

friday Review

THE HINDU

Reimagining the repertoireSenior dancers added a new dimension to traditional compositions **p2****Dedicated to Muthiah Bhagavatar**Madurai T.N. Seshagopalan offered tribute to his *paramaguru* at a recent event **p3****THE 'DUST' STORM**Musician and composer Karsh Kale is back with a new multi-genre album **p4****Shailaja Khanna**

At the seminal 150th Harivallabh Sangeet Sammelan – 2025 in Jalandhar an elderly bearded man, his turban tied carelessly, a blanket wrapped around to keep away the bitter winter cold, was leaning against a pillar. "Which concert did you enjoy the most?" I asked. Holding the hand of the little child accompanying him, he said: "It's not about enjoying the music, it's my duty. I was brought here as a child by my grandfather, who told me it is Jalandhar's honour to host this sammelan. I come every year to mark my presence. I used to come with my sons, but now I am here with my grandson."

This seems to be the reason why Harivallabh, India's oldest music festival, remains a vibrant centre of music even today. For many artistes and listeners, it is almost like an annual musical pilgrimage.

There is always a festive air, and a buzz even at 11 p.m., when temperatures can dip to 2 degrees C.

Originally called 'Harballabh', it used to be held at the Tripuramalini Devi temple, one of the 51 'Shakti Peeths'. Called Devi Talao (talao means pond), the area was outside Jalandhar city, and an ascetic, Baba Hariballabh, who lived there was also a musician. Around the same time, in Bikrampura in Jalandhar, music soirees used to be held in Bikrama Hall, the haveli of Kapurthala royal Bikrama Singh. 'Beena kaar' (rudra veena player) Mir Nasir Ahmed, who had fled the Mughal court of Bahadur Shah Zafar during the 1857 mutiny, was under his patronage. Musicians, including Baba Hariballabh, would come to meet Mir Nasir Ahmed, who was a descendant of Tansen.

Punjab has traditionally been a major centre of music, even before Kolkata, Benaras and Lucknow rose to prominence. The Punjab gharana of tabla is as old as, if not older than, the Delhi gharana, and the region



North star

Started in 1875, Harivallabh Sangeet Sammelan – India's oldest music festival – continues to draw artistes and audiences in large numbers to Jalandhar

for an opportunity to perform at the week-long, all-day fest. Till then, they would stay with music lovers in the town. Did you know that when the legendary Bhimsen Joshi was in search of a guru, he came to Hariballabh?

Poornima Beri, president,

Musical legacy (Clockwise from below) Shri Devi Talab Mandir - the venue; Ustad Wasifuddin Dagar at the festival; the floral finale; and Kapurthala's Bikrama Singh. PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Harivallabh Sangeet Sammelan, feels the audience has grown organically. "I remember coming to the festival 60 years ago when I was newly married. The process of listening and absorbing began then. That's how it's been for most of the audience here."

Begum Parveen Sultana remembers singing at Harivallabh in 1969, when she was still in her teens. "There were thousands of people listening," she recalls. People used to sit on straw covered with cloth spread on the cold ground, huddled inside the blankets they carried.

With the passage of time, the funds needed to hold the festival increased, and prominent families in the area chipped in. Artistes started to be paid nominal fees. But, sometime in the 1970s, other festivals gained visibility, and Jalandhar's aura started fading. The ad hoc arrangements, which used to be viewed indulgently by artistes as being part of the quaint

charm of the festival, started to irk. And then, Ashwini Kumar, a senior police officer posted in Jalandhar, took charge of the festival, formulated a trust and things began looking up.

The festival has thrived despite challenges. There was a period of lull after Ashwini Kumar's time, and in the 1990s, Poornima Beri, a music lover, was chosen to lead the committee. "We have had unanimous decisions most of the time, but it's not been easy. Each of us has put in our money into the festival at some stage."

Some of the artistes who have performed here like to hold on to their memories of a festival driven by passion for music. Ustad Shujaat Khan says it was once considered the premier festival of the world. "There was a Hotel Skylark. All of us stayed there during the fest, laughed and had a great time."

Over the years, the festival has also faced criticism for ignoring Punjabi artistes at the cost of giving opportunities to gharana exponents. But, all of this is forgotten on the last day of the festival. The concluding concert is usually held at 4 a.m., when everyone is enveloped by the warmth of the music. For a century-and-a-half, it has been a visual delight – as part of an old tradition, at the close of the festival the stage is showered with flowers.

**CULTURE BRIEFS****Annual music workshop**

Nadasangamam, the music wing of Narada Gana Sabha Trust will conduct the annual residential workshop for aspiring musicians (below 35 years) from February 6 to 8 at Thenrangur.

Veena vidushi Prof. R.S. Jayalakshmi is the convenor. Musicians Thamarai Kadu Govindan Namboothiri, Sriranji Tapsya Santhanagopalan, C.R. Vaidyanathan and Savita Sreeram are the resource persons. There will be teaching/learning sessions, talks and interactive sessions. Dancer-yoga instructor Renjith will conduct yoga sessions during the three-day workshop. Registration forms are available at Narada Gana Sabha office. For details call 2499 3201 or 2498 3201 or mail ngsabha@gmail.com.

Composer special

Rasika Ranjani Sabha has organised a special event to celebrate the 'Timeless legacy of Sri Purandaradasara'. To be held on

February 3 (6.15 p.m.) at

Sundareswarar Hall,

the event, features a

vocal concert by R.K.

Padmanabha with

Pappu Gyandev on

the violin and B.

Sivaraman on the

mridangam. The

Karnataka-based vocalist,

Padmanabha is one of the

foremost exponents of

Haridasa Sangeetha, who has

made significant contributions

in propagating Purandarasar's

works.

**Cultural festival**

Hamsadhwani's 36th annual festival will feature the following performances at Youth Hostel, Adyar.

Schedule: Today, 6.45 p.m.:

PMG Mayurapriya's play

Ennadi Penne. January 31,

6.45 p.m.: UAA's *Lights On*.

February 1, 6.15 p.m.: A.

Kanyakumari with Embar

Kannan (violin).

**Accent on Tamil**

Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Mylapore, conducts 'Bhavan's Tamizh Isai Vilizha' from February 1 to 6, at its main auditorium. A series of vocal concerts will be featured during the festival (non-ticketed). Details: February 1, 6 p.m.: K. Gayathri. February 2, 6.30 p.m.: Amritha Murali. February 3, 6.30 p.m.: Dr. Sirkazhi Shivachidambaram. February 5, 6.30 p.m.: Gayathri Girish. The festival concludes on February 6 with Brindha Manickavasagan's vocal concert at 6.30 p.m.

HCL concerts

The Music Academy has organised a vocal concert by Srividya Vadlamani on February 2 at 6 p.m., as part of the HCL concert series. Srividya will be accompanied by Vignesh Nydhruva on the violin and Ajay Gopi on the mridangam. Venue: Kasturi Srinivasan Hall.

Into the soul of Sringara

Rama Vaidyanathan explored the myriad facets of love through her nuanced interpretations



PHOTO: K PICHUMANI

N.C. Srinivasaraghavan

Mahati Kannan's Bharathanityam performance for Krishna Gana Sabha's Pongal Dance Festival was an ode to tradition. She was supported by Gayathri Kannan on the vocals with Anantha Shree providing vocal support and nattuvangam, Shreelakshmi Bhat on the violin, and Nagai P. Sriram on the mridangam.

The recital opened with a Pushpanjali, following which Mahati took up the Tiruppavai of the day, 'Koodarai vellum'. This choice mirrored the customary practice in Carnatic concerts where the Tiruppavai of the day is rendered. Its translation into movement brought a time-tested framework into the dance space.

One of Mahati's strengths is the variety of compositions she chooses. This was evident in 'Ma mayil meedhu eri vaa', a composition by Meenakshi Subrahmanyam on Muruga. The piece permitted ample scope for sancharis, particularly episodes depicting Muruga as Swaminatha, the divine guru who revealed the meaning of the Pranava to Shiva himself. These narratives were handled with clarity, making room for the philosophical idea to emerge without excessive elaboration.

The central piece of the evening

Karanas as the link

Mahati Kannan portrayed with clarity the distinct features of Bharathanityam



Graceful Mahati Kannan.

PHOTO: B. VELANKANNI RAJ

was the varnam 'Vanamala shri gopala' by Kunrakudi Krishna Iyer in Valaji. The varnam's restrained musical and lyrical structure provided fertile ground for dance, allowing movement to remain at the forefront. For each line, Mahati drew upon episodes from the Bhagavatam, sometimes juxtaposing them creatively – as when she questioned Krishna on the contrast between his stealing the gopis' garments and his protection of Draupadi's honour. Such moments added an element of introspection to the presentation.

In the post-charanam section, the tempo increased, and Mahati demonstrated a notable interplay of karanas and adavu-based nritta. Karanas were not treated as isolated inserts but were woven into rhythmic passages, particularly in the endings of ettugada swaras, each concluding with a distinct spatial resolution. This thoughtful variation enhanced visual interest and highlighted a Bharathanityam

approach that integrates karana vocabulary with structured adavu patterns.

The pieces that followed continued this exploration. 'Neela vaanam' in Punnagavarali by Oothukkodu Venkatasubbaiyer, which describes Krishna amidst the lushness of Vrindavan, was approached with sensitivity. The composition naturally lends itself to suggestive rather than descriptive abhinaya, and the inclusion of jathis structured with karanas added rhythmic interest without disturbing the contemplative tone of the song.

'Vandeham sharadaam' by Swami Dayananda Saraswati included a sanchari drawn from the 'Shankara Vijayam', narrating the episode of Adi Shankara and Sharadamba, which was conveyed with restraint. The concluding 'Adbhuta natanam', a composition by Puliur Doraiswamy Iyer on Nataraaja, tuned by veteran dancer-scholar Padma Subrahmanyam, presented an expanded karana inventory, connected appropriately using charis to give the choreography a complete kinetic expression.

Gayathri's pleasant and steady vocal presence contributed significantly to the recital, supported ably by Anantha Shree. Shreelakshmi's violin complemented the dance sensitively, while Nagai Sriram's intuitive mridangam accompaniment responded closely to the dancer's rhythmic needs.

Mahati's recitals continue to stand out for the proportion and precision of karanas employed alongside adavus, reflecting the choreographic vision of Padma Subrahmanyam.

In step with Nature

Sujatha and Shriya Srinivasan's production highlighted the issue of climate change

Rupa Srikanth

Sujatha and Shriya Srinivasan's 'Vivarta' used the language of Bharatanatyam to bring home the universal concern of climate change. Backed by excellent music composed by violinists Lalgudi G.J.R Krishnan and Lalgudi Vijayalakshmi and voiceovers,

'Vivarta' was about how greed and over-exploitation ruin the Earth.

The story line was a bit simplistic. From the brink of devastation, the painless recovery felt a bit naïve, but it could be passed off in the interest of artistic liberty. But, the students of Sujatha's Shri Kalaa Mandir made up with their timing and coordination. The production began with



Well-curated Roja Kannan and (below) her students performing 'Theeravinaitheerkum Tiruchendur.

PHOTOS: M. SRINATH

On a Tiruchendur trail

'Theeravinaitheerkum Thiruchendur' was an artiste's voyage to the temple town

Srividya

Roja Kannan, along with her students, unravelled the intriguing aspects of Tiruchendur Murugan in 'Theeravinaitheerkum Tiruchendur', in her carefully-crafted recital at Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan.

The evening commenced with pushpanjali in raga Shanmukhapriya. This was followed by a viruttam and Subramania kavuthuvam with verses from Tiruchendur Shanmuga Stotram. In each of these items, the synchronised movements of the dancers aligned perfectly with the jathi.

Murugan as Valli Kanavan was depicted through expressive abhinaya and gestures in the Ragamalika Shabdham. It was heartening to see the context being reinforced through the traditional margam.

Parur Ananthashree and Sahana Selvaganesh, senior students of Bharatha Natyalaya, performed Lalgudi Jayaraman's varnam in Nilambari raga, Adi tala, which celebrates Tiruchendur Murugan. The

dancers touched upon the sthala purana of Thiruchendur and depicted how devotees worship Muruga – by observing fast and carrying the kavadi on their shoulders.

The highlight was Roja Kannan's soulful depiction of the story of Kumaraguruparar in Periyasami Thooran's song 'Muruga muruga yenraal' in Saveri raga, Misra Chapu tala. The story goes that Kumaraguruparar, who could not speak till he was five, was brought to Tiruchendur by his distraught parents, where he began to talk.

The panner elai vibhuthi of Thiruchendur cured Adi Sankara and Vishwanatha from their debilitating illnesses. These were portrayed through Adi Sankara's 'Subramanya Bhujangam' presented in Ragamalika.

The concluding piece was a thillana in raga Tillangal followed by the Tiruppugazh.

The orchestra included Roja Kannan and Parur M.S. Ananthashree (nattuvangam), Prithvi Harish (vocal), G. Vijayaraghavan (mridangam) and R. Kalaiarasan (violin).



Art with a purpose Sujatha Srinivasan and team performing 'Vivarta: Transformations.'

PHOTO: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

mention of the Big Bang, and moved on to depicting the five primordial elements. The latter was portrayed through a beautiful medley of ragas and swaras (M.S. Sukhi), while creation was showcased through another ragamalika composed by the Lalgudi siblings.

The choice of ragas aided in the progress of the story – Vakulabaranam was used to show the Earth's decline as every natural resource is polluted. The Earth retaliates with forest fires and destruction. The song 'Mammil...', speaking about what

comes from the Earth has to go back to it (written by Vijayalakshmi and composed in raga Bhavapriya), followed. Eventually, people realise their mistake, ask the Earth's forgiveness and take collective responsibility to care for her. Nature heals.

The dancers were Sujatha Srinivasan, Shriya Srinivasan, Nithya Kasibhatla, Sita Vakkalanka, Sweta Balaji, Samyutha Polaconda, Nandita Srikumar and Sneha Upadhyayula.

There was a thillana (Basant Bahar, tisra nadai Adi) and 'Bhoomi Mangalam' (from Chants of India by Pt Ravi Shankar). There were a couple of instances where one felt the music and dance could have been more detailed. But for that, 'Vivarta' was a well-intended and well-executed effort.

V.V. Ramani

When love becomes the focal point of a dance performance, the experience is sublime. That was the feeling Rama Vaidyanathan evoked on the inaugural day of The Music Academy Dance Festival.

Three compositions were selected to explore the idea of love and its many expressions. The first delved into anticipation and disappointment, the second into surrender and devotion, and the third into passion and yearning.

Shabdham, a composition that blends simple korvais and abhinaya, has become a rarity in the Bharatanatyam repertoire these days. Rama chose to perform a ragamalika shabdham by Thanjavur Arunachala Pillai as the opening number. A heroine confesses to her confidante her deep love for the lord of Chidambaram, and her doubts if he would reciprocate her feelings. Rama layered it with an imaginative expansion of ideas, turning a simple conversation poetic.

In the varnam, a composition by M. Balamuralikrishna in raga Thodi, she explored the love towards the universal mother Devi, the benevolent benefactor who alleviates the fears and sorrows of her devotees.

What enhanced this presentation was how attuned the dancer was to the music. As Raghavendra Prasad played the flute, Rama came up with different postures to create a visual imagery of the same. The vibrant jathis, composed by Sumodh Sridharan and rendered by Sridhar Vasudevan with finesse and the beautiful swara passages sung with rich musical intonations by Vishwesh Swaminathan formed a seamless tapestry of music and movement.

At the end of the pallavi, anupallavi and charanam, creatively imagined moments were depicted through impeccable sancharis that conveyed the bond between a devotee and the goddess.

Taking verses from Kalidasa's *Ritusamharam*, Rama depicted the anguish of separated lovers. The piece revolved around a mango tree, with every emotion of the hero and heroine amazingly linked to Nature. Soorya Rao's lighting was the highlight here.

Rama's performance was a testimony to how the traditional repertoire can be reinterpreted to accommodate contemporary sensibilities.

Andal's timeless appeal meets the modern creative lens in Anita Ratnam's production

Why 'Naachiyan Next' continues to resonate



Chitra Swaminathan

chitra.swaminathan@thehindu.co.in

More than two decades after it premiered, Anita Ratnam's 'Naachiyan' continues to resonate with audiences across the globe. The production's ability to reinvent itself for new generations as 'Naachiyan Next' reflected in the presence of many youngsters at its recent performance on the 26th day of Margazhi at Chennai's Museum Theatre. The fact that several audience members returned for repeat viewings underlines its enduring appeal and why it merits not merely a review but a reassessment. And, this makes it a compelling work in the current Indian dance landscape.

There was never a dull moment in a production that delves into the inner world of Andal – the 12-year-old saint-poet who forges a passionate bond with Krishna, expressing both her emotional and physical states in devotion. The theme itself is not unusual. Anita is not the first dancer to explore Andal's story; her own connection began early, when, at the age of nine, she practised a piece on Andal for her arangetram.

Rooted in scripture and imbued with a Vaishnavite ethos, including the ritual of Araiya Sevai (done beautifully by Madhusudanan Kalaichelvan), 'Naachiyan Next', nevertheless, carried a



contemporary sensibility. Andal was portrayed less as a distant goddess and more as a woman, and this humanising of divinity made the work heart-warming.

Thematic group productions may be popular in classical dance today, but presenting a truly slick and well-rounded work demands a holistic understanding of both the subject and the art. It requires drawing upon the creative resources an artiste has absorbed over the years. In this respect, Anita is fortunate to belong to a generation that witnessed the brilliance of Rukmini Devi, Chandrakala, Yamini Krishnamurthy, Balasaraswati, Ram Gopal and Uday Shankar – each leaving an indelible mark on different facets of dance. That inspiration, often unconsciously, finds expression in 'Naachiyan Next', where every element – costume, music, lighting, props, abhinaya, nritta and narration – came together impeccably.

Each element of the production deserves

Finely crafted Anita Ratnam and team and Nandhini Subbulakshmi as Andal PHOTOS: ADITHYA NARAYANAN

close attention. Take the costume, for instance: designed by Sandhya Raman, the use of Madurai's iconic *sungudi* saris beautifully anchored the work both socially (Andal belonged to a poor Brahmin family) and culturally (she grew up in Srivilliputhur near Madurai). Conventional Bharatanatyam accessories were deliberately done away with, instead simple beads lent freshness to the visual aesthetic.

The music, too, warrants special mention. Live accompaniment always lends an edge to a dance production, and here the all-women ensemble – vocalist, nattuvangam artiste, veena player and multi-percussionist – was not only excellent but also made a presence in coordinated attire. The score evoked the milieu of Andal's era, consistently supporting the narrative without ever overwhelming it.

Props, though common in dance, were employed effectively. They were woven seamlessly into the storytelling. The parrot, the *thirai seelai*, the sacred garland, the conch and the Srirangam lord depicted through a fabric bearing a *namam*, *shankh*, *chakra* and *padam* were integral symbols.

The production may be heavy on narration, yet expression and movement were equally compelling. The five well-trained dancers conveyed the emotions demanded by each scene with conviction. Andal (Nandhini Subbulakshmi), in particular, stole the show with her helplessness, earnestness, and vulnerability – making her an apt choice for the role. The jatis were clear, sharp and striking, while the group patterns displayed firm footwork and precise gestures. The production showcased its fidelity to classical roots while opening itself to contemporary expressions.

It is rare to see *sutradhars* carry a production on their shoulders, but Anita did just that. Her years in New York as a television producer and host/anchor came through in her flawless narration, delivered in both English and Tamil and interspersed with the singing of *pasurams* rendered with perfect intonation. It also reflected her long engagement with dance on her own terms – never abandoning its core, yet constantly seeking ways to make it relate to changing times. In that balance lies the true strength of 'Naachiyan Next'.

Kapalik Pandvani', will be presented next by Meena Sahu and group from Chhattisgarh.

Erudite Madurai T.N. Seshagopalan with TNS Krishna (vocal); Shriramkumar (violin); and Trichur C. Narendran (mridangam). PHOTOS: NICK HAYNES & THE HINDU ARCHIVES



P Srihari

What is the common thread linking ragas such as Mohanakalyani, Hamsanandi, Valaji, Karnaranjani, Pasupathipriya, Gaudamalhar, Sarangamalhar, Vijayanagarai, Vijayaraswasathi, Budhamanohari, Sumanapriya and Niroshtha? The answer lies in one of the most significant contributions of Harikesanallur Muthiah Bhagavtar (1877-1945) to Carnatic music: he was the composer who first gave form and life to these ragas through his kritis.

Erudition, an affluent background and a commanding presence placed Muthiah Bhagavtar among the elite in the musical world. He was the first musician in India to be awarded a doctorate (in 1943), and is credited with nearly 500 kritis composed across Sanskrit, Telugu, Tamil and Kannada.

To mark Muthiah Bhagavtar's 148th jayanthi, maestro Madurai T.N. Seshagopalan's Gurukrupa Trust recently organised an award ceremony and a lecture-demonstration on the musician-composer, Sanskrit scholar, vaggeyakara, musicologist and Harikatha

A raga alchemist

Madurai T.N. Seshagopalan's lec-dem highlighted the brilliance of Harikesanallur Muthiah Bhagavtar's musical vision

exponent at Ragasudha Hall.

While violin virtuoso M. Chandrasekaran was honoured with the 'Gayaka Shikamani Dr. Harikesanallur Muthiah Bhagavtar Award', there could not have been a fitter presenter for the lec-dem than Seshagopalan himself – a direct musical descendant, being a disciple of Ramanathapuram C.S. Sankarasivam, whose guru was Muthiah Bhagavtar.

A multi-faceted musician himself, T.N. Seshagopalan has popularised scores of Bhagavtar's compositions and has even set chittaswaras for about 15 of them. He began with Bhagavtar's Sriranjani kriti 'Sakthi vinayaka' followed by his own shloka 'Manda smitha mukhamborumham' extolling his paramaguru's personality. He regaled the audience with interesting anecdotes and insightful snippets from Bhagavtar's life, weaving them together with his tongue-in-cheek humour.

T.N.S. Krishna lent vocal support and seasoned accompanists R.K. Shriramkumar (violin) and Trichur C. Narendran (mridangam) provided admirable instrumental backing. Orphaned before age nine, Muthiah Bhagavtar

was raised by his maternal uncle Lakshmana Suri, father of musicologist T.L. Venkatarama Iyer. Grounded initially in the Vedas, he then underwent rigorous musical training in Thiruvaiyaru. He returned to Harikesanallur at 16, hailed as a 'Maha Gayaka' and earned the patronage of Moolam Tirunal of Travancore when he was barely 20.

Seshagopalan dismissed the notion that Bhagavtar turned to Harikatha at 27 due to a fading voice, explaining that he sought a wider audience amid its growing public craze. In doing so, he innovatively enriched its repertoire by incorporating forms such as kavadi chindhu, Nondi chindhu, kill kanni, themmangu, virutham and shloka. He noted, with a touch of humour, that vocalists of that era possessed 'mayakkku' (mesmerising) voice' unlike today's reliance on amplified 'mic voice'.

Bhagavtar's discourses, particularly on 'Valli Parinayam', 'Tyagaraja Divya Charitram' and 'Tyagaraja Ramayanam', gained immense popularity; and he even delivered one praising the British rule, reflecting the era's complexities of patronage. He also introduced new ideas and songs for specific situations in his performances. The 'English Note', later made famous by Madurai Mani Iyer, was one such improvisation as he sang it in 'Rukmini Kalyanam' and 'Subhadra Kalyanam', using its rhythmic drive to musically mimic a speeding chariot in abduction scenes. He also adopted it for the Durvasa Bhiksha episode, varying the tempo to suit the situation.

Seshagopalan said that the tana varnam 'Manamohana'

in Mohanam was created by Bhagavtar for the Arangetram of his disciple Sankarasivam. He demonstrated how the third mukti swara therein can be interpreted as sahityam also. Similarly, he highlighted the daru varnam 'Mathe' in Khams where the entire final charanam is an example of masterful swarakshara sahityam.

Bhagavtar's stay in Varanasi and his exposure to Hindustani music, particularly raga Sohini, resulted in his Hamsanandi kritis, and Pasupathipriya was an inspiration from raga Durga. His creative acumen was recognised nationally when he composed the Vijayanagar-based signature tune for All India Radio. He also composed about 10 thillanas.

According to Seshagopalan, crediting someone with 'inventing' or 'creating' a raga (barring the vakra variety) is a misnomer. He asserted that a raga can only be discovered, and never created, because its constituent notes have always existed.

No narrative on Bhagavtar's music could be complete without reference to his ingenious kriti 'Rajaraja radhithe' in Niroshtha. The raga is formed by the five notes that do not involve lip movement (excluding ma and pa). The prefix 'Nir' means 'devoid of' and the noun 'Oshta' refers to lips. In a stunning parallel, the entire lyrics – not just the swara structure of the raga – shun labial consonants, not requiring the lips to press together. Seshagopalan said he composed a thillana in the raga, inspired by his paramaguru.

The engaging presentation concluded with Bhagavtar's 'Mangalam bhavatu' in Pantuvarali.

CALENDAR

Kuchipudi solo



Pragnya Thamire, a U.S.-based Kuchipudi dancer, will perform at Sri Kapaleeswarar Temple, Mylapore, today, at 5.30 p.m.

Book release

Under the auspices of Kedaram, a book titled 'The Subtle Art of Mastering Korvais - A Practical Guide to South Indian Rhythm through Konnakol Vol 2', authored by mridangist Mannakoil J. Balaji, will be released on February 1, 10.30 a.m. at Ragasudha Hall, Luz, Mylapore. Cleveland Sundaram will release the book and the first copy will be received by senior musician Neyveli Santhanagopalan and veteran mridangist Thiruvaarur Bakthavathsalam. The book release will be preceded by G.R.S. Murthy's veena concert at 9.30 a.m.

An evening of sufi and folk music

Ruhaniyat is back in Chennai with its 25th edition to be held on February 7

TCS Ruhaniyat, presented by Banyan Tree, returns to Chennai with its 25th edition 'Seeking the Divine', on February 7, 6.15 p.m. at the Madras Race Club.

For over two decades, the festival, held at multiple cities each year, has served as a platform for folk, sufi, baul, qawwali, and other musical forms from across India and the world.

This landmark edition will once again highlight the importance of bringing into the spotlight musical traditions that often do not find space in mainstream festivals.

The evening begins with 'Through the Eyes of Kabir' featuring Bheru Singh Chouhan and group from Rajasthan. 'Chhattisgarhi



'Kapalik Pandvani', will be presented next by Meena Sahu and group from Chhattisgarh. Ruhaniyat's global outlook finds expression through 'Whispers Through Rainforests' featuring Tais Reganelli from Brazil and 'The Melodic River Flows

Narendra Kusnur

Karsh Kale is one of the pioneering figures in the indie music scene, UK-born, New York-raised Karsh Kale is releasing a full-length album *Dust* after nine years. "I am looking forward to its release in February end," says Karsh.

Besides his skills as a tabla player and a drummer, Karsh is also known for his eclectic mix of Indian classical, folk, electronica, rock and ambient music. He recently performed at Lollapalooza, the multi-genre festival, in Mumbai. "The event attracts different types of listeners, who are open to new sounds. Though people may come for rock, hip-hop or pop, they also love sounds with an Indian flavour. I will play a mix of new numbers and older material, and some wonderful guest artistes will join me," he says.

Dust features collaborations with keyboardist Salim Merchant, sitarist Purbayan Chatterjee, and indie artistes Gaurav Raina of the MIDival Punditz, Neel Adhikari and Komorebi. Karsh says the difference this time is that instead of having too many other vocalists, he has done a lot of singing himself. "Another highlight is the song 'Tabla Beat Scientist', dedicated to Ustad Zakir Hussain, who has played a major role in my career," he adds.

In keeping with his desire to follow a new process each time, Karsh began working on *Dust* by spending two months making 28 paintings which inspired him to write the compositions on piano. He says, "I was sick of the same process of staring at a screen and working on tracks. So, I wanted to go back to my childlike creativity. Once I finalised the melodies and finished the songwriting, I approached engineers. The next step was to

The genre-defying musician's new album is a celebration of rhythm and roots

Karsh Kale returns with

Dust



spend four months in a studio where I worked on the soundscapes on my own."

Karsh has been on the scene for over 25 years – he released his first full-length album *Realize* in 2001. The Asian Underground sound was popularised by Talvin Singh and other musicians in the UK in the late 1990s, blending electronica with Asian sounds. When Karsh began playing similar music in the US, its popularity had expanded considerably. He recalls, "It was no longer underground, and in



the US, we were collaborating with artistes from India, Japan, Canada, various places. So the name 'Asian Massive' became associated with this genre."

Around that time, American producer Bill Laswell approached Karsh for his electronic foray 'Tabla Beat Science', featuring Zakir Hussain and sarangi maestro Ustad Sultan Khan. Karsh recalls, "The project acted as a seminal moment in the history of Asian electronic music. Before that, there were a bunch of young musicians experimenting with these sounds

in their bedroom studios. But here, we had stalwarts who not only acknowledged that sound but became part of it. They elevated it to a place of legitimacy for the rest of the world to accept."

With the albums *Liberation* and *Broken English*, Karsh established himself on the indie circuit. He even did projects with singers Sting and Norah Jones, sitarist Anoushka Shankar, trumpeter Dave Douglas and pianist Herbie Hancock. After releasing the album *Up* in 2016, he chose shorter EPs, besides appearing on Coke Studio, collaborating with Amaan and Ayaan Ali Bangash and being part of the *Gully Boy* film soundtrack.

About the indie scene in India, Karsh says, "The good sign is that there is an indie scene. I remember playing in India for 10 or 15 years, when we were so underground, because people only listened to classical or film music.

Today, we have DJs who mix different kinds of sounds from jazz and rhythm 'n' blues with Indian music, and sitar players

who play the blues. They have a fairly large audience listening to them."

However, the floodgates have opened so wide that thousands of songs are released, and many go unnoticed. He says, "We've reached a situation where some artistes have millions of fans, but many people haven't heard them. I guess this is a transitional phase. Today, a young artiste from India can say he/she wants to become a full-time singer-songwriter, or do something like Radiohead, Jeff Buckley or Adele. That was so out of reach 20-25 years ago."



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Though he's deeply rooted in electronic music, and keeps a tab on the changing trends, Karsh believes technology and AI can only act as tools in the creation of fresh music. He says, "What people want is a unique experience, which only a human can create. AI is only going to create something routine. Sadly, people are talking more about the convenience of AI rather than its dangers."

According to Karsh, technology keeps changing with the times, but it is only a tool. He explains, "How it is used depends on where you come from as a creator. One can take two spoons and write a song. Even in a sci-fi film, there has to be a script first. Everything else comes later." That's an approach he's used in his new album too.

Architect of beats Karsh Kale joins forces with Salim Merchant, Pu Neel Adhikari and Komorebi for *Dust*.
PHOTO: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

of five to eight women puppeteers.

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"There were no televisions or social media. People came to watch every night but not so now, yet it is staged with the same reverence and sincerity," says Rajitha Ramachandran Pulavar, founder of Penntholpaavakoothu. The Pulavar family began introducing new contemporary subjects. The creation of Penntholpaavakoothu in 2022 was a step in the same direction of making it resonate with today's audience and times.

If tholpavakoothu provides the silhouettes, Amata brings in the voice, literally. She and her collaborator Sekhar Sudhir use folk-inspired instruments, experimental violins, and natural percussive sounds. *Shadow Play* unfolds with Amata's six original compositions, mapping a young woman's journey from home to self-realisation. "It is about integrating the shadows within, a concept I resonate with from Jungian psychology. I believe the art we practice is a healthy expression of the oppressed and repressed aspects of ourselves," she adds.

The puppets themselves are artworks crafted from goat and buffalo skin, hand-punched with motifs inspired by nature and society. Rice-grain punches honour farmers; drum-shaped ones salute musicians; lunar crescents and leaf patterns evoke forests. "Everything is handmade and each design and pattern has a significance. The puppets of Rama will always have Veerlipattu punches," says Rajitha.

To the artistes, initiating the first-ever collaboration with Penntholpaavakoothu. Invited to Shoranur, she witnessed an overnight temple performance, complete with the ritual lamps, smell of oil, and dynamic movement of puppets behind the screen. *Shadow Play* features 15 puppets – a mix of newly created pieces and repurposed ones, handled by an ensemble

of artistes, including the

Kabir meets Tukaram

Pancham Nishad presents 'Tuka Mhane Kahe Kabira' on February 1, 5.30 p.m. at Chowdiah Memorial Hall, Bengaluru. Vocalist Jayateerth Mevundi will bring alive Tukaram's abhangwani, Bhuvaneshi Komkali will render Kabirwani, and Dhanashree Lele will narrate insights, weaving philosophy with performance. They will be accompanied by Mandar Puranik (tabla), Dnyaneshwar Sonawane (harmonium), Sukhad Munde (pakhawaj), Sunil Kumar (flute) and Suryakant Surve (rhythms). Tickets on BookMyShow.

93 MISSING GIRLS ONE FEARLESS COP

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PVR AMPA MALL	AMINIJIKKARI
PVR PALAZZO	VADAPALANI
PVR S2 CINEMA	PERAMBUR
AGS CINEMAS	T.Nagar
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MAYAJAAL	VILLIVAKKAM
AGS CINEMAS	MEDURAVOYAL
AGS CINEMAS	Omr
AGS CINEMAS	Velachery
INOX THE MARINA	MEENAGAR
INOX GRAND MALL	SRI SAKTHI CINEMAS
INOX NATIONAL	MB
INOX LUXE PHOENIX	INOX VIJAYAAL
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PVR AEROHUB	VETRI CINEMAS
PVR CITY	SALEM
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Look who holds the strings!

Shadow Play is an experimental and interdisciplinary collaboration between Amata Bob and Penntholpaavakoothu



Powerful narratives (clockwise from above) Members of Tholpavakoothu Puppet Centre; Amata Bob; and artistes on stage PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Shailaja Tripathi

The stage dims into a constellation of oil lamps – the flickering glow that has illuminated Tholpavakoothu, Kerala's ancient shadow-puppetry tradition for centuries. But this time, instead of the familiar verses from the Kamba Ramayana echoing through the courtyards of Bhadrakali temples in Palakkad, Thrissur and Malappuram, a live sonic improvisation begins to unfold. Bengaluru-based vocalist, musician and sound artiste Amata Bob, summons not the gods, but the 'inner shadow'.

Shadow Play premiered at BLR Hubba 2026 on January 22 at Panchavati, Amphitheatre. This unlikely encounter between experimental sound and ritualistic puppetry was created in collaboration with Penntholpaavakoothu, an all-women shadow puppetry ensemble from the Tholpavakoothu Puppet Centre in Shoranur. The group is led by Rajitha Ramachandran Pulavar, seasoned shadow puppeteer and daughter of K. K. Ramachandran Pulavar, the 11th generation master shadow puppeteer.

It is believed that Rajitha admits entering a male-dominated space was not easy. "Earlier, women were only backstage, but initiatives by the Kerala government and support helped us. The Padma Shri given to my father gave us recognition and motivated us to launch Penntholpaavakoothu," she says.

For Amata, the collaboration is personal. "For us, it's a shared story. As women and as artistes, we have encountered resistance whether from society or our own families. The shadow becomes a way of acknowledging that part of ourselves which isn't given space," says Amata, who discovered Tholpavakoothu through an online documentary and reached out

to the artistes, initiating the first-ever collaboration with Penntholpaavakoothu.

Invited to Shoranur, she witnessed an overnight temple performance, complete with the ritual lamps, smell of oil, and dynamic movement of puppets behind the screen.

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of five to eight women puppeteers.

The narrative, driven by experimental music, follows a woman grappling with conflicts before reaching the zenith of self-discovery. Historically, Tholpavakoothu was staged as a literary and ritual performance of the Kamba Ramayana, often running for 7, 21 or even 72 nights in temple courtyards called Koothumadam.

"There were no televisions or social media. People came to watch every night but not so now, yet it is staged with the same reverence and sincerity," says Rajitha Ramachandran Pulavar, founder of Penntholpaavakoothu. The Pulavar family began introducing new contemporary subjects. The creation of Penntholpaavakoothu in 2022 was a step in the same direction of making it resonate with today's audience and times.

If tholpavakoothu provides the silhouettes, Amata brings in the voice, literally. She and her collaborator Sekhar Sudhir use folk-inspired instruments, experimental violins, and natural percussive sounds. *Shadow Play* unfolds with Amata's six original compositions, mapping a young woman's journey from home to self-realisation.

"It is about integrating the shadows within, a concept I resonate with from Jungian psychology. I believe the art we practice is a healthy expression of the oppressed and repressed aspects of ourselves," she adds.

The puppets themselves are artworks crafted from goat and buffalo skin, hand-punched with motifs inspired by nature and society. Rice-grain punches honour farmers; drum-shaped ones salute musicians; lunar crescents and leaf patterns evoke forests. "Everything is handmade and each design and pattern has a significance. The puppets of Rama will always have Veerlipattu punches," says Rajitha.

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