

# fridayReview

THE HINDU

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ILLUSTRATION: KESHAV

Aruna Sairam writes about Krishna's abiding influence on her art

## In tune with the muse

Rewind to Chaya Building, Parsi Colony, Dadar-Matunga, Mumbai.

Each morning, as the first rays of the sun filtered through the window of our small apartment, I would look at the image of Kalinga Narthana Krishna hanging above my bed.

His divine form filled the room with a presence, both powerful and playful. I often found myself in conversation with him, sharing my fears and joys. At times, his gaze seemed intense, almost overwhelming, but at other times, he appeared as a mischievous child, playing

with a serpent. After being fully awake, I would turn to the beautiful shrine in a corner of the room, where Radha and Krishna resided, their forms bathed in the soft glow of the morning light. My mother would come with a glass of milk, singing Mira's bhajan, 'Jago bansi wale, jago more pyare'. She offered the milk to Krishna, a ritual of love and devotion, leaving it at his feet. I would check every now and then if he drank it.

**First abhang experience**  
It was a Sunday. The

house buzzed with energy. That evening, Shri Mohan Pai and his abhang mandali were to perform at our house. We awaited the arrival of fellow devotees, kindred spirits who shared our love for Panduranga. I was particularly excited with the thought of joining the chorus and chanting 'Vithala, Vithala'. As dusk fell, the room echoed with Vithala Nama and bound us all in its energy. Years later, Pt. Bhimsen Joshi's rendering of 'Teertha Vithala Kshetra Vithala' became my favourite abhang.

**Mid-week melodies**  
It was a Wednesday, and my mother's friends arrived for their weekly Mira Bhajan Mandali session. When I returned from school, the house reverberated with their voices. My mother gently beckoned me to join them. I knew she would ask me to sing 'Maadu meikkum kanne' at the end, a tradition I cherish to this day.

There is something indescribably beautiful about gazing at Krishna's form as I sing for him, feeling a connection that transcends the music itself.

**Balamma's divine dance**  
I was in class five. We went to watch a dance performance by Balasaraswati, who was affectionately referred to as Balamma. We eagerly awaited her rendition of 'Krishna nee begane baro'. As she stepped onto the stage, her eyes remained fixed at just two feet above the stage. It appeared as if she was looking at little Krishna. Throughout the song, her gaze never moved. I was mesmerised by the love, music, and dance that unfolded before me. Balamma's performance was not just dance; it was a conversation with the divine.

**Learning from Brindamma**  
As a youngster seated among a small gathering of senior singers, I felt special. Brindamma began teaching a new composition 'Chetashree Balakrishnam Bhajare' and I followed along as best as I could.

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Artistes showed how changing seasons can be portrayed through dance

# Weather report

V.V. Ramani

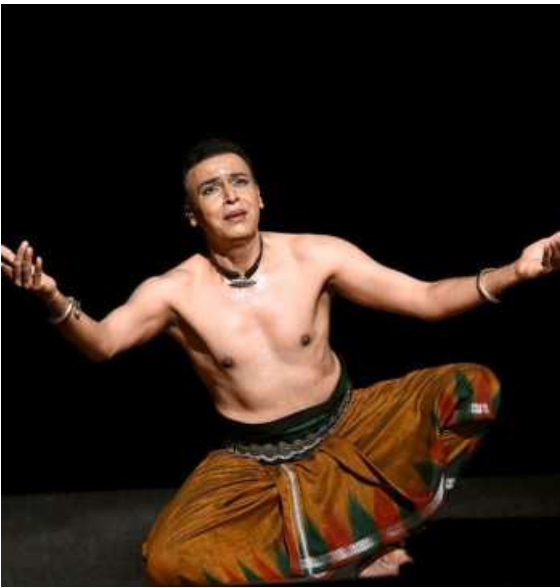
Every year Natyarangam, the dance wing of Narada Gana Sabha, brings together artistes and scholars for its annual thematic festival. Dancers, both young and established, look forward to performing at this festival. It gives them an opportunity to go beyond the traditional repertoire to create a full-length work. For the past 25 editions, the festival has been coming up with diverse and interesting themes. This year's, titled 'Rithu Bharatham', was based on the six seasons. Dancers along with musicians and resource persons explored the myriad facets of each rithu (season). But the guideline to necessarily include pieces based on Kalidasa's works, Sangam literature, Ragamala paintings and festivals seemed constricting. This fixed template resulted in a familiar pattern on all six days. Artistes should have been given the liberty to visualise the theme in their own distinct way.

### Spring in her step

The festival began with senior Bharatanatyam dancer Rama Vaidyanathan heralding the Spring (Vasantha Rithu). Rama presented the season in five parts – Saumya (season of equanimity), Punaravarthana (rejuvenation), Kama roopini (love), Bahu Varnani (multi-hued), and Apeksha (hope).

Backed by a well-composed soundscape, she came up with an interesting depiction of the season such as scattering of seeds to the rhythm of tanam and using swara passages for blooming of flowers. The highlight was her detailed exploration of the lotus flower, on which stands goddess Saraswathi. For this imagery, she used the song 'Saraswathi namosthuthe', composed by G.N. Balaubramaniam in raga Saraswathi. The section showing Manmatha gliding on

his vahana Parrot was gracefully presented. However, her descriptions of cool breeze, swaying palms, birds, bees, peacocks and deer were a little overstretched. Spring is marked by the most colourful festival Holi and Raslila dance. Rama presented them from the point of view of a modern bride and her concern for the environment. The music was conceived by S. Vasudevan, who used instruments such as ghatam, kanjira, sitar and suitable ragas for different sequences.



### Monsoon musings

Vaibhav Arekar's 'Varsha – Harvest of Lost Dreams' took the series into a dance-theatre mode. The artistes of the well-put-together musical ensemble were all dressed in black to go with the mood of the season. The premise of Vaibhav's performance was based on a farmer's emotional connect with Nature. He began by showing a farmer ploughing, tilling and sowing seeds, and waiting for the rains for a good harvest. However, when the monsoon doesn't arrive on time, he is shattered. The piece concluded with the farmer surrendering to Nature's vagaries. The scene that stood out was where Vaibhav lay under the spotlight, slowly and gracefully raising up his hands as if holding his beloved in a tight embrace. It showed the strong bond between man and Nature.

Jathi korvais and adavus were used beautifully to convey the energy of the sun and force of the water. Dikshitar's composition 'Anandamrithakarshini', a Sangam poetry, and works of Kalidasa and Bharati were woven seamlessly to convey the idea. Monsoon evokes a feeling of anticipation, joy and excitement. However, in this performance the mood was largely of angst, anguish, and fury.

### Visual images

It was a great idea to use Ragamala paintings, which are based on ragas and the season associated with them, as a source material. But the paintings could have been projected more meaningfully and for the entire duration of the pieces based on them. This could have helped the audience draw a connect between the paintings and the dance.



### Soaking up the sun

It was time to move on to the next season – Summer, as Apoorva Jayaraman presented 'Grishma Rithu'. Wearing a waistcoat on top of the Bharatanatyam costume, Apoorva appeared as Manmatha and performed verses from Kalidasa's *Ritu Samharam* to depict Kamadeva. Unlike the romantic portrayal in spring, the imageries here included Manmatha's drooping sugarcane bow, wilting flowers of his arrow, and a tired parrot, conveying the exhaustion caused by heat. Water scarcity, a common problem faced during summer, was conveyed through a beautiful abhinaya sequence. The piece showed a mother's love as she quenches her child's thirst with the little amount of water that she has, before she embarks on a long journey to procure water. Rhythmic jathis to denote the blazing sun, and swaras to depict the peacock were interesting, but repetitive musical phrases throughout the performance appeared tedious.



## CULTURE BRIEFS



### Digital music bank

Raga bank, launched recently by MDnD, is a digital repository of Carnatic compositions rendered by different musicians. It holds a collection of 200 ragas and around 1,000 videos and audio recordings, each spanning 10 minutes. Filters such as raga, language, type, artiste, and composer on MDnD's homepage will help rasikas enjoy kritis of their choice. One can also click on the 'About' menu to listen to various aspects of Carnatic music including kriti, alapana, swarajati and thillana. A series of videos by Dr. S. Sunder carries a brief introduction to the ragas in this section. Apart from six young vocalists, he also performed at the launch event. Artistes and organisers can share their recordings with Raga Bank. For details send an email to ragabank@mdnd.in. or call 98410 88390 / 99401 52520.

### Book launch

The C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar Foundation has organised the release of the book *My Madras*, authored by C.K. Gariyali, IAS (Retd), on August 31 (11 a.m.) at its venue (1, Eldams Road). P. N. Vasudevan, MD & CEO, Equitas Small Finance Bank, will release the book. Shivdas Meena, chairman, Tamil Nadu Real Estate Regulatory Authority, will receive the first copy. This will be followed by a talk on the book by Nanditha Krishna and C.K. Gariyali.

### Voice and string

Madhuradhwani will feature the following programmes at Arkay Convention Center, Mylapore. Details: Today, 5 p.m.: Gayathri Mahesh (namasankirtanam) followed by Brahmasri Sundarkumar's upanyasam 'Sri Krishna Charitram'. Tomorrow, 5.30 p.m.: Rajameenakshi Muralidhara (vocal) and 7.30 p.m.: Nidamarthi Lohit Datta (vocal) for Malladi's Institute of Music. September 1, 4.30 p.m.: Sreeranjane Kaushik and 6.30 p.m.: S. Varadarajan (violin). Sept. 2, 6.15 p.m.: Bombay Lakshmi Rajagopalan. Sept. 4, 6.15 p.m.: R.S. Jayalakshmi and Charulatha Chandrasekar (veena).

### Kalakshetra festival



Kalakshetra Foundation presents a three-day music festival, Sunaadam, from today at Rukmini Arangam. Artistes to perform are: August 30, 5.45 p.m.: J.B. Sruthi Sagar's flute recital followed by Saketharaman's vocal concert at 7.30 p.m. August 31, 5.45 p.m.: Sahana (veena) followed by Amrutha Venkatesh (vocal) at 7.30 p.m. The event concludes with Aditya Madhavan's vocal concert on September 1 at 5.45 p.m.

### Suganthy Krishnamachari

Eva Wilden did her PhD in vedic rituals from the University of Hamburg. She later studied classical Tamil under S.A. Srinivasan. When she was a researcher at the French Institute, in Puducherry, she studied under Tamil scholar T.V. Gopal Iyer. Since 2017, she has been a Professor of Classical Tamil and Manuscript Studies, University of Hamburg. Eva Wilden also heads the Tamilex project in Hamburg. She has won the Presidential award 'Kural Peetam', for her outstanding foreign contributions in the field of classical Tamil. This award was instituted by the Central Institute of Classical Tamil, functioning under the aegis of Ministry of Education, Government of India. Eva Wilden is the author of many books and research articles on Sangam literature.

Excerpts from the interview.

**Question:** From a study of Vedic rituals to Sangam literature – How did this happen? Do you still pursue research in Sanskrit literature?  
**Answer:** The Vedic study was a long time ago, during my doctorate. Both Vedic and Sangam literature sound hermetic to outsiders: they make use of a code, and unless you understand the conventions in minute detail, you cannot understand what it is all about. In both cases, I was fascinated by the construction of such a code. Nowadays I have my hands full with Tamil alone.

**Q:** How many manuscripts of Sangam literature are available



## For the love of Tamil

Prof. Eva Wilden, who heads the Tamilex project, on what inspired her to study Sangam literature



and what is their provenance?  
**A:** In my 2014 book, (*Manuscript, Print and Memory, Relics of the Cankam in Tamilnadu*), I mention 183 as the figure. This is partly misleading because 60 of them fall under the *Tirumurukattruppadai*, which had a life of its own as part of the Shaiva canon, and as a devotional text still in use. Sangam manuscripts come from Tamil Nadu, Kolkata (where the Vaiyapuripillai collection went), London and Paris. Sadly, not much is

known about the provenance of most of them.

**Q:** How do you conclude when a certain manuscript was written?  
**A:** Very rarely, there is a colophon, that is, a note at the end which states where, by whom, and when a manuscript was copied. For the others, one can only compare the material and the script. For instance, in palm-leaf, some letter forms changed over time, like *periya ra*, which was written with a single loop in the early period.

**Q:** What interesting revelations have you found in the colophons?

**A:** Nothing much, except a few dates. What is interesting is the role played by sectarian transmission. Most of the manuscripts were copied in Shaiva circles, but there is a smaller number which was clearly transmitted by Vaishnavas, and the variations between two such versions can be considerable, as in the case of the *Agananuru*. Without Vaishnavite transmission, we would have lost a number of poems and their order.

**Q:** Morphologically, how different is Sangam Tamil from bhakti literature, and the Tamil of a later period?  
**A:** Pretty different. From the point of view of the modern Tamil speaker, the biggest

(From left) Eva Wilden with the Tamilex project team; with some rare manuscripts that the Puducherry-based Ecole Francaise D'Extreme-Orient helped to preserve; and the Ettuthogai manuscript from Thiruvavaduthurai Adheenam Saraswathi Mahal Library. PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT & THE HINDU ARCHIVES

differences are the absence of the present tense and of the plural suffix -kaL. The auxiliary system was also different, as well as some pronouns, such as *yaan* for *naan*, or *utu* in addition to *itu* (this) and *atu* (that).

**Q:** Among the Azhvars, what is the reason for your interest in Nammazhwar's works?  
**A:** Firstly, my teacher, T.V. Gopal Iyer was very fond of Nammazhwar. Secondly, Nammazhwar makes the most sophisticated use of Sangam imagery, as seen in his messenger poems. But I have



also worked on other Azhvars.

**Q:** Andal says in her 'Vanga kadal' pasuram, 'Sanga tamizh maalai muppathum'. So, was Andal familiar with Sangam literature?

**A:** It is highly likely that Andal, like all the bhakti poets, was familiar with Sangam poetry. Think practically. Where would poets like Andal or Nammazhwar have learnt the art of composing poetry?

**Q:** Tell us about the Tamilex project, which you head?

**A:** Tamilex is an undertaking financed by the German Academy of Sciences for a period of 24 years. This project format is unique to Germany. It allows fundamental research of great complexity and breadth. We bring together all the available sources to make, from scratch, a new historical dictionary of early Tamil. Our database includes manuscript images and transcripts, images of the older editions and transcripts, critical editions, translations and complete analytic word indexes of every form and every meaningful variant. We record material found in the commentaries, and entries in traditional lexicons such as the Tivakaram or the Pinkalam. We cross-reference earlier existing lexicons such as the Tamil Lexicon. On the basis of all this material, we then create a new dictionary. It is conceived as an online tool, accessible to everybody across the world.

We promised the academy that we will cover all the literature of the first millennium – Sangam, Kizhkanakku,

Perunkappiyam, Nalayira Divyaprabandham, the Shaiva Tirumurai plus the bulk of grammatical literature beginning with the *Tolkappiyam*. But we intend to include other texts too. For the lexicon of Tamil inscriptions, we have an agreement with another big project, the ERC Synergy Grant DHARMA.

**Q:** Who are involved in Tamilex project?

**A:** The core team in Hamburg has nine scholars plus student assistants. Charles Li is our computational philologist. My husband Jean-Luc Chevillard, a specialist in the grammatical tradition, was honoured two years ago with the 'Kalaigarnar Mu. Karunanidhi Semmozhi Tamizh Virudhu' (award) by the Tamil Nadu government. Neela Bhaskar, our first postdoc, works on *Silappadikaram*. We have doctoral students – Leo Rishi Nelson Jones (*Tamilneri Vilakkam*), Nikolay Gordiychuk (*Purapporul Venbamalai*), Maanasa Visweswaran (*Cirupanattrupadai*) and Iona Macgregor (*Manimekalai*). Post-doc Roland Ferenczi, who will work on *Pattinapalai*, will soon join us. Our Indian team at Ecole française d'extrême-orient, Puducherry, has Tamil scholars such as Indra Manuel and T. Rajeswari.

We are supported by a huge external team, grown out of past collaborations with CNRS in Paris, SAI in Heidelberg, Oxford University, and the University of Bologna. In Europe, my professorship for classical Tamil is the only one. Thanks to Tamilex, we now have the biggest team of scholars working on Tamil outside of Tamil Nadu.

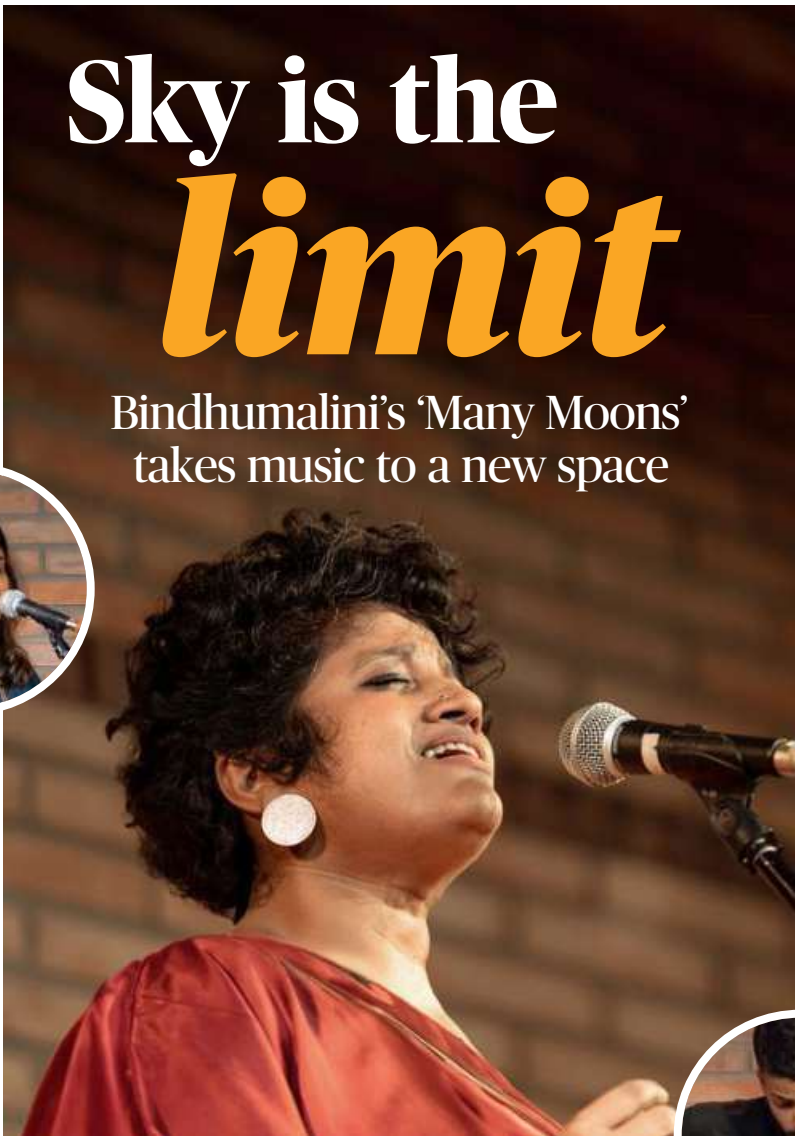


Charumathi Supraja

Many Moons’ by Bindhumalini inhabited the liminal spaces between sound and music, cognitive understanding and intuitive knowing. The layered musical experience offered at Courtyard Koota, Bengaluru, during their sixth anniversary celebrations, invited audiences to travel through shape-shifting soundscapes. Beginning with a meditative immersion into a sound sculpture or musical installation, the programme led the audience towards a new space of listening to and thinking about music in its second part, which was somewhat like a concert but not quite.

Moving from silence, sounds and musical question marks to lyric-free melodies, tune tributes and formal compositions, ‘Many Moons’ treated audiences to a heart-to-heart between disparate entities in music making, without a trace of dissonance. Does sound have to be arranged for music to emerge? How does the heart instinctively hear oneness in harmony that actually has notes from different registers as its building blocks? These were just some of the questions that came up.

The first few offerings of the concert were happily unrestricted by words and carried their foundations in ancient knowledge structures ever so lightly. The singers Bindhumalini and Gurupriya Atreya effectively employed body rhythms and humming, serving up music with generous helpings of ta-ra-ra-ras and la-la-la-las to the vibrant strumming (sometimes singing, sometimes sound-making) by classical guitarist Abhaydev Praful. The composition ‘My sweet golden moon’ paid tribute to Illayaraaja’s ‘Yen iniya ponn nilave’ while baring the intimate connection between music and memories. ‘Rain and



Sky is the limit

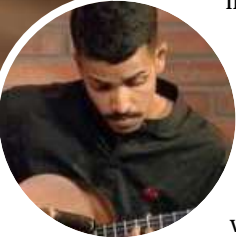
Bindhumalini’s ‘Many Moons’ takes music to a new space

smoke’ was energetic and continued in the style of swara-strings. ‘Auto-tune,’ it turned out, was so titled because it was created in an auto – not because it was a lofty contemplation on the relationship between music and spontaneity.

These pieces defied classification though they resonated with multiple musical genres including jazz, classical and film music. The next few pieces echoed familiarity – one a song of lament, another a lullaby, and the third – a timeless classical composition, all set to the Carnatic raga Bhairavi. While the first two were presented in snatches, the magnificent ‘Kamakshi’ was presented as the grand finale, in all fullness. This

piece came as a complete surprise, even stoking resistance in my mind, attuned by then to the explorative approach of the concert. Yet, how long can the heart or head hold out against Bhairavi and such a rich ode to the divine feminine as is ‘Kamakshi’? Also, by the end, the concert held out its promise of leaving loose ends untied, which felt just right.

Bindhumalini marvels at the “magic, hiding in plain sight,” while speaking of an “underlying unity of notes” in what is called Natabhairavi in Carnatic music, Asavari in Hindustani music and the Natural Minor scale in Western music. Having stumbled on a host of cross-cultural approaches to this



Immersive Bindhumalini; Gurupriya Atreya; and Abhaydev Praful.  
PHOTOS: SUMUKH BHARADWAJ

scale during research for another musical composition, she delved further into Natabhairavi’s offshoots and worldwide avatars to make ‘Many Moons’. She wished for the processes behind the show to be seen, for the output to be “a warm welcome into a shared experience” than a “display” of the raga’s range and manifestations.

This was the intent behind sharing with the audience – playlists from the research phase and voice recordings from other musicians on their relationship with the scale, both of which played outside the venue, before and after the show. The audience was also invited to soak in “the study material” that got created and then became the musical installation, a crucial part of the programme. She credits Natasha Iype (architect and artistic curator of Courtyard Koota) and the creative team with enabling such an experimental work.

Bindhumalini carries many accolades earned at the national and international level with much lightness, makes music for films, sometimes works as an actor in the theatre and engages with multiple musical genres through performance, composition and research. She’s constantly collaborating with artistes from diverse backgrounds because, she says, it opens a “common space of shared creativity” that is greater than the individual artistes and their talents.

She shares a story from her school life while speaking about the title. She and her friend had gleefully gotten away to the terrace to view the moon. They both didn’t have their glasses (that they needed) but saw what they saw in the moon and even described it to each other. Though there was a single moon, they feasted together on many moons. This is the essence she sought to bring into ‘Many Moons.



In tune with the muse

CONTINUED FROM  
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Some phrases were too intricate for me, but I lingered on the words and the tune, especially the line that began with ‘Nalina Patra Nayanam’. I asked Brindamma what ‘Vata Patra Sayanam’ meant, and she explained that it referred to an endless expanse of blue water, with a small Banyan (aalilai) leaf floating on it, upon which lay little Krishna, all curled up, sucking his toe, a smile on his radiant and alluring face. In Tamil, we call him ‘Aalilai Kannan’. As she described it, I got lost in the lyrics.

Festive ambience  
It was Gokulashtami and the preparations were underway. Pictures of Krishna’s various leelas were cut and pasted on a cardboard and carefully arranged around our little Radha-Krishna shrine. I heard someone sing the viruttam ‘Nalliravil pirandu, nadi kadandu, valiya pillai endru emmai aala vanda tavame’, followed by ‘Karuttill niraindai kannil maraindai kanna’ (the latter composed by Tiruvurur Ramamurthy Bhagavatar).

A chance encounter  
Many years later, perhaps in 1994, during a visit to Tiruvurur, my father’s birthplace, we attended the Mummoothigal Vizha, conducted exceptionally by Lalgudi Jayaraman

sir. A fellow rasika, Chandrashekhara Raja, accosted us and offered us a precious recording – a cassette of Kalinga Narthana thillana rendered by Needamangalam Krishnamurthy Bhagavatar. He wanted us to copy it immediately and return the original. Back home, when I finally played it, I was moved to tears. This was the song that I had carried in my heart since I was 10. I had heard Needamangalam Bhagavatar sing this thillana through his two-hour upanyasam. He would stop at every line and narrate a Krishna story.

Later that year, I travelled to Switzerland for a concert tour, where I found a cow shed near the house of my friends and hosts Eva and Oti. It was there, with a cassette player in my hand and surrounded by robust Swiss cows, that I relearned the Kalinga Nartana thillana. That weekend, I performed it for the first time. Since then, it has belonged to Krishna and to all bhaktas and rasikas.

Oothukkadu Venkata Subba Iyer must have had a vision of Krishna on Kaliya. To me, this thillana is pure sound born out of a clear vision and emanating from an unconditional love for Krishna – a life in Krishna’s melody.



As a 10-year-old, Aruna was mesmerised by Balasaraswati’s performance of ‘Krishna nee begane baro’.

CALENDAR



Tamil drama festival

Bharat Kalachar inaugurates a nine-day drama festival, to be staged only on weekends, on September 1 at YGP Auditorium, T. Nagar.

It will feature plays by well-known theatre groups. The curtain goes up with *Mahan Sri Narayana Guru* by Mali’s Stage. Plays to be staged on other days are: September 7: PMG Mayurapriya’s *Big Boss*. Sept. 8:

Koothapiran Navabharath Theatre’s *Surukku Pai*. Sept. 14: Sathyasai Creations’ *Pattanathil Bootham*. Sept. 15: *R R Creations’ Gurukshethram*. Sept. 21: thREE’s *Kaatchi Pizhaigalo*. Sept. 22: Dummies Drama presents *Thottra Mayakangalo*. Sept. 28: Sairam Creations’ *Paadhai Maari Pogumbodhu*. The series concludes on September 29 with a Malayalam play *Teachers’ Day* by Makthoob Theatre. Play time: 6.45 p.m. Entry free

Thematic dance performance

Nritya Samsrti Trust has organised an event on August 31 at Narada Gana Sabha, Alwarpet. It begins at 6 p.m. with the launch of Niranjana Bharati’s book *Pudhiya Athichudi Vilakka Urai*. Rajkumar Bharathi will release the book, and chief guest Vijaya Thayanban, Member Secretary, Tamil Nadu Eyal Isai Nataka Manram, receives the first copy.

Professor Y. Manikandan, Head, Department of Tamil, University of Madras and K. Sumathi, advocate, writer and public speaker)are the guests of honour.

This will be followed by a thematic dance performance ‘Thamizhukkum Aramendru Peyar’ by the students of Nritya Samsrti. It weaves together verses from the Sangam literature, Thirukkural and Aathichoodi to celebrate the beauty of Tamil language.

Promoting arts

Jakathalaya conducts the valedictory function of Balotsav and Jakatho utsav on September 1, 6 p.m., at Sir PT Thyagaraya Hall, T. Nagar. The evening begins with the performance by the winners of Swarotsav at 5.30 p.m.

Thematic presentation by the students of Bharathanjali (6.05 p.m.); Bharatanatyam performance by the students of Manjari Chandra Pushparaj, Udipi (6.35 p.m.) and honouring the dignitaries and prize distribution (7.05 p.m.) form part of the event.

Veteran Bharatanatyam dancer-scholar Padma Subrahmanyam; senior dancer Srekala Bharathi; actor Radhika Sarathkumar; Member of Parliament (Lok Sabha) Tamizhazhi Thangapandian; and MLA J. Karunanithi are the chief guests.

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From Mari Selvaraj

A SANTHOSH NARAYANAN MUSICAL

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# Liberating lens

The camera captured a new perspective of choreography at the Manifest Dance Film Festival

K. Hariharan

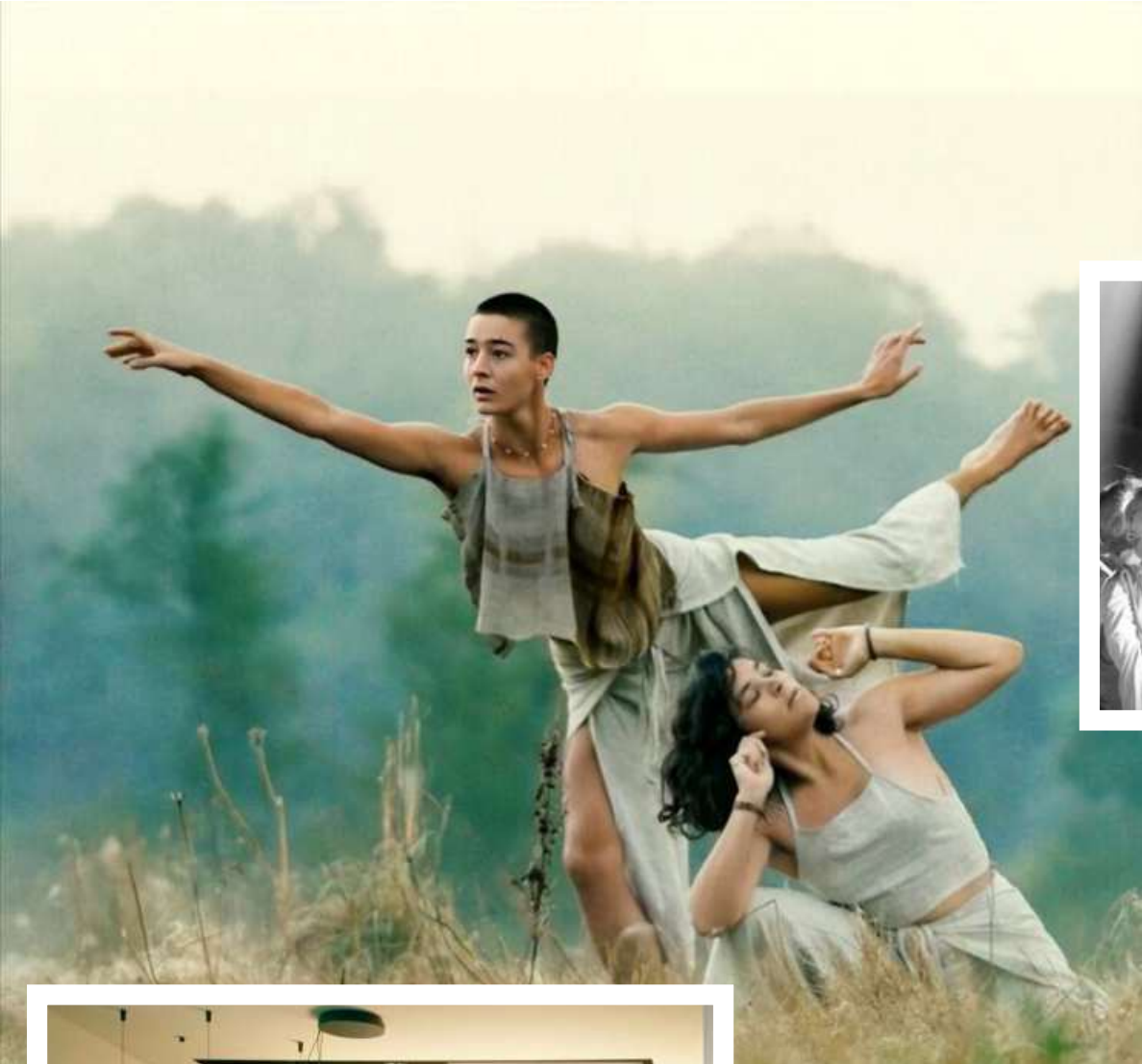
Should not the performing arts be primarily a joyful and positive experience, so that we strive to create an atmosphere of fun and inclusivity? Or should it be necessarily presented in a disciplined form/template, as witnessed in our classical dance and music, in the name of creating meaningful ‘art’ for the final audience? Can we not give priority to our intuitive feelings , instead of obeying codified notations as passed down to us through our elders? Do we have to believe that those traditions handed down to us by renowned performing artists are sacrosanct? Have they never undergone serious changes by themselves, over the centuries?

These were some of the questions raised at the Manifest Dance Film Festival held last month in Puducherry. Over 100 dance films of varied durations, from three minutes to 72 minutes, were screened along with a range of dance workshops conducted by contemporary practitioners from all over the world.

What is so unique about Dance Films? Firstly, they are not films

about dancers trying to explain their feelings, methods and journeys . Secondly, they do not necessarily tell a conventional story with a beginning, middle and an end. These films are about experiencing and representing life in the way we undergo, say the reality of a chaotic traffic junction or an overcrowded market place. The dancers portray ‘living’ in that experience while also articulating through ‘body language’ the thoughts and feelings that arise in us at the same time. It is like composing a song while writing and scoring the music for it at the same time.

Undoubtedly this is a recipe for chaos but Dance Films are about how do we engage with the chaos of a cascade and still manage to hold our heads high and sane enough to survive. Take a film like *Until* by Tarin Torabi. It was shot on an iPhone in Tehran during the Woman Life Protests movement in 2023. With the facility to switch freely between the front and rear camera lenses, the dancer/ cameraperson without a ‘hijab’, walks through a traffic escaping, as if, from the eyes of law. And in a flash, the camera passes on to more such comrades taking over the camera like a baton. The entire escape is now choreographed as they run from



**Wide angle view** (Clockwise from left) From *Stork*; *Where Do Ants Sleep At Night* and *Until*. PHOTOS COURTESY: MANIFEST DANCE FILM FESTIVAL

one alleyway to another in one single shot. This experience is the story of what is objective v/s subjective, its form and content. In short, the grammar is original and yet, the language communicated is easily recognisable.

Such a film festival helps us to distinguish at one level, between Contemporary Dance and Modern Ballet, while also telling us that the only way to engage with modernity in these disturbing ‘post-modern’ times is to use the film medium as a mode of praxis rather than working to a specific script. This means that while improvisation might seem spontaneous, it often evolves through a deep understanding of the body, space and relationships.

And when one recognises the fact that one of the crucial origins of Contemporary Dance is in Somatic Therapy, which explores how the

body expresses deeply painful experiences and then goes about finding alternative systems to help recovery from trauma. Films such as *Layers* from the Netherlands, *Stork* from France and *Where Do Ants Sleep At Night* from China deal with loneliness, deprivation and concerns with climate change in intertwined manners.

And there was *Q5- The Quintessentials* by Sarada Sarita from the Netherlands, paying tribute to a vibrant form called ‘Waacking’, a style that emerged in the multicultural gay clubs of Los Angeles in the 1970s. For all of us at the Manifest Dance Film Festival, curated by Vajrasara and Abhyuday, it was an eye-opener to empathise with various layers of distress experienced, especially by the millennials who are subjugated to rigid and formulaic modes of entertainment and its proliferation in the name of popular culture.

*The writer is a director and film historian*

## CALENDAR



### Dikshitar special

As part of the year-long celebrations of Muthuswami Dikshitar's 250th jayanti, Veenavaadhini Sampradaya Sangit Trust, has organised Dushyanth Sridhar's upanyasam, ‘Guru Guhananda on August 30, 6.30 p.m., at Narada Gana Sabha. The evening begins with an invocation to the composer by the students of Veenavaadhini at 6 p.m.

### Endowment concert

The Music Academy, will feature Sashank Mallya's veena concert today, 6 p.m., at Kasturi Srinivasan Hall. He will be accompanied by Karakurichi N. Mohanram (mridangam) and D.V. Venkatasubramanian (ghatam). The concert is organised under the endowment of Sri. Shanker Annaswamy in memory of his sister Nagalakshmi Anantharaman.

### Anniversary celebrations

The 59th anniversary of Mylapore Arts Academy will be celebrated on August 31, 6.30 p.m., at R.K. Swamy Auditorium, Mylapore. A.R. Santhanakrishnan, president, Rasika Ranjani Sabha, will be the chief guest. The evening also features the Bharatanatyam performance by Mega Ramesh, student of Archana Mahesh at 7 p.m.



### Music and theatre

Hamsadhwani has organised the following programmes at Youth Hostel, Adyar. Today, 6.35 p.m.: United Visuals' play LKG Asai. Sept. 1, 6.15 p.m.: Bhajan abhang sandhya by Sriram Parasuram with Chandrasekhar on the harmonium, MT Aditya and Ram Khadse on the tabla and Prabhu on the manjira/talam.



### Kriti and kirtanam

As part of the on-going Sri Jayanthi music festival, Sri Thyaga Brahma Gana Sabha will feature the following events at Vani Mahal, T. Nagar from August 30 to September 7. The evening begins with namasankirtanam at 4.30 p.m. followed by music concerts (6.30 p.m.). Schedule: Today: Namasankirtanam by the students of PSBB school, K.K. Nagar, followed by Kannan Balakrishnan's Madhuraveena. Aug. 31: Aravind Choodammnai Bhagavatar and group (namasankirtanam) and Vasudha Ravi (vocal). Sept. 1: Chromepet Sisters (namasankirtanam) and Varsha Bhuvaneshwari's 'Kuchelopakhyanam' (harikatha). Sept. 2: Gnyaneshwar Bhajan Mandali and Abilash Giriprasad (vocal). Sept. 3: The Hindu Senior School, Adyar, and S. Kasthuri Rangan (vocal). Sept. 4: Sri Sankara Vidyalaya, Urupakkam, and Bhavya Hari (vocal). Sept 5: Sri Sankara Vidyalaya, Adyar, and Amrutha Venkatesh (vocal). Sept. 6: Tripunithura S. Jayaraman (namasankirtanam) and U.P. Raju and U. Nagamani (mandolin). The line-up concludes with Kochi Mani's namasankirtanam (4.30 p.m.) followed by Shreya Devnath's violin concert (6.30 p.m.).



**Eco-conscious notes** The band during a performance and the members. PHOTOS COURTESY: SWARATHMA

culminated in *SUNNY*, the 100KVA clean energy system that is travelling with the band on an eight-city concert tour in which the sound, visuals and sometimes even the lights of the show are fully powered by solar or clean energy, eliminating the need for the standard diesel gensets that are otherwise used at concerts. “We hope to set a new standard for environmentally-conscious entertainment and promote the adoption of sustainable practices within the music industry. This idea resonates with the kind of music we make, and it has been heartening to see the response from audiences and organisers alike,” added Jishnu.

Recently, Swarathma also supported retaining Bengaluru's green cover with an acoustic jam inside Cubbon Park. Under the ‘Tour of Trees’, the band partners with groups working to protect green cover in urban areas, a cause that is very close to their hearts. “On the appointed day, we move from tree to tree performing acoustic versions of our songs for the trees as well as tree lovers. The announcements go like ‘9.00 am: Peepal Tree’, ‘9.30 am: Banyan Tree’, etc. It's a humorous take on the concert tour format, but with a purpose,” explained Jishnu.

“As artistes we tend to be open and vulnerable to things happening around us. We are blessed to have music as a means of expressing and healing; whatever affects us gets an outlet in the form of music,” said Vasu Dixit.

In the past, the band has also made music around issues such as child sexual abuse, urbanisation as well as a satire on politics in daily life among other things. “Music is a great way to communicate and start a conversation about difficult things, and we know that it might not be an answer to everything or anything. But music definitely helps build bridges in our hearts,” concluded Vasu.

## A bright idea

The tracks of Swarathma's latest studio album, *Raushan*, will make listeners think



Dasan, a renowned folk/fusion artiste from Tamil Nadu. Undergoing final mixing and mastering at the moment, the band has been playing the song live to see how people respond to it. “We enjoy such collaborations as they bring forth fresh ideas and styles that sometimes contrast beautifully with our own,” said Sanjeev Nayak.

**Challenging project** In their current series of eco-tours, Swarathma has used solar and clean energy for key concert systems in Mumbai,

Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Chandigarh and Lucknow among other cities. The initiative has been one of the most enriching and challenging projects the band has ever done. It began when they worked on a music project with SELCO Foundation, which works on accessible renewable energy across communities. “In the course of composing a song for them, we came up with a wild idea of powering a 1,000-person concert with renewable energy,” recalled Jishnu Dasgupta. The conversation sparked off a beautiful chain of events that

Neha Kirpal

Seldom do we come across a band that not only plays soulful music, but often stands up for important social issues too. Bengaluru-based folk/fusion band Swarathma's fourth studio album, *Raushan*, talks about being in a state of liberation and floating in a state of feeling light within.

The band has taken a different approach with its latest album, and decided to release each song separately. This has given them time to work on each track, while in the midst of their tour. “There is no running theme to this album, so each song has its own thing going on. It's interesting even for us, because we don't know how the next one is going to turn out,” said Varun Murali.

‘Bas’ is a comment on the state of the country or world at large and how the band chooses to respond to it. “I've heard a couple of my friends interpret it quite differently, and that's actually great. So, I would love to hear how people interpret it,” added Varun.

### First Tamil track

The next track to be released from the album is ‘Aiyanaar Kudurai’, a song about the journey of a horse. This is the first time Swarathma is attempting a Tamil song, for which they have collaborated with Anthony