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A unique tradition

Padi-ettra Sevai, when the Arayar walks backwards singing the Pallupaatu **p2**

Promoting diversity in art

International Music & Arts Society in Bengaluru celebrates its 40-year journey **p3**



A KANNADA FILM ON A FADING FOLK TRADITION

Alindia Radio is based on the life and music of the Neelgaras **p4**

Tale of the tawaifs (Clockwise from below) Husna Bai, who was known for her expertise in khayal, thumri and tappa gayaki; Sharmin Segal in *Heeramandi*; and A.K. Gandhi's book. PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT & NETFLIX



Nandini Bhatia

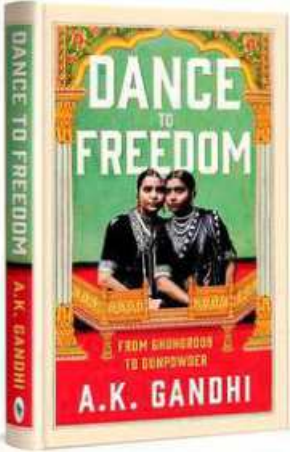
When it comes to giving credit to women in whatever profession or movement, we can see a marked disinterest among historians," writes historian A.K. Gandhi. The history of India's freedom struggle, too, has been sifted and pruned; contributions of many, overlooked. In his book, *Dance to Freedom*, Gandhi pays tribute to one such lost community and their lost art: tawaifs, the forgotten heroines, and their journey "from luxury and influence to neglect and societal scorn". Finding its roots in ancient Indian mythology and early dynasties – the Haryankas, the Guptas – the performative art rose to its peak in the medieval, Mughal years, and lost much of its muscle in British India. It is this rise and fall that Gandhi materialises in his latest book.

Following the lives of five courtesans, Gandhi writes a "soft history" of the position enjoyed by tawaifs before the advent of Europeans, as educated, noble, dignified women; how their policies and judgments impacted their position among the royals; and how tawaifs' role in fighting the British was unrecognised, confined to nothing more than footnotes in Indian history. He interestingly separates the early British years in pre and post-steamship periods. Steamships enabled British officials to bring their families to their respective stations, allowing European morals to reduce courtesans as "mere prostitutes who also sang and danced." As the distinction dissolved, multiple "anti-nautch" movements arose, led by Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, and joined by revolutionaries, demanding a shutdown of *kothas*. Mahatma Gandhi too called the profession "a social disease" and a "moral leprosy" that must be done away with.

The courtesans, however, had in them enough courage, grace and spirit to use their art as a tool for activism.

Diplomatic skills

Azizan Bai, born in the rich Lucknavi tradition of courtesans, operated in Kanpur circles as a spy. Often seen on the horseback, "in male attire decorated with medals, armed with a brace of pistols", she fought till her last breath. Husna bai, the "Chaudharayan of Banaras", confronted Mahatma Gandhi in a rally, organised the Kashi Tawaif Sabha, and took to singing the patriotic word. Begum Samru, the widow of mercenary Walter Reinhardt Sombre and ruler of Sardhana, was often called a sorceress or a witch by her enemies for her intelligent practical ways. She took keen interest in administration and in learning military techniques and displayed remarkable diplomatic skills. Begum Hazrat Mahal "rose from Pari to Begum" in the court of Mirza Wajid Ali Shah, the prince of Awadh (Oudh). When the docile and timid prince, inclined towards nothing but poetry, failed to save his province, Begum Hazrat stepped up and lead the protest and openly criticised the British who "felt no shame when it came to not keeping their word." Dharman Bibi, left her newly born



Cultural influencers

A.K. Gandhi's book *Dance to Freedom* and Sanjay Leela Bhansali's series *Heeramandi* throw light on how courtesans used their art as a tool for change

twins and sacrificed motherhood, to fulfil her duty towards her husband, Kunwar Singh, and the nation. Today, as Kunwar Singh is immortalised in history, there is hardly any mention of Dharman Bibi's sacrifice. People in Arrah pretend not to know her, for the shame she might bring her royal patron; "so her memory has been swept under the carpet." Gauhar Jaan, who popularised Hindustani classical music, also finds an honorary mention in Gandhi's book.

History does them a disservice but the courtesans continue to live in legends and folklore. Despite the negligible space tawaifs occupy in history, there is no such dearth in popular discourse. Literature and cinema have done their due diligence: Kamal Amrohi's *Pakeezah* (1972), Shyam Benegal's *Mandi* (1983), Saba Dewan's documentary (2009) *The Other Song* or her book *Tawaifnama* (2019), Amritlal Nagar's *Ye Kothewalian* (1959), Munshi Premchand's *Seva Sadan* (1919), Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* (1993) and Manish Gaekwad's much

recent memoir of his mother's life in the falling kothas of Bombay, *The Last Courtesan* (2023). Their struggles have been recognised by various art forms but their plight remains unheard.

Historical reference

Dance to Freedom's timely release makes for an excellent companion piece to another cinematic tribute to tawaifs in pre-independence India: Sanjay Leela Bhansali's OTT debut, *Heeramandi*, with its grand, hypnotic set up and ruthless, cunning and unforgiving characters, about which much has been written. The book provides necessary historical context to traditions such as nath-utrayi that the web series portrays.

In the aftermath of World War II and at the peak of Quit India Movement, *Heeramandi*, its occupants and its visitors, stand at the cusp of the violent, immoral ways of the British and their duty towards their own people. *Heeramandi* represents tawaifs as a community and not as individuals who broke the barriers of gender to

rise as revolutionaries.

The five courtesans in A.K. Gandhi's book are much luckier than the courtesans of the Bhansali universe, where relationships are fragile. Love does not triumph in the show, although glorified and much sought-after. Patrons are not as loyal as real-life Wajid Ali Shah and Kunwar Singh and the tawaifs are not immune to jealousy, greed or opiods. The nawabs have little power, except for some that are borrowed from their British masters, unlike the nawabs who are companions, and talented poets if not brave fighters, in the book.

When seen in the light of A.K. Gandhi's book, the web-series shows tawaifs in possession of an affluence which they most likely lost by that time in history. It is commonly known (and amplified by *Dance to Freedom*) that as punishment for the courtesans' rebellion in 1850s, the British confiscated their properties, relocated them, and levied heavy fines. They implemented stringent, biased laws (on marriage, adoption, etc.), rendering tawaifs powerless.

The nawabs' boycott of kothas followed this retaliation, making the courtesans lose their wealth and social stature. The show objectifies and sexualises them in the same misleading way that the British did; something A.K. Gandhi's book spends 300 or so pages, debunking.

It seems that *Heeramandi* makes a comfortable choice in choosing 1940s as its point of reference and not the distant past in 1800s but continues to picture the courtesans in their traditional role, one that A.K. Gandhi generously elaborates upon.

Heeramandi, although placed decades ahead of the book, seems to offer only a glimpse of their role in history. Tawaifs' initiation into the freedom struggle and a new-found purpose in nationalism, is a consequence in Bhansali's show and not the source of the story.

The closing lines of the show rightly point out, "a woman's struggle never ends." Historians like A.K. Gandhi and filmmakers like Bhansali, revive historical debates, and facilitate new ways of seeing history and history-makers.

Sid hits the high note

Narendra Kusnur

Sid Sriram has been singing the Tiruppugazh, taught to him by his mother, since the age of nine. But little did he know that one day, he would sing it on a completely different platform, for a largely western audience. His singing of the Tiruppugazh 'Sivanar manam kulira' at the Coachella festival in California was much talked about, with his Instagram video clip going viral.

"The verse is written by Arunagirinathar, and is dedicated to Murugan. I usually perform it at all my shows, and decided to include it at the Coachella gig too.

The singer made headlines by presenting a Tiruppugazh verse at the Coachella festival

I'm sure it's the first time a Tamil verse has been sung at this popular international festival," says the U.S.-based singer.

Sid began his performance with the Ganesha invocatory song 'Vakratunda mahakaya'. "Though the rest of the set mainly consisted of numbers from my recent English album *Sidharth*, I felt it was important to tell the world about my roots. The silence and awe after both the prayer songs were unbelievable."

At Coachella, Sid also got a great response for the songs 'Do the dance' and 'Dear sahana'

from the album. I also performed my next single 'One day god'. It's more of an ambient soul song, done my way."

Sid was born in Chennai in 1990, and his parents moved to Fremont, California, when he was a year old. He started learning Carnatic music from his mother when he was three. The western music exposure came when he was seven, initially when listening to jazz saxophonist Wayne Shorter on the radio. Finding a similarity between Carnatic vocal



Native flavour Sid Sriram performing at the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival in California. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

techniques such as the gamaka and western improvisation, Sid worked at blending the two.

He also got an early break in film music, when music director A.R. Rahman gave him the Tamil song 'Adiye' in the 2013 movie *Kadal*. He was 23 then, and went on to record a string of film songs. His biggest hit, of course, was the Telugu song 'Srivalli' with composer Devi Sri Prasad in the 2021 film *Pushpa: The Rise*.

Released last August, *Sidharth* is Sid's second album, after *Entropy* five years ago. On his last visit to India, he spent time recording new film songs in Chennai. These include 'Ae pulla' with Rahman for *Lal Salaam* (Tamil), 'Netru varai' with music director G.V. Prakash for *Siren*

(Tamil), 'Nandanandanaa' with Devi Prasad for *The Family Star* (Telugu) and 'Madam sir madam antha' with Kalyan Nayak in *Maruthi Nagar Subramanyam* (Telugu).

Asked whether he changes his approach for a Carnatic music audience, he says, "I have gone past the phase where I keep thinking of the perception to my music. I put in my best, and to me the opportunity to be on any stage comes as a blessing."

One of his concert dreams will be fulfilled when he performs at the Sydney Opera House later in May. Besides concerts, he's working on new English songs. "There were many new things I learnt while putting together *Sidharth*. I am working on some cross-cultural collaborations, and will announce them at the appropriate time," he concludes. His fans are waiting.



Accent on Tamil
Kashyap Mahesh and Sai Prarthana performing for Mudhra. PHOTOS COURTESY: PALAM TV

Sai Prarthana and Kashyap Mahesh highlighted the richness of Tamil literature in Carnatic music

Language of expression

Sreevalsan Thiyvadi

Put together, Prarthana Sai Narasimhan and R. Kashyap Mahesh presented 21 compositions in their concerts spanning two hours each. It highlighted the richness of Tamil literature in Carnatic music, yet did not explore its deeper musical possibilities. Never serving dull moments, but neither keen to push the envelope, both the vocalists sought to showcase the charm of orthodoxy, regaling audiences at the ongoing Chitirai Isai Vizha 2024 under the aegis of Mudhra in association with Nalli.

At successive weekends of the month-long festival of Tamil compositions, Prarthana and Kashyap did, however, chip in refreshing elements. By including works from the fifth-eighth centuries to those who lived as recently as till the last decade, their kutheris underscored the continued contribution of the ancient

language to south Indian classical music. Be it the *Divya Prabandham* by the Azhwars, whose verses are one-and-a-half millennium old, or a varnam by scholar T.K. Govinda Rao (1929-2011), the pieces reinforced a constant Tamil flow into the stream.

Prarthana began her presentation with TKG's 'Aanai mugane' in Sarasangi. While this 27th parent scale rarely functions as a starter, the singer wound up the piece with her own solfa sequences beyond the set chittaswaras. Violinist Shertalai Sivakumar couldn't tune in easily to this extemporaneous presentation, even as K. Arun Prakash (mridangam) and Sai Subramaniam (morsing) laid the track fairly well.

As if in a hangover of TKG's unhurried Musiri school style, the ensuing Saveri composition assumed a pace that was lesser than usual. 'Muruga muruga' (Periasamy Thooran), too, concluded with kalpanaswaras, which straightaway stemmed from

the second speed. Papanasam Sivan's songs were rendered back-to-back – 'Kumarantazh' (Yadukulakamboji) and 'Senthil andavan' (Karaharapriya). The second was the sub-main, bracketed by a frills-fuelled alapana and post-niraval swaraprastara that culminated with zigzags encapsulating the spirit of the melakarta raga.

Gopalakrishna Bharatiyar's 'Enneramum' (Devagandhari) was the filler ahead of the 50-minute main package in Mohanam. Sivakumar's solo response was proportionate to the vocalist's five-minute alapana, while Arun Prakash's measured beats escorted 'Kapali' (Papanasam) into the anupallavi, guiding an amused Sai Subramaniam. The swara sequences revelled in the raga's typical bubblyness, capped by a kanakku-laden finish. The following tani avartanam, too, bore geometry.

Prarthana, next, came up with a welcome raga, with 'Narahari veshha' (Rukmini Ramani). Tarangambadi Panchanada Iyer's

'Arabhimanam malika' spelt out a dozen ragas before Papanasam's 'Ennatavam' in Kapi. 'Vandinam muralum' in Thodi (Thondaradipodi Azhwar) was the swansong.

Common threads
Prarthana, trained by Mani Krishnaswami and Chingleput Ranganathan, resorts to sounding sweet without being all that sturdy. The resultant non-aggression is, coincidentally, a trait she shares with Kashyap, moulded chiefly under the legendary T.V. Gopalakrishnan. Both the vocalists showed a penchant for patterned kalpanaswara, never going overboard with it all the same.

Kashyap spun kalpanaswara in all the first four compositions of his recital. Starting with a shloka in Nattai, the vocalist opened with Bharatiyar's 'Ganapati thalai' in Adi tala. K.R. Ganesh on the mridangam initially played beats and rolls that didn't synchronise too well with the song,

prompting Madipakkam Murali (ghatam) to be cautious in his interventions. Suitably subdued was V.V. Srinivasa Rao on the violin, seldom trying to score a point.

If Nattai helps a concert to take off early, building on the momentum was Hamasanadam. Danadapani Desikar's 'Paadavendume' travels mostly along the upper ranges of the pentatonic raga, going well

with the musician's overall sprightliness. Geometric progressions went off well in the Rupaka tala swaraprastara – as also in the succeeding Mishra Chapu during the singing of 'Kadaikan' by Ramaswami Sivan.

The first detailed alapana came in Purvikalyani, with warm assistance from the violinist. The evening melody was sketched along conventional lines, after which came 'Marukkulaviya', a Tiruppugazh by Arunagirinathar. The piece also ushered in a niraval, around

'Tirukuravadi nizhal'. It was steeped in devotional fervour; so was the swaraprastara. Not so orderly was a brief percussive gig that followed.

Marimutha Pillai's 'Thillai chidambaram' (Kapinarayani) heralded the onset of the *piece de resistance* – in Madhyamavati. The alapanas, spanning 10 minutes, carried the sobriety of the kriti: 'Saravanabhava mukhane' (Papanasam Sivan). The swaraprastara was reposeful, too, and so was much of the tani avartanam in the eight-beat Adi.

A viruttam, starting 'Kodayile', surfed along Pantuvarali, Bilahari, Kapi, Nilambari and Shri before settling for Jhonpuri to course along 'Andavan darisaname' (Muthaiah Bhagavatar). The fag end featured Guru Surajananda's 'Muruganin marupeyar' (Bihag) and Maharajapuram Santhanam's thillana in Misra Sivanjani and 'Mannupugazh' (ragamalika by Kulasekhara Azhwar from Divya Prabandham).



Arjun Srivatsan

In the heart of Srirangam, amid chants and rituals, there lived an Arayar whose dedication to his kainkaryam is unparalleled. His life takes an unexpected turn when he hears the haunting sound of the oppari (songs of mourning). He decides to use the tune to sing Azhwar pasurams. His efforts lead him to a young oppari singer, living near Keezhacheri. Drawn to her, the Arayar chooses to live with her despite being admonished for doing so. He is even barred from entering the temple precincts.

Heartbroken and ostracised, the Arayar pours out his grief through 13 songs – five of which are presented in prose style, five as poetry, and three as padiettram. Known as 'Pallupaatu', they are composed in the oppari style, beseeching the divine mercy of Azhagiya manavalan.



Unique ritual
The Arayar renders verses during the Thirumbukal Purapaadu of Namperumal. PHOTO: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Steps of faith

Padi-ettra Sevai, when the Arayar walks backwards singing the Pallupaatu

Witnessing his anguish, Namperumal, during Chitra Pournami, embarks on the Thirumbukal Purapaadu, the return journey.

The kainkaryapirars wonder about Namperumal's silence over the matter. He expresses his desire

to reunite with his beloved Arayar, who is feeling guilty. Moved by his sincerity, Namperumal bestows upon him the title, 'Varam Tharum Perumal Arayar', signifying the granting of divine blessings for his act of contrition.

Overcome with gratitude, Varam

Tharum Perumal Arayar sheds tears of joy as Namperumal embraces him. Thus, amidst the echoes of the Pallupaatu Pasurams, the Arayar finds redemption.

Today, during the *Padiettra Sevai*, the soul-stirring verses of the Pallupaatu Pasurams resonate through the temple corridors, a testament to the enduring legacy of Varam Tharum Perumal Arayar's devotion.

During the annual Chitra Pournami, as Namperumal embarks on the Thirumbukal Purapaadu, the chants of Arulapaadu Varam Tharum Perumal Arayar can be heard.

So, amidst the celestial symphony of the Pallupaatu Pasurams, a ritual takes place. One of the Arayars, inspired by Varam Tharum Perumal Arayar's bhakti, walks backwards for nearly two kilometers from Amma mandapam to the temple precincts. With each step, the transformative power of devotion is experienced.

Melody meets mathematics

Sivasri Skandaprasad established an instant rapport with the audience with her balanced approach



Clear diction
Sivasri Skandaprasad. PHOTO: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

M. Surya Prasad

With a young team comprising Pradeshachar on the violin, Adamyia Ramanand on the mridangam and Karthik Ravikumar on the ghatam embellishing her vocal recital, Sivasri Skandaprasad served a sumptuous treat of melody and mathematics. Performing recently at the Old fort High School Grounds in Bengaluru for Sree Ramanavami Global Music Festival, her wonderfully varied singing made each song enjoyable.

Sivasri displayed the changing emotions in her singing. She began with a slow-paced Mohanam varnam 'Ninnukori'. She switched over to madhyama kala from charanam onwards.

A leisurely Manirangu raga for the Dikshitar kriti 'Mamava pattabhiraam' befitted the occasion. Because of her clear enunciation one could savour the phrases and swara combinations. The exposition of Kamavardhini raga was

brilliantly conceived and executed. The time-tested sancharas in a mix of madhyama kala phrases and brigas mirrored the raga's enchanting facets.

The rare Tyagaraja kriti 'Naradamuni' was rounded off with niraval at 'Narayana namamulanu' tagged with intelligent and reposeful swaravinyasa. She surprised the audience by taking up a Ugabhoga as a preamble to Dasa's 'Yama nelli kanendu'. She seemed to have reserved her grip over melody and mathematics for the detailed treatment of this Dasara pada. Its raga, Sivanjini, glowed with soft and deep notes. The soothing sancharas in all the sthayis brought out the essence of the lyrics. 'Bhogeendra sayinam' set a lively mood for the ensuing Kalyani raga delineation. Purandaradasa's 'Anjikinnetakayya' (with niraval and swaras at 'Purandaravithala') which followed was a methodical and evocative rendition.

Sivasri's singing could serve as an inspiration to young Carnatic enthusiasts.

The beauty of rakti ragas

Archana and Arathi presented Syama Sastri kritis to pay homage to the composer



H. Ramakrishnan

Syama Sastri, though not as prolific a composer as the other two of the Trinity, gained qualitative excellence through his unique style and his undivided devotion to Kamakshi. All his compositions are in rakti ragas and he succeeds in making his style apparent in every raga. It was his family that built the Bangaru Kamakshi temple in Thanjavur.

This year, on the occasion

of his jayanthi, Kedaram paid tribute to the composer by organising a concert of his compositions by sisters Archana and Arathi.

Syama Sastri's kritis stand out for their rhythmic beauty and soothing appeal. The sisters tried to bring out these aspects through their unhurried singing. They are the great granddaughters of Muthiah Bhagavatar and great grandnieces of T.L. Venkatarama Iyer.

It can be said without fear of contradiction that the three phenomenal Swarajathis by Syama Sastri

are his *triratnas*. After a few songs, when the sisters commenced the alapana in Bhairavi, one could easily guess that it would lead to one of the Swarajathis. If Archana laid the foundation of the raga, Arathi built it up. Together, they brought out the essence of Bhairavi, highlighting its various facets. Their appropriate selection of the segment of the note 'ma' in 'Bhaktajana kalpalatika' for kalpanaswaras proved effective.

On the violin, V. Deepika proved herself equal to the task by etching a lovely

edifice of the raga. On the tambura was Nityasri.

Arjun Ganesh (mridangam) and Trichy Murali (ghatam) enhanced the concert's appeal with their laya finesse. Their tani was lively and enjoyable.

Grip over laya
The sisters commenced the concert with the Begada varnam 'Dayanidhe mamava'. After Archana offered a soulful alapana of Anandabhairavi, they sang 'Mahilo amba' on Brihannayaki of Thanjavur with swaras at the pallavi.

Art chronicler

The International Music & Arts Society has been promoting inclusivity for the past four decades



Malini White

The decision of the International Music & Arts Society to bring out a commemorative volume to celebrate its 40th year resulted in a book, which is an invaluable record of Bengaluru's cultural activity. The idea of starting a cultural society was suggested in 1974 by the erstwhile Maharaja of Mysore Jayachamarajendra Wadiyar to his sister Rani Vijaya Devi of Kotda Sangani, who had settled in Bangalore. A fortuitous naissance indeed, as the Mysore royal family was known for its rich cultural heritage. An exceptional polymath, Jayachamarajendra Wadiyar was a noted scholar of Sanskrit, a connoisseur and practitioner of both Carnatic and Western classical music. Mysore's patronage also extended to visual arts [many of Ravi Varma's oil paintings were commissioned by Krishnaraja Wadiyar IV].

Shift in patronage The family wanted to share this significant legacy with people, thereby continuing from court to courtyard, a tradition of royal patronage that enabled artistes to thrive and share their talents with the public. The volume is, incidentally, also a record of how patronage of the arts has shifted from royalty to corporates. Chaired by Vijaya Devi, an

IMAS committee was formed with a dedicated band of friends, who shared her views on promoting music and the arts. Accompanying her diplomat-husband Thakur Sahib of Kotda Sangani, she had developed a wonderful network of Indian as well as international friends, exponents and experts in culture [from Rachmaninoff and Menuhin to Constance Keene; from Vilayat Khan and Russian yoga adept Indira Devi to George Mitchell]. The opening essay is appropriately by Vijaya Devi on growing up in Mysore. Thereafter, the book is divided into convenient sections, dealing with the society's history and some of its major programmes including Indian and western classical music; classical, folk and contemporary dance; and visual art.

A few events particularly linger in memory. In 1982, Rostropovich's cello's sheer acoustic beauty touched one deeply. Even in an unsuitable bleak cavernous hall, he managed to convey his humanity and sensitivity to the human condition. This section is followed by essays on the arts, and delightful personal snippets. The articles are accompanied by wonderful photographs. IMAS' inaugural event was a

dance recital by Vyjayantimala Bali [whose mother had performed in the Mysore court]. Her dancing was splendid, her beauty enhanced by the real jewellery she insisted on wearing. **Medtner-Mysore connection** Pianist Paul Stewart formed a close personal connection with IMAS, having played a Medtner piece in an early appearance. His essay, 'An Indian Fairy Tale', documents Jayachamarajendra Wadiyar's patronage and generous promotion of this neglected Russian composer of whom few had previously heard. His concert in 2010, to celebrate the Society's 35th anniversary, was held at the Bangalore Palace, underlining the Medtner-Mysore connection. Vijaya Devi's infrequent performances made them special, her solo appearances rarer than

her duo concerts. With her diffident self-effacing nature, she felt more comfortable sharing the limelight with her friend, Annarosa Taddei, perhaps harking back to her childhood performances with her cousins on the several magnificent palace pianos. The Essay section alone would make this book worth acquiring, containing insights into arts by experts: Malavika Sarukkai's 'Tradition and Change in Bharatanatyam'; George Mitchell's 'From Vijayanagar to Mysore: Palace Architecture of Southern India' is a valuable contribution, as are Prateeti Ballal's observations on Chamber Music, and Meera Pranesh's 'The Mysore Wodeyars as Patrons of Music'. Such a review cannot begin to do justice to the volume's riches. Only the readers' personal perusal of it can do so.

The best of both worlds

As Chennai-based sitarist Janardhan Mitta turns 90, he talks about his journey in classical and film music



V.V. Ramanji

"I will gladly allow my son to forego his engineering studies, if you feel he has the calibre to pursue music," said Mitta Lakshmi Narasaiah to Pt. Ravi Shankar. On his next visit, the iconic sitarist seeing Janardhan's passion accepted him as his disciple. The father decided to let his son take to music and then, there was no looking back for the young man. Pt. Janardhan Mitta, born in Hyderabad, imbibed a passion for music from his father, a leading advocate, who could sing and also play the tabla and the harmonium. Every

weekend, he would make his six sons sit around him for music lessons. Well-known musicians of the time would visit their house. Janardhan grew up in a musical milieu. He first experienced his love for the sitar when he started playing the instrument that was left behind by his sister after her marriage. Janardhan soon realised the sitar was his life's calling. He mastered the technique and nuances. He further honed his skill under Pt. Ravi Shankar. He even got to accompany his guru, who instilled in him the confidence to perform solo concerts. Janardhan has also played jugalbandis with many

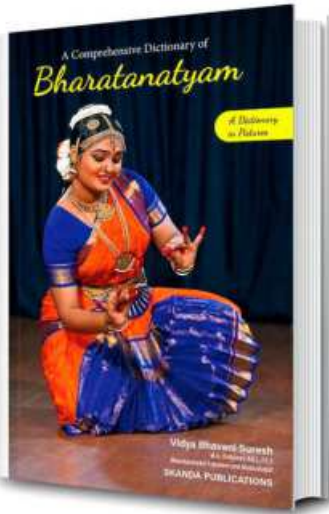
Hindustani and Carnatic musicians. He has had the distinction of performing at the United Nations in 1971, besides being the first Hindustani musician to play at the Tyagaraja Aradhana in Tiruvaivaru. He launched Viswa Kala Sangama with like-minded friends to promote music and provide a platform for young musicians in Chennai.

Tryst with cinema Janardhan's journey in film music began when he went along with his brother, who was auditioning for playback singing in Telugu cinema. The music director Master Venu asked Janardhan to play the sitar for a recording. One project led to another. On the advice of the music directors whom he was working with, Janardhan shifted to Madras in 1959. He has worked with stalwart music directors such as Salil Chowdhury, Ghantashala, M.S.Viswanatha, Ilaiyaraaja and Rahman, juggling two to three call-sheets everyday, in a career spanning 65 years. Recalling some memorable moments, the veteran, who is also a composer, said, "Once Ghantashala was worried about the non-availability of a sarangi or shehnai artiste for playing the music for a poignant scene. I suggested I could create the required emotion by playing the base strings of the sitar. Ghantashala was thrilled with the outcome. I was fortunate to have played for great composers, who gave me immense freedom to improvise." As he celebrates his 90th birthday on May 12, Janardhan Mitta looks back with happiness. "I aspired for a profession where each day brings in new challenges and opportunities. Music has certainly given me that," says Janardhan.

For Bharatanatyam learners

To help students of dance understand the nuances of Bharatanatyam and focus on mastering the moves, Vidya Bhavani Suresh has released a book *A comprehensive dictionary of Bharatanatyam* (by Skanda Publications). It carries 115 terminologies related to the dance form along with short definitions and corresponding images. The book explores various topics ranging from different types of abhinayas, aharyas, and araimandi posture to a student's preparatory steps for a maiden performance, and how the make-up and ornaments add to the visual appeal. It also has an elaborate explanation of the different types of adavus. Besides the core elements, the significant role of stage props, which add to the aesthetic appeal of a performance, and that of tala or rhythm are also highlighted. A pictorial representation of

single-hand and double-hand mudras is an interesting addition. While the 267-page volume serves as a reference material for Bharatanatyam, the number of pages could have been reduced for to retain readers' interest.



Book of Tamil varnams

For learners of Carnatic music, senior vainika and vocalist Rukmini Sivakumar has brought out two books of Tamil varnams set to 72 melakarta ragas and 35 talas (by Varna Malai Publications, Mylapore). The 72 *Mela Kartha Varnangal* contains Tamil sahityas printed in English, while the 35 *Thala Varnangal*, has the varnams printed in Tamil. While the varnams in melakarta ragas are divided according to the respective chakras, the tala varnams have composition in each of the 35 Suladi talas. Only seven or eight talas are in vogue now. For the benefit of the learners, the names of the ragas and talas, and the respective ascending and descending notes are mentioned on top of each composition. For details call 99623 03217.

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FARNAZ

M CH-CHE

Varsha Krishnamoorthy shares her experience of being part of the Mahalakshmi Ladies Drama Group

Deepa Venkatraman

The lights have been dimmed. Gadadhar Chattopadhyay is ardently praying to a life-size idol of Kali for a darshan at the Dakshineswar temple in Kolkata. When the Goddess finally appears in front of him, Gadadhar becomes ecstatic. His emotion tugs at the audience’s heartstrings. Varsha Krishnamoorthy, who plays Gadadhar, reprises the role impeccably.

Not only Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Varsha has also donned the roles of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Maha Periyava, Ramana Maharshi and Shirdi Sai Baba. In the last decade, as part of the Mahalakshmi Ladies Drama Group (founded by Bombay



Role call (Clockwise from left) Varsha as Maha Periyava in ‘Bhaja Govindam’; as Gadadhar Chattopadhyay in ‘Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsar’; and as Ramana Maharshi in ‘Bhagavan Sri Ramanar’.

PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



different act

Gnanam), Varsha has performed more than 200 shows.

Tryst with theatre Varsha’s journey in theatre began during her school and college days. When in primary school, she had scripted and directed a play on Supandi, a popular character from Tinkle comics. “I also donned the

role of Supandi,” she recalls. She joined MLDG in her early twenties. MLDG has been her training ground. She picked up the nuances of the craft at rehearsal sessions. “Experience has been my best teacher,” she says.

It was during a rehearsal that she landed the main role. “I usually know the dialogues of all the characters in a play. So when we were practising for the play on Maha Periyava, Gnanam aunty was extremely impressed by my impromptu performance and asked me to play the title role.”

Varsha also owes her acting

abilities to senior theatre artiste and music composer R Giridharan. “I watched him get into the skin of the character when he was dubbing for the play on Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. I then realised the importance of enacting while dubbing.”

Perfect diction Over the years, Varsha learnt how to perfect her dialogue delivery, expressions and body language. When asked about the preparation she undertakes to make her performance engaging, Varsha credits Bombay Gnanam for it. “Even though there is a voice-over for dialogues, she ensures that we memorise every line to maintain the timing and spontaneity on stage. She insisted that I do research before playing the roles of various saints. So I read books, browsed the Internet and spoke to historians.”



Talking about the bonhomie among the members of the group, Varsha says, “MLDG is like home to me. You are never anxious when working.”

After every performance, members of the audience throng the backstage to meet Varsha. She

remembers how once after the play on Maha Periyava, they came to seek her blessings. “We had got prasadam from Kanchi Math, which I distributed among them.”

Varsha now shuttles between Chennai and France. She completed her MBA this year from Grenoble Ecole de Management, where she also joined the theatre group. “I was the first non-French speaker to attend their audition, and promised them that I would learn the language soon. They were surprised to see me play the role of Dr John H Watson from Sherlock Holmes for the audition.”

Varsha was in Chennai early this year for a MLDG play despite a ligament tear. “Playing the roles of various saints has had a positive impact on my life. It has helped me deal with pain and challenges,” she says.

Shailaja Tripathi

We have a plethora of folk music traditions, where each note is a testament to the rich cultural heritage – from Karnataka’s Bhavageete, which stirs hearts with its poetic depth and the Baul musicians of Bengal, who signify devotion, to Sohar of Rajasthan that celebrates childbirth and Chhattisgarh’s Pandavani, which retells epics with fervour.

From such a wide array of musical traditions, filmmaker Rangaswamy S has trained his lens on a musical community known as Neelagaras. They travel from one village to another singing the story of Manteswamy.

Rangaswamy looks at the community of singers through a fictitious character called Madappa in *Alindia Radio*. The film shows how Neelagara Madappa spends time spreading the teachings of Manteswamy and is drawn to the magic of the radio. Madappa’s commitment to the cause decreases as he desires to earn more money. In the process, he is exploited by people, who bring out cassettes, CDs and books without his knowledge. Madappa is devastated.

The film was screened at



Folk and fabulous From the Kannada film *Alindia Radio*. PHOTO: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

the regions of Mysore, Mandya, and Chamaraajanagar in South Karnataka. They narrate the folk epic to the accompaniment of string instruments, cymbals and drums. The language and expression of the songs are simple. The songs carry the messages of bhakti and life’s philosophy.

Rangaswamy made the film inspired by senior Kannada writer Amaresh Nugadoni’s short story *Daivakke modalu sharanembevu*. He also took reference from *Dharege Doddavaru*, a work based on Manteswamy’s life. “Apart from these references, I had discussions with well-known Neelagaras such as Malavalli Mahadevaswamy and Pichalli Srinivas. The latter is also the singer and music composer of the film.” The lead role has been essayed by theatre actor Goutam Mysore.

The film, which highlights the loss of a musical tradition and human values, has also been screened at the Indo-French International Film Festival and Indian Film Festival in Melbourne.

Songs of the soil

Alindia Radio, a Kannada film, portrays the life and music of the Neelgaras

the 15th edition of BIFFes (Bengaluru International Film Festival). Manteswami is a 15th century veerashaiva saint, who fought against dowry, caste-based exploitation and domestic violence. His stories and preachings are found in Manteswami Kavya, sung by his disciples – the Neelagaras, mostly found in

CALENDAR



Thematic series

MadRasana presents a thematic concert ‘Virata - Grandeur of Creation’, featuring young vocalists Swarthmika Sureshkumar, Preeti Sethuraman, Madan Mohan and Kaushik Sridhar. The event will be held on May 12, 6.30 p.m. at Ragasudha Hall, Luz, Myslapore.

Naada Inbam has organised a concert on Thiruppugazh verses by Bhavya Hari on May 13, 6.15 p.m. at Ragasudha Hall, Luz, Myslapore. The accompanists are Sudha R.S. Iyer and T.R.S. Manikandan.



Sankara jayanti

Sri Kanchi Kamakoti Peetam will perform special rituals to mark the 2533rd Sankara Jayanti mahotsavam to be held on May 12 at Shrimatam, Kanchipuram. The morning rituals include Chatur Veda Parayana purti and avatar ghatta parayanam from 8 a.m. to 12 noon. In the evening chariot procession around the Raja Veedhi will take place at 6 p.m. The celebrations will also be held at Thenambakkam; Jagadguru Vidyasthanam at Tiruvanaikaval, Tiruchi; Kalady (Kerala); Kathmandu (Nepal); Sri Ram Janaki Mandir, Dhangbadi (Nepal); Srinagar; Jammu & Kashmir; around 70 places in Andhra Pradesh; Bhadrachalam (Telengana); Cultural Centre at RK Puram (New Delhi); Ayodhya; Sri Shankar Dham, Amritsar (Punjab); Balaji Mandir and Maa Kamakhya in Assam; and Sri Shankar Math, Pune. Special programmes include guru puja, special abhishekam, and Veda parayanam. This year also marks the 2500th aradhana of Adi Sankaracharya.

On a musical trail

Naada Inbam has organised ‘Kshetra Sankrthana Vaibhavam’ from May 14 to 17 and May 20 to 22 (6.15 p.m.) at Ragasudha Hall, Luz, Myslapore. Young vocalists will sing kritis on temple towns. Each day’s concert is themed on three kshetras. The series begins with Pranati Ganapuram singing on Srirangam, Tiruchi and Tiruvanaikaval. Aritstes to be featured on other days are: May 15: P. Vikaram (Madurai, Rameswaram and Thanjavaur). May 16: Shakti Muralidharan (Tiruvapur, Mayavaram and Mannargudi); May 17: Prithvi Harish (Kanchi). May 20: S. Krithana (Chidambaram). May 21: Shalini Muthukumar (kshetras in and around Chennai).

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