

## New Melodies in the Sounds of Summer

BY INVITATION | SHUBHENDRA RAO



Here I am, sitting in Winnipeg, Canada, staring outside the window and seeing the grey skies and imagining what Delhi is like right now. Some things would have changed by the time I reach home—it would be hot and dusty for sure. But the most important change would be that India would have a new Prime Minister and a new government. Like anything else, change always brings in a state of apprehension. How is it going to be? Will the change bring about positives we badly need? Will it be the same old song? I, for one, am an optimist and have a strong feeling that this change was due for some time now. It will hopefully give us all the focus we need to change things around and if we can all work together to strengthen the hands of our new Prime Minister, then we can surely take our country forward.

Far away from home and news, my summer concert tour has taken me to two new cities in Canada—Jonquiere which is three hours north of Quebec city and Winnipeg which is supposed to be one of the oldest cities of North America and right in the centre of North America. In Jonquiere, we performed to a virgin audience. People were listening to a sitar concert for the first time ever. It was the 25th anniversary of a wonderful music festival, the Festival des Musiques de Creation, which means a festival of new creative music. Since Saskia (well-known cello artiste and wife) and I compose our own music that tests and extends the boundaries of classical Indian music, we were invited to present some of our compositions at this beautiful festival. It is always wonderful to play to

a new audience that comes to listen to the music and not because of who is playing. The reactions we received after each piece and the standing ovation at the end is something I shall always treasure.

Winnipeg has been a completely different experience since it is being hosted by an Indian organisation as a part of the Asia week that is being cel-



## WORSHIPPER OF the Body Divine

In a landmark exhibition of 300 artefacts, curator and art historian Naman P Ahuja studies the cultural

pretty tough. In Greek art you see all the strong voluptuous and heroic men with their perfect bodies, if you study Indian art, where are the fabulous looking men? Why is Indian art so fundamentally patriarchal that it has no interest in showing the male body except in symbolic ways whereas the female is shown in a highly sexualised figure? Kartikeya and Shiva come across as the heroes in a wide representa-

### THE SHOWSTOPPERS

A squatting woman giving birth supported by two attendants. In wood, from South India.

Lajja Gauri depicts the process of giving birth. In sandstone, from Madhya Pradesh.

Independence is our birthright.

body is incised, she too has been incised into something. It's out of love that she is being motivated to write. That's something so unusual."

For Ahuja, one way of thinking of art was through mythology. But he wanted to break the trap for the cultural narrative. He adds, "We can think of Sita, Lakshmi, Durga, Draupadi archetypes in our myths. The gender questions come into play with regard to two or three powerful works, including the sculpture



completely different experience since it is being hosted by an Indian organisation as a part of the Asia week that is being celebrated here. Moving on, I will be travelling to some other beautiful cities here in Canada. Next on the list is Calgary followed by Vancouver and Victoria. Really looking forward to the drive through the Canadian Rocky Mountains from Calgary to Vancouver. I have done this drive before in 2008 and am looking forward to the absolute stunning view of the Rockies and the fresh air.

It's wonderful to be able to travel to all these beautiful places and meet some amazing people and share my beautiful music with them. I surely feel blessed to be able to do all this. In free time between concerts, I have met people from the Indian community here, sharing some of their experiences, speaking to some of the older generation who have been here for 50 years. It's wonderful to know how adventurous they were even back then to travel to such a far-off place and make it their home. Back then, they really faced difficulties. There were no places of worship like temples, gurudwaras and mosques. They had a dream of making it big here and doing well for themselves and their families. It is absolutely so wonderful to see how well they have done for themselves and for the whole community, integrating well with the other communities. I feel so proud of that generation of people who have really struggled initially but can now relax with the comfort of knowing that their struggles have been worthwhile.

Signing off from Winnipeg and looking forward to many more adventures.

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## In a landmark exhibition of 300 artefacts, curator and art historian Naman P Ahuja studies the cultural narrative of the corporeal

By SUMATI MEHRISHI

**T**his dynamic professor knows the art of creating a courageous multicultural dialogue. Through 300 artefacts that span 4,000 years of Indian history, Naman P Ahuja, the curator of *Rupa Pratirupa: The Body in Indian Art*, a landmark exhibition held at the National Museum, New Delhi, celebrates the corporeal, the spiritual, the sensuous and the sacred in the concept of "body". He has tried to study the pluralistic approach to body and India. He says, "Normally, it takes three-four years minimum to pull such an exhibition together. I tried to do my best in 15 months. Because it was a temporary exhibition, I could take certain liberties with chronology that a permanent exhibition demands." The artefacts in the "diachronic" exhibition that has also travelled to Brussels have been sourced from various museums and collectors across the country. Divided into eight sections and displayed in different galleries, the exhibition travels through the concepts of 'Death', 'The Body Beyond the Limits of Form', 'Rebirth—Creation', 'Mothers', 'Miraculous Children', 'The Body in Cosmos',

'The Body Ideal: Supernatural', 'Heroic', 'Ascetic' and 'Rapture: The Body of Art'. It's a fantasy field of unknown and lesser known artworks, interspersed with very familiar video narratives of folk rituals. The sculpture of Putana feeding Krishna is just one of the 300 works that demand a viewing of solid and static works as performing and not visual art. "The Putana sculpture is the capturing of time. There she is feeding him (Krishna), there she is dead. The body smells. Where am I going to get smell in a visual art exhibition?" Ahuja wants to study India outside religion through this exhibition. "I wanted to look at everyday men and women, not gods and goddesses only, from medieval India. Death made a powerful start."

Ahuja, who teaches Art History at Jawaharlal Nehru University, starts with certain "burning questions". Does Indian art show only voluptuous beauties? Is there any way of showing aging bodies, decrepitude and illness? Where are the sick people in Indian art? Are we a society that refuses to acknowledge our failings? "I had a hard time thinking. It was turning out to be

the male body except in symbolic ways whereas the female is shown in a highly sexualised figure?" Kartikeya and Shiva come across as the heroes in a wide representation of male bodies. The figures of Kaumari, Lajja Gauri and Kinnara with a musical instrument engage you in a strong gender narrative. The physical merges and lingers out of metaphysical. Death, "the great leveler", dispels the Western clichés and probes the Jain, Hindu and Islamic philosophies. The seductive rapturous and curvaceous female bodies give way to the jolting, excruciating, scary depiction of death and Kankaal Bhairav. Before you tend to ask the voluptuous, beautiful woman in one of the seductive Khajuraho sculptures what prompted her to write, Ahuja throws light from his phone on its flowing back. The light thrown on the stone sculpture reveals passion, the love-making endured during the night, the nail marks. "When I first learnt about it, I was so fascinated. Here is a woman who is so empowered. She is a literate woman who is writing. But the sculptor has done more than that. Look closely at that sculpture. Her entire back is covered with nail marks. Just as her

Lajja Gauri depicts the process of giving birth. In sandstone, from Madhya Pradesh.

Independence is our birthright. Galaxy of Congress leaders... offset coloured print. From Priya Paul's collection.

A page from *Shahnama* showing the birth of Rustam. In Persian, Nastaliq.

Demoness Putana suckling Krishna. In wood, from Odisha.

Double-sided carved relief Ardhnarishwara on one side, an old Tara/Lakshmi painted on the other. In stone, from Kannauj, Uttar Pradesh.



cultural narrative. He adds, "We can think of Sita, Lakshmi, Durga, Draupadi archetypes in our myths. The gender questions come into play with regard to two or three powerful works, including the sculpture of a woman putting a blade to her throat—a woman warrior who is being remembered by her community. She is sacrificing herself for a cause. Right next to it, I have kept a Sati plaque in the background. I can't deny the history of Sati or patriarchy. It's there. I don't wish to foreground it. You don't ignore it. You don't brush it (history) under the carpet." Was the motive behind the "intellectually draining" exhibition to create a multi-cultural dialogue through the concept of body or to present a contrast between the medieval and "contemporary"? Ahuja says, "I was doing both. Contemporary has a very bad definition these days. It's just not the work of Dayanita (Singh), Subodh (Gupta) and Pushpamala N who are urban studio artists. Contemporary is also *Amarchitra Katha*. Abanindranath's work of Bharat Mata became a print. Gandhi becoming Markandeya and the Bharat Mata pictures. That's visual art affecting people's lives. It's art being used for political purposes. It was powerful art." It's a powerful display of performing art.

## Words of Tribute to Dance and Devotion

Minati Mishra, the world renowned Odissi guru and the oldest performing artiste of the dance form, is writing a book on its devotional aspects after years of practice

By DIANA SAHU

**T**he beautiful Odissi Guru's gracious smile is the sweetest reward for her disciples. She prefers to be addressed as "Maa" (mother) instead of "Guru Maa". Abhinaya is her power, and humility her jewel. Minati Mishra, who recently performed at 'Samsaranam', an event organised in Bhubaneswar to pay a tribute to Odissi's legendary exponent Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra, is now writing a book, *Devotional Dances: A Special Reference to Odissi*. She hopes to finish writing the book within a year.

"The book comes from years of *sadhana*," says Minati, 78, the world's oldest performing Odissi dancer today. "Dance is a way of life and a means to attain *moksha*," she says. Having done her doctorate in Natyashastra, she has been performing for 60 years. Even today, she practices dance, and meditates for three hours every day. "This gives me strength, peace and solace to my soul," says the classicist.

Though Minati is based in Switzerland, she comes down to Odisha every year for six

months to participate in Odissi festivals. In Switzerland, Minati teaches the theoretical aspects of Odissi in her school Kalinga Kala Tirtha.

Born and brought up in Cuttack, the cultural capital of Odisha back then, she took to dance at the age of seven. "As a kid, I used to visit the Annapurna theatre with my parents. Once I got to see a dance performance by Laxmipriya Mohapatra, wife of Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra. I fell in love with the dance at first sight and asked my parents to allow me to learn it. In the 1940s, being a dancer carried immense social stigma. My father agreed on a condition. He wanted me to complete my education," she adds.

She was introduced to Odissi by Kabichandra Kaliparan Patnayak, the guru known for his pioneering in-depth research on Odia dance styles. In the 1950s, Minati started training under Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra. Upon completion of her studies, she availed a special scholarship of the Odisha Government to go to Rukmini Devi Arundale's Kalkshetra in Ma-

dras. "I learnt Bharatanatyam from Chokalingam Pillai, but I decided to give up the dance form following an advice by dance critic Charles Fabri who had seen me performing Odissi in New Delhi," she says. Minati has the unique distinction of learning from and collaborating with all the three first-generation gurus of Odissi dance—Guru Pankaj Charan Das, Guru Deba Prasad Das and Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra. She has incorporated their distinct styles into her dance.

She was also instrumental in giving Odissi music and dance an academic avatar. When the State Government established the Bhubaneswar-based Utkal Sangeet Mahavidyalaya in 1964 to revive Odisha's cultural heritage, Minati took over as the principal of the college in 1966. She manned the post for 25 years (1966 to 1991) and in the meantime, created syllabus for taking up Odissi dance and music as subjects of degree education.

Though Minati is not happy with the shape Odissi has taken today, she feels the dance form has been reduced to a commercial venture. "Dancers are taking up Odissi for instant recognition. Teachers want to mint money," she remarks. According to Natyashastra, there are hundreds of *bhagis* (stylised poses), *karanas* (yoga-based body positions) and 36 types of eye movements in Odissi. "A six-month crash course will not teach all this. It needs a lifetime. Sadly, no one today is ready to give a lifetime; everyone is looking for publicity, recognition," she adds.

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