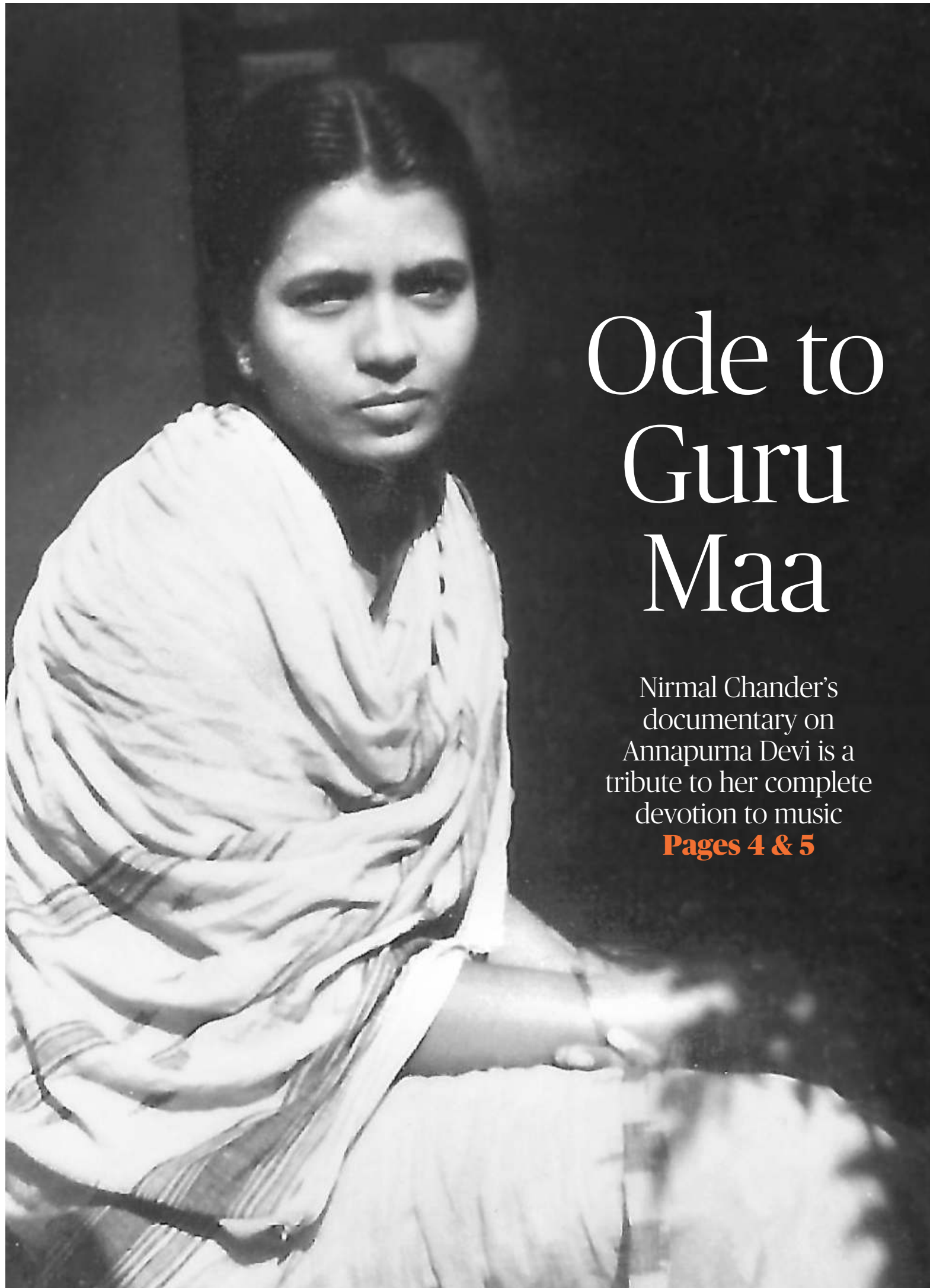


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Ode to
Guru
Maa

Nirmal Chander's documentary on Annapurna Devi is a tribute to her complete devotion to music

Pages 4 & 5

INSIDE

Like a banyan tree...



Known for his self-effacing humility, Pandit Santosh Banerjee always strived to practice what he taught **P3**

'I have always loved the circus'



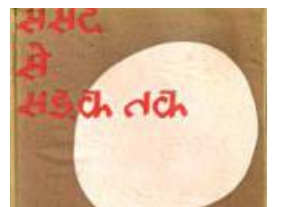
For Sakti Burman, art is a way to present reality with a dash of imagination **P5**

'A play is made in the rehearsal process'



Mohit Takalkar on why he finds theatre-making exciting **P6**

Refusing to fade away



A poet of protest, Dhoomil's thoughts continue to resonate with the readers

P7



Almost there! Danish Ali

Well begun is half done

The sitar and violin duet by Adnan Khan and Danish Ali was pleasing in parts

MANJARI SINHA

The Swarit Foundation featured a sitar-violin duet by Adnan Khan and Danish Ali in the 9th edition of Smaran, a concert series featuring young Indian musicians and dancers, at the Kamani auditorium.

The first half of the evening was, in fact, a trio of young talents with Adnan Khan on sitar, Danish Ali on violin, and Zuheeb Ahmed Khan on tabla, all three of them coming from traditional family of musicians. Adnan, initiated into music by Zafar Ahmed Khan is the son of sitarist Sayeed Khan, both from the Dilli gharana. He was further groomed at the ITC-SRA, into gayaki ang under the tutelage of Ud. Mashkoor Ali Khan of Kirana Gharana, who happens to be his maternal uncle.

Dayam Ali was initiated into violin by his grandfather Ud. Mohammed Ali Khan, who used to play sarangi and sur-singar. Later, he trained under his uncle Aleem Khan and presently he is being groomed under Ud. Iqbal Ahmed Khan, the Khalifa of Dilli Gharana. Zuheeb, a young Tabla practitioner of Ajrada Gharana is the son of Naushad Khan and got trained under his maternal grandfather Ud. Hashmat Ali Khan and maternal uncle Mohd Akram Khan.

The chosen raga for the duet by the young sitarist and violinist was Yaman, one of the most expansive and melodious ragas of the evening. The leisurely aalap was perhaps the most beautiful part of the duet, where the personal chemistry between both the instrumentalists came forth in imaginative sequences of the swaras adorned with soot and meend, while playing around the chosen 'nyas' swara, in the sequential progression of the raga. Jod had beautiful rhythmic patterns before they reached the jhala and concluded the introductory part of their performance.

Dramatic element

The slow composition set to the seven-beat cycle of Rupak tala, had a beautiful mukhda, the opening phrase, that reached the 'sam' most dramatically. Zuheeb joined them with a calculated uthaan that reached the sam with a chakkardar tihai, reciprocating the dramatic element like tit for tat. The raga revealed itself gradually through the raga-vistar with gat-toda sequences where both the instrumentalists complemented each other, enthralling the discerning audiences. The medium tempo Teentala gat composition resembled the famous Bandish "Mori gagari na bharan det...", studded with harmonised phrases, intricatemelody and rhythm-based patterns. This was followed by yet another drut composition in the same tala, facilitating the jhala.

This unnecessarily elongated part of the performance tended to sound repetitive, especially in the taan patterns, before they reached the jhala, where Zuheeb also matched their jet speed.

There was no time left to undo this chaotic end by playing some melodious dhun or thumri-dadra, to bring back their opening impact. The young duo seems to have a lot of potential, but they have yet to learn how to organise all the material in the given time and showcase it all in an aesthetic way.

Murder of a marine

Set in Guantanamo Bay Naval Base in Cuba, "A Few Good Men" is a court room drama brimming with suspense and tension

DIWAN SINGH BAJELI

The two remarkable aspects of "A Few Good Men", presented by Dragon Rose Project under the auspices of Aadyam Theatre at Kamani Auditorium, are uniformly superb acting and an ingeniously conceptualised set. A court room drama, the production sees the unfolding of the tragic theme of the murder of a marine in the name of security and military discipline. As the truth about the murder is gradually revealed, the atmosphere becomes tense and full of suspense.

Adapted by Aaron Sorokin for the stage from his film of the same title, the play is set in Guantanamo Bay Naval Base in Cuba. In this base, William Santiago is posted as marine. Unable to cope with hard and inhuman working conditions, he seeks his transfer. Before he could be relieved of his duties, his body is discovered. Two fellow marines are accused of murdering him. Three lawyers are provided to defend the accused in the military court with Lt. Daniel A. Kaffee to lead the team. Initially, he seems to be least enthusiastic about the case and is careless. However, he is constantly goaded by one of his associate Lt. CDR. Joanne Alloway to work hard and study law seriously and go into the bottom of the murder case. All this is not that simple as the top hierarchy of military establishment wants to believe. As the legal proceedings begin in the



Engrossing play A scene from "A Few Good Men" ■ NEVILLE SUKHIA

military court, Kaffee gets seriously involved in the case, doing homework with earnestness with his team. As two marines stand in the witness box, it is widely believed that they will be declared guilty.

Meanwhile, Kaffee feels sympathy for Santiago. He finds it difficult to obtain facts about the case while talking with Col. Nathan Jessep, a highly arrogant officer who always considers himself responsible for national security and maintaining discipline in the armed forces. Lt. Col. Mathew Markinson knows truth about the murder. He feels the pricks of his conscience but he is timid and in his guilt he commits suicide. In the absence of a key witness, the defence team of lawyers find it hard to secure justice to their clients.

Finally, appears Col. Nathan Jessep as the witness, full of airs, his every gesture and style of speech revealing his narcissistic outlook. He looks at the lawyers and even the judge with superiority complex. Displaying

physical alacrity and mental alertness, defence lawyer Lt. Kaffee provokes him and questions him in forceful voice, attacking his ego as a self-styled defender of much needed discipline in the armed forces. He admits he had issued "Code Red" order against Santiago.

In fact, "Code Red" order is an extra judicial violent punishment given to a soldier whom the officer considers a serious offender of discipline, who could not be prosecuted in a military court. Set design, conceptualised by Juhi Gupta, deserves special mention for exploring space horizontally and vertically. The dramatic action continues to be transferred to different locales. The military court has several sessions to cross examine witnesses and arguments of lawyers.

Smooth transition

The set ensure the shifting of the action from one locale to another with a number of exit and entry points in a smooth way, maintaining the tempo and rhythm of the production. The dark, grim,

tense moods are reinforced by the use of shades of grey, black and steel. Without disturbing the structure high up the upstage on a platform we watch Lt. Col. Markinson committing suicide feeling unable to face the court to reveal the truth. The image is projected in the dim light to accentuate the dark face of severe and inhuman military discipline. The audience views this sequence with bated breath.

Rajit Kapur is suitably cast as Col. Nathan Jessep. He delivers his dialogue in a booming voice, creating an aura of a narcissistic personality. Neil Bhoopalam as Lt. Daniel A. Kaffee, the defence lawyer, gradually transforms his carefree lawyer into a lawyer with keen legal insight and art of cross examination. While cross-examining Col. Jessep, he becomes the cynosure of all eyes, forcing Col. Jessep to admit his extralegal and inhuman act. Ira Dubey as lawyer Lt. CDR Joanne Galloway combines her portrait with intensity and silent persistence to bring out truth.

Seeking peace

Discourses by scholars on Buddhism, feature films, an art and photography exhibition were some of the highlights of The Inner Path - Festival of Buddhist Film, Art & Philosophy that was held at the National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi, recently.

The festival, organised by The International Buddhist Confederation and the Network for Promotion of Asian Cinema, saw screening of "Seven Wonders of the Buddhist World" by Faris Kermani of UK; "A Thousand Mothers" by Kim Shelton



A still from 'Searching for a Miracle'

and "Bodh Gaya - The Seat of Enlightenment from India" by MSN Karthik.

The Buddhist art exhibition "Looking Inward" revealed a understanding of what the Buddha taught. Art Konsult, a gallery showcasing art at "The Inner Path" in previous editions, brought a plethora of art inspired by the Buddhist thought, presented in three parts "Zen", "Thanka" & "The Buddha". The exhibition featured artists like Bryan Mulvihill, Dheeraj Yadav, Kalicharan Gupta, Nupur Kundu, Biman Das and Dharmendra Rathore.

The inaugural address was given by Austin Fernando, High Commissioner of Sri Lanka in India. He spoke on Anagārika Dharmapāla's contribution to Buddhism in India.

Tribute

Like a banyan tree...

Known for his self-effacing humility, Pandit Santosh Banerjee always strived to practice what he taught

MEENA BANERJEE

A fatal fall, followed by a cardiac arrest, and almost two days of struggle between life and death came to a halt in the early morning of 19th October as Pandit Santosh Banerjee left this world of mediocrity and set out on his eternal journey in the quest for purest music - his life-long mission.

A typical Bengali, frail, fair man who had striking similarity with the matinee idol Uttam Kumar's good looks and the only surbahar and sitar maestro belonging to Senia Rampur Sahaswan Gharana, was too fast for his darling daughter Sahana Banerjee, an eminent sitarist in her own right, and a clutch of doting disciples who were trying their level best to bring him back; because for his followers and connoisseurs this epitome of self-effacing humility was like a banyan tree under whose shades the pure veena-based tantrakari of yore thrived so far. But it was not to be.

The century-old house on the Kali Temple Road, adjacent to the world-renowned Kalighat Mandir of south Kolkata, had always seen streams of visitors who came seeking musical knowledge from both, the Sangeetacharya and his erudite life partner Chhabi Banerjee, daughter-disciple of Kashinath Chatterjee belonging to Rampur Sahaswan Gharana. Their residence, which always reverberated with classy vocal and instrumental music, was submerged in hushed silence despite the presence of musicians belonging to every possible genre. All came to bid adieu to this renowned sitar-surbahar player, formerly a member of faculty and head of the department of Instrumental Music, Rabindra Bharati University and a sought after guru, who was known for his dogged devotion towards the traditional ethos of his style, handed down to him by his loving ustad, Dabir Khan, grandson of Ustad Wazir Khan, descendants of the daughters' family of Miyan Tansen.



Role model Pandit Santosh Banerjee (1931 - 2019)

Ustad Wazir Khan, the legendary beenkar had groomed immortal stalwarts such as sarod legend Ustad Alauddin Khan, sitar maestro Ustad Mushtaq Hussain Khan and several others; but never let them in the secret world of veena - an art reserved for the family only.

Ustad Dabir Khan (1905 - 1972), a beenkar and vocalist of high repute, came down to Calcutta in 1935 and settled in Rippon Street. Like his grandfather, he too chiselled generations of great musicians such as sarod maestro Radhika Mohan Maitra, Birendra Krishna Roy Chowdhury, eminent playback singer Manna Dey and a host of others. When a teenaged Santosh Banerjee went to learn from him at Bhowanipur School, he found that the ustad did not play the sitar; he always sang; even to teach instrumental music!

Ironically, as a young student of music, Santosh always believed that there are many intricate nuances that are impossible to express through

When a teenaged Santosh Banerjee went to learn from him at Bhowanipur School, he found that the ustad did not play the sitar; he always sang; even to teach instrumental music!

vocal music; only instruments could do justice to these. That is why he was keen to learn sitar and began his musical journey pretty early under the guidance of Aparesh Chatterjee. His father was interested in music and drama. He encouraged his son to pursue his passion but along with the proper support of scriptures. This ignited an unquenchable thirst in his young mind for the underlying philosophy of music. Captivated by this quest, Ustad Dabir Khan, on his own, asked him to learn the veena, separately at his Kali Temple Road residence. This was a huge step - a departure from an age-old tradition of Senia beenkars.

By this time, Santosh Banerjee was an established sitar exponent who also developed unflinching faith in vocal music. He started taking vocal taaleem from Kashinath Chatterjee. His ravishingly beautiful daughter Chhabi was a serious student of music and this developed in a special bond. After the untimely demise of his guru, Santosh married his daughter and despite his conservative background encouraged her to continue with her art.

His own melodious sitar renderings, blending emotion and skill, were noticed by high officials of All India Radio and he got chain recitals all over India. Veena lessons added depth to his playing but, unfortunately, the myth -

that 'veena is not meant for everyone', proved true in his case.

Despite his devotion, veena eluded him and he suffered ill-health. He could not play even the sitar for over one year. The undeterred Ustad gave him another option - surbahar. And this worked. He taught the entire gamut of dhrupad-based been-anga baaj to his favourite disciple.

This technique was uniquely different from the widely heard rudraveena based on gayaki anga. The Senia Rampur style of alap consisted of sthaayi, antara, sanchaari, aabhog followed by jod replete with twelve segments, tarparan with pakhawaj and thhonk jhala. During their association as the guru and shishya for over two decades, the ustad gave him as much vidya as possible. To this Banerjee added the intrinsic essence of his soulful romanticism. As such their jugalbandis on rudraveena and surbahar became very popular in Calcutta circles. In 1969, the ustad-shagird duet at the Tansen Sangeet Samaroh, Gwalior turned out to be a great success. With passing years, in the twilight zone of his life, he could not manoeuvre this majestic but heavy instrument; but played the sitar with the zest of a youngster.

Grooming torchbearers

Despite his success as a performer, Banerjee loved to teach - the way his ustad did. He could never appreciate the materialistic mindset of the artistes and ensuing compromises with one's art. He preferred 'manmauji' or moody artists to calculative ones. Moreover, he wished to groom worthy torchbearers who would carry the legacy of his Gharana. He always strived to practice what he taught. As a living role model he inspired and mentored many learned musicians like (the late) sitar maestro Deepak Chowdhury, surbahar exponent Ujjwalendu Chakraborty and several others including Sahana Banerjee who incorporates a lot of veena tantrakari elements in her sitar playing.

Albeit very happy with his daughter's and disciples' dedication, he often lamented the decaying musical culture in the absence of devoted gurus and diligent pupils. With his sudden departure, this diminishing clan has received yet another severe blow.



Complete devotion Bombay Jayashri ■ V.V. KRISHNAN

Music for the soul

Bombay Jayashri was in sublime form at her morning concert of Carnatic music in New Delhi

C S PANCHAMAKESAN

Melody is defined as a linear succession of musical tones that the listener perceives as a single entity. In case of vocal music, the melody is accentuated with a gifted voice which few people are born with. Bombay Jayashri is one of the rare vocalists embodying erudition, pedigree, honey voice and intense manodharma. Over the years, she has emerged as nightingale of Carnatic music.

India Habitat Centre and SPIC MACAY featured Bombay Jayashri on a Sunday morning concert of Carnatic Music this past week. While Hindustani classical music has several ragas which are traditionally associated with different times of the day or seasons, Carnatic music does not have such a straitjacket structure.

Thus, it was a challenge for Jayashri to string the pearls of her repertoire to suit the theme. She simply and delightfully chose a traditional concert or kutchery format and presented divine music to a packed audience of music lovers of both Carnatic and Hindustani.

Inspired by this integration, Jayashri took them through an internalised musical journey for two hours

She began her concert with a scintillating alapana of raga Mohanakalyani followed by Bhuvan Eshwariya, a composition of Harikeshanallur Mutayya of late 19th Century, who is credited with more than 400 compositions. The pentatonic scale of Mohanam and the Melakarta effect of Kalyani gave a soulful start that set the tone and tenor for the morning.

Then followed a deep meditative Khamas alap that heralded Muthuswamy Deekshidar school of music which recognises this as a sampurna raga. Aptly Jayashri invoked Deekshidar kriti Santhana Gopalakrishnam in Sanskrit. This song is believed to bestow progeny and prosperity as Deekshidar himself says in the Anupallavi.

Jayashri very piously brought out all the hues and shades of sentiments of this song and endowed it with a garland of pristine pure swara prastharas. The piece de resistance of the morning was the beautiful raga Mayamalavagowla, a very auspicious raga that evokes peace and divinity. Jayashri elaborated the ragas and brought out the inner majesty to the fore in a languid manner which spread an aura of tranquillity. The entranced audience were served with one of the most sacred compositions of Saint Thyagaraja - "Meru Samana Dheera" on Lord Rama.

Continued on Page 7

The enigma of Annapurna Devi

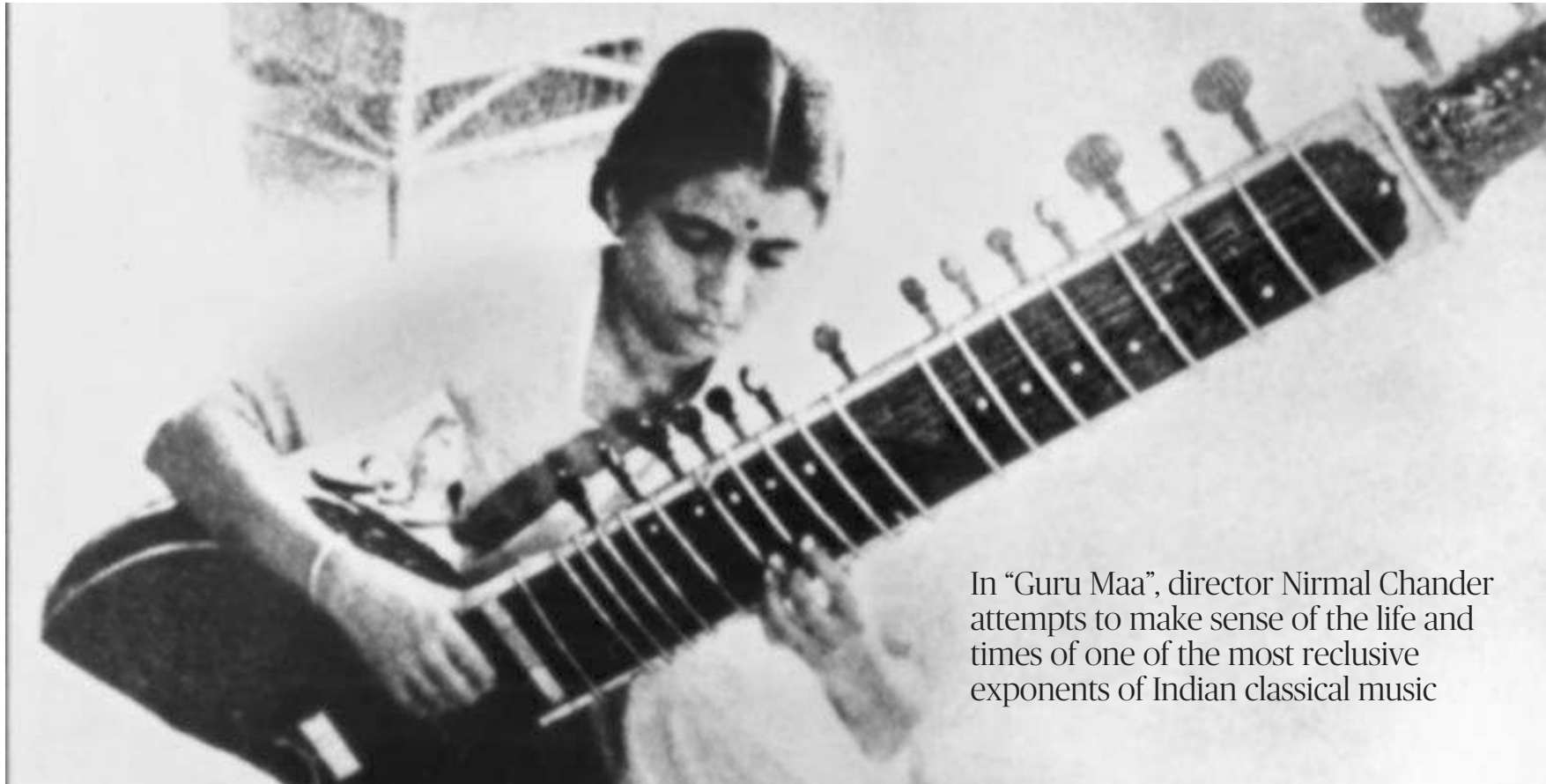
SHRINKHLA SAHAI

In the world of newsfeed narratives, recreating the story of an invisible maestro from the last century is a formidable challenge. Annapurna Devi, remains an enigmatic legend of the Hindustani classical world whose absence from the spotlight of a promising performing career, is matched by her mythical musicianship that was shared only with her circle of students. Known fondly as Guru Maa to her disciples, she mentored several renowned musicians including Hariprasad Chaurasia, Nikhil Banerjee, Nityanand Haldipur, Kartick Kumar, Basant Kabra, and others. Capturing her life through a documentary film, “Guru Maa”, posed a fascinating puzzle that led to a transformative journey for the director, Nirmal Chander.

The absent artist

The National Award-winning filmmaker says, “When I was approached by Sangeet Natak Akademi to make a film on Annapurna Devi, I took it up as an interesting challenge. First of all, beyond the classical music fraternity, no one knows much about her. Since she chose to live away from the public eye, people mostly know her as Pandit Ravi Shankar’s first wife, Baba Allaudin Khan’s daughter or Ali Akbar Khan’s sister. I felt this film is an opportunity for the world to get to know her beyond this. I tried to interpret her from the narratives of her disciples. She tried to make sense of life through music, I attempted to make sense of her life through the camera, as a fellow traveller.”

Produced by the Sangeet Natak Akademi, the film traces the contours of her life through the places she lived in and moved through - mostly focusing on Maihar where she was brought



A class apart Annapurna Devi ■ PHOTOS COURTESY SANGEET NATAK AKADEMI ARCHIVES

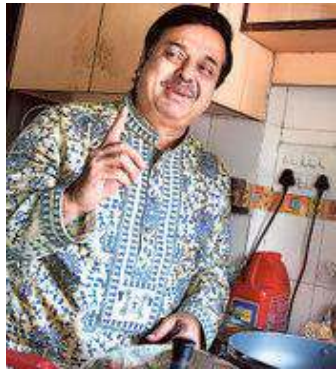
up, and Mumbai, where she lived a reclusive life after her separation from Ravi Shankar. The film follows a leisurely pace, putting together the puzzle of her life and persona through the voices of her disciples, relatives and a few family friends.

The musician herself appears fleetingly on screen, through an excerpt from an interview conducted by Shekhar Sen, Chairperson, Sangeet Natak Akademi. Introducing the film at the screening, and sharing his own fond memories of frequenting her home along with his mother as a child, when she was learning from Annapurna Devi, Sen recollected, “I was given stern instructions by my mother to wait quietly, not to ask anything, or touch anything in the house. I was in awe of Guru Maa. Even her dog, named Munna, was attuned to music and could follow notes



The film doesn’t describe her life or analyse her music; it is simply about devotion to music

Nirmal Chander



I was in awe of Guru Maa. Even her dog, named Munna, was attuned to music and could follow notes

Shekhar Sen

using music as a tool to reach somewhere else. I think for her it was about surrendering to music with love. Informing myself in that manner, I structured the film accordingly. The film doesn’t describe her life or analyse her music; it is simply about devotion to music.”

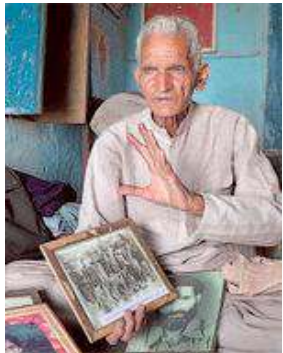
Silent notes

The film pieces together her early life through archival photographs, while it is also mentioned that she ‘hated the camera’. At the age of 13, she was already an accomplished surbahar player, daring to take up an instrument that was lesser-known, more challenging to play

Lens on life

The camera captures verdant expanses and the scenic beauty of Utarakhand, juxtaposing that to the lonely struggle of a farmer poet as he haltingly shares the journey of a lifetime. Produced by the Public Service Broadcasting Trust, “Moti Bagh” is Nirmal Chander’s documentary film that trails personal narratives and poetry, expanding them into larger political questions about migration, displacement, and community. The film won the Best Long Documentary award at the 12th International Documentary and Short Films Festival of Kerala which made it India’s official entry for the 92nd Academy Awards in the Best Long Documentary category. For the filmmaker, the themes are structured around his observations of the world. He feels the urge to make a film, to understand better, the world around, and within. “It’s a part of me trying to make sense of the world through the camera,” he shares. “For me, ‘Moti Bagh’ is deeply personal. At one level it is about my own uncle, someone I have known forever. In a way, it is also about my own roots. And then it explores larger issues around our relationship with nature, decay, loss, moving away, migration.”

The protagonist of the film is 83-year-old Vidyadutt Sharma, living in a remote Himalayan village called Sanguda in Pauri Garhwal. Immersed in poetry and farming, he survives amid abandoned villages, unravelling the world through his words and activism. “I remember the time when the entire roof of his house was blown away in the storm,” recounts Chander, “and he just sat down muttering to himself, ‘even my white hair can’t understand this cycle of nature, one moment it gives, the other moment it takes everything away!’” The film tugs away at the idea of emerging from loss and the filmmaker paced out the film slowly to capture the entire agricultural cycle over all the seasons. “I marvel at the way Vidyadutt ji has become an inspiration for others; it takes a lifetime to understand and be one with this rhythm of nature, to make peace with it.” Reflecting on how his film has carried an unknown story into the limelight, Chander says, “We are so occupied with talking about prominent personalities, but it is these ordinary stories of everyday life that really draw me, these are our stories, and we need to recognise them as lives that are being lived extraordinarily.”



and even bigger in size compared to her petite frame. Her brother would often tease her about it, and she even had to sit on a stool to hold it properly. Yet, in her stubborn, determined way, she took this up. “I am still a child, finding my way in the world of music,” says the artist in her brief presence in the interview.

Her last known performance was in 1963. Consequently, she denounced public performance, and wilfully withdrew into oblivion. The reasons for this decision

have never been clearly known but speculatively attributed to the tragic tale of the marriage breaking apart in the aftermath of professional jealousy, incompatibility, and infidelity. Why did she stop performing, and what if she hadn’t, remain the key questions that underline any work on her life and music.

For Chander, it was important to turn this question inside out, “We think in a certain way as artists, as audience and society, that is why it is so difficult for us to understand or accept this act

of turning away from the active performance,” he opines. “But why is it so unbelievable? Her world was different, for her, maybe, it was natural to do so. Maybe she did not want any credit for her music, then who are we to question it! I don’t find it very strange that she didn’t perform, I can relate to it. Did she do a disservice by not performing in public? Again, who are we to judge that!” he says.

While she stopped performing, she never stopped teaching. Reflecting on her dedication as a

guru, Chander says, “How do we know she was great? But you have to be a great musician to produce so many disciples of that stature.”

Music and muse

Chander’s earlier film, “Zikr Us Parivash Ka”, was about another legendary personality of Hindustani music, Begum Akhtar. Both artists occupy divergent, contrasting ends of the spectrum in terms of their persona and approach. Akhtar’s exuberant and charming public persona kept her at the helm of stage success, and her personal life was often the most openly scandalous for her era.

Reflecting on his own journey as a filmmaker, Chander says, “I feel very happy for this opportunity to make films on two women artists on different ends of the spectrum. For Begum Akhtar, the context where she came from was very different, the way she reversed the cultural narrative about tawaifs was highlighted in the film, giving them due credit. On the other hand, Annapurna Devi broke another kind of myth. We think art is for public display and applause, and she breaks that idea. To really understand this, one has to introspect and rethink one’s own art form.”

Chander points out that Annapurna Devi also played a major role in reclaiming the space for women instrumentalists in the 20th century. “Her achievement is extraordinary. We wanted to bring that out in a humble way. Choosing to play the surbahar, was an extraordinary feat, and opened up the way for so many women performers in the last century even though she herself did not perform.”

The film also deepens the poignant speculation about the idea of solitude, emotional pain, and how that translates into life and art. “Of course, she lived with a lot of pain,” reflects Chander, “to be able to live alone with that and have the strength to give, is rare. As an artist, how one processes that pain, sorrow and love, that is important. It is something she lived with and did not let it destroy her. She chose the people she wanted to share her music and life.”

In treatment and aesthetics, the film attempts to resonate Annapurna Devi’s approach to life - it is austere, inward-looking and in many ways keeps the enigma intact. “Guru Maa never sought approval from anyone, she lived with and for her art, for me, it was important that the film also expresses that. It changed me as an artist, and I hope it will make the audience also rethink their own approach to art and life.”

‘I have always loved the circus’

For Sakti Burman, art is a way to present reality with a dash of imagination

UMA NAIR

Sakti Burman, the alchemist of dreams unravels 66 years of work at New Delhi’s Art Alive Gallery with drawings, sketches, and watercolours. It draws you into a trance that permeates your senses. The Paris-based artist’s oeuvre flits through orchestration of ephemeral and evanescent encounters with sylph-like figures floating between realms of metaphoric and material transcendence. He presents insights into his tumultuous years.

Excerpts:

Let’s begin at the genesis, the frescoes of Pompeii, the narrative of Naples. It’s as if Greek and Roman fables have fed your fantasy for more than six decades.

Absolutely, at the end of the day, I have always been a storyteller. And Pompeii has been my all-time inspiration. I find that story unforgettable in every way. I love to visit Pompeii and Naples, I love to see the paintings again and again. The history of Roman painting is almost entirely dominated by these durable frescoes. It never pales, never fades.

Pompeii is also about the great orator Cicero, and the fine poet Virgil. So many images come fleeting back in memory. Is art then more about the imagination as well as what feeds your fantasy in terms of literature?

Indeed nothing in the art can move if we don’t have imagination. When I create my watercolours and drawings, I’m going back in time and bringing it forward to the present. The stories that I see, that I experience, the stories in my memory, each event



Multiple characters pull the narrative Sakti Burman’s “Two Horses”; an untitled work

serves to freeze a moment in the past. I love the beauty of history and memory overlapping in my mind. I think of the perfectly preserved ruins - petrified over the centuries. For me, as an artist, it offers the world’s most complete picture of ancient Roman life.

And characters and poets like Virgil and the great writer Cicero are always there in my mind. For me, painting and literature go hand in hand. I remember a few years back requesting the famous poet Sunil Gangopadhyay to write about my work. It was an honour. I consider writing a high form of art.

What about the many characters that have always been part of your alchemy of dreams. It’s as if you are mixing the real and the unreal - the clowns, the human figures with the crowns, the bird-like hybrid humans. Each individual seems to float in the archive of your multiple moorings.

I have always loved the circus. The clowns play an important part in my creations because they are a symbol of dark comedy. They stand for a satire that is more poetic than political. It is their sadness through the veil of comedy that has always touched me. Art, for me, was always about trying to express some kind of reality mixed with what is unreal, a dreamlike sequence. The events you see are a result of juxtapositions within my subconscious, my cultural fabric, and my reality.

Within the contradiction and the ironies, it becomes a paradox of connection and disconnection through patterns of familiarity. Your early works have a



An artist must remain true to his or her instincts and find the absolute truth within the intuitive

realist mooring, like Kashmir and Bhubaneswar, as if belonging to differential notes of being. From this you moved into the floating feathery figures...are you leading viewers into an auratic element of enchantment?

I have always felt that my stories need to be told. The characters come and go. It’s like playing through many acts and scenes-and being the playwright of a garden of earthly delights. Sometimes, I’m speculating, sometimes I’m finding a sequence, but it’s always about the realms of human figures - they are part and parcel of my fabulous tales.

My childhood memories were mixed up with existing realities. For me, my art can be creative only if my memory is fertile. My coupling past and present through my tapestry of memories is what sustains my repertoire of reflections.

Equally enticing are your placement of figures and hybrid bird-like forms as if in an allegorical epiphany of tones and tenors. How does Hanuman fit in with the Centaur?

I paint people. I capture the expression and emotion of humans, sometimes they are not so manly nor womanly, but they are beautiful as they are. My characters go through their griefs but they are also full of hope. Ultimately, hope is the only thing you can hold on to and continue living. It’s this optimism that I bring to the fore in my work, underlining the positive side of life - the crown is that symbol. I am always in close communion with my painterly world, that is why even if I’m at the airport or on a train I keep drawing all the time.

Mine is an eternal quest for the line, in my search for the indefinable the line is what keeps me living. Hanuman and the Centaur, the East and the West, it becomes a confluence of many conversations. My drawings are about a practice that revolves around recreating and recasting my idea of the existence of humanity at different spaces, places and times.

Ancient history, mythology, and personal history, everything must merge and that is why tradition and modernity both play a role for me. I have always tried to follow a line to find that inward journey because an artist must remain true to his or her instincts and find the absolute truth within the intuitive.

(The exhibition continues at Art Alive Gallery, New Delhi, until October 30)



The Piano Man

Art is where the home is

Have you ever thought about the crucial role selfless and silent caregivers play in the lives of musicians?

ANIL SRINIVASAN



What makes a musician great? Is it his or her ability to take us into the realm of sublime timelessness during the period they engage us? Is that reason enough for us to venerate them? What makes them such important entities for us?

They are healers indeed! Since music's therapeutic value is well known. But some recent developments seems to be taking the art far away from its basic purpose. Meaningless awards and titles, the artistes' constant craving for adulation and desperation to stay relevant not only render true creativity irrelevant but end up making musicians create pressure on themselves.

In a study recently published in New Zealand and later on followed up in the U.K., it was found that musicians have the second highest incidence of mental breakdowns (the highest being doctors).

While the artistes battle it out in the performance arena, it is important to know if they are backed by a stable or protective environment at home. And so, in the wake of the upcoming December Season, I turn my attention to the support system that contributes immensely to the production of great musicians.

Family support

The sacrifice and strength of character of those in the support system are crucial in the face of irrational and unreasonable behaviour some musicians show in their personal space. As a performing artiste, I often see how my moods and behaviour affect those closest to me – my wife, mother, siblings and friends. Though it's a part and parcel of my creative make up, it cannot be an excuse.

And I think of Constanze Mozart. Of Clara Schumann. And of Saint Tyagaraja's wife. To live a life not as an equal, but as a permanent caregiver, uncomplainingly.

Constanze Mozart endured a husband fond of wine and women, but who composed the most beautiful songs. She had to tolerate a man who was often careless with his money, and owed debts all over Vienna. In this, she made a home for him, raised his children and allowed him his space to create musical solutions for the universe. Also a young widow, she took to popula-

rising his music and in later life, memorial concerts, to support herself and her two sons, one of whom also became a musician and composer. Biographers of the Mozarts have often been harsh on Constanze, which is rather usual for patriarchal hagiographies of the age. But we must understand how hard and complicated life must have been for her, given how prolific and unpredictable her brilliant husband was. The important thing to remember is that she was a musician herself.

Very little is said of Saint Tyagaraja's wife. Not the first one, Parvati, who died young. But the second, Kanakambal. Amidst all the hardships that she faced, she created a stability in their household attending to both economic and personal challenges, fairly often.

Clara Schumann was a gifted pianist, perhaps one of the best in her time. She was also a collaborator with her composer-husband. Her life was far from easy, being a performer herself and having to deal with a genius at home, who was emotionally unstable. He died young, at the age of 46, never recovering from his mental illness.

At this point, I want to hit the 'pause' button. Before assessing the mental health of musicians, both the well-known and the not-so-known, I want to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to all the caregivers. I want to use this essay to celebrate their nurturing, selflessness and special strength of these silent witnesses to greatness. May the festive season fill all our lives with light.

The writer is a well-known pianist and music educator



Artistic collaborator Clara Schumann



Theatre Talk

'A play is made in the rehearsal process'

Mohit Takalkar on why he finds theatre-making exciting

DEEPA GAHLOT



Mohit Takalkar was just out of the shoot of his second feature film, *Medium Spicy*, when he was invited by the Mumbai theatre group Rage, to direct *Mosambi Narangi*, co-incidentally set in a film shoot in north India.

"It is the first play of mine where I have not chosen the script. I walked in when the script and team were in place," he says. There was a certain comfort level.

Takalkar's group Aasakta Kalamanch, established in Pune, in 2003, quickly established a reputation for its unique and experimental plays. He went on to win many awards and fellowships even while continuing his work as a film editor, actor, writer and restaurateur. A graduate of Mumbai's catering college and a good cook it reflects in the success of Barometer, his restaurant in Pune that he runs along with fellow group member Ashish Mehta. "It still does not earn enough profits to fund our plays," he laughs.

Apart from 'Gajab Kahani', which he revisited for Aadyam in order to "experiment with scale," Takalkar's recent plays, like 'Main Huun Yusuf Aur Yeh Hai Mera Bhai' and Chaheta (both by Palestinian playwright Aamir Nizar Zoabi) and 'Mathemagician' (a solo performed by Ipshita Chakraborty Singh) have been simple productions with complex ideas to convey.

"Plays with just one or two actors are hard to find and hard to do too," he says. "When you have an ensemble, it's a different challenge. An ensemble is like an orchestra, you have so many voices to play with."

Takalkar turns a critical eye on

the work of Aasakta, and is bothered about low numbers for plays like 'Chaheta' and 'Mathemagician'. "We are, right now fighting for funds and audiences. To make a play, mount it and carry on a production has become a big task for us. *Mosambi Narangi*, a comedy and well adapted by Ashok Mishra, has come as a breath of fresh air since we are known for doing serious plays. Also, we haven't done a Marathi play for a long time, I need to reconnect with that audience and go back where we started."

Several of Aasakta members like Sagar Deshmukh, Varun Narvekar, Omkar Govardhan and Sarang Sathye have made a place for themselves in the film and web

Takalkar's group Aasakta Kalamanch focuses on unique and experimental plays that give a creative high



Drama time A scene from 'Mosambi Narangi' (below) Mohit Takalkar

space; Radhika Apte is in another league altogether. "Everyone has graduated except for me," says Takalkar laughing. "When we start reading a new play, whoever is in Pune turns up. In every Aasakta play, we work with at least one actor we have not worked with before. When someone comes to us and says they want to work with Aasakta, I first ask them if they have seen any of our plays. We have the reputation of being inaccessible but once they come, they realise it's good. In spite of the fact that we don't pay and rehearse in Pune they want to stay. Like Ajeet and Ipshita have done. Why? Because of our approach to theatre, the way we access the play.

"A lot has to be done by the actors to find themselves within the play and own it. Even a backstage person has the freedom to have an opinion. Rehearsals spread over two months bind people together. For me, a play is done in the rehearsal process, after the first show I detach myself. That is why none of our shows go beyond 25 – never mind if there is a demand for more shows, we close every production after 25 shows. Except for 'Gajab Kahani', I have never been tempted to revisit any of my plays. For me, the success of a work is that feeling the morning after a tiring, emotionally draining show, when you are still raring to go for the next show. I enjoy the theatre-making process. That's why no matter what else I do, it never even crosses my mind to give up theatre," says Takalkar.

The writer is a critic and columnist

Hindi Belt

Refusing to fade away

A poet of protest, Dhoomil's thoughts continue to resonate with the readers

KULDEEP KUMAR

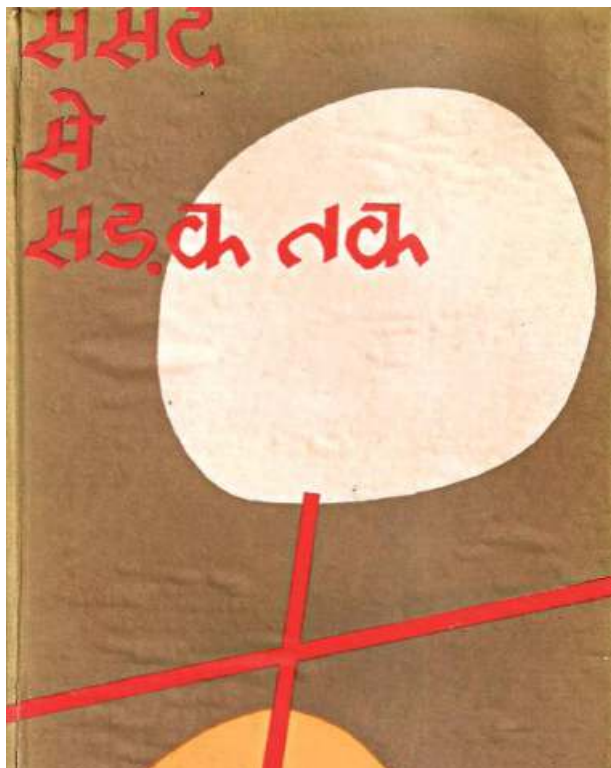
Ek aadami roti belata hai
Ek aadami roti khaata hai
Ek teesra aadami bhi hai
Jo na roti belata hai, na ro-
ti khaata hai
Vah surf roti se khelata hai
Main poochhata hoon --
"Yah teesara aadami kaun
hai?"
Mere desh ki sansad maun
hai.

("Roti aur Sansad")
One man rolls out bread
One man eats it
There is a third man too
Who neither rolls out
bread nor eats it
He merely plays with it
I ask: "Who is this third
man?"

The parliament of my
country maintains silence.
("Bread and Parliament")
Is this poem, written by
Dhoomil in the early 1970s,
not as relevant today as it
was at the time of its writing?

The Hindi world suffers from short memory syndrome. It is true that remembering all the relevant writers all the time is just not possible, but it is also true that certain writers are remembered all the time while certain others are pushed into oblivion despite the fact that they enjoyed an iconic status not too long ago. Dhoomil, whose real name Sudama Pandey was known only to a few, belongs to the latter category. While he was alive, he was hailed as one of the most significant voices of protest in the world of Hindi literature. His genius lay in his ability to fashion a largely unfamiliar poetic language that gave a jolt to traditional literary sensibility and his gift to coin phrases that gleamed like gems was the envy of many of his fellow poets.

In the beginning of the 1960s, he exploded on the Hindi literary scene like a powerful cracker and, despite his rustic mannerisms, compelled the literary establishment to recognise his originality and talent. The



support of influential Marxist critic Namwar Singh too played a big role in propelling him to the front ranks of contemporary poets, much to the discomfiture of many a well known writers. A few days after his sudden death on February 10, 1975 at the age of 38, a condolence meeting was organised at Uttar Pradesh Information Centre in Delhi's Connaught Place. I have vivid recollection of that meeting where Agyeya, one of the top Hindi writers, grudgingly acknowledged that Dhoomil too had his flock of "admirers", leaving a distinct impression that he was not among them.

Rebellious nature

Dhoomil was born in Khevali near Banaras on November 9, 1936 where his father was a munim (accountant) with a businessman. However, when he was barely 15, he lost his father and had to struggle a lot to move ahead in life. He did a diploma in electrical engineering from Industrial Training Institute and became an Instructor in the same institution.

Because of his rebellious nature and an acute sense of self-respect, he was transferred to several places including Balia and Saharanpur. After the death of Muktibodh in 1964, Dhoomil emerged as the most prominent poet of protest and rebellion who exposed the glaring contradictions of Indian democracy and the system that it had put in place.

This was also the time when language politics was at its peak and misguided Lohiaites had launched a movement for removal of English while Tamil Nadu and other south Indian states had risen in opposition to the imposition on Hindi. As Arvind Krishna Mehrotra has pointed out, Dhoomil in his poem *Bhasha ki Raat* (The Night of Language) described the politician as the 'true butcher' and 'hungry beast' who raises the emotive issue of language for his own selfish ends, leaving the real issues untouched.

Mehrotra, an eminent poet, and translator renders a few lines from this poem: "In the eyes of the true

butcher/ Your Tamil misery/ And my Bhojpuri grief/ Are one and the same/ In the mouth of that beast/ Who is one thing in the street/ And another in parliament/ Language is a piece of meat." Is today's India any different from the one Dhoomil described so evocatively in his poems?

In a poem titled "Bees Saal Baad" (After Twenty Years), the poet asks himself: "Kya azadi sirf teen thake hue rangon ka naam hai/ Jinhen ek pahiya dhotaa hai/ Yaa iskaa koi khaas matlab hota hai?" (Is Independence merely the name of three tired colours/ That a wheel carries along/ Or, does it have a special meaning?) And another poem called "Patkatha" (Screen-play) prophetically ends with these words: "Ghrina mein dooba hua saara ka saara desh/ Pahle ki tarah hi aaj bhi/ mera karaagar hai" (The country soaking in its hatred/ Holds me a prisoner/ Today, as always).

When Dhoomil was writing his poetry of political protest, other kinds of protests were also taking place in Hindi poetry in the form of *Akavita* (Anti-Poetry), *Bhookhi Peedhi* (Hungry Generation) and Left-wing poetry. Sexual norms were also being challenged in a mostly chaotic manner. Consequently, there are strong male chauvinist sexist resonances in his poetry and they sound rather jarring. Dhoomil could publish only one collection containing 25 poems during his lifetime. Titled "Sansad Se Sadak Tak" (From the parliament to the street), it was published by Rajkamal Prakashan. His other books "Kal Sunana Mujhe" (Listen to Me Tomorrow), "Dhoomil ki Kavitaen" (Poems of Dhoomil) and "Sudama Pandey Ka Prajatantra" (The Democracy of Sudama Pandey) were published posthumously.

The writer is a senior literary critic

Telling Voices

The plot unfolds

For Stephen King, the fun of writing a novel is not in the finished product but in the process

SUDHAMAH REGUNATHAN

If John Grisham has his plot in hand before he wrote, Stephen King, no less a best selling author has a completely different strategy. He says, "There is no rationale...you go where the story leads you. In the story I just wrote, I had no idea it was to have a dark conclusion. I thought this book will be the opposite of *Dracula* where the good guys win.

In this book, the good guys are going to lose and everybody is going to become a vampire at the end of the book. But that did not happen. Because you go with the book and this one just led me into a very dark place. I did not even want to go there, I wanted people to find it out for themselves..."

King describes writing as a, "...big powerful machine. The best description of writing a novel, that I ever heard, was in Thomas Williamson's novel about a novelist trying to write a novel. It covers one or two days...it is a process

and a lot of things happen to him. It is a fabulous book.

He says that writing a novel is like building a little camp fire on an empty dark plain. One by one these characters come out of the dark and each one has a little pile of wood and then it



is this big bonfire and all the characters stand around to warm themselves. And that is what is good for me. I have a good friend, John Irving and John says he always begins a novel by writing the last line and to me that is like eating your dessert before you eat the meal. Everybody works in different ways... I could never write a book that way."

Little red thread

King continues, "I have also thought of writing like a little red thread that goes into a hole and you start to pull it out, winding it slowly finding the other end of it. Sooner or later you will get there. For me, the fun of writing a novel is not in the finished product, for which I do not care that much...the shelf holding up my books, that is like dead skin. They are things that are done. But I love the process. I tell the story to myself. And in a way when the work is the best work it is more like being a secretary than being a creative person, you just take the stuff down..."

Yes, King does believe in God because he says, "I made a decision to believe in God because it is better to believe than not. When I had problems bigger than I could solve myself, it was easy to say if I have a pal greater than myself then I can use that to make my life good...there is no downside in believing there is a heaven..." Though he adds, "People with lot of faith have a greater fall...I don't think I fear death so much as diseases that may stop me from thinking..."

...Music for the soul

Continued from Page 3

The lyrics say let us feast our eyes on Your emerald hue and majestic gait and Jayashri portrayed all that Saint Thyagaraja visualised. The song was preceded

ed by a brilliant portrayal of the raga by the ebullient young lady violinist Charumati Raghuraman and followed by a crisp Tani on mridangam by Anantha R Krishnan. Both provided embellished

support in a very unobtrusive manner of total harmony. Bombay Jayashri concluded by taking a few lines from sage Arunagirinathar song "Nada Bindu Kaladi Namo Nama" and suffixed with her Guru Lalgudi's Tillana. It was music from the soul for the souls

Quick Five: Gaurav Chopra

Rogue by choice

ATIF KHAN

Suave and intense are some of the adjectives that are used for Gaurav Chopra who shot to fame with “Uttaran” where he was loved as a rule breaker. He is currently playing a rogue industrialist in MX Player’s “Hello Mini”. Based on “Marry Me Stranger” by Novoneel Chakraborty, the show is a psychological thriller and has Anuja Joshi in the lead role.

Excerpts:

Tell us about your character in the show “Hello Mini”

I am playing the character of a self-made industrialist named Aditya Grover. For him, everything is about power. He has his own set of rules which he follows honestly. He is clear about his choices and is ready to fight to get what he wants. He comes into the story in such moments that require an extra dose of suspense and drama. The character is not part of the book ‘Marry Me, Stranger’.

How do you see your journey so far?

When I first started, I was associated with English bands and was all into music. Acting happened much later when I joined the theatre. I still remember my role in “Uttaran” where I played Raghuvendra Rathore, the rogue, bold rule-breaker, loosely based on the character of Rhett Butler in “Gone with the Wind”. People still remember me for that. I have had my share of failures in the career spanning more than 20 years but it is part of every actor's life. I am happy that people receive me with the same zeal as they used to receive earlier. My stint with reality television brought me closer to my audience. Recently, I took a long break for the theatrical adaptation of “Devdas” where I played the lead.

You also hosted “Savdhaan India” for a while. Some feel such encouragement fetish for crime, what is your take?

There is a very thin line here. Shows like that are planned to make the regular people aware of what is happening in the world around them but there is a possibility of getting sadistic pleasure out of those stories. I am not a creator of the show so I cannot comment much on what goes behind making such shows but I am very sure that it may happen as a coin has both sides, the good and the bad. It is upon us to decide what works for us.

Having worked in television for so long, do you see any change in consumption patterns?

In the last couple of years, the programming has gone really low in content, which is a sad thing. Today, television is competing with the OTT platforms and the producers have to bring quality content to retain the audience.

You acted with Leonardo DiCaprio in “Blood Diamond”. How do you remember that experience?

I was not expecting such an opportunity and it came by sheer coincidence. I was in Africa for a theatre engagement and when I was performing, the casting director was in the audience. He spotted me and gave me the opportunity. I got the same kind of treatment that Leo was receiving and we both used to chat between the shots. It was humbling to know that Hollywood operates in a very professional manner and artists are given respect because of their body of work, not because of their popularity or stardom.



Sound of the dawn



Enchanting music blended seamlessly with the majestic surroundings at the RIFF Dawns

Of mood and melody Bir Singh in performance at Jaswant Thada ■ SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

MURTAZA ALI KHAN

Sufi poet Shah Hussein pithily establishes the man's relation with the divine using the following lines:

‘Man Atkeya Beparwah De Nal

*Man Atkeya
Man Atkeya Beparwah De Nal*

Us Deen Duni De Shah De Nal...

As soon as the Punjabi singer Bir Singh renders these lines at the fourth and final early morning session at the Rajasthan International Folk Festival (RIFF 2019) in Jodhpur, the sun suddenly begins to rise up on the horizon, dispelling the night's darkness as if invoked by Shah Hussein's magical verses, which were first made famous by the legendary Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. “When our mind gets deeply attached to the God there is a strong urge to come face to face with Him. While the God cares for everyone and provides for everyone and all, the poet regrets that his deepest desire of meeting his maker in person remains unfulfilled. But he is convinced that eventually he will succeed,” explains Bir Singh.

According to legends, Tansen could use the ragas to achieve astonishing feats such as making an oil lamp light up (raga Deepak) or summoning rain (raga Megh Malhar). Singh too believes that music and nature share a strong association. “I have a song which I like to call the ‘Song of Wind’. The song is about a difficult phase of my life. I remember I was sitting in a Gurudwara. I wasn't paying any attention to the Gur-

bani as I was lost in some thought. I was engulfed in sadness and there were tears in my eyes. Suddenly, the wind started blowing and my tears quickly dried up. The weather started to change and I began hearing the Gurbani loud and clear as if the pious music had summoned the natural forces to console me when I was feeling so low, perhaps reminding me that a better future awaits me,” re-collects Singh.

The setting

Every year at the Jodhpur RIFF during the resplendent early morning musical sessions, eloquently termed as the RIFF Dawns, the spiritual connect between man and music seems to attain a new dimension. The melody of Azan and the soulful chants of mantras seamlessly blend with the enchanting hymns of the morning ragas performed by legendary musicians to create a magical symphony. It serves as a perfect overture to the enrapturing view of the skyline at the break of the dawn. Jaswant Thada, the cenotaph built in 1899 in memory of Maharaja Jaswant Singh II of Jodhpur, is the home to these entrancing sessions that take place out in the open on every morning of Jodhpur RIFF. The eclectic programming choice on each day ensures that each experience proves to be a unique one. One really has to be out there in order to truly appreciate the magical experience of listening to the music under the stars just before the break of the dawn while savouring the changing moods of light before and after the sunrise.

Earlier, during the second dawn session at the 2019 RIFF, the audiences were treated to performances of noted Rajasthani folk singers like Gemra Ram, Mahesha Ram Meghwal, and Baghe Khan Manganiyar as they transcended the boundaries of caste and religion by singing bhajans in the Nirgun tradition. An important albeit mystical aspect of India's spiritual traditions is Nirgun bhakti. Nirgun doesn't have a body or a soul, beginning or an end. “In the modern society we are used to deifying people, creating idols and gods. But in the Nirgun tradition the notion of a god is always without form, characters, or morals. No good or bad exists in this particular tradition,” explains festival director Divya Bhatia.

The idea of a formless and benign divinity is most evident in Kabir's poetry of the 15th Century as well as poetry and teachings of Goraknathji, Sankarcharya, Ramnanda, and Guru Nanak. “These bhajans are passed from one generation to another. I learnt them from my father who learnt them from his and so on. Hopefully, the coming generations will hear them and learn to appreciate the virtues of this tradition just like their ancestors,” says Gemra Ram. The bhajans are essentially stories that keep the new generations rooted to their tradition. “The Nirgun bhajans are usually sung in the wee hours of the morning. These songs people together more so in today's times when things like caste and religion divide us easily,” avers Mahesha Ram Meghwal.

As part of the third dawn session, the audiences were presented by a brilliant line up of Indian and international musicians featuring the likes of Carnatic vocalist Mahesh Vinayakram, Sindhi sarangi maestro Asin Khan Langa, English musician Andrew Cronshaw, Armenian musician Valeri Tolstov, and the master kamaicha player Darra Manganiyar.

The Meghwals of Marwar

In keeping up with the tradition, the Meghwals of Marwar yet again opened the RIFF Dawns this year. Bhallu Ram and Teja Ram sang the poetry of popular poets of the Meghwal community as well as the saints of Rajasthan with the rhythmic fusion of tandura, dhokla, and manjira filling the air with meditative and spiritual vibes.

Moonrise session with Pushkar Lele

Other than the four dawn sessions scheduled at the Jaswant Thada, a special moonrise session was also organised on the penultimate day to mark the occasion of Sharad Poornima, the brightest full moon of the year in North India. As part of the session, the audience witnessed an enchanting performance by the young and talented Hindustani classical vocalist Pushkar Lele hailing from the Gwalior gharana. “The atmosphere was absolutely magical. So I decided to begin my performance with raga Marwa. Then I presented a bandish in raga Kalyan, “Chandaji Aahi Gaye Cha Hi Gaye Ab...”, composed by Vidhushi Meera Rao,” reveals Lele.