

# fridayReview

THE HINDU

**Spotlight on pallavis**  
At the annual festival dedicated to this segment of Carnatic music **p2**

**A bond built on music**  
Umayalpuram Sivaraman and M.A. Baby in conversation at *The Hindu* office **p3**

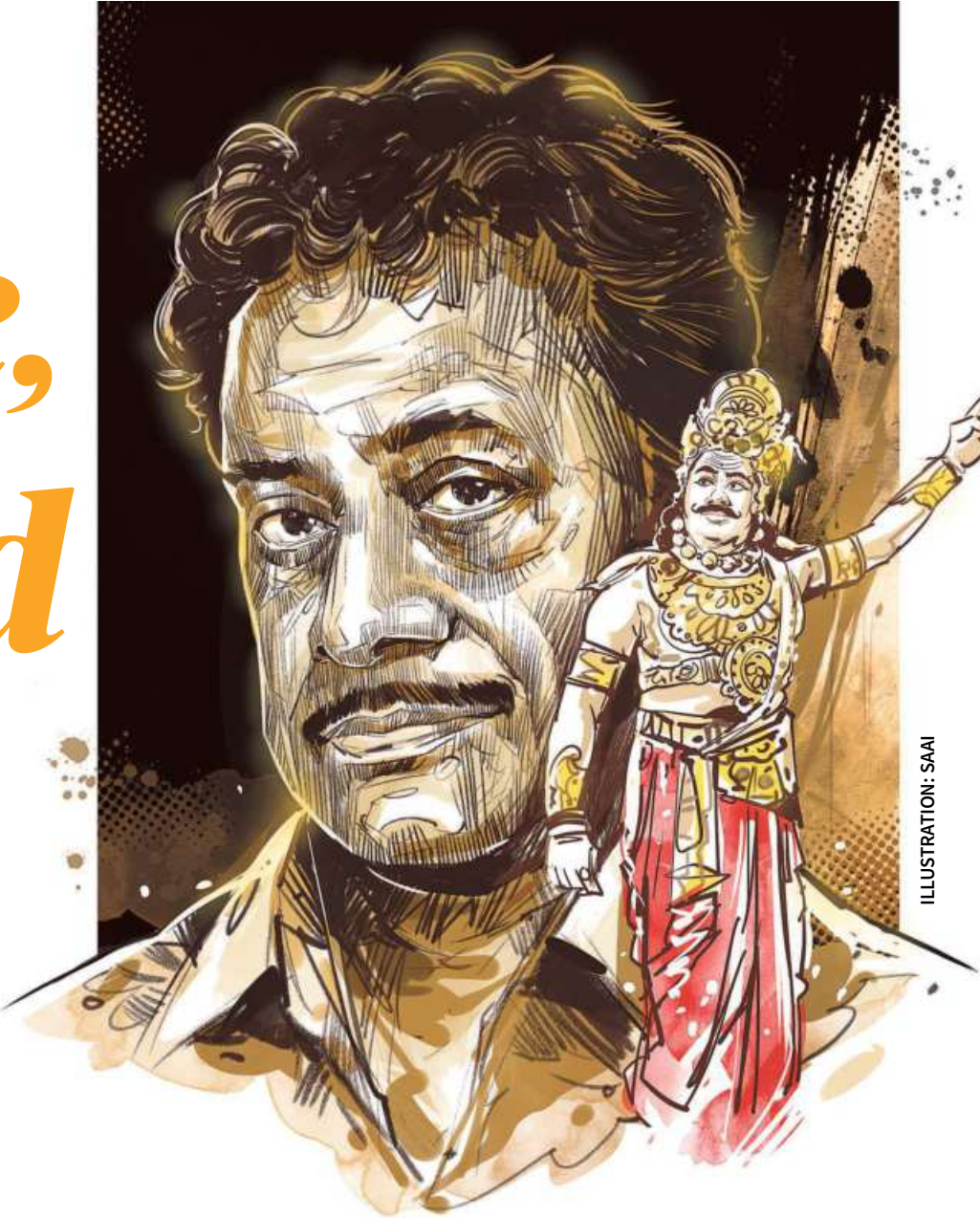


**A THEATRE COLLECTIVE'S TRANSFORMATIVE TALES**

How Storee ki Boree reaches out to children through fiction and reality **p4**

## The stage, his world

In his birth centenary year, remembering actor-director R.S. Manohar, who changed the course of Tamil theatre



**Karthik Bhatt**

**T**he 1950s was a pivotal decade in Tamil theatre. A major change to happen was the shift in focus from historical and mythological subjects (a staple those days) to social themes and drawing-room dramas. With the legendary Nawab Rajamanickam in the last phase of his active theatre life, it looked like it was curtains down for the historical and mythological genres. That they continued to thrive for more than three decades after this, was largely due to the efforts of theatre and film actor, R.S. Manohar, whose birth centenary is being celebrated this year.

Born on June 29, 1925, to Rajalakshmi and R. Subramania Iyer, an inspector in the Postal Department, Manohar was named Lakshminarasimhan at birth. As his father was in a transferable job, Lakshminarasimhan had his early education at various places, including Namakkal and Bellary, before moving to Madras, where he studied at the Muthiah Chettiar school and later at the Ramakrishna Mission High School in T. Nagar. He did his B.A. from the Pachaiyappa's College. After working with the Imperial Tobacco Company for a short while, he quit his job and joined the Postal Department.

Lakshminarasimhan's interest in theatre dated back to his school days, when he acted in one-act plays. His first major play was *Rajabhakti*, enacted by the students of

Ramakrishna Mission High School. He then went on to act in a few more plays while studying at the Pachaiyappa's. The story of how he came to be christened Manohar, is also well-known – he substituted for the lead actor at the last minute in the popular play, *Manohara*, and the name stuck on.

Manohar continued performing on the stage, even while working, and was associated with troupes such as the Egmore Dramatic Society, Nataraja Amateurs and the YMIA. In 1951, his performance in the play, *Marumalarchi*, caught the attention of screenwriter A.T. Krishnaswamy and director R.M. Krishnaswamy, who were looking for a fresh face for their upcoming movie *Rajambal*. Manohar fit the bill and thus began a successful stint on the big screen. He performed in over 200 films – *Kaidhi*, *Kannayiram*, *Vallavanukku Vallavan*, *Ayirathil Oruvan*, *Adimai Penn* and *Ulagam Suttrum Valiban* – to name just a few. Despite sharing the screen with two of the biggest heroes of the era – MGR and Sivaji Ganesan – Manohar carved a niche in cinema, but the stage remained his first love.

Manohar started National Theatres on November 14, 1954. Interestingly, the first few productions such as *Imbanaal*, *Alavukku Meerinaal* and *Ulagam Sirikkiradhu* were based on social themes. However, *Ilankeswaran* was its biggest hit in the mythological genre.

**CONTINUED ON**  
**» PAGE 4**

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Scan to Chat



P. Srihari

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has found its way onto the Carnatic concert stage – truly ‘All-Invasive’, one might say. Just two days after ChatGPT made its debut as a pallavi composer at Pallavi Darbar 2025 (July 2 – 6), though, the spotlight swung back to tradition.

Under the auspices of Carnatica and Sri Parthasarathy Swami Sabha, disciples of vocalist-violinist Delhi P. Sunder Rajan revisited and reimagined pallavis, crafted by past masters and their guru. The event, organised as part of the annual Pallavi Darbar festival, was held at Srinivasa Sastri Hall.

Shruthi Shankar Kumar, R.P. Shravan, Padmashree Srinivasan and Dhanya Rudrapatnam not only rendered a curated array of pallavis with flair, but also articulated their structural and aesthetic features with endearing clarity.

The programme titled ‘Pallavi Memoirs’ saw the quartet present nine pieces, with Chidambaram G. Badrinath on the violin and R. Akshay Ram on the mridangam providing enthusiastic support. Of the nine selected, four were composed by T.R. Subramaniam, a pioneering one by M. Balamuralikrishna and four by Sunder Rajan. Given the focus was on the pallavi structure, the traditional trikalam and tisram were demonstrated where relevant.

Mukhi pallavis

Known for his inventive, populist approaches to pallavi, Subramaniam brought a fresh energy to the form. Balamuralikrishna, on the other hand, enriched the rhythmic canvas with his Mukhi pallavis, opening up new exploratory possibilities within the Carnatic idiom. The main pallavi, composed by Sunder Rajan, was a creative expansion of Balamuralikrishna’s Mukhi concept.

Though it came later in the recital, the conceptual high point merits early attention here. As a tribute to Balamuralikrishna on his 95th



# On a pallavi trail

‘Pallavi Memoirs’ provided a peek into the creations of past masters

birth anniversary, the team offered a brief presentation of the maestro’s well-known Panchamukhi Adi tala pallavi in Kalyani ‘Sangeetha laya jnaanamu, sakala sowbhagyamu’. Balamuralikrishna devised the Mukhi talas – Trimukhi, Panchamukhi, Saptamukhi, and Navamukhi – by applying different gatis (rhythmic subdivisions) to the two components of a Suladi tala: sa-shabda (with sound) and ni-shabda (without sound). In these talas, only the sa-shabda kriyas (e.g., beats 1, 5, and 7 in Adi tala) adopt a nadai other than chatusram, while the rest of the cycle retains its base structure. The tala derives its name from the nadai applied to these audible beats: tisram (Trimukhi), khandam (Panchamukhi), misram

(Saptamukhi), and sankeernam (Navamukhi). Inspired by the concept, Sunder Rajan composed a Gati-traya Bahumukhi pallavi (featuring three gatis and multiple rhythmic dimensions) in Charukesi, set to Misra Triputa tala. Following a succinct raga alapana by Dhanya, mirrored on the violin by Badrinath, Shravan rendered the tanam. The intricate pallavi ‘Eesana mahesana! ninai, trinethranai pavithranai jaga(deesana!)’ was executed with poise by the disciples. Its vibrant rhythmic fabric incorporated tisra (first beat), khanda (eighth) and misra (10th) gatis in the sa-shabda sections, representing the confluence of the three gatis. A short burst of kalpanaswaras followed, with Akshay Ram capping the piece with a crisp, energetic tani avartanam.

The recital opened with three consecutive pallavis by Subramaniam. The first in Pantuvarali ‘Sambho mahadeva vibho paahi prabho, santatam swayambho’ was set to Misra Triputa. The uttarangam featured a Gopucchayati – a tapering sequence of syllables resembling the shape of a cow’s tail – beginning with ‘santatam’ (seven counts), followed by ‘swayambho’ (6), and continuing into the purvangam with ‘sambho’ (5) and ‘maha’ (4).

Interesting addition

A Bilahari sketch by Shruthi preceded the next pallavi ‘Raghukula tilakudai velasina ramachandrade, maa paali devudu sri’ set to Khanda Triputa. The embedded trikalam in each of the first three words – in a 4:2:1 ratio – was aesthetically executed, as was the tisram. The inverse ratio singing (1:2:4) was an interesting addition.

The Kiravani pallavi, ‘Vallee deva senapathe, namo namasthe’ had a tanam prelude by Padmashree. Set to Khanda Triputa, this pallavi featured a receding mathematical pattern in the purvangam: ‘vallee’ - 4,4 counts; ‘deva’ - 3,3; and ‘senapathe’ - 2,2. In the uttarangam, namo - 1,4; namasthe - 1,4; and 1,4 (the

## ChatGPT turns composer

The audience at Ashwath Narayanan’s concert at Pallavi Darbar was in for an unexpected revelation. The acoustic pallavi in Tamil that he presented in four ragas had been composed with the help of ChatGPT – marking a novel intersection of technology and tradition in the evolving landscape of Carnatic music.

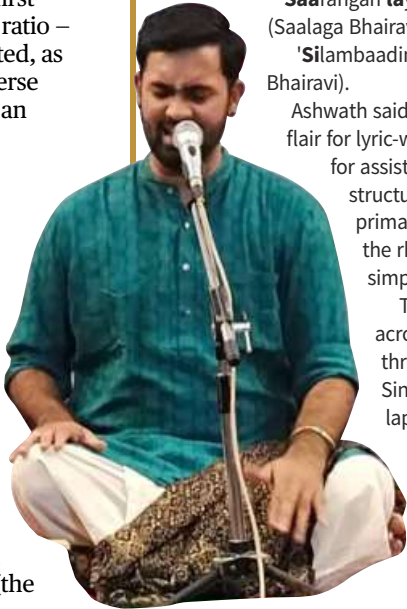
An acoustic pallavi is one in which the first syllables or letters of each word or line of text form a meaningful word or phrase. In this instance, the structure was designed to yield four raga names – Ananda Bhairavi, Vasantha Bhairavi, Saalaga Bhairavi, and Sindhu Bhairavi. The purvangam (first half) contained text whose opening syllables of the words spelt out the respective raga names (excluding the common suffix ‘Bhairavi’), while the lyric of the shared uttarangam (latter half) gave out ‘Bhairavi’.

The lyrics ran as follows:  
‘Adinaan nandagopan thanayan, painkuzhalaada rasamigavaagi vinaigal-arave’ (Ananda Bhairavi);  
‘Vadamathurai sannidhiyil thavazhndhaadinaan’ (Vasantha Bhairavi);

‘Saarangan layamodu gathiththaadinaan’ (Saalaga Bhairavi); and  
‘Silambaadinaan dhuvavarakaapurisan’ (Sindhu Bhairavi).

Ashwath said that, not being someone with a flair for lyric-writing, he had turned to the AI tool for assistance. Given the pallavi’s multi-raga structure, he added, he chose to focus primarily on the melodic aspect, keeping the rhythmic framework deliberately simple.

The composition followed the acoustic structure closely in the first three segments, but the fourth – Sindhu Bhairavi – featured a minor lapse, with the middle syllable ‘n’ of ‘Sindhu’ not represented in the lyric. Nevertheless, the experiment stood out for its creativity and aesthetic execution.



# Square route

Sumitra Nitin’s ‘Sri Chakra’, a blend of Navavarana kritis and visual art, is an ode to the sacred geometry

Aishwarya Raghunathan

Sri Vidya, the luminous knowledge of the Goddess, and the Cosmic Mother, Tripura Sundari, stand as the crown jewel of Shakta Tantra. The spiritual tradition of Sri Vidya is rooted in the worship of Shakti, celebrating the divine as both creator and creation. Though popularly known as the Navavaranas, implying nine kritis, the Kamalamba series by Muthuswami Dikshitar comprises eleven compositions. Bookended by a Dhyana Kriti and a Mangala Kriti, these works are a musical pilgrimage through the sacred enclosures (Avaranas) of the Sri Chakra, with Kamalamba, the goddess, presiding at Kamalanagaram (Tiruvavur). Dikshitar’s compositions methodically illuminate each Avarana, guiding the seeker from the outermost square to the innermost bindu, where the goddess herself resides.

**Intricate musical structure**  
Dikshitar, an ardent Devi upasaka, meticulously crafts each kriti to reflect the geometry, deities, mantras, and esoteric qualities of each Avarana. The lyrics are dense with Sanskrit grammar, each kriti employing a different vibhakti (case), which uses all eight cases, Kamalamba,

Kamalambam, and so on, culminating in Kamalaambike. Dikshitar’s genius lies not just in his command of Sanskrit but in his audacious raga choices. He adheres to the Venkatamakhin sampradaya, classifying ragas into Melakarta, Upanga and Bhashanga categories. While the nine central kritis span this spectrum of Kalyani and Sankarabharanam representing the Melakarta ragas, Sahana, Bhairavi, and Anandabhairavi are Upangam ragas, and Kamboji, Punnavagavali, Ghanta, and Ahiri are Bhashangam. Each raga is chosen not just for its melodic beauty but for its symbolic resonance with the corresponding avarana. As Sumitra Nitin, Carnatic vocalist and Bharatanatyam dancer, explains, his juxtaposition of Kalyani and Sankarabharanam, the ragas that differ only by a single note, ‘madhyamam’ was a deliberate pedagogical move. “He has shown you that these swaras make no sense,” she says, “it is the prayogas that matter.” In other words, the essence of a raga lies not in its scale, but in its emotive grammar. “Through these kritis, Dikshitar teaches us not just how to sing, but how to understand,” she adds. For Sumitra, the idea for a unique presentation of these kritis came in an unexpected moment of quiet reflection.



Insightful Sumitra Nitin with her disciples; and a Sri Chakra Yantra painting by Rekha Krishnan. PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

The inspiration came from a Sri Chakra Yantra painting by Rekha Krishnan. “I then started dreaming about this programme,” she recalls, “where I could showcase the synergy between this ancient visual art and the profound Navavarana compositions.” Though initially unfamiliar with the kritis, Rekha’s journey soon became intertwined with Sumitra’s vision, leading to a collaboration bridging the sacred and the aesthetic. When Sumitra approached Rekha to collaborate on a full-sequence performance of

the Kamalamba Navavarana kritis, the timing was serendipitous. Rekha had, by then, become a Sri Vidya upasaka herself. “I’m very much into the Sri Vidya philosophy now,” she shares. Rekha created an entirely new series of paintings, each infused with her spiritual understanding of the corresponding avarana. This vision now comes to fruition in an upcoming thematic event titled ‘Sri Chakra’, to be held at Sri Thyaga Brahma Gana Sabha (Vani Mahal) on, July 20 at 10 a.m. Sumitra will present a

lec-dem of the Kamalamba Navavarana kritis, accompanied by nine of her students from Natyasruti. As the compositions unfold, Rekha’s visual interpretation of each avarana will be projected on screen. The musical ensemble includes Sivateja Mallajosyula on the violin and Abhiram Nitin on the mridangam.

When asked about her interpretation of the Navavarana kritis, Sumitra was quick to clarify: “I follow Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer’s Patantaram.” She learned a couple of kritis directly from him and absorbed more through her guru T. Rukmini, also a disciple of Semmangudi. This lineage is not about rigid replication but about aesthetic refinement. Sumitra, as a teacher, took on the challenge. Referring to the sheer complexity of Navavaranam, she taught them “slowly,” often just “one line or maximum two lines per class.” Many of her students are in school, some in college. Yet, through patience and perseverance, the young ensemble rose to the occasion.

One might assume that to compose such spiritually potent music, a composer might simplify his musical structure. But Dikshitar did the opposite. “He challenged himself in his own way,” says Sumitra. From using all eight vibhaktis to composing in rare talas such as the 14-akshara cycle for the seventh avarana, Dikshitar imposed complicating conditions upon himself, only to transcend them. In doing so, he didn’t just compose kritis, he expanded the very boundaries of Carnatic music.

During the performance, Rekha’s Sri Chakra paintings will be displayed on the stage. “These visuals will add a new dimension to the kritis,” adds Sumitra.

# Comedy of errors

Killadi Maplae is low on logic but high on humour



Suganthi Krishnamachari

In Sathya Sai Creations’ *Killadi Maplae*, Arunachalam (Mapillai Ganesh) leads a double life, with one wife in the city and another in Kanchipuram. Neither knows of the existence of the other. The story, needless to say, lends itself to humorous situations, and humour is the forte of Ezhichur Aravindan, who has written the story and dialogues for the play, which was staged at Vani Mahal, T. Nagar. Arunachalam’s first wife Krishnaveni (Devika) is an astrology buff, which again leads to a lot of rib-tickling jokes. His second wife is Yamini. Luckily for Arunachalam, life goes on smoothly, with no one suspecting anything, until his sister-in-law Bhamini’s (Malini) wedding is arranged. Arunachalam’s peace of mind is shattered when it turns out that Krishnaveni’s father and Bhamini’s father are long-lost friends. Krishnaveni arrives at Bhamini’s wedding. Add another character to this complicated state of affairs – Kandasamy (Ramprakash), a man who knows Arunachalam’s secret

and has no qualms about blackmailing him. Kandasamy also happens to be in love with Bhamini and wants Arunachalam to stop the wedding. Arunachalam is resourceful, and manages to avoid being exposed by pretending to each wife that Kandasamy is the husband of the other. The quirky humour in these mix-ups was endearing. Mappillai Ganesh’s direction ensured that the audience was not confused by the complicated goings-on in the play. Interestingly, the roles of Yamini and Bhamini were played by the same person, and when a character in the play asks why both sisters are never together, Arunachalam replies, “This is not a film, where we can show the same actor in dual roles at the same time.” Neither wife showed any surprise upon discovery of the other, which was rather odd, even for a farce. There were political jibes as well in the play. Don’t look for logic in the play. Who wants stark realism all the time? Reality can be depressing, and we need a trip away from it now and then *Killadi Maplae* is the prescription for your anxieties.





Neha Kirpal

In a fast-paced world, where gadgets and technology dominate our lives, stories and theatre can play a powerful role in connecting us to ourselves. Delhi-based theatre collective, Storee ki Boree, recently staged its latest production, *Ka Se Kahani*, at the LTG Auditorium, Mandi House. A heart-warming story set in a village backdrop, the play is about love, learning, second chances and the magic that happens when generations truly connect. It traces the quiet yet radical journey of Vijaya, a 60-year-old woman at a village in North Karnataka, who decides to learn to read, guided by her granddaughter, Seeya. This theatrical adaptation was inspired by ‘How I Taught My Grandmother to Read’ – a short story by well-known author Sudha Murty. Directed and designed by film and theatre actor, Munish

# Transformative tales

Theatre collective, Storee ki Boree, reiterates the power of storytelling

Sharma, the production weaves together dialogue, movement and music to create an immersive experience that resonates with audience across ages. Dialogues are by Mrinal Mathur and dramaturgy support by Kavitha (Vishwa Shilpi Art Consultation, Bengaluru). “As a storyteller and an educator, *Ka Se Kahani* reminded me how stories, when told right, can be gentle

revolutions,” says Shraddha Gupta, founder of Storee ki Boree. When Shraddha returned from London, her children had “nothing but malls for entertainment”, she felt the need to tell them about our



**Playtime** From *Ka Se Kahani*, a theatrical adaptation of Sudha Murthy's short story 'How I Taught My Grandmother to Read'. PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

rich culture and heritage. The journey began at a nurturing space called Learning Tree, where she worked with children and discovered the power of listening. “When you truly listen, you see how deeply children feel and how naturally they express themselves through stories. That’s what led to Storee ki Boree,” she says. Known for its emotionally rich, child-led storytelling, it honours the child’s voice – not just as performers, but as storytellers in their own right. Since 2008, Storee ki Boree has staged more than 50 original productions in over 11 cities and has trained more than 10,000 children and adults through its theatre and storytelling workshops. From *The Nutcracker* to *Krishna Katha*, it has hosted everything from mythology to modern tales. For instance, *Ramlila*, which has had over 200 housefull shows, is a nice blend of mythology and modernity told with humour and imagination. Further, *Kabuliwala*, a Tagore classic, has been equally loved for its emotional depth and simplicity. **Pause and reflect** The team consists of not just theatre-makers, but also passionate educators, artistes and child-development specialists, who believe in the transformative power of stories. “Our goal has always been to nurture self-expression while building trust, awareness and respect in every interaction – on and off stage,” says Shraddha. Alongside theatre, they also design leadership workshops to help build confidence, communication and empathy in children. The collective’s work is informed by its understanding of child protection and safety frameworks, such as POCOS, which helps them ensure emotionally and physically safe spaces for every child.

## CALENDAR

### Dance festival

Kalakshetra Foundation presents Kala Mela, a two-day dance festival, on July 19 and 20, at Bharata Kalakshetra Auditorium, Tiruvanniyur. Day one will feature a Kathak performance by the students of Kathak Kendra, New Delhi. ‘Rukmini Kalyanam’, by Kalakshetra Foundation will be presented on day two. Time: 6 p.m. Tickets on mdnd.in



### Bharatanatyam performance

Natarangam, the dance wing of Narada Gana Sabha, will feature the Bharatanatyam performances of Divya Rajan, disciple of Sunanda Narayanan at 6 p.m. followed by Nivedha Harish, disciple of Roja Kannan, at 7.30 p.m. Date: July 19, Venue: Sabha mini hall.



### Debut

Srinidhi Nandhagopal and Aaradhya Nandhagopal, disciples of Sridevi Nrithyalaya, will present their Bharatanatyam arangetram on July 20, 9.30 a.m., at Rasika Ranjani Sabha.

### Celebrating Dikshitar

As part of Veenavaadini Sampradaya Trust’s Samvatsara Mahotsavam, being held to commemorate the 250th birth anniversary of Muthuswami Dikshitar, the following events will be held on July 20 from 9 a.m. to 6.35 p.m., at Ragasudha Hall, Luz, Mylapore. Nagaswaram, vocal and instrumental concerts will be featured on the occasion. The day-long event will conclude with Sowmya’s vocal concert at 6.35 p.m.

### Themed on Syama Sastri

Sri Thyaga Brahma Gana Sabha has organised the following programmes at Vani Mahal, T. Nagar. Details: July 19, 6.30 p.m.: N.J. Nandini’s concert, featuring the kritis of Swati Tirunal. She will be accompanied by Raghul (violin), Praveen Sparsh (mridangam) and Vishnu Kammath (kanjira).

### Memorial concert

Chennai Fine Arts in association with Ganakalanidhi Vinjamuri Dr Varadaraja Iyengar Memorial Trust, celebrates the 110th birth anniversary of musician Vinjamuri Varadarajan Iyengar with a special vocal concert by Kalyanapuram Aravind today, 6 p.m., at Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Mylapore. H.N. Bhaskar on the violin, Srimushnam Rajarao on the mridangam and B. Shree Sundarkumar on the kanjira.

# The stage, his world



CONTINUED FROM  
» PAGE 1

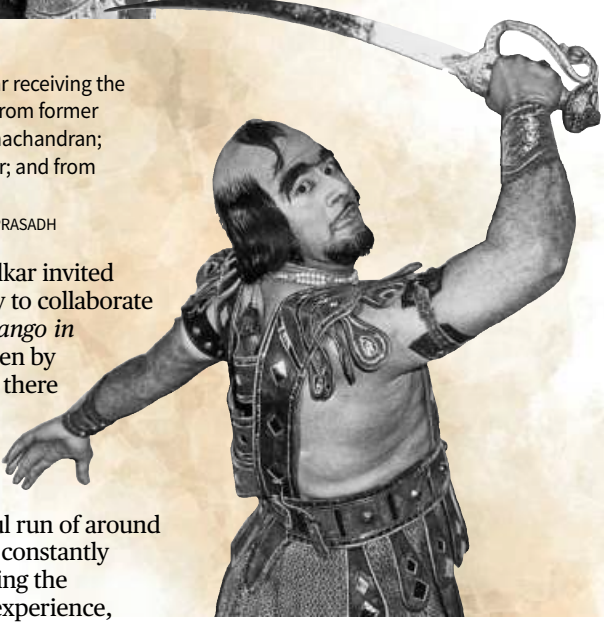
*Ilankeswaran* was written by Thuraiyur Murthy. Premiering in Madras in 1956, it had a tremendous run in India as well as abroad, in countries such as Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Singapore – with nearly 2,000 shows being performed over the next three decades. It was based on a version of the *Ramayana*, which portrayed Ravana as the father of Sita and attracted its share of controversies too. Manohar went on to produce plays such as *Indrajith*, *Narakasuran*, *Sisupalan*, *Chanakya Sabadham*, *Malik Kafur*, *Dronar*, *Soorapadman*, *Kadaga Mudhreyan*, *Ottakoothar* and *Viswamitrar*. In all, National Theatres had 31 plays and around 7,950 shows to its credit. The audience was held in thrall as much by the acting and as by the grandiose on the stage. Special effects employed to portray scenes, left them baffled too. Separate rehearsal sessions, spanning two to three days, were held exclusively for the technical team to execute the trick scenes. Watching a performance of *Ilankeswaran* in Madras in 1980 and impressed by the special effects, the famous ad-man and



(From top) R.S. Manohar receiving the Nataka Kavalal award from former Chief Minister M.G. Ramachandran; with Kripinanda Variyar; and from *Aatchipeedam*. PHOTOS COURTESY: S. SHIVPRASADH

actor Bharat Dabholkar invited Manohar to Bombay to collaborate with him for *Last Tango in Heaven*, a play written by him. The audiences there too, were completely floored by Manohar’s stagecraft and the play had a successful run of around 70 shows. Manohar constantly worked towards giving the audience a unique experience,

introducing a technique called dramascopes, where the sets spanned across the entire stage with a stereophonic sound system. National Theatres completed its Silver Jubilee in 1979. A committee with Justice S. Mohan as the chairman, V. Emberumanar Chetty as the secretary and dignitaries such as C.R. Pattabiraman, MAM Ramaswamy, V.G. Panneerdas and Sowcar Janaki was formed to celebrate the occasion and a grand function was held in April 1980. In 1991, Manohar was appointed the secretary of the Iyal Isai Nataka Mandram by former Chief Minister J. Jayalalithaa, who professed an ardent admiration for his plays. It was also at her behest that he staged *Thirunavukkarasar* in 1994. Presiding over a performance in November that year, she bestowed the title of *Nadaga Chemmal* on him. The music for the production was composed by violin maestro Kunnakudi Vaidyanathan, who was then the president of the Iyal Isai Nataka Mandram. In 1992, the government also produced *Velicham*, a play on prohibition under Manohar’s guidance. Manohar was also bestowed with titles such as *Nataka Thilakam*, *Nataka Kala Chakravarthy* and *Nataka Kavalal*. He passed away in 2006. Today, his memory and legacy is kept alive by his nephew S. Shivprasad and grand-daughter S. Sruthi, who have revived some of his plays such as *Dronar*, *Kadaga Mudhreyan* and *Chanakya Sabadham*.



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