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# friday Review

THE HINDU

**Internalising the experience**Priyadarsini Govind demonstrated the significance of silence in dance **p2****Questioning self and society**Artist Pushpamala explores the 'Body politic' at The Hindu Lit Fest 2024 **p4**

## THE SINGER WHO CHALLENGED STEREOTYPES

A tribute to Kirana gharana doyenne Prabha Atre, who had a unique style **p4**

**Sudhanva Deshpande**

To make theatre that was authentic to its cultural milieu and history while also being thoroughly modern, both in content and form – this was Habib Tanvir's life's achievement. His theatre was exuberant, festive, celebratory, funny, moving, thoughtful and reflective. It was progressive and secular, and because it was created by a man with a Muslim name, it was reviled and attacked by Hindutva forces. He worked with rural actors to create plays that appealed to audiences far beyond the rural. In the history of Indian theatre, Habib Tanvir was a singular presence.

Born in Raipur in 1923, he went to Bombay to pursue a career in films in the mid-1940s. But the decisive influence on him at the time was his entry into the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), where he met and befriended artistes such as Balraj Sahni, Dina Gandhi (later Pathak), Zohra Segal, and M.S. Sathyu. The left-wing perspective of IPTA was to stay with him throughout his life, even though he forged his own unique path in theatre.

The film industry disillusioned him. It worshipped money, not art. He came to Delhi, where he joined Hindustani Theatre, where he met Moneeka Misra, a theatre director trained in the U.S. They fell in love and got married.

In 1954, Habib Tanvir wrote and directed his first masterpiece *Agra Bazaar*, on the life and art of the plebeian 19th-century poet Nazir Akbarabadi. It was an astonishing production for two reasons. One, the protagonist Nazir never appears in the play – because no biographical information about him was available, even as a large corpus of his poetry had survived, passed on orally from generation to generation. Two, Habib Tanvir asked residents of Okhla village on the outskirts of Delhi to act in the play – his first attempt to make theatre with rural folk.

Soon after, he left for Britain to get formally trained as a director, at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts (RADA), and the Old Vic. He was in his thirties, with over a decade of theatre work under his belt. What he learnt in Britain, most of all, was what he needed to reject – the overly regimented theatre of the time, realistic in a photographic sort of way,



**Habib Tanvir created a stage for everyone with his progressive and secular plays**

## Theatre of change

about middle-class life. He longed for the free-flowing, delightful, irreverent theatre that he had enjoyed as a child in Chhattisgarh. He returned to India and set out to find rural actors.

The first lot of six rural actors he picked came with him to Delhi in 1958. They were all more or less unlettered, but masters of the Nacha, the rural theatre of Chhattisgarh. They acted and danced with abandon, sang melodiously in their open, strong voices, were masters of farce, and could also move you to tears. With them, and with Moneeka as his companion, he founded his own company, Naya Theatre, in 1959. They produced play after play, touring the country extensively, but while his plays of the time had spark, success eluded him.



It was befuddling. Why were these great actors, who were so delightful when they performed in the villages, so stiff and rigid on the urban stage, he wondered. It took him 15 years, from 1958 to 1973, to figure it out. He was forcing them to speak in Hindustani, a language that was alien to them, and he was 'directing' them, telling them where and how to stand, where and when to move, what gestures to use. When he melded together three rural farces into a single play in *Gaon ke naon sasural mor naon damad* ('I'm the son-in-law and My in-laws' house is my village), he asked his actors to speak in Chhattisgarhi and improvise their moves.

It was magic. With their tongues and bodies unshackled, the actors were magnificent. Remarkably, urban audiences, most of whom had no familiarity with Chhattisgarhi, embraced the play. A string of hits followed, many recognised as masterpieces of modern Indian theatre – *Charandas Chor* (Charan the Thief), *Mitti Ki Gaadi* (Sudraka's The Little Clay Cart), *Bahadur Kalarin*, *Shajapur Ki Shantibai* (Bertolt Brecht's Good Person of Szechwan), *Hirma Ki Amar Kahani* (The Immortal Tale of Hirma), and *Kamdev Ka Apna, Basant Ritu Ka Sapna* (Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream).

Habib Tanvir was a formidable intellectual with deep insights about the Natyashastra and Indian performing traditions, a sophisticated aesthete who soaked up influences from all over the world, and a citizen-activist committed to values of secularism and social justice.

"In India, the economically poorest are the culturally richest, and the economically richest are the culturally poorest," he would often say. He devoted his life and his art to uplift the culture, and the voice, of India's poorest. And he did it with unparalleled verve, beauty, and joy.

*The session titled 'Recalling Habib Tanvir: Excerpts from the film and a talk' will be held at Sir Mutha Venkatasubba Rao Concert Hall, Harrington Road, Chetpet, on January 26, 3.15 p.m.*

**The writer is an actor, director and organiser with Jana Natya Manch and Editor with LeftWord books. He has co-directed two documentaries on Habib Tanvir.**

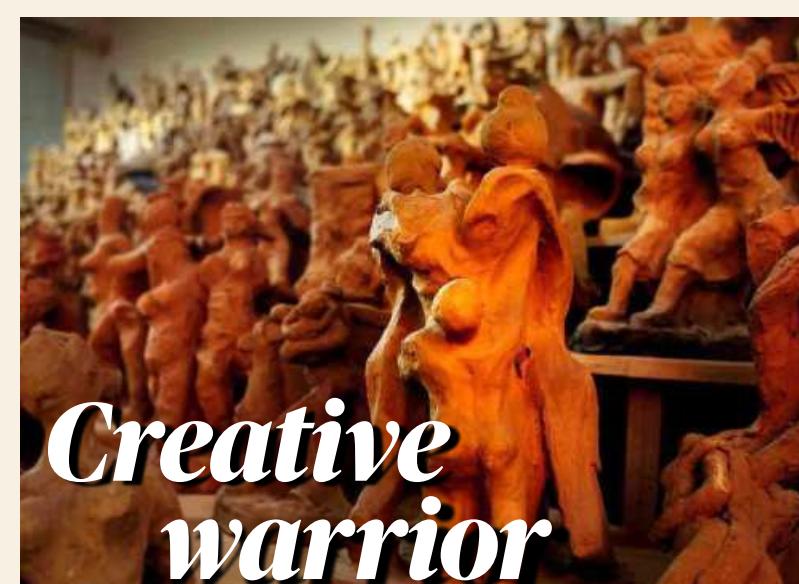
H. VIBHU

**Ashish Rajadhyaksha**

September 2023, five months after Vivan Sundaram passed away, a book with the simple name *Kasauli Art Centre 1976-1991* was published. It included precious archives of 15 years. Sundaram used to organise art camps, talks, workshops, conferences, theatre performances and film events at a large villa in Kasauli named Ivy Lodge, which he inherited from his mother.

A month later in October, an exhibition was curated by Latika Gupta at the Panjab University, Chandigarh, that reprised the entire Kasauli project. The art camps had been supported by the university's Art History Department, then led by the legendary art historian B.N. Goswamy. Participating artists were expected to donate an artwork each to the department's collection. Several of these donated works, including paintings, sculptures and prints, were on show, together with detailed documents of the events. There were letters, formal and informal, account books, photographs, diary notes, and multiple memorabilia.

The book and exhibition were also an early iteration of an artist-organiser at work. Sundaram wrote interminable, painfully typed letters to artists, galleries, consulates, government agencies organising stay and food for artists.



**Creative warrior**

**At The Hindu Lit Fest 2024, take a peek at Vivan Sundaram's remarkable oeuvre, where art and politics came together**

It is indicative of a time when young artists worked together in a pure creative, largely innocent space. The early 1990s brought a dramatic change in Vivan Sundaram's work. In the late 1980s, an unexpected visit to Auschwitz, Poland, had prompted a charcoal drawing named 'Penal Settlement' (1987) that signalled the beginning of a definitive change, the scale of which we can only understand in retrospect. An entire series, titled 'Long Night' (1989) of darkly

dystopian drawings in thick charcoal was followed by the 'Engine Oil and Charcoal on Paper' series. A fallout of the Gulf War, they provided top-angle images of unremittingly bleak, bombed-out landscapes over which hovered an amalgam of mythic firebirds and aerial WMDs. The iconic 'Approaching 100,000 Sorties' was a gigantic floor-to-ceiling drawing with oil on paper and on the floor, as though caught in the middle of a bomb explosion.

**Artist-activist** Vivan Sundaram (below); and his installation '409 Ramkinkars', which was dedicated to sculptor-painter Ramkinkar Baij.

PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

AND AJAY JAIMAN

A year later, activist and theatre legend Saifdar Hashmi was murdered. As one of the founders of the memorial trust set up in Hashmi's name, it saw a major shift in Sundaram's organisational energy.

The Babri Masjid demolition in 1992 truly widened Sundaram's work. A relentless series of installations repeatedly returned to a photograph of the body of a man, who was killed in the 1992-93 riots, on a Mumbai street. By the late 1990s, spaces in his works and the materials used increased exponentially. Most importantly, the number of people involved in his creative initiative included academics, artisans, carpenters, photographers, filmmakers, social activists, writers, actors, technicians and publishers.

Art-making and art authorship transformed into something far more radical.

At the end of the 1990s, Sundaram took over the entire Victoria Memorial, Kolkata, to make a work of history: 'Structures of Memory: Modern Bengal' (1998), working with

historians, social scientists and artists.

In the next decade, for 'Gagawaka: Making Strange' (2011), he used industrial waste, collaborating with fashion designer Pratima Pandey and sound artist Ishi. It included theatre-actors, dancers and tailors. '409 Ramkinkars' (2015), a performance-installation-cum-

theatre piece sprawling across the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Art in Delhi was made with theatre directors Anuradha Kapur, Santanu Bose and Aditi Biswas, and author Rimli Bhattacharya.

Filmmaker R.V. Ramani too had a major presence.

There were also a series of books that reflected and furthered the collaborative impulse: *History Project* (2017), which records the Victoria Memorial, is in a way a companion work to Kasauli Art Centre, and both books as well as *Vivan Sundaram Is Not a Photographer* (2019) – reveal yet another project collaboration, this time with an independent publishing house, Tulika Books.

There was clearly history to this, and a reason for the shift from what we might call the Kasauli mode into something larger, wider, spanning locations, cities, materials and collaborators. Part of it was

defined by location, and much of it an expansion of a curatorial impulse. Whatever it was, by now it wasn't just those who worked with him or simply knew him as 'Vivan' – and numerous people did – but even viewers, all of whom had become his fellow art-makers. For, by now, when you stepped inside his art, as the title of his 2017 retrospective at the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art suggested, you were no longer a stranger.

*The session titled 'Remembering Vivan Sundaram: A journey through images' will be held on January 26, 12.55 p.m.*

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# Bouquet of Tamil songs

Bhakti dominated J.B. Keerthana's concert, which featured kritis on Vishnu

Renuka Suryanarayanan

The audience was treated to Tamil compositions sung with good diction and bhakti bhava at J.B. Keerthana's concert. Since it was Vaikunta Ekadasi day, the songs were themed on Vishnu.

With Ranganatha on the mind, could Saint Periyazhwar be far behind? Keerthana caught the imagination of the audience by beginning with a shloka and a Periyazhwar Thirumozhi, 'Pallandu pallandu pallyirathandu' (Nattai). On listening to the lyrics, the mind's eye took one to Srirangam.

## Anniversary concert

Sri Parthasarathy Swami Sabha will have its 124th year celebration on January 21, 5.30 p.m. at Narada Gana Sabha. N. Gopalaswami, former Chief Election Commissioner of India, inaugurates and Nalli Kuppuswami Chetti presides. The evening will be marked by a special concert 'Rambahajana' celebrating the glory of Rama, by Ranjani and Gayathri. Tickets at mndn.in



## Drama festival

Hamsadhwani will host a series of Tamil plays as part of its 34th annual music, dance and drama festival, to be held from today at Youth Hostel, Adyar. The festival, on till January 28, will begin with a Tamil play *Thazhal Veeram* (6.45 p.m.) by S. Sruthi's Naatya Naadha Nataka Sangamam.

THE MUSIC ACADEMY

A rendition of 'Indha paramukham edhu' by the singer, a fine addition to her Tamil idiom. This evocative kriti concluded with the niraval and swara at 'Nee silaiyo nee en'

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## Special sessions

Swami Mukundananda will conduct Life Transformation programmes on January 22 (6 p.m., Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Mylapore), January 23 (6 p.m., Bhavan's Rajaji Vidyalayam, Kilpauk) and January 24 (6 p.m., Sri Thyaga Brahma Gana Sabha). Entry is free.

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**Clear diction**  
J.B. Keerthana, PHOTO: M. SRINATH

murai kettilaiyo'.

A touching 'Nannu brovu lalitha vegame' (Lalitha, Syama Sastry) raised the emotional ante, followed by 'Paripurna chandra vadani' (Purnachandranika raga) by Thanjavur Sankara Iyer.

A kriti in praise of Venkateswara followed. An elaborate exposition of Karaharapriya by the vocalist and violinist was effective, before the singer launched Papanasam Sivan's 'Srinivasa thava charanam'. She continued the Sowky bhava with niraval at the line, 'Kamalaja manohara srikara karuna jaladara.' The rendering concluded with a kalpanaswara bristling with kanakku. The final swaraparthas were anchored on 'dha' and wound up with a korvai.

A promising vocalist, Keerthana would do well to enhance the spontaneous creative suites with even more polish.

Mridangist Karthicknarayanan wove a well-structured tani avarthanam.

Keerthana completed the bhakti mood with the Tamil pasuram in Sindubhairavi 'Oorilen kaani illai uravu matruvaru illai.'

# Bonding over notes

'Mithra' was a celebration of women power in music



**Innovative** An all-women ensemble led by Lalitha and Nandini. PHOTO: M. KARUNAKARAN

**G. Swaminathan**

As part of the birth centenary celebrations of Hamsadhwani founder R. Ramachandran, 'Mithra – a women ensemble', led by popular violin duo, M. Lalitha and M. Nandini, presented 'Ramachandram bhaje'.

Lakshmi Rajasekhar Iyer on the mridangam, Ramya Ramesh on the ghatam, and Latha Ramachar on the kanjira and konnakol showed how women are storming the male bastion. From start to end, the performers sustained the spirit and momentum. The high point being

the tani avartanam, interspersed with konnakol, where the women percussionists displayed their way with rhythm and their mutual understanding.

Lalitha-Nandini opened the concert with 'Raghunayaka' in Hamsadhwani (Tyagaraja) and proceeded to 'Ramachandram bhavayami' in Vasantha (Diskhitar). The sedate Charuvali raga alapana progressed with a blend of subtle

and strong phrases. 'Adamodi galade' by Tyagaraja was their choice here. The swara passages were handled briskly though, with some slightly riotous exchange of shadjam-centric swaras.

The main raga of the evening was Kalyani and the raga alapana carried both repose as well as buoyancy. The swara exchanges in Tyagaraja's 'Ethavunara' was interestingly structured.

The lighter and concluding section of the concert included Subramania Bharati's 'Parukkulle nalla naadu' and 'Nagumomu ganale', the Utsava sampradaya kriti by Tyagaraja in Madhyamavati.

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**Unconventional** The singer at a concert. (Below) Receiving the Padma Vibhushan from the former President of India Ram Nath Kovind. PHOTOS: K. MURALI KUMAR AND PTI

**Prabha Atre, who passed away recently, was known for her pristine music and strong views**



## The voice of a rebel

Shailaja Khanna

**E**ven at the age of 91, Prabha Atre remained connected with her music, and was keen to share it. Every Sunday, during the Covid lockdown, she released a composition from her private collection on social media. In an earlier interview she had shared, "I have only one regret that I did not record myself more often when I was younger." Indeed. Her first LP recorded in the 1960s, featuring raags Maru Bilag and Kalavati, continues to inspire singers.

Prabha Atre lived an extraordinary life. She was taught by two of Ustad Abdul Karim Khan's (founder of the Kirana gharana) children - Suresh Babu Mane and Hirabai Barodekar. Thus, she represented the original stream of Kirana gharana gayaki that was different from the styles popularised by other greats of the gharana such as Bhimsen Joshi and Gangubai Hangal.

Prabha Atre gave her music a unique stamp, concerned more with what she felt the raag represented than the strict grammatical usage of notes. Her thoughts about music were unconventional. She questioned the time theory of raags, how they should be taught, and even their naming. All this brought a certain depth to her music. Her thoughts



translated into confident singing.

Always clad in a pristine white sari, Prabha Atre did not sing to entertain or to ensure that one concert led to another. This gave her music a serenity, and an uncompromising quality that her audiences loved. She was a public figure but never sought publicity, bringing in a rare dignity that the younger generation ought to emulate.

The legendary vocalist's foray into music was literally destined – Prabha's parents were both scholars not connected to music. When her mother fell ill, it was suggested that music would help her heal. So a young Prabha took to music but also continued her academics. She did her Bachelor's degree in science from the famed Fergusson College in Pune. She then went on to study law. She earned her doctorate in music in 1974. Her doctoral thesis on sargam was innovative. She

questioned why it was not used as a tool for teaching music. She also studied Western music at Trinity College London.

Prabha was a thinking musician, who had decisive views on classical music and how it should continue to evolve. She wrote several books on music (in Marathi and Hindi), two of which are compilations of her articles on music over the years and two others are on her compositions. *Enlightening the Listener and Along the Path of Music* are her books in English.

Defying convention, Prabha took up a job as producer at All India Radio, even though it meant staying alone, which in those days was unusual. She was first posted in Ranchi and then transferred to Nagpur. She was the Head of the Department of Music at SNDT Women's University, Bombay, from 1979 to 1992 – this exposure for a practicing musician gave her the perspective of an outsider – she was able to look at music and musicians differently.

Prabha Atre was an active singer almost till her end. From 2007 onwards, hers was always the closing performance at Sawai Gandharva, Pune's popular Kirana gharana festival. But last year, due to ill health, she was unable to perform.

Arati Kundalkar, her disciple, feels Prabhaji's education shaped her music too. Vocalist Manjusha Patil of the Gwalior, Jaipur and Agra traditions says, "Unke sur mein sacchapan tha (there was honesty in her music)." Gauri Pathare, who has trained in Kirana, Gwalior and Jaipur gharanas finds "Prabha tai's zest for life inspiring". Sawani Shende of the Kirana gharana did not learn from Prabha Atre but cannot deny her influence on her music. According to Arati Kundalkar, as a guru she was a purist but gave her disciples the confidence to empower themselves artistically.

### Remembering a doyen

Sri Ariyakudi & K.V. Narayanaswamy Memorial Trust has organised Neyveli Santhanagopalan's concert as part of Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar's remembrance day. It will be held on January 23, 6 p.m., at Arkay Convention Centre. Nalli Kuppuswami is the chief guest. The accompanists are V.V. Ravi (violin), Trichur Narendran (mridangam) and K.V. Gopalakrishnan (kanjira).



### CALENDAR

#### Music concerts

**Kedaram** presents the following concerts on January 20, at Ragasudha Hall, Luz, Mylapore. V. Subashri's vocal concert, themed on Papanasam Sivan kritis at 4 p.m. will be followed by that of J.B. Keerthanai's (6.15 p.m.) as part of Thanjavur Sankara Iyer remembrance day concert.

**Narada Gana Sabha** has organised a group rendition of Arupata songs, led by Kudanthai M. Kodilingam, on account of *Thai Poosam*, on January 25, 6.30 p.m. Venue: Sabha main hall.

#### Lecture

An illustrated lecture on 'Ancient Temples of Tamil Nadu' will be presented by historian Chithra Madhavan on January 20, 6 p.m. at Tattvaloka, Alwarpet.

#### Tamil play

Under the auspices of Narada Gana Sabha, TOM Media presents *Venniraadai* Murthy's Tamil play *Lakshmi Kalyana Vaibogame* on January 20, 6.45 p.m. Venue: Sabha main hall.

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## Holding a mirror to reality

Multifaceted artist Pushpamala lets irony and satire speak through her work

### Charumathi Supraja

**S**he was due to be born on Rajyotsava (the State formation day of Karnataka), and take the name of Rajyalakshmi. But, she was born on another date and took on the name of Pushpamala.

Years later, Pushpamala N., a trained, skilled, much-awarded sculptor-turned photo and video artiste, would play Rajyalakshmi, chief reporter of *Ideas Times*, and interview herself on her artistic processes and choices – and this would be published in a catalogue for a show of her work at a gallery in Bangalore.

"You have been getting photographs taken of yourself and exhibiting them. Are you a narcissist?" Rajyalakshmi would ask her. "No, I am a humourist," Pushpamala would reply, laughing.

Stepping right into the mirror and conversing with her image (or one she has created), with the audience as witness is a hallmark of Pushpamala's art. You see her in her art but you also see her outside, making it. Her presence at multiple levels in the artwork offers a gamut of images, not unlike many mirrors reflecting each other into infinity.

Pushpamala doesn't dissolve divides in her art-making, to shock or wow her audience. She does it because her artistic questions lie on all sides of the mirror, and often, also in the viewers' imagination. Finding the need for more breadth of expression than traditional art practices could provide, Pushpamala moved from being a sculptor to working with conceptual photography and video in the 1990s, a time of rising fundamentalism and neo-liberalist policies in the country.

Pushpamala's first photo-romance, *Phantom Lady* or *Kismet* (in which a masked female character sets about rescuing her lost twin) was "laughed at", she says in an old media interview. Those were the early years of conceptual



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the dish and then share it with the audience," she says. It is her "act of remembrance and an attempt to humanise dear friend Gauri," she adds. Pushpamala discloses that performing live makes her nervous as she's used to having a lot of space to edit and finalise exactly what the audience sees of her work, while working with the camera.

Speaking of her impending talk at *The Hindu Lit Fest 2024*, she says she will be "addressing the idea of the nation and women's place in the nation" through a playful exploration of the term 'The Body Politic'. "I haven't yet decided which of my works I will reference through this talk," she says. Her strongly feminist work has always reflected her "boredom with the idea of woman as victim."

She prefers to let "irony and satire speak through her work" that she "layers with histories and memories". This is something any audience can recognise and relate to, says this multifaceted artist.

*Pushpamala's session 'The Body Politic' will be held on January 27 (5.35 p.m.) at Sir Mutha Venkatasubba Rao Concert Hall, Chetpet.*

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