

# INDIA INTERNATIONAL CENTRE **IIC** Diary

THE IIC EXPERIENCE: A FESTIVAL OF THE ARTS 2023

## A Treasure Trove

**EXHIBITION:** *A People's Library: Celebrating the Connemara Public Library*

**COLLABORATION:** *The Connemara Public Library, Chennai*

**27 October to 2 November 2023**

At a time when more historic buildings are slated to face the hammer and dynamite, the exhibition celebrating the Connemara Public Library assures us that several are still valued in a fast-changing cultural environment. Situated in Egmore, Chennai, the library is one of the country's largest and oldest—it formally opened in 1896—and, at present, houses over 9 lakh books. It is also one of the four National Depository Centres that receives a copy of all books, newspapers and periodicals published in India.

Several well-organised panels with large-format photographs conveyed a sense of what it must be like working at the custom-made teak (or perhaps rosewood) desks beneath exquisite frescoed ceilings. Or to pause and gaze at imaginative capitals featuring characters from Kipling's *Jungle Book*. How must a reader feel to be viewed by Bagheera—or even Kaa, one wonders! The Indo-Saracenic architecture of the grand building designed by Henry Irwin combines a mélange of styles—Gothic, Rajput Mughal and Hindu Deccani.

The exhibition took one through various features of the building and, more importantly, introduced the viewer to the Library's exceptional collection through images and text. The rare books section is clearly the *piece de resistance* housing as it does *Thambiran Vanakkam*, which was published in 1578, the first printed work in an Indian language and script, as well as other gems such as 12 volumes of *Hortus Indicus Malabaricus*. The curators



would have done well to inform the viewers that this 17th-century Latin botanical medicinal treatise was compiled by Hendrik van Rhee, the governor of Dutch Malabar—but with active help from Itty Achudan, a distinguished Ezhava herbalist.

In fact, given the extent of research and conceptualisation that may have gone into this exhibition, detailed captions would have been in order. Some visual sections had no captions at all, which was unfortunate, as many images had interesting stories to tell, a case in point being reprints from the album *Photographic Views of Poodoocottah* (Pudukkottai) by Linnaeus Tripe of the 12th Madras Native Infantry. A portrait reproduced in the exhibition was that of a young Raja Ramachandra Tondaiman of Pudukkottai seated on his ivory throne, surrounded by four courtiers. A clearly nervous Raja's hand (a non-Brahmin king from the Kallar caste) hovers above a document as he is overseen by the all-powerful Brahmin *diwan* (prime minister) who towers over him.

Reprints of botanical illustrations were a joy to look at, as were a few rare texts—though these should have been placed within glass cases. One hopes that IIC will now continue extensive multi-media coverage of similar institutions throughout the country, some of which may indeed face an uncertain future.

■ MALAVIKA KARLEKAR

## Epitome of Elegance

**EXHIBITION:** *Chettinad—An Enduring Legacy*

**FROM THE COLLECTION OF:** M. Rm. Rm  
Cultural Foundation, Chennai

**CURATED BY:** Visalakshi Ramaswamy

**28 October to 10 November 2023**

A community that inhabited a small region in the southern part of Tamil Nadu, the Chettians came to be known as the Nagarathar for the beautiful town villages they founded. This homestead of the Chettians, comprising 96 villages, came to be known as Chettinad.

Inherently a sharp and thrifty business community during the Raj, the Chettians established financing firms in British colonies abroad and, as coordinators and financiers, made enormous wealth that they sunk back into their homes at Chettinad. This enabled them to evolve into a highly refined and cultured community with gracious, elegant lifestyles.

The exhibition was envisioned as a journey through the history and heritage of the distinctive Chettians. It wove its way through the symbolic clan temples to their grand homes, crafts, textiles and traditions, displayed with high expertise and excellent taste.

Every Chettian family had an accountant who interestingly was the first point of contact for anyone visiting the house. Lacquerware from Burma and Southeast Asia, once a Chettian favourite, showed cross-cultural influences that made the community unique. The array of Kottan—palm leaf basketry on display—traditional, fine and intricate, spoke of high artistry. When women began working outside of their homes, there was no longer time for them to pursue this fine, handed-down craft.

Intricately cut-out palm leaf pictures were another treat. Chettinad mansions were laid with very special glazed



tiles. The exhibition featured a few of these tiles, as well as the materials and tools used to make them. Among the most elegant silverware showcased were large kitchen utensils, antiquated traditional chopping tools and ladles, pitchers for water storage in the water-starved region, and a conventional water heater. The very scale and quality of the kitchenware exuded a sense of prosperity and good taste.

Most of these primarily functional articles were made with ritual dimensions at their core, belonging to an era when life had a different pace and priority, that have now bowed out to time, leaving behind lingering nostalgia.

Post World War II and independence, the Chettians hit their lowest. Changing times saw many reversals in the fortunes of this conservative merchant community, with many of them leaving home to seek their fortune elsewhere. This left Chettinad as a series of ghost villages, eventuating into the decaying grandeur of mansion-lined streets, enlivened only when families returned to their ancestral homes for special occasions.

While readying to adapt to changing times, the Chettians still cling to the traditions and customs that define them.

■ ARUNA BHOWMICK

## A Festival Tradition

**LAUNCH OF THE IIC QUARTERLY**

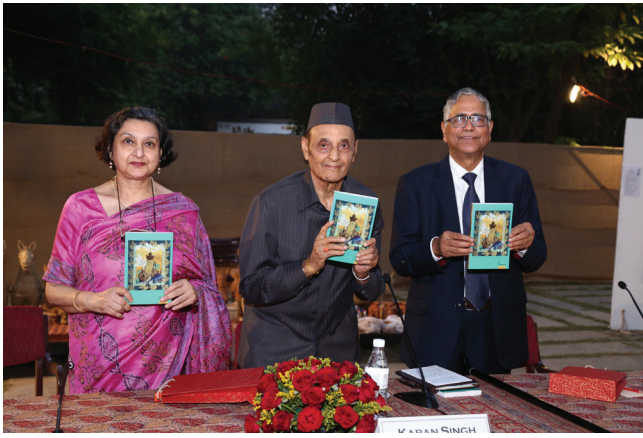
*Autumn 2023 by Dr. Karan Singh*

**1 NOVEMBER 2023**

It is now an understood annual tradition for Centre veterans that the launch of the Autumn issue of the *IIC Quarterly* coincides with the Festival of Arts, and so it was this year as well, as the lengthening shadows enveloped

the elegant Gandhi–King Plaza, surrounded as it is by the greenery the Centre is famous for.

K. N. Shrivastava, Director, IIC, in his welcome remarks, mentioned that the *Quarterly* is one of the pillars and a cerebral publication of note beyond the boundaries of the Centre. Chief Editor Omita Goyal thanked the audience for attending the programme and said it was a happy occasion to launch the issue amid the Festival, a solace from the usual mundane issues which often dominate such releases.



Chairman of the Editorial Board, Dr. Karan Singh, lauded the effort that went into bringing out a quality journal like

the *Quarterly*. Talking about the venue, the Gandhi–King Plaza, he pointed out that it must be remembered that Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. were the two great apostles of peace of the 20th century, particularly relevant now since two gruesome wars were taking place in different parts of the world.

He said that the *IIC Quarterly* had evolved to its present stature over the years, and he had been associated with it from the very beginning. He added that the current issue had some refreshing articles, and he was sure the members and other erudite readers would find interest in it. The programme ended with a vote of thanks by the Editor.

■ ARVINDAR SINGH

## Salute to a Continuing Tradition

**EXHIBITION:** *Stories from the Earth: Terracotta Narratives*

**COLLABORATION:** *Sanskriti Pratishthan*  
**27 October to 2 November 2023**

Fitting seamlessly into the theme of lived traditions of south India, the *gram devta*, protector against all evils, Lord Ayyanar, stood vigil at the very entrance of the Centre. Accompanied by his commanders, both on foot and mounted on large horses, they cast a protective shield over the exhibition.

The figure of Lord Ganesh placed under the huge banyan tree, with offerings of sweets and flowers, with silent terracotta worshipers, added to the village atmosphere cast in the verdant environment of the Gandhi–King Plaza.

The figures and objects that dot the villages of Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry were carefully chosen to evoke this living tradition. And like in the villages, their placement at the venue was dedicated and earmarked for the protectors.

Lord Ayyanar, recognised by his fierce demeanour, enormous moustache and wide open eyes, kept a constant unblinking watch on all who entered. His army was equally fierce and alert and well-equipped with tools of war with large-sized horses. Their shadows were frightening and lengthening at dusk as if ensuring no marauders, demons or evil crept in during their watch.

The Lord was accompanied by protective and talismanic figures, both divine and from the animal kingdom, from the bull, the Kamadhenu, elephants, the Naga serpent shrine Nagakanni and other votive offerings.

Displayed at the exhibition were also terracotta objects of the everyday—chicken coops, cooking pots, water and grain storage vessels and Tulsi plant containers—all reflective of village life.

The assemblage of the Ayyanar cult figures was the joint effort of M. Rengasamy and his team comprising R.

Thangayya, R. Kumaresan, K. Rengasamy, K. Annamalai, M. Subbaiya and Palaniappan. Steeped in ritual and following the iconometry and iconography that is representative and appropriate to each figure, these artisans continue to uphold their age-old tradition and practice.

The figures ranged from small to over 6 metres tall, which could be considered among the largest to be sculpted. Using special clays available locally in the ponds, its strengthening mix is made of moist clay with straw and sand. The figures are built up gradually and then joined together, with details of bells, mirrors, fierce faces, crocodiles and others, all moulded separately and added on. The firing is done in a locally made kiln that uses a mix of straw and dried cow dung as fuel. For village offerings, the figures are painted in bright colours to underline their characteristics. The face, when painted red, denotes anger, while blue represents calm.

■ RITU SETHI





## Classical Frenzy

**FILM FESTIVAL:** *Hollywood Bonanza—A Magical Mystery Tour: Festival of Films*

**CURATED BY:** Shivendra Singh Dungarpur, Film Heritage Foundation

**27 October to 2 November 2023**

**T**wenty vintage Hollywood classics were screened at this bonanza.

*The Iron Horse* (1924), John Ford's silent masterwork on the construction of the railways in the US, cutting through vast distances in the post-Civil War era (1866 onwards), still holds our attention. The sheer scale of the production and its execution is most impressive. Ford's politics is dodgy, and the film's depiction of the Red Indians, the native inhabitants of the land, is condescending, to put it mildly. Ironically, it is dedicated to Abraham Lincoln, the assassinated president who abolished slavery in the country.

Comedian Buster Keaton's 1926 silent classic, *The General*, set in the American Civil War, is hilarious, and its conception and execution of special effects in the pre-electronic age thrills the viewer even now, as do his awe-inspiring stunts.

Charles Chaplin was an artiste with a profound social conscience. *Modern Times* (1936) is prescient in depicting technology as a source of alienation and misery rather than happiness. Of course, Chaplin's treatment of his subject is both uproarious and serious.

Two comedies by Ernst Lubitsch, *Ninotchka* (1939) and *To Be or Not to Be* (1942) uphold his reputation as a director of sophisticated wit, charm and great warmth, who can be anti-authoritarian as in *Ninotchka*, starring Greta Garbo as a visiting head of a Russian trade delegation who comes



to Paris, and despite herself, falls in love. The film is set in the 1930s when citizens of Soviet Russia were being terrorised by Joseph Stalin. *To Be or Not to Be*, with Jack Benny and Carole Lombard in the lead, is about the German occupation of Poland in World War II and a Jewish theatre actor in Warsaw who outwits the Nazis and escapes to England with his wife and entire troupe.

*The Red Shoes* (1948) by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger is about ballet in the early 1920s. It is a moving portrayal of the destruction of a ballerina's life by a tyrannical, obsessive producer, based on Sergei Diaghilev, head of the Ballets Russes. Anton Walbrook, in an entirely unsympathetic role, dominates the film.

Billy Wilder, Lubitsch's star pupil, leaves a profound impression with two contrasting films about the American way of life. *Double Indemnity* (1944) is about fraud by an insurance agent driven by attraction for a woman. *Some Like It Hot* (1959) with Marilyn Monroe, Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon, the latter two, fleeing from the Mafia having witnessed the Saint Valentine's Day massacre in Chicago in 1928, is a sizzling, deeply perceptive comedy about the power of the Mafia in the US in the late 1920s that continues to this day.

■ PARTHA CHATTERJEE

## The Khana Peena

**FOOD FESTIVAL:** *Derived from the Theme of India's Presidency of G20*

**27 October to 2 November 2023**

**I**n today's ubiquitous media world when even our food choices are migrating to food platforms like Zomato, it was refreshing to find the choicest cuisine curated and served to us in real-time. The bouquet of Turkish, French, South African, Japanese, Chettinad, Russian and Mexican cuisine was unbelievably tasty and worth recalling.

The first day was a Turkish feast from which historically we have also borrowed quite a few of our delights. The starters, i.e., harissa cottage cheese with smoked paprika aioli, chickpea falafel with tzatziki smoked paprika chicken topped with chimichurri sauce, lamb kibbeh with pickled onion and Ezogelin corbasi were the delightful beginning of the food festival. In the main course were Lebanese chickpea stew harissa, Bamia b'zeit, maghmour and lamb kuru fasulye. A special preparation in the segment was the Lebanese fish, i.e., sayadieh. The shawarma counter drew quite a crowd. Marinated chicken leg rolled with toum sauce, Arabic pickle, tashi and fries too were in great demand.

The French course, prepared by the team led by the Centre's own Chef Vijay Thukral, did its best to serve delightful but simple starters—fish only, chicken brochette, spinach cutlet and leek quiche tart. As always, the much-savoured French desserts with croquembouche, blueberry cheesecake, fruit savarin and orange ice cream made people save their energy and space for the last round.

'Prasadams' constitute an important 'takeaway' for devotees visiting temples, later shared with other family members. Through his unique programme, 'Sacred Offerings: Poetry in Food', Chef Rakesh Raghunathan gave a demonstration, interspersed with songs and stories, and with references from ancient texts, of the offerings in the Tamil Nadu temples. Some of these items such as neer moru, panakam, puliyodharai, sundal, pongal, etc., were part of the delectable lunch that followed. These are indeed the 'living traditions', as they form a part of breakfast served in many south Indian homes and restaurants.

On the third day was served South African cuisine where Chef Nishant Choubey, who knew his guests well, curated just the right meal for the occasion with an exhaustive menu. Bunny chow with chicken or vegetable curry needs special mention; the buns used were soft to allow the preparation to melt in the mouth. The base rice dishes were flavoured perfectly for the Indian palate and went well with the Cape Malay chicken. The vegetarian appetiser of sosaties (sweet potato) gave stiff competition to its non-vegetarian sosaties, as the mutton could have done with some more beating and grilling.

Curated by Chef Dhruv Oberoi, Japanese cuisine was eagerly awaited as Japanese food conjures up vivid images and flavours of subtle and appealing colours and fragrances. The miso soup, the fried seafood, the tofu, the squid, the omelette, the tuna, the calamari and the accompanying sauces were all good, but the general light flavours were replaced with dense, heavy flavours. The menu was extensive, but there was no hint of sushi, sashimi, etc. Replacing Japanese items with northeast spices may have worked had the 'umami' flavour unique to the cuisine not gone missing.



The Chettinad dinner by Chef Richa Johri did not make it among the favourites either. While the Malabar Kizhangu



cutlets were just right and the crispy fried bitter gourd salad a 'sweet' surprise, the Moringa rasam was too sour and the mini ragi uttapams were a trifle hard. In the main course, vegetable stew and appams were delicious as was the mutton ghee roast. Jackfruit biryani was a favourite with the vegetarian friends. The desserts—unnigappam, payasam and rava kesari—were delectable and allowed the guests to leave on a happy note.

What completely changed the environment of both food and talk on the day of the Russian cuisine, prepared by the chefs of the Embassy of Russia, were the starters with pickled tomatoes and Russian salad with baked eggplant. Many were seen comparing the Indian varieties of eggplant preparations with the Russians'; this Russian preparation won hands down. Main course dishes like spicy stewed cabbage, buckwheat with mushrooms julienne, spiced potatoes with garlic and herbs, rice with vegetables, chicken Pozharsky cutlet and pilaf with mutton spicy chakhokhbili were much talked about. Russian desserts, although not much known, were popular with mannik (semolina pie) and gingerbread sharlotka (apple pie).

With many of our own vegetables coming from South America, the Mexican cuisine on the last day was anticipated with immense curiosity and excitement. The fabulous pumpkin soup not only met this expectation headlong but also helped raise the status of pumpkin in Indian eyes. Guacamole and chips, quesadilla, tostadas de rajas con crema and tostadas de frijoles con queso also added glamour and taste. With the increasingly sugar-conscious Indians shunning kheer, Mexicans brought it back with elan; their rice pudding was everybody's delight and one saw a bit of rush and wait at the counter.

With familiar faces and novel items, the food experience at the Festival was an exciting affair.

■ RAKESH BATASYAL; SHUBHRA TANDON;  
N. RAMACHANDRAN; MEKHALA SENGUPTA

## A Melodious Morning

**PERFORMANCE:** *Carnatic Vocal Recital by N. Vijay Siva from Chennai*

**ACCOMPANISTS:** *Sanjay Swaminathan (vocal support); Sandeep Ramachandran (violin); and N. Manoj Siva (mridangam)*

**29 October 2023**

The morning concert by Carnatic vocalist N. Vijay Siva was an extraordinary experience in itself. The heartening sight and sound of a pair of tuneful acoustic *tanpuras* (a rare sight in Carnatic concerts) made a remarkable difference to this melodious experience. This could be felt from the very beginning when Siva opened with 'Vara-Lakshmi Bhaja re Manasa' in raga Saurashtra.

Born to a musical family, Siva amazed people from a very tender age by instinctively recognising any raga he heard. Initiated into Carnatic classical music by his mother, the Carnatic vocalist Akhila Siva, he was further groomed under gurus like T. K. Jayaraman and D. K. Pattammal, revered for absolute tunefulness along with classicism. This ingrained quality of *shruti-shuddham*, or perfect tunefulness, was evident all through this concert. Also, a trained *mridangam* player, Siva could play with rhythm as well.

The auspicious invocation was followed with a Tamil composition in raga Begada. The detailed alapana in raga Pantuvarali next created the perfect ambiance for the Thyagaraja *kriti* set to Rupaka Talam, followed by 'Vacham agochara mey manasa' in raga Kaikavasi, set to Adi Talam.

These appetising starters served with the accompanying dressings of Sanjay Swaminathan's vocal support, Sandeep Ramchandran's violin and N. Manoj Siva's mridangam, augmented one's hunger for more. The main course proceeded with an elaborate alapana in raga Sankarabharanam. This created an appropriate atmosphere for Muthuswami Dikshitar's famous composition 'Sada Shivam Upasmahe', adorned with attractive chitta swarams and kalpanaswaram which heralded repeated applause from discerning listeners.

Purandara Dasa, the Pitamaha (grandfather) of Carnatic classical music, was remembered thereafter with 'Yadava Neeva Yadukula-Nandana Madhava-Madhusudana Yaaro' in the Carnatic raga Devagandhari, which sounded quite similar to the Hindustani Bhimpalasi. Adi Shankaracharya's immortal 'Shiva Kevaloham', composed by Rama Kumar, was rendered as a riveting ragamala, a garland of ragas ending with Sindhu Bhairavi. The Thiruppugazh on God Kartikeya by saint Arunagirinathar, set to Dhruva Talam, and the concluding Mangalam in Saurashtra, made for a fully gratifying concert that left the *rasikas* totally enthralled.

■ MANJARI SINHA





## A Tribute to the Maestro

**PERFORMANCE:** *To Celebrate the Birth Centenary of Kumar Gandharva*

**HINDUSTANI VOCAL RECITAL BY:**  
*Shashwati Mandal from Delhi*

**ACCOMPANIED BY:** *Vinod Lele (tabla); and  
Vinay Mishra (harmonium)*

**30 October 2023**

The Hindustani classical concert by Shashwati Mandal was dedicated to the memory of the late Kumar Gandharva. Mandal is an acclaimed vocalist of Gwalior Gharana, the fountainhead of Khayal tradition from where emerged Kumar Gandharva himself.

Mandal is the granddaughter of Balabhau Umdekar, an erudite musician of Gwalior Gharana and the court musician of Gwalior state. Initially trained under her mother, Kamal Mandal, she received a scholarship from the Ministry of Culture to study Tappa under Balasaheb Poonchwale. Mandal also learned Thumri and Dhrupad under Purnima Chaudhury and Gundecha Brothers, respectively. An artist of All India Radio, Mandal was awarded the Mani Mann Fellowship by the Sanskriti Foundation to be groomed in Kumar Gandharva's style and to learn his compositions under his foremost disciple, Madhup Mudgal.

Accompanied on tabla by Vinod Lele and harmonium by Vinay Mishra, Mandal opened her vocal recital with

the somber evening raga Shree. The introductory aalap was followed with Kumar Gandharva's composition 'Pava Main Dooraan Se Daras Tori'.

The story behind this composition, she shared, was a musical trip by Kumar Gandharva to some sacred place, where no time was left for him to visit the Devi temple after the programme. He got a glimpse of the temple from the train and created this composition that praises the Goddess for giving him *darshan* even from a distance. The Chota Khayal 'Karan De Kachhu Lala Re' was his pleading to the naughty child who would not let him work.

Remembering how Kumar Gandharva gave credibility to traditional ragas and Bandishes, along with his own creations, Mandal sang the traditional composition 'Mhara Rasiya...' set to Rupak Taal of seven beats cycle in raga Shyam Kalyan. This offered a cheerful contrast after a serene raga like Shree.

Mentioning the seamless Jod ragas created by Kumar Gandharva, Mandal presented Sohini Bhatiyar, which was a rare combination of ragas Sohini and Bhatiyar with Shuddha Rishabh. The comely composition 'Mharu ji, Bhulo Na Mhane' was also composed by Kumar Gandharva.

The traditional Tappa in raga Khamaj was very thoughtfully joined with the famous Tappa of Kumar Gandharva, 'O Dildara Aa Ja Re', before concluding with a Nirguni Bhajan of Gorakhnath in raga Bhairavi, sung in the lilting gait of Deepchandi Taal.

■ MANJARI SINHA



## Provoking and Contemplative

**PLAY:** *Daklakatha Devikavya: An Experimental Play Drawing from the Epic Poetry and Stories of K. B. Siddaiah's Selected Writings*

**DEvised AND DIRECTED BY:** Lakshman K. P.

**PRESENTED BY:** Jangama Collective, Bengaluru with Bindu Raxidi (Dakla Devi, Kadiramma); Santhosh Dindgur (Dakla, Cheluvaiah); Bharath Dingri (K. B. Siddaiah & narrator); Narasimharaju B. K. (Narasappa); and Ramika Chaithra (Gangavva, Munivenkatamma)

**ACCOMPANISTS:** Poorvi Kalyani & Skanda Ghate (vocal); Bharath Dingri (tamate); and Narasimharaju B. K. (areye)

**2 November 2023**

*Daklakatha Devikavya* is an open-ended play performed in an engagingly informal folk style, evolved from the epic poetry and stories of K. B. Siddaiah. It presents the inner workings and external experiences of the Daklas—a Dalit community.

The setting of the play was flower sellers squatting in the background and rising in turn as actors with robust voices. The traditional folk device, a half curtain, *yavanika*, was used to introduce the important characters. The actor would peep over the curtain which was lowered after he started speaking or singing. The most important aspect of the performance was that it retained the spiritual richness of the Dakla community through its music. Two of the characters appeared on stage playing *tamate* (hand drum) and *urumi* (hourglass drum), instruments not seen in contemporary theatre. Daklas are people who are protected by the untouchables and hence are still lower in the social hierarchy. But whatever notions people have



about Adivasis or Daklas being a backward community better revise them forthwith. First, the female roles were played by women and not female impersonators. These women unhesitatingly lighted beedis, and were not coy about using cuss words, which is true to their lives. It is also true of contemporary OTT films, which claim to be more modern and truer to our lives.

The author had a strong faith in mysticism, as exemplified by his poetry, which was the soul of the performance.

*O mother as you rock the world  
And rock the child  
Bear me again in your womb  
Walk this infant from the cave of your vagina  
Into the cave of contemplation.*

In the above context, the poet is saying that once the mother bears him in her womb the stigma of untouchability will not be so strong. One recurring metaphor that has remained constant is hunger. The poet throws a direct question to the creator:

*O God! Take birth like me  
Then  
Try to touch and be polluted!  
Try to take like me, like me take birth!*

Untouchability does not generate self-pity in the play; in fact, it is an instrument of self-awareness and enlightenment. Sheer magic was created in the dark night by the luminous display of improvised spinning fire wheels and urns with radiant charcoal cinders. All elements in the play contributed to a magical night to remember.

■ MANOHAR KHUSHALANI



## Tales of Devotion

**PERFORMANCE:** *Kshetra Prema: Stories from Temples of South India—An Evening of Stories and Music from Temples of South India, Narrated by Vinay Varanasi with Vocals by Vivek Sadasivam*

**ACCOMPANISTS:** Aditi Krishnaprakash (violin); and Adamya Ramanand (mridangam)  
**31 October 2023**

The programme took us through different shades and stories of bhakti within the myths and traditions of different temples in the southern part of the country. Curated with music and myths from temples of south India, a beautiful evening was catered to by Vinay Varanasi, with vocals by Vivek Sadasivam.

The narrator, very skilfully, weaved vignettes of bhakti stories, starting with a touching tale of Ananthazhwar and his devotion to Lord Venkateswara. The narration then turned to a Muruga temple in Kerala, where an adorable story of bhakti comes up. A little boy, who happens to be a Muslim, falls fatally sick when his family is advised to go to the Muruga temple to pray. What follows is an expression of *bālābhakti* when the child innocently takes a Munch chocolate for the idol inside. Bhadrachala Ramadasu's story featured too, wherein he calls to his Lord through his mother and Rama's wife, Sita, to save him from his exile. What ties these stories is that bhakti is not just an esoteric theme. As Parimala Ranganathan, he takes up myriad shades of devotion, whether as a physical blow

or a Munch chocolate, absorbing all the *bhavas* directed towards him from his devotees.

The medley of stories moved to Srirangam, where Vishnu is venerated as Ranganatha, around whom Sri Vaishnava Sampradayam grew. Following the plunder of the temple, the utsava murti is stolen, following which the priests in Srirangam come to Delhi to seek the idol, where, in the meantime, Muslim princess Bibi Nachiyar falls in love with the Lord. This leads to a beautiful tale of cultural integration, where one discovers how Bibi is now worshipped along with Lord Vishnu in the temple as a goddess, and a *roti* in her name is offered as *naivedyam*. One can't stop thinking how these were also ways of making philo-religious transactions between different regions of the country. The idol wearing a chequered lungi shows the assimilation of Muslim communities by the coast.

Bhakti, in the form of extreme abstinence as well as sacrifice, was brought out through the stories behind the Oppiliappan Temple, where, till today, *prasād* cooked without salt is served to God as a reminder of the myth where Vishnu ate the saltless food. The evening ended with a mesmerising performance of a Vitthala Abhang after Varanasi narrated the folk story of sage Jamadagni's wife, Renuka, with the local deity Yellama devi. Through a beautiful tale of cultural appropriation, one sees how the Jogappa community of transgender in Karnataka get married to the Goddess Yellama to become women. These stories show that despite the temple being brick and stone, its inner idea is within the body and the mind, within which one sows the seeds of bhakti and faith to enjoy the fruits of moksha.

■ PRERANA PURNIMA ROY



## A Dramatic Interpretation

**PERFORMANCE:** *Don Kihote in Kathakali*

**PRESENTED BY:** Margi Theatre from Thiruvananthapuram

**SCRIPT AND DIRECTOR:** P. Venugopalan

**29 October 2023**

**K**athakali, the classical style originating from Kerala that interweaves dance with drama, is known for its presentations based on Hindu mythology and Indian epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata. Adapting this unique style to interpret *Don Quixote*, the famed 1,500-page Spanish fictional novel written by Miguel de Cervantes, required innovative storytelling.

This is just what the Thiruvananthapuram-based Margi Theatre was able to do, and that too with great élan. By marrying the dance-drama of Kathakali with elements of Spanish theatre, Margi brought Don Kihote (Quixote) to life through their dramatic interpretation.

The story of Alonso Quijano, who takes on the name Don Quixote de la Mancha and sets out to save the world after being influenced by books on chivalry, was depicted in eight scenes. There were no props, barring the oil lamp, traditionally placed at the front of the stage before every Kathakali performance. But the moment the two people holding the brightly coloured half curtain, called *thirasseela*, came on stage and the *chenda* and *maddalam* musicians began drumming, a hush descended. All eyes turned to the performers as the curtain slowly dropped to reveal them.

Since Kathakali is derived from the word *katha*, which means story or a traditional tale, and *kali*, meaning performance or play, the portrayal of Don Kihote's



adventures turned misadventures was expressed through dance, music and drama, including dialogues spoken by the vocalists. As Manipravalam, a blend of Malayalam and Sanskrit, is the medium used in Kathakali, Margi had thoughtfully put up a small side screen explaining each scene.

Except for the first and last scenes, where the protagonist was dressed in the Spanish style, the remaining narrative was portrayed in the Kathakali style, replete with spectacular costumes, colourful makeup and superlative vocal support. The vivid makeup, pomp and magnificence of the Kathakali costume, like the *kireetam* (huge ornamental headgear), the *kanchukam* (oversized jackets) and a long skirt worn over a thick padding of cushions, had a mesmerising effect. Whether it was the two vibrantly dressed Kathakali performers used to portray windmills that Kihote (himself in eye-catching Kathakali attire) fights against, thinking they are evil spirits, or the caged lion, also in a Kathakali costume, that he wants to kill to save the village, the stunning visual imagery was fascinating.

Although all the Kathakali artists performed well, it was the vocalists who stole the show. Using just cymbals as musical accompaniments, the two vocalists were outstanding, especially at the end when Kihote tragically realises his foolish and unrealistic pursuit of idealistic goals.

■ SWAPNA MAJUMDAR

## With a Contemporary Twist

**PERFORMANCE:** *Thiranottam—Mohiniattam Recital* by Methil Devika and Troupe from Palakkad, Kerala

**ACCOMPANYING ARTISTS:** Sumasandhya; Shobha Madhu; Alex Raphael; Goutham Mahesh; and Angitha Pushpajan

**27 October 2023**

**L**ike all the nine classical dance forms in India, Mohiniattam has its own unique style. Legend has

it that Lord Vishnu transformed himself into a beautiful enchantress (Mohini) to entice demons with her sensuous and graceful dance-like movements (*attam*) to take back the elixir of life they had stolen from the Gods. With her soft, lyrical movements and subtle expressions, dancer Methil Devika's performance epitomised the languorous Lasya style of dance that Mohiniattam is known for.

Devika's ability to push boundaries and make artistic changes in her repertoire has been bolstered by her knowledge as a scholar and educator. While Mohiniattam, a dance style that originated in Kerala, has rigid rules, Devika has not allowed it to confine her creativity. So,

although men are not allowed to perform this dance form, by including two of her male students in her presentation, Devika underlined that dance is gender-neutral.

She performed her own interpretations of Thiranottam, a compilation of local legends and mythological and religious stories, to give it a more modern and universal appeal. Her presentation on the meaning of enlightenment or nirvana, as attained by Buddha, seamlessly merged the Buddhist chanting dialect with the Mohiniattam style of music to reinforce the universal truth that detachment from sorrow and joy can bring peace and stability of mind.

In 'Peelipattu', or peacock feather, Devika used *abhinaya* (expressions) to narrate an interesting conversation between two Lord Krishna devotees, the Zamorin Raja of Calicut and Vilwamangalam Swamiyar. According to local legend, when Lord Krishna left behind a peacock feather after making a brief appearance before the Zamorin, the latter pledged that he would use it to make the Lord's headgear, compose *krishnagiti*, or a text of *slokas* and *padams* in Sanskrit, dedicated to Lord Krishna or Guruvayurappa, the presiding deity in Guruvayur Temple. Till today, peacock feathers are used in Krishnanattam, a dance-drama detailing the life of Lord Krishna, as written by the Zamorin and performed at the Guruvayur temple.



Devika's concluding piece was about Uchchila, a young girl who immolated herself after being ostracised by men in her high caste community when they felt threatened by her intellectual brilliance. Interestingly, Uchchila's story is perhaps the first woman's voice recorded in mythology.

Devika's use of some traditional art forms for certain characters and props, especially to depict the agony of isolation leading to setting herself on fire and then rising out of the ashes as a goddess and being deified, was dramatic and thought-provoking. It left behind a lingering thought about whether much has changed even today for women who challenge patriarchy.

■ SWAPNA MAJUMDAR

## Infectious Moves

**PERFORMANCE:** *A Dance Story of Taiwan—Contemporary and Traditional Dance*

**PRESENTED BY:** Artists of Dance Forum Taipei, Taiwan

**DANCERS:** Shih Pei-chun; Wang Huai-shen; Fan Shu-yu and Cheng Yi-wen

**1 November 2023**

A visit to the Centre is always special. But come October or November, there is an extra special excitement in the atmosphere. There are beautifully lit candles twinkling at every strategic point—unmissable. There are gorgeous *rangolis* everywhere. The Centre is all dressed up and so are the visitors!

So, I set off in the evening to see a Taiwanese dance performance. The venue was full and I wondered what was going to unfold.

Performed by the only repertory dance company in Taiwan, Dance Forum Taipei, the five choreographic pieces were 'South', 'Belief', 'The Cloak', 'Red and White Zoom In' and 'Beyond Movement'.

The dance movements were reminiscent of modern dance; Martha Graham came vividly to my mind with the first performance. Graceful, long and languid, yet frugal movements traversing the entire stage with just two or three steps kept me hooked.

The most outstanding piece was 'The Cloak'. It was amazing what the dancer and choreographer did with just a cloak and a chair. The black and white of the cloak added so much drama and the prop of the chair was used very effectively.

Based on a famous Chinese story, 'Red Rose and White Rose', the performance focused on the tangled love





between one man and two women—his spotless wife ('white rose') and his passionate mistress ('red rose'). Finely detailed, the performance explored the women's tragic fate.

And then there was 'Beyond Movement', an on-the-spur-of-the-moment improvisation dance piece—a group of dancers making contact with each other and reacting without any previous knowledge or intention. Suddenly one performer jumped off the stage, dancing all around,

suddenly popping out from where the audience sat, jumping on and off a chair and finally jumping back on stage! Unexpected and great fun. The audience was clapping, participating and very engaged. The moment was so infectious; I could have been jumping around too!

The dancers, the choreographers and the music, all came together to create a perfect evening.

■ POONAM SAHI

## Backstage Wonder

**PUPPET THEATRE:** *Lankha Dhahanam (The Burning of Lanka): Tholu Bommalata, Traditional Puppet Theatre Presented by Chaya Nataka Brundram, Led by Sindhe Chithambara Rao from Dharmavaram*

**PRESENTED BY:** S. Chithambara Rao—Director and Lead Male with Khande Viranjineylu (puppetry); Khande Chinna Anjinamma (female lead); Sindhe Sreenivasulu (puppetry); and Dalavai Kulkayappa (puppetry)

**ACCOMPANISTS:** *Sindhe Chinna Venkatamma (harmonium); Sindhe Kulkayappa (mridangam); and Sindhe Venkatamma (female chorus)*

**28 October 2023**

Stories from the Ramayan are a staple in every household in India and almost a moral compass guiding our behaviour and actions right from childhood. It has multiple regional renditions and has been adapted by many art forms, whether written, performative, or visual. At the shadow theatre performance depicting the episode of the burning Lanka, therefore, even though scripted in Telugu, language was hardly a concern for the north Indian audience well versed in the happenings in the epic. What stood out, though, were the tall puppets with intricate details and bright colours, their reckless yet synchronised movements, and the background score that matched the rhythm of the movements.

The eight-member troupe, Chaya Nataka Brundram, led by Sindhe Chithambara Rao, hails from Dharmavaram in Andhra Pradesh and practices the age-old tradition of shadow puppetry, *tholu bommalata*. 'Tholu' means 'leather', 'bommalu' means 'puppets' and 'atta' is derived from 'attam', 'dance'. Together it is 'the dance of leather puppets', conjuring striking visuals and movements. Performed by certain communities typical to India's oral traditions, these practices are passed on to generations.



Historically, tholu bommalata troupes travelled from village to village, creating provisional stages and performing through the night. In return, these troupes were offered rations and donations. Such a nomadic life possibly led to the migratory history of the community. Rao's ancestors, for instance, had travelled from Maharashtra to Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka and took the art form from them. The family creates puppets from leather, beaten and processed to become translucent. Following this they are hand painted and crafted. Inspired by the carvings and paintings adorning temples, Rao draws outlines that his wife further meticulously decorates in signature bright colours.

The magic created off-screen was visible in the performance itself. The brisk and detailed movements of the puppets with bright, stunning visuals from the beginning, when Ravana was seen in dialogues with Sita before he took her hostage, kept the audience hooked until the end when Hanuman burnt Lanka. The background score too complemented the ongoing visuals, never leaving any movement of a limb without a beat. A few scenes, such as Hanuman's confrontation with the sea monster Surasa and Ravana's soldiers, with loud beats and fast-paced movements, seemingly acrobatic, had everyone amused.

The performance concluded with felicitation of the artists, leaving the pleasant October evening with a hint of warmth.

■ SHWETA KESHRI