

# fridayReview

THE HINDU

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V.P. and Shanta Dhananjayan look back at their creative journey **p2**

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**SITAR MAKES A SPLASH AT LOLLAPALOOZA**

Niladri Kumar creates space for classical notes at the festival of rock acts and rappers **p4**



## The theatre of reality

As META completes two decades, looking at how it has emerged as an independent voice for playwrights

Anuj Kumar

A father beseeching the system to return his son, a mixologist hiding his Dalit identity to serve a casteist society, and a village struggling to find ways to survive the eccentric diktats of its ruler – these are some of the works to be staged at the ongoing META-2025 (Mahindra Excellence in Theatre Awards). And, speaking to feisty theatre practitioners at the ongoing META-2025 offers reassurance that great theatre is about challenging how we think and aspire to be or, as Stella Adler said, “The play is not in the words, it’s in you”. At a time when thespians are struggling to hold on to their independent voice, 10 plays in seven languages, shortlisted out of 367 entries

across 25 States and 47 languages and dialects, underline the diverse and inclusive approach of the festival that completes two decades of commitment to quality theatre this year. Based on the P. Rajan case, Kannan Palakkad’s *Kando ningal ente kuttiye kando* (Have you seen my son) depicts a father’s struggle to find his missing son. “A student activist, Rajan, died in police custody during the Emergency but the State denied his existence as his body was never found,” explains Kannan. The Malayalam play is an eye-opener for those who feel that the Emergency impacted only the Northern parts of the country, as Kannan captures the shadow of the dark days in South India. “Rajan’s teacher-father T.V. Eachara Warriar was also an activist and a classmate of the



then Chief Minister. He kept knocking at the doors of the political leadership and the judiciary. But justice was denied to him,” Kannan adds. Told through “real and surreal moments”, where a police officer seeks forgiveness from the father, Kannan says: “We have imbued the play with several what-if situations.” He avers the play has a

**The stage is set** (Clockwise from left) From the plays ‘Portal Waiting’; ‘Swang: Jas ki tas’; ‘Bob Marley’; ‘Beloved’ and ‘Kando ningal ente kuttiye kando’ PHOTOS COURTESY: META



Rohit Vemula’s letters, and draws from Ambedkarite poet N.K. Hanumanthaya’s verse. “Set in a contemporary setup, it is the story of three Dalit characters from a village who work in Bengaluru. Apart from Bob, who works in a bar, there is a woman who teaches English and a stand-up comedian. These are people who have risen above their immediate surroundings and social strata, but are still made conscious of their caste and food culture,” he adds. Akshay Singh Thakur’s *Swang: Jas Ki Tas* shows life in a Bundelkhand village that is struggling to come to terms

says Thakur, adding that the form is now being revived. Music, dance and sound art take evocative shapes in Sapan Saran’s *Be-Loved*, an exploration of queer love, and Abhi Tambe’s *Portal Waiting*, a depiction of humanity’s pursuit for freedom told through a conversation between a cyborg and the last man on earth. Reflecting on theatre finding its voice in smaller centres, playwright Ashish Pathak, whose Agarbatti bagged four META Awards, says the economics of towns lends itself to a deeper understanding of the craft. “In big cities, the cost of hiring spaces for practice is punishing. In centres such as Jabalpur, people sometimes lend space even out of love. Most budding actors prefer playing parts that reflect their condition in their language over jumping behind a star in an OTT series,” elaborates Ashish. Unlike in the past, when the playwright and the theatre group didn’t collaborate at the time of creation, these days, the playwright lives with the repertory. “He takes into account the demands and desires of the actor and the visual structure that the director could create on stage. Playwrights increasingly rely on poetry to shorten the dialogues,” says Ashish, adding “The meaning of a musical is no longer limited to songs. The sound of a sewing machine or tap water can also make a play a musical.”

Noted theatre scholar Bishnupriya Dutt says theatre is indispensable, for it is a live, people-to-people, and body-to-body performance. “It has an efficacy that no other art form has. META has not shied away from presenting plays that take a socio-political position. It works in a way that allows autonomy of theatre practice,” concludes Bishnupriya.

*META-2025 is on till March 19 at New Delhi’s Kamani Auditorium and Shri Ram Centre.*

with an eccentric feudal lord. Based on Vijaydan Detha’s story, *Thakur Ka Ruthna*, the folk play becomes a metaphor for the ill-conceived policies of those in power. “In the story, the Thakur orders the wells to be filled with soil so that water will come up. The villagers know it is a foolish idea, but they can’t go against the wishes of an elder, whom they, over the years, have been conditioned to worship like a god,” says Akshay Singh Thakur, a young theatre practitioner from Jabalpur, which is emerging as an incubation centre of fresh voices in theatre. Bundelkhandi Swang (or Saang) is an endangered traditional folk dance-theatre form that uses entertainment as a disguise to show a mirror to society. “It uses song, dance, and caricaturish characters to make its point,”

Bengaluru changes his name after the reggae icon to escape derision. “The play is about how people are forced to conceal their identity in a casteist society and talks about how caste and food culture work in an urban set-up.” Lakshman says this devised play is inspired by B.R. Ambedkar’s autobiographical work *Waiting For A Visa* and

usually, we talk of caste in a rural context, but K.P. Lakshman brings out the social divide in an urban milieu in Bob Marley From Kodihalli, a dark comedy in Kannada, where a mixologist working in

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Just as he ambled on stage at *The Hindu*’s art deco office building, Alexander Babu, performer and comedian extraordinaire, said he came prepared with a line that would elicit initial giggles. It was part of his formula, one guaranteed to please the audience. “That moment when a Christian at *The Hindu* office chats with Krishna about *Sebastian & Sons* and other things,” he said. On cue, the audience let out a laugh. *The Hindu* Fridays, ironically held on a Tuesday this time, saw a packed house that actively engaged with the two showmen, who enthralled the gathering with a conversation encompassing a host of topics, including their respective musical journeys, handling criticism and a conscious effort to strive for equity in unequal spaces. The two performers, also eloquent speakers, dabbled in banter, often pulling each other’s leg, while also switching to philosophy. Alex, who began by speaking of his journey in the stand-up scene, said that he had a fairly comfortable life in the corporate world. “I decided I had done my part, worked long enough. This was to be a two-year sabbatical. It has been 10 years. I was motivated by joy,” he said. On the other hand, T.M. Krishna



**Striking a chord**  
Alexander Babu and T.M. Krishna during the session  
PHOTO: R. RAGU



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## Learning to rock the boat

Read on to know what happened when an ace Carnatic vocalist and a popular stand-up comedian met for a conversation at a session of *The Hindu* Fridays

said that he was always into music. Purpose led him in the direction of economics. It was his way of trying to decipher the world. However, he was equally musically inclined. “I had a clearly laid out plan. I had

finished my college at Vivekananda. I was to go to the Delhi School of Economics and eventually to the London School of Economics. But right then, I had to choose, so I looked to my father.

He suggested I try my hand at singing for a while and then study if it did not work out,” he said. Krishna went on to add that the internal churning led to finding something sanguine on stage. He

loved the applause and attention that he received, but found himself seeking purpose. “I was the darling. Then, things changed because the meaning of joy changed.” His journey of understanding his privilege and politics has been a central part of Krishna’s growth. Alex recounted the first time he watched Krishna on stage. It was a small hall in Salt Lake City with a sparse audience. Krishna intervened to say that it was in 2005. “He performed as though he was singing to a stadium,” Alex remarked, asking Krishna if his voice ever felt a strain. “I don’t think anyone in my family knows the meaning of speaking softly. When you are taught by a guru who has excellent voice culture, it automatically gets easier. One must know how to produce the voice,” he said. Alex, who has learnt Carnatic music too, was asked to sing by Krishna. He obliged and the two jumped into a conversation about the sabha culture in the city. “I was told that kutcheris are the best way to learn to sing so I began paying attention, but I often found them boring,” Alex said. According to Krishna, the idea of a stage has changed over the years. He usually prefers quiet time before getting on stage. Tuning the tambura is one of the ways he prefers to shut the world out. “I experimented once by tuning the tambura on stage with

the audience. They knew that they had to remain silent too through the process. I found that they were more drawn in during the performance,” he said. Two bits of Krishna’s observations were particularly fascinating. One, he said that he felt like his voice opened up once he got fitter. He aims to climb and summit at least one mountain a year. This requires year-long training so he tries to get in four days a week. “I try to sing for a few minutes when I summit a mountain. I was curious to see which was the longest performance under the circumstances. It was Mt. Aconcagua in Argentina and it was about 15 minutes long. I too had summited that mountain in 2019 and sang for as long. I just didn’t record it. It could have been mine,” he said. He added that learning to be deeply vulnerable was central to his being. Alex agreed and said that he often addressed the audience as his ‘chellams’ because he called his children the same way and added that learning to circumvent different forms of criticism has been an eye-opening journey. Alex often said that Krishna knew how to ‘rock the boat’ in several spheres. Playing on the pun, the two musicians sat down to sing ‘Nila adhu vanathu mele’, Ilaiyaraaja’s nod to fisherfolk in the iconic Mani Ratnam film *Nayakan* (1987). A fitting, spirited end to a loquacious evening.











**Rocking the**

**T**he Sunday afternoon heat was oppressive, but the many music lovers who had walked a couple of kilometres to attend the Lollapalooza India 2025 at Mumbai's Mahalaxmi Race Course, wearing caps of different shapes and colours, did not seem to mind. Most of them were in their 20s or 30s, waiting to hear American rock band Green Day, Norwegian singer Aurora and Kerala rapper Hanumankind, who stormed the global charts last year with 'Big Dawgs'. Their primary tastes were different, but they listened patiently, and clapped regularly, when sitar exponent Niladri Kumar did a 40-minute fusion set. BookMyShow's



# Rocking the *sitar*

## Amidst rocks acts and rappers, Niladri Kumar's sitar strings held their own at Lollapalooza India 2025

Lollapalooza India 2025 was held on March 8 and 9. This was the festival's third edition in Mumbai, and encompassed various genres such as rock, pop and electronic dance music to desi rap and Indian

indie. Niladri's appearance came a year after sitar player Anoushka Shankar performed at the festival. Though he did take out his traditional sitar for a few minutes, Niladri mostly played the zitar



(electric sitar), his creation. Accompanied by tabla player Satyajit Talwalkar, drummer Gino Banks and keyboardist Agnelo Fernandes, he displayed a lot of energy and spontaneity, and occasionally, his humour. After playing a 10-minute introductory piece, he said, "That was only our sound-check. The real concert begins now."

It wasn't a traditional classical concert by any means. A large chunk of it consisted of improvisation spells peppered with familiar phrases – from 'Raghupati Raghav' and 'Do Lafzon Ki' to 'Smoke On The Water' and 'Fur Elise'. The 51-year-old musician knew the pulse of the audience, and his focus was to keep them entertained with his zitar, even if seasoned ears found his efforts

gimmicky. The broader idea was to tempt them to listen to more Indian classical music in future.

As Niladri said, "Lollapalooza is a landmark event that happens in the musical calendar of Mumbai, and it's a place where many international acts perform. Many youngsters come to see them. I wanted the crowd to also listen to the genre I perform. I hope the music has had an impact on them."

Niladri's performance took place on Ustad Zakir Hussain's birthday. The sitarist has travelled extensively with the late tabla legend, doing numerous classical and fusion shows. "So much has already been said (about Zakir's passing), and without being repetitive, the only thing I'll say is that the thrill of pure, true improvisation has been lost," said Niladri.

Niladri was trained in the sitar by his father Pt Kartick Kumar, a disciple of the legendary Pt Ravi Shankar. While he continues to play the instrument in its traditional form, he also felt the need to develop a variant that could offer a newer style. That's how the zitar came into being. "It's

not like I woke up one day and the zitar came into my hands. The process took a few years, beginning with when I started experimenting with microphones way back in 1998. However, the initial attempts did not give me what I wanted in terms of sound.”

In 2001, Niladri started experimenting with magnetic pick-ups. He explained, “This is basically an electric pick-up. Two decades ago, it wasn’t easy to buy sound equipment here. You either travelled abroad to buy, or asked someone to get it for you. So, it took time to get what I wanted. The first time I placed an electric pick-up was on my father’s sitar. He had been advised some rest, and I took his sitar without prior permission. I remember removing the sympathetic strings and sticking the Velcro and progressing as I went along.”

On a visit to Delhi, he visited the musical instrument shop Rikhi Ram. He said, “They were advertising something called the baby sitar or travelling sitar. It aroused my interest. So, I bought that sitar, and converted it by changing the configuration of strings. It was more practical. I could now travel with two sitars – my own traditional sitar and the smaller one which I named the zitar.”

The new creation, however, looked similar in colour and shape to the traditional sitar. That’s when Niladri decided to give it a new colour. Painting Indian instruments was not really popular, because they probably thought it would tamper with the sound. But, I tapped into the science I studied in school and college to make sure the sound wasn’t affected. I probably would never own a Ferrari, but I thought I could colour the instrument like that – hence, red.”

Niladri said he wasn’t sure whether the zitar had succeeded in attracting a new audience to classical music. “But I do know it has succeeded in making many musicians take it up, in some other form or shape or colour or name.”

Niladri hoped Lollapalooza would give him the impetus to come up with a new repertoire. A surprise might just be in store.

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