

# fridayReview

THE HINDU

## Ode to acharyas

A seamless blend of verses, nritta and abhinaya at the Natyarangam festival **p2**

## Remembering the master

How composer Devarajan carved a niche in the world of music **p3**



## A KOODIYATTAM EXPONENT’S LAST ACT

Sivan Namboodiri’s journey as a performer comes to an end **p3**

Kausalya Santhanam

The third segment of the Edict Project ‘Ashoka and Ecology’ will be held today at the Ashoka University’s campus. Nayanjot Lahiri, professor of History at the University, has been deeply involved with the project as a consequence of the University’s partnership with Carnatic vocalist T.M. Krishna.

Krishna, and artistes such as M.K. Raina, Kapila Venu and Justin McCarthy (Ashoka University), have teamed up to musically and artistically re-imagine the emperor’s edicts. Nayanjot, along with Naresh Keerthi of Ashoka University, has had conversations with the artistes and has helped them understand and interpret the words of the edicts.

Nayanjot is the award-winning author of two deeply researched books on the Mauryan emperor who ruled Magadha from 268 BCE till his death in 232 BCE: *Ashoka in Ancient India* and *Searching for Ashoka: Questing for a Buddhist king from India to Thailand*. Her books are the result of numerous extensive trips to the various sites where Ashoka’s imprint is seen.

In rugged landscapes across the country, immutable, stand these edicts, literally writ in stone. The persona of the emperor in Nayanjot’s books and in the Edict Project is close to what Ashoka himself put out – from being compassionate towards living beings to unique ideas of governance as well as personal fears and limitations.

These are the messages of a king who forswore war and thought of humanity at large after waging the most sanguinary war. Ashoka lives on, and his words speak with the same immediacy and effectiveness today as they did nearly 2,300 years ago when they were first chiselled on boulders, rock crops, pillars, in caves and near what were once urban sites. These are found in 50 sites all over India and beyond – in Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Odisha, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka as well as in Afghanistan, Nepal and Pakistan. The majority of the edicts are in the Prakrit language, while some are in Greek and Aramaic as also Kharosthi; the common script is Brahmi. “Ashoka has fascinated



# On the edict trail

Historian Nayanjot Lahiri focuses on ‘Ashoka and ecology’ in the third segment of the Edict Project, which will be launched today at Ashoka University

generations of Indians. There are many reasons for this. He not only ruled the largest empire of ancient India but also wrote himself permanently into Asian religious history by moving towards Buddhism. He had fought a great war and won it, but he believed that the human toll of his conquests was a moral defeat. This is how he presents himself in his Kalinga edict and it is a striking message,” says Nayanjot.

His relevance to contemporary times is also because he was a master communicator. “Today we have television and the social media. But millennia ago he communicated

his messages to be heard – for millennia.”

“In the early edicts, he talks about Buddhism, but in the later ones, his focus is on speaking about novel modes of governance that he introduced, and what he believed should be the norms of public and personal conduct,” she points out.

However, Nayanjot contests the interpretation of Ashoka as an exemplar of non-violence. “If you look at the Kalinga edict in its total context, you realise that there is violence there. And not just in relation to Kalinga, which he regrets and repents. Ashoka’s message of his moral defeat and his metamorphosis

into a man of peace gets muddled because he is threatening forest dwellers in the same Kalinga edict. This really comes back to the fact that the state cannot control all its land, it cannot control all its people. In such instances, non-violence is inevitably situated within the practice of violence.”

What makes him most interesting to Nayanjot is that Ashoka was an all-India figure, she says. “This has to do with the ways in which the emperor made himself visible through his edicts in large parts of the Indian subcontinent. Uniquely among world rulers of his time, Ashoka appears to us not through



Writing on the stone (From far left) Sanchi Stupa in Madhya Pradesh; and Sannati edicts of Ashoka. PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT AND COURTESY NAYANJOT LAHIRI



the chronicle of a courtier, or a visitor to his kingdom, or by religious hagiography but by speaking carefully and deliberately in his own voice. There were many kings and emperors before him but they didn’t speak to their subjects and thus, to us.”

Among the edicts, Nayanjot’s favourites are the Queen’s edict in Allahabad and the edicts in the Deccan. In the former, Ashoka’s queen Karuvaki says all the donations that have been made by her have to be registered as the mother of Tivala (her son). The king says this is what the queen wants and instructs his officials to do so. “It shows Ashoka gave space and agency to women.”

Ashoka’s presence (epigraphic imprint) in the Deccan is far larger than in any other region. “This highlights that Ashoka is as much an emperor of the Deccan as he is of north.”

The Edict Project seeded by Krishna is about “reimagining Ashoka’s words in musical and artistic forms as also create vibrant academic, socio-political and aesthetic conversations around them,” elaborates Nayanjot. “Krishna’s interest and curiosity are remarkable; I feel I have been enriched working with him.”



Ashoka had fought a great war and won it, but he believed that the human toll of his conquests was a moral defeat. This is how he presents himself in his Kalinga edict and it is a striking message.

NAYANJOT LAHIRI

# From Mozart to Tamil folk

The Poland-based Concerto Glacensis and Chennai-based MMA came together recently at Museum Theatre to celebrate cross-cultural music

Rachel Rhine

Western classical music has always occupied an unusual space in Chennai. In a city, where the December Season dominates headlines and Carnatic music shapes its identity, the strains of Bach, Bernstein or Whitacre have often been heard only in small circles – school choirs, church halls or the occasional orchestra appearances. Yet, over the past decade, there has been a quiet but discernible growth of Western choral and orchestral culture in the city. More youngsters are being trained, many schools are investing in choirs and international ensembles are now making Chennai a stop on their tours.

What stood out at a recent concert was not only the scale – over 120 voices filling the arches of the Museum Theatre – but also the ease with which the audience embraced it. Sacred music from Europe, Tamil folk melodies, Polish

village songs and Broadway classics followed one after the other without any sense of rupture. For listeners, who may have first encountered Western classical music through a school hymn or a film soundtrack, here was a chance to experience it in full-bodied choral form.

The programme itself moved between a solemn prayer and playful rhythms, between the quiet lyricism of European hymns and the theatrical sweep of Andrew Lloyd Webber’s ‘Amigos para siempre’. But what mattered more than individual ‘Przesliczna panno’ was sung, and delighted recognition when the Tamil ‘Punnai marathu’ entered the air. Applause broke out during the Broadway medley, reminding one that Western music is no longer an imported curiosity but something Chennai audiences feel comfortable claiming as part of their listening.

As Augustine Paul, music director and conductor of MMA, remarked, “This was a treat for our



Musical bridge The two choirs at their collaborative performance in Chennai. PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



music-loving audience, young and old alike.” His words capture the widening demographic of listeners. Once confined to a small Anglo-Indian and Christian community, Western choral music now draws a more diverse public.

For the Polish visitors, the experience was equally transformative. “The MMA Choir is friends first, and collaborators second,” said conductor Katarzyna Mąka, who has worked closely with MMA. She spoke of the emotional weight certain songs carried for her singers, and of how the Chennai audience’s response reaffirmed the idea that music transcends borders. “Even if the words are not understood, the message is felt with

the heart,” she reflected.

Her words pointed to another dimension of such concerts: their ability to create a space of empathy. In an age where cultural diplomacy often takes the form of summits and trade deals, here was a demonstration that harmony can be literal as well as symbolic. Katarzyna went further, suggesting that collaborations such as these can open doors for broader exchanges in education and social life, not just in music.

For the MMA Choir, the concert was another chapter in its century-long history of holding up Western choral traditions. For Concerto Glacensis, it was the fulfilment of a dream.



Srividya

On the second day of the Natyarangam festival, K.P. Rakesh, Girish Madhu and Vidya Girish Madhu gave a presentation on the life and teachings of Ramanujacharya.

The performance began with Ramanuja Chatusloki, a set of verses which highlight Ramanuja's role in dispelling ignorance and his mastery over the scriptures. This is recited to seek his grace and blessings. A nritta piece, it stood out for the dancers' clear and firm footwork.

As the production unfolded, the dancers took up different roles to effectively convey the essence of the philosophy.

Once Yamunacharya, a Visishtadvaita philosopher, saw Ramanuja in Kanchipuram and was impressed by his appearance. He was certain that this was the disciple he was looking for. He asked his disciple Mahapoorna to bring Ramanuja to Srirangam. When Ramanuja reached the banks of the river Cauvery, they got to know that Yamunacharya had passed. They hurriedly went to his house and found that three of his fingers were folded, symbolising three unfulfilled tasks. When Ramanuja vowed to fulfill Yamunacharya's wishes, his fingers automatically opened.

Rakesh as Ramanuja brought out the character's emotional turmoil with amazing restraint.

Ramanuja desired to learn the maha mantra from Yamunacharya's disciple, Goshtipurna, who possessed the essence of Visishtadvaitam. After being denied on 17 occasions, Ramanuja finally managed to convince Goshtipurna on his 18th visit, when the



# Glimpses of a Sacred life

Dancers blend verses, nritta and abhinaya to bring alive Ramanujacharya's life

latter extracted the promise of secrecy from Ramanuja and gave the *upadesha*. However, Ramanuja decided to share the mantra with everyone. So he climbed the gopuram of Sowmyanarayana Perumal temple in Thirukoshtiur and taught the maha mantra to the people gathered there.

Once in Srirangam, Ramanuja noticed a young man walking with a beautiful woman. Unmindful of the public gaze, he held an ornate umbrella for her in one hand and fanned her with the other. Girish Madhu and Vidya Girish Madhu as the couple aptly brought

out the sringara rasa in the scene.

Ramanuja sends for him and asks what had made him so brazen. The man, Dhanurdasa, replies that he was completely captivated by the woman's eyes. Ramanuja tells him that he will show him a pair of eyes more captivating than hers, and takes him to the Ranganatha temple. As the lamp illuminates the Lord's lotus-like eyes, the young man becomes ecstatic, and all worldly attractions fade into insignificance. He pledges lifelong service, renouncing material entanglements. This scene could have been portrayed

more engagingly .

The profound impact of Andal on Ramanuja was shown in the incident where Ramanuja sees his acharya's daughter and takes her to be Andal and goes into a trance. It is believed that he liked to be called Thiruppavai Jeer.

Ramanuja retrieves the idol of Ramapriya, whom he considers his *chella pillai*, from the sultan and reinstalls it as Sampathkumar. Ramanuja's staunch devotion to Narayana was well-portrayed by Rakesh. Girish Madhu exhibited well the royal demeanour of the sultan while Vidya Girish was impressive as the sultan's daughter.

Ramanuja ensured continuity of his mission by appointing acharyas, creating a spiritual network that safeguarded the sampradaya.

The production concluded with the Charamashloka from the Bhagvad Gita to convey the concept of *saranagati*. This was a fitting finale to a well-researched production.

Dushyant Sridhar was the resource person and choreography was done by the dancers themselves.

The music ensemble was led by Sudarshini Devnath, who not only did the nattuvangam but also explained each scene. Parur M.S. Ananthashree, who had composed the music for the presentation, lent vocal support. Guru Bharadwaaj (mridangam), N. Ananthannarayan (veena), Shreeya (violin) and Adhvaith Bhanu (flute) enhanced the appeal of the presentation.

## Whispers of wisdom

Praveen Kumar conveyed complex philosophical ideas in his performance

Manasa Vijayalakshme C

Praveen Kumar, who performed on Day three of the Natyarangam's Acharya Bharatham festival, paid a rich, meditative homage to Madhvacharya. With a performance that was both intellectually charged and viscerally moving, Praveen Kumar, who portrayed the Acharya, seamlessly brought together philosophy, narrative and aesthetic.

The evening opened with a soulful composition, which showcased Madhvacharya's familial devotion and how it shaped his early life. Against a silhouette poster and under a calm blue spotlight, the dancer emerged in a simple white dhoti, striking a contemplative pose that set the tone for the evening. Throughout the performance, visual minimalism was balanced by emotional and physical dynamism.

The highlight of the performance was the narration, interwoven between the pieces, an evocative script that reflected Madhvacharya's philosophical lineage as the third avatar of Vayu, and tracing his descent from Hanuman and Bhima to Madhvacharya. The dancer's flexibility, particularly in portraying animal forms and divine energies, were engaging.

Switching into a kurta and turban while holding a tambura, Praveen Kumar assumed the role of

the wandering sage, becoming both the seeker and the knower. Using a refined vocabulary of karanas and bhedas, he delineated complex philosophical ideas – the soul's search for the divine, the dualistic clarity of Dvaita Vedanta – and portrayed Hari not as a god, but as a friend who walks with us, protects us, and even laughs with us.

The Prahlada-Hiranyakashipu episode was rendered with emotional clarity – the stillness of devotion against the turbulence of tyranny. Likewise, Lakshmana's silent strength, his shadowing of Rama through exile and war, became a metaphor for unwavering service without expectation. These vignettes emphasised Madhvacharya's core values: dharma, duty, and bhakti in its most disciplined form.

The performance asked: Who is God? Where do we find Him? Through dance, Praveen showed that divinity lives in all.. Echoing Krishna at Govardhan, he reminded us that God is not distant, but present in nature and in the people around us. To honour the divine, we must protect and cherish both.

The production closed on a powerful note, with the dancer reminding us of the timeless relevance of devotion rooted in wisdom. The orchestra for the evening featured vocalist Pradesh Achar, nattuvangam by Navyashree K N, mridangam and tabla by Anoop Vinodh Shyam, flute by Mahesh Swamy, and lighting by T M Nagaraj.



S.R.M.G. Creations' Karaikkal Ammaiya. PHOTOS: B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

## Retold with a twist

The play *Karaikkal Ammaiya* strayed far from the original story

Suganthy Krishnamachari

SRMG Creations recently staged a play on Karaikkal Ammayar at Bharat Kalachar. Karaikkal Ammayar is one of only three women Nayanmars, and her story is recorded in Sekkizhar's *Periya Puranam*.

The play (story and script: Poovai Dhaya; direction: V.S. Sridharan) differed from *Periya Puranam* in some respects. In *Periya Puranam*, Nidipathi, a rich merchant of Nagapattinam, proposes a marriage between his son Paramadattan and Punithavathi, daughter of Dhanadattan, a wealthy merchant of Karaikkal. But in the play, the hero and heroine meet, before the engagement takes place. They argue about whether God exists, with Punithavathi, an ardent devotee of Shiva, vowing to prove God's existence to the agnostic Paramadattan. The arguments between Parvathi and Shiva were thought provoking. Parvathi wonders why the marriage of Punithavathi should end tragically. She says that men find themselves a new wife at whim, but what is to happen to poor Punithavathi?

The lively exchanges between Paramadattan and Punithavathi and the sparring between Shiva

and Parvathi were welcome additions, enhancing the dramatic appeal of the play. Punithavathi does finally prove to Paramadattan that God exists. But Paramadattan is now filled with awe for his wife, because he sees her as divine. He leaves for Pandya Nadu, remarries, and has a daughter, whom he names Punithavath.

In Sekkizhar's story, Paramadattan, his second wife and child seek the blessings of Punithavathi. When Paramadattan says he can no longer look upon her as his wife, Punithavathi prays to Shiva for a *pey uruvam* (a skeletal form). Punithavathi, who came to be known as Karaikkal Ammayar, is in fact, depicted as a skeletal figure in bronzes. In the play, however, she asks not only for a *pey uruvam*, but also for *mudhumai* (old age). Also, the name of Nidipathi was changed to Sivagnanam in the play. Such liberties should not have been taken with the original story. The comic interludes were pathetic.

Gopalakrishnan as Paramadattan and Vidhyalakshmi as Karaikkal Ammayar turned in good performances. But why was Paramadattan smothered in makeup, with a more than generous daubing of lipstick and rouge? The story of Karaikkal Ammayar could have been handled better.

## Traditional repertoire

Jayaprada Ramamurthy chose to perform well-known compositions

H. Ramakrishnan

Among instruments, the flute is one that is rooted in the most fundamental sign of life – breath. Jayaprada Ramamurthy performed recently at Mudhra's Venuganam series. She is the daughter of vocalist Prema Ramamurthy, and was mentored by flute virtuoso N. Ramani.

Her profound Bhairavi alapana was followed by Dikshitar's 'Balagopala' on Mannargudi Rajagopalaswami. This kriti is in the eighth (Sambodhana Prathama) Vibhakti. She made full use of the infinite scope to improvise, which the kriti offers, and captured the bhakti rasa embedded in the lyrics. She embellished it with gamakas and



Jayaprada accompanied by Chidambaram Badrinath (violin), Melakaveri K. Balaji (mridangam) and Adambakkam K. Sankar (ghatam). PHOTO COURTESY: MUDHRA

swaraprastaras. Chidambaram Badrinath, on the violin, responded impeccably during alapanas and kalpanaswaras.

On the percussion side, Melakaveri K. Balaji (mridangam) and Adambakkam K. Sankar

(ghatam) enriched the swaraprastaras. Their tani with deft transitions was enjoyable.

Jayaprada's handling of both long (with a deeper base) and short flutes enhanced the melody in the songs. Another extensive raga enunciation

that stood out for its manodharma was Pantuvarali. She chose a lovely Oothukadu kriti, 'Ati nirupama sundarakara', which has both tistra gati and chatusra gati patterns. The transition from tistra (pallavi and anupallavi) to chatusra (charanam) was

seamless. The percussionists lived up to the task.

Earlier, Jayaprada commenced the concert with 'Vandeham jagat vallabham' in Hamsadhwani (khanda chapu) by Annamacharya. Again, swaras at the pallavi were replete with rhythmic patterns. Chidambaram Badrinath embellished the kriti with his soft bowing technique. Tyagaraja's 'Chinna naade na' in Kalanidhi bore the stamp of Ramani's style.

After a short sketch of Kapi, she played 'Enna thavam seythanai', a popular kriti by Papanasam Sivan. Jayaprada concluded her recital with 'Bhaja bhaja manasa' (Sindhubhairavi) by Swati Tirunal and a Revathi thillana (Misra Chapu) by Lalgudi Jayaraman.

### CALENDAR

#### Onam special

Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan's Chennai Kendra has organised a five-day festival to celebrate onam. Beginning from September 1, it will feature dance performances by artistes from Kerala.

Details: September 1, 6 p.m.: Sopana Sangeetham followed by Kalamandalam Sreeja R Krishnan's Mohiniyattam at 7.45 p.m. Sept. 2, 6.30 p.m.: Tholpavakooth and 7.30 p.m.: Onappattukal. Sept. 3, 6.30 p.m.: Chakyar Koothu; 7.30 p.m.: Kerala Natanam and 8.05 p.m.: Thiruvathirakali. Sept. 4, 6 p.m.: Chenda Melam and 7 p.m.: Anuragakkadavil. Sept. 5, 6.30 p.m.: Mahishi Charitham, a kathakali performance by Madhu Varansi and Prasanth Kalakshetra and team will bring the five-day celebration to a close. The five-day festival is open to all.

#### Music festival

Sri Thyaga Brahma Gana Sabha's gokulashtami music festival draws to a close tomorrow. The last two days will feature the following programmes: Today, 4.30 p.m.: Namasankirtanam by Nungambakkam Suresh and 6.30 p.m.: Prasanna Venkatraman. Tomorrow, 4.30 p.m.: Namasankirtanam by Haridwaramangalam T. Ramgopal and 6.30 p.m.: T.N.S. Krishna. Venue: Vani Mahal, T. Nagar.







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