement gaining momentum, patriotic plays garnered attention. Gopalachari, Te. Po. Krishnaswamy Pavalar, Saminatha Sarma, S.S. Viswanatha Doss and S.D. Sundaram wrote plays that captured the patriotic fervour in the country. Viswanatha Doss went to prison 29 times because of the content of his plays. Long before Bombay Gnanam began a women-only troupe, temple dancer Kumbakonam Balamani Ammal did so with her Balamani Drama Company. In fact, the Railways had to run special trains called Balamani Express to cope with the rush. During a show of M.R. Radha's *Ratha Kanneer* in Madurai, the police had to wield their

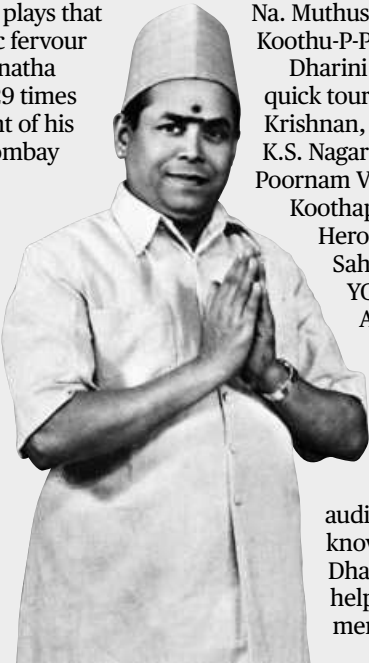
batons to deal with the huge crowd. In 1876, the Dramatic Performances Act was passed so that the British could censor plays. The Act continued until 2012, when theatre artist Gnanani went to court against it, and it was scrapped.

The Dravidian movement brought to the fore rationalist ideas, which were presented in dramas through powerful dialogues from the pens of Arignar Anna and Kalaignar Mu. Karunanidhi. V.C. Ganesan played the titular role in Anna's *Sivaji Kanda Indu Rajyam*. The play was staged during a meeting organised by the Dravida Kazhagam. Ganesan excelled in the role of the Maratha king, and Periyar told him he should henceforth call himself 'Sivaji' Ganesan. M.G. Ramachandran, the hero who became chief minister of Tamil Nadu, also began his acting career on stage.

Dharini also spoke about the contributions of S. Ramanujam to Tamil theatre. She pointed out that many film actors of today trained in Na. Muthuswamy's Koothu-P-Pattarai.

Dharini took the audience on a quick tour of the works of N.S. Krishnan, Indira Parthasarathy, K.S. Nagarajan, Sambu Natarajan, Poornam Vishwanathan, Koothapiran, R.S. Manohar, Heron Ramaswamy, S.V. Sahasranamam, Seshadri, YGP's United Amateur Artists, Cho Ramaswamy, Mouli, ARS, K. Balachander, Kathadi Ramamurthy and Crazy Mohan.

Though many in the audience might have known all this, listening to Dharini narrate them helped refresh one's memory.



## Ramanavami special

- The Music Academy celebrates Ramanavami with a vocal concert today, 6 p.m., at Kasturi Srinivasan Hall. D.B. Ashvin will perform with Anaiyampatti G. Venkatasubramanian (violin) and Palayamkottai B. Guru Raghavendra (mridangam). The programme is organised under the endowment instituted by Madhavi Rajagopalan in memory of R. Seethammal.
- Rasika Ranjani Sabha Foundation and R.R. Sabha Arts Academy have jointly organised T.N.S. Krishna's rendition of Kamba Ramayana pasurams, set to tune by Madurai T.N. Seshagopalan. B.U. Ganeshprasad (violin) and Trichur Narendran (mridangam) are the accompanists. Date: April 7. Time: 6 p.m. Venue: Kamakoti Hall, R.R. Sabha.



## Youth festival

The Music Academy conducts this year's Spirit of Youth Festival from August 1 to 10 at Kasturi Srinivasan Hall. The annual festival features a series of music and dance performances. Those in the 18-25 age group can participate in the festival, organised in memory of Ambujam Krishna. Application forms may be downloaded from the Academy's website <http://www.musicacademymadras.in>. Completed applications may be sent to the Music Academy on or before May 15.

## New play

Under the auspices of Kartik Fine Arts, Dummies Drama stages its new play *Kapidhwaja*, today, 7 pm., at TAG Mylapore Fine Arts Club Auditorium. The play is written and directed by V. Sreevathson.