

# INDIA INTERNATIONAL CENTRE IIC Diary

## THE IIC EXPERIENCE: A FESTIVAL OF THE ARTS 2025

### Layered Reality of Indian Women

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS:** *Depth Sounding Our Unseen Histories*

**SPEAKER:** Mrinal Pande

**CHAIR:** Shyam Saran

**9 October 2025**

The annual IIC Festival of the Arts, with this year's theme, 'Sā Vanitā: Thus She Speaks', began fittingly with a keynote address by veteran journalist and author, Mrinal Pande. Her perspective of viewing history as layers of the ocean, in contrast to the widely accepted linear and teleological model, set the tone for the evening. 'A woman is the product of this layered history, shaped by what is seen and what remains unseen', she said.

Beginning autobiographically, she recounted her childhood in her maternal grandmother's house in Almora, marked by a complete lack of privacy and the imparting of traditional wisdom about gender roles, alongside stories about male ancestors who had migrated from the plains to the hills. The men did not even know the names of their mothers and sisters, nor were their names recorded in family histories. The Gayatri Mantra was whispered in male ears alone, and family deities were always from the paternal side. A slight shift occurred with her mother and an aunt who attended Tagore's experimental school, when women were primarily being educated at home to communicate and read scriptures. During her own time at the university, she recalled, authorities were often challenged by boys, with girls acting as spectators.

Pande shifted her focus to tracing women in ancient texts and times. She mentioned two *Brahmavadinis* (women ascetics), Maitreyi and Gargi, from the Upanishadic period. When Maitreyi's husband, sage Yajnavalkya, decided to renounce the world and divide his property between his two wives, she chose the path to *Brahma Gyan* (supreme knowledge). Gargi, who remained celibate, challenged Yajnavalkya to a public debate, refusing to be silenced and persistently questioning the conceptualisation of Brahman (the Supreme Being) as a single entity, enquiring into its female aspect. In Buddhism, she stated, the *bhikkhunis* or nuns of the Theravada sect—the first sect the Buddha launched to preach dhamma—



orally transmitted verses in Magadhi for centuries. However, they were written down and translated into Pali by the 6th-century scholar Dhammapala. 'So ultimately the man's word became the official text', said Pande, adding that after the Buddha, the concept of women as nuns roaming fearlessly 'disappeared'. In another example, she spoke about *swatantra stree* or *Swairini*, mentioned in Vijñāneshwara's *Mitākshara*, a law treatise explaining the *Yajñavalkya Smṛiti*. These were free, unpunishable women who voluntarily existed outside marriage and were free to meet with men, often for a fee. However, by the 11th century it had become a pejorative term.

Moving into modern times, she observed that although women have been protesting since the 1970s, today's issues remain unchanged: dowry, domestic violence and reproductive rights such as abortion, foeticide and family planning. Challenges faced by migrant and marginalised women remain unaddressed. Women seeking reservations, alimony, or those in male-dominated fields like sports are often overpowered by the system. Well-educated, intelligent and assertive women are usually viewed with suspicion—as frequently depicted in pop culture. Women are not regarded as workers, but as 'labharthis' (beneficiaries) for appearances. The youth of the digital age are being 'deliberately raised as frivolous, lazy readers', and the gender divide is subtly widening. She insisted on continual re-evaluation of laws related to dowry, domestic violence and sexual assault, among others, to meet the needs of changing times.

In the question-and-answer session that followed, what struck me was Pande's uncompromising attitude as she emphasised that one must find one's own path.

■ SHRUTI SAREEN

# From 'Soft' Beats to Frontlines

**DISCUSSION:** *Breaking the Frame: Women's Shifting Roles in Media*

**PANELLISTS:** Malini Parthasarathy; Sunetra Choudhury; and Neerja Chowdhury

**WELCOME REMARKS:** Shyam Saran

**VOTE OF THANKS:** K. N. Shrivastava

**CHAIR:** Sonia Singh

**11 October 2025**

A general rule in carrying news at a given moment is the peg of 'why now'. The panel discussion was timely, as it took place a day after the visit of the Afghan Taliban government's foreign minister to Delhi caused a stir—female journalists were excluded from his first press conference. Forty-eight hours after a collective outrage, women journalists were seen occupying front-row seats at his second interaction with the press.

Between these two events, four well-known women journalists shared their views in a lively discussion. Neerja Chowdhury opened with sharing the turning point for women in media, citing two exchanges between 1977 and 1982. One was with the late journalist Kuldip Nayar, where his publication wanted an undertaking from women reporters to work with them for at least three years and not to treat the job as a waiting room for marriage. The second was with the late editor C. R. Irani, who mentioned *The Statesman* aimed to increase its hiring of women, as they were more hardworking and conscientious than men. Evidently, peers like Prabha Dutt, Usha Rai and others had made their mark. Malini Parthasarathy countered, stating that although women participated in the independence struggle and politics, there were not enough of them in the media during her early days. While it was heartening to see women journalists moving from 'soft'



feature beats to covering war from the frontlines, they have had to work twice as hard as their male counterparts to make an impact. Sunetra Choudhury, who has worked across media—print, TV, books, OTT—noted that normalisation of working from home post COVID-19 and mobile phones enabling going live from anywhere have empowered the current generation of journalists.

On the issue of dress code, Chowdhury shared how when an MP advised her not to wear sleeveless sari blouses, she responded pragmatically—limiting herself to wearing them at private functions. Choudhury added how she sensitively guided a young political reporter in her team between her choice to wear crop tops (her preference) and reporting stories (her job), ensuring she did not become the story instead.

The panel also highlighted challenges faced by women reporters today, when the role of the media is not well defined. Some young people today confuse PR with media, and given the decline in parliamentary discourse, women bear the brunt of it, observed Chowdhury. With people being hired for their large followings on social media, where anyone can share their views, it becomes difficult for women to create their identity in an environment driven by 'trending' and 'clickbait', added Choudhury. Sonia Singh highlighted the 'old boys' clubs' that helped journalists get access and stories—power networks where women were largely excluded.

In terms of learning, Chowdhury reminded the audience that credibility is the most prized possession of any journalist. Discovering India and preserving its diversity within a democratic framework, she considered among the job's biggest challenges.

Choudhury suggested that if there is something you do not know or cannot handle, look for someone with experience to help find a solution, especially since women have been doing this for a long time.

■ SHALINI SINGH

# An Underrepresented Minority

**DISCUSSION:** *Role of Women in Politics in India—Then and Now*

**PANELLISTS:** Aparajita Sarangi; Atishi Marlena; and Iqra Hasan

**CHAIR:** Sonia Singh

**VOTE OF THANKS:** K. N. Shrivastava

**13 October 2025**

This timely discussion offered a rich, critical discourse on women's political participation, moving beyond partisan differences to focus on the shared experience of 'womanhood' as a 'political caste'. It highlighted the essential mechanisms needed to turn legislative assurances into effective political leadership.

One of the central themes explored was the paradox of representation, stressing how the legal provisions for increasing seats starkly contrast with the persistently low levels of actual representation in legislative bodies. It was noted that while the Lok Sabha has 543 seats, only 74 are occupied by women, representing 13–14 per cent. Although positive developments have occurred at the local level due to earlier constitutional amendments, national legislative

bodies continue to reflect stagnation. While the Parliament passed the 33 per cent Women's Reservation Bill in 2023, the implementation, Iqra Hasan said, is of utmost importance. She cautioned against 'tokenism' and the manipulation seen in the *Pradhan Pati* (proxy leadership by an elected woman's husband) phenomenon. However, Atishi Marlena argued that a woman occupying a position of power, attending sessions and signing documents, represents a fundamental transformation in the political landscape and offers an opportunity for independence, even if she starts as a 'puppet'.

The panel also stressed the importance of strategic feminism to navigate the inherently male-dominated political arena. This approach involves setting aside superficial identity questions to focus on larger societal battles. Aparajita Sarangi, drawing on her administrative background, recounted facing profound institutional gender bias and emphasised that women must be prepared to 'wage war against this attitude' by acquiring knowledge, talent and ability. Conversely, Marlena posited that being a woman can be turned into a valuable 'electoral advantage', granting unique access and empathy to half the electorate, a connection typically unavailable to male politicians.

The dialogue highlighted two key paths to fostering future leadership. Marlena strongly advocated that constitutional reservation is the only viable mechanism to ensure representation for marginalised groups, thereby preventing political parties from solely favouring immediately 'winnable' male candidates. However, Hasan proposed that parties must implement mandatory internal reservations to cultivate 'effective organic leadership from the grassroots'. She drew parallels with successful international models that achieved high representation without reservation by implementing systemic changes, such as state-sponsored childcare and universal parental leave, which free women from traditional responsibilities.



The panel largely agreed that the purpose of attaining power is to address systemic inequality. Marlena highlighted the unequal allocation of resources within families, citing examples in education and healthcare that favour the male child. The panel acknowledged the many valuable qualities that women bring to governance—vision, balance, compassion and the ability to multitask.

Ensuring that young girls see women in decision-making positions as role models they can look up to is crucial. On the one hand, Sarangi underscored the individual responsibility of women to gain knowledge and strive for success. On the other hand, Hasan pointed to the societal barriers, including patriarchy, that necessitate collective effort and an enabling environment for women in rural or less privileged regions.

The discussion concluded with an interactive question-and-answer session, highlighting subjects such as the need for a women's caucus in Parliament to combat incivility, when will India see its next woman Prime Minister and a new gender-inclusive reservation model.

■ SAURYA MISHRA

## Enabling Women's Agency

**TALK:** *Women, Work, Resilience and Peace: SEWA's Role in the Empowerment of Women in India's Informal Economy*

**KEYNOTE SPEAKER:** Reema Nanavaty

**CHAIR:** Bina Agarwal

**13 October 2025**

An exceptionally inspiring panel discussion highlighted the work of the largest national trade union of women workers in India, Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), in transforming the lives of millions of women who form the backbone of our country's informal economy. The organisation challenges traditional notions of gender roles and seeks to redefine women's identities in a world that continues to rely on their unpaid and unrecognised labour.

In her introductory remarks, Bina Agarwal underscored the critical role of SEWA in organising and empowering women. Founded in 1972 by the visionary Ela Bhatt, SEWA today represents over 3.2 million women across 18 states, many of whom are home-based workers, street vendors, small farmers and artisans. Over 90 per cent of India's female labour force operates in the informal sector, often without job security, social protection or fair wages. SEWA, Agarwal noted, has achieved the extraordinary by organising and unionising women whom society had long considered 'unorganisable'.







Reema Nanavaty, who has led SEWA for nearly four decades, spoke passionately in her keynote address about the Association's mission to secure full employment and self-reliance for every woman and her household. Tracing SEWA's Gandhian roots, she emphasised that poverty is a 'form of violence with the consent of society'. SEWA's approach, she explained, combines unionisation with entrepreneurship, enabling women to become owners and managers of their own trades. Through collective action, training and access to microfinance, SEWA offers its members not only economic and social security but also identity and dignity.

Nanavaty described SEWA as a 'banyan tree' that is deeply rooted yet branching out across regions, religions and castes, nurturing solidarity among women workers. The discussion was attended by several members of SEWA from various

districts across India, who shared inspiring stories of empowerment. One such account was that of Sakhee Ben from Gujarat, a third-generation member who became the first girl in her community to pursue higher education. Today, she holds a postgraduate degree and helps other women access heatwave insurance and climate-resilient livelihoods. There were similar stories from Kashmir, Ladakh and many other regions of the country that highlighted the common themes of resilience, self-confidence and intergenerational empowerment.

Among SEWA's recent innovations are green energy livelihoods, climate insurance and initiatives that connect women producers to sustainable supply chains.

Expanding its reach across South Asia, including Nepal, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Afghanistan, SEWA's vision remains that true freedom will come only when every woman can earn and live with dignity from her own labour.

The discussion concluded on an uplifting note with the SEWA members and participants joining in a multilingual rendition of 'Hum Honge Kamyab' (We Shall Overcome). The programme reaffirmed SEWA's timeless message that women's work is vital to inclusive development. It is also fitting to observe that SEWA is more than an organisation, it is a movement that continues to redefine solidarity and empowerment for women in India's informal economy.

■ **RICHA VADINI SINGH**

## Changemakers from the North-East

**DISCUSSION:** *Working for an Equal World*

**PANELLISTS:** Patricia Mukhim; Rakhee Kalita Moral; Stuti Goswami; and Purnima Barman

**MODERATOR:** Sanjoy Hazarika

**CHAIR:** Rami Chhabra

**VOTE OF THANKS:** K. N. Shrivastava

**14 October 2025**

The discussion centred on women's empowerment, gender inequalities in the North-East—encompassing the past, present and future—and how women's emancipation relates to broader issues across the seven north-eastern states. The four panellists, each a woman with unique insights into gender equality, began by outlining their areas of interest.



Rakhee Kalita Moral, whose research has concentrated on women rebels, primarily spoke about young, educated women who joined rebel groups during a period when anti-establishment activities peaked across the North-East in the last part of the 20th century, particularly in Assam. Moral explained how these women sought emancipation but discovered that life inside a rebel camp echoed life outside: the patriarchal structures, restrictions and inequalities they had hoped to escape remained intact on both sides of the divide. They continued to be labelled as 'bad girls'.

Patricia Mukhim offered insight into a similar story of women having to fight patriarchy—ironic considering most people outside Meghalaya associate

the culture with a matrilineal society. Mukhim discussed the widespread issue of teenage pregnancies, the lack of responsibility or accountability among the men involved and the resulting rise in single mothers. Mukhim also emphasised that what is needed is not just equality, but equity: policies, resources and means must be tailored to meet the needs of specific groups or individuals.

Stuti Goswami and Purnima Barman took a different route for their respective presentations, both markedly distinct from those of their co-panellists, yet equally engaging. Goswami's talk focussed on two aspects. The first was a brief overview of five prominent women from the North-East, including freedom fighters Thengphakhri Tehsildar (also Assam's first woman tehsildar), Kanaklata Barua and Gaidinliu Pamei, popularly known as Rani Gaidinliu; educationist Indira Miri; and writer M. K. Binodini Devi. The second part explored Goswami's study of pre-Independence literary periodicals published in Assam up to around 1935, highlighting intriguing facts about the contributions of female writers to these periodicals, whose articles often emphasised the importance of education and social reform, or the promotion of weaving.

The final speaker was Purnima Barman, a conservationist whose efforts have led to a significant increase in the population of the greater adjutant stork in Assam. Known locally as Hargila, its numbers rose from 450 in 2007 to over 1,800 in 2023. This remarkable growth prompted the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) to change the bird's status from 'Endangered' to 'Near Threatened', which contributed to Barman's name being included among 13 women in *Time Magazine's* Woman of the Year 2025. Barman's presentation, as Sanjoy Hazarika described it, was a 'showstopper'. Using a few slides, a painted wooden model of the bird and Hargila-patterned clothing and

jewellery, Barman explained how her conservation work also involves local women across the bird's habitat. According to Barman, the 20,000-strong 'Hargila Army' now supports initiatives to protect not only this species but also the broader ecosystem—and, in the process, benefits the community.

Offering a fitting conclusion to the discussion, Barman's Hargila Army showed that women's empowerment can benefit not only the community but also the broader ecosystem and society. Everything, at least in the North-East, is interconnected.

■ **MADHULIKA LIDDLE**



## Building History

**TALK:** *Women in Architecture in India: Changing the Historical Canon*

**SPEAKER:** Madhavi Desai

**CHAIR:** Abhay Purohit

**12 October 2025**



'How many women architects can you name?' asked Madhavi Desai, introducing a slide featuring some commonly known architects in India—B. V. Doshi, Charles Correa, among other male figures. This marked a deep dive into the history of women in architecture in modern India. Her thought-provoking question regarding the contributions of women architects in building post-colonial India and their relative anonymity raised some of the most pertinent questions of our time. Why are women not celebrated as much as men in the profession? Referencing, among others, Eulie Chaudhary, who worked closely with Le Corbusier to build Chandigarh as we know it today, or Gira Sarabhai, who contributed to various design initiatives in Gujarat, Desai highlighted the irony that perhaps women architects may not even realise the significance of their role in history. Desai discussed various aspects of the role, challenges, injustices, as well as achievements of women architects in India.

Women are not a homogeneous group, she argued. They are shaped and driven by their socio-cultural and economic backgrounds. Caste and class significantly influenced women's involvement in architecture, with family expectations and support playing a major role in career development until a few decades ago. This also contributed to the development of a common husband-wife partnership model in architecture (and likely other professions), which offers flexibility and





a work-life balance. She notably highlighted how the entry of women into the workforce was significantly catalysed by Mahatma Gandhi and his call to women to participate in the freedom movement. This was the first time ordinary women stepped out of their homes to actively participate in a mass movement. Surprisingly, she lamented, the history and development of the women's movement is not taught in architectural schools in India. This further fosters

a sense of apathy towards women's issues, sometimes even among women.

Showcasing some of the most important women architects, Desai introduced the audience to the works of trailblazers such as Pravina Mehta, Hema Sankalia, Revathy Kamath, and contemporary figures like Chitra Vishwanath, Abha Narain Lambah, Anupama Kundoo, Brinda Somaya, and many others, underlining the shift towards impactful practices led by women in recent times. She further highlighted younger, emerging women-led practices that are currently turning the tide in India.

The talk concluded with an introduction to the work of Desai's organisation, 'Feminist Collective in Architecture' and its efforts to document and archive the role of women in architecture across India through extensive research. The ongoing database aims to highlight the immense contribution of women and to create a more inclusive history of architecture in India.

It is fitting to end with Desai's remark: 'women architects want to be known only as "architects"'.  
**■ SUPARNA GHOSH**

## The Circle of Reason

**EXHIBITION:** *Shunya: The Power of Zero*  
**9 to 16 October 2025**



The exhibition explored India's mathematical heritage, particularly the concept of zero and its impact on subjects such as algebra, astronomy and music. The idea of 'nothingness', the appearance of the symbol for zero used as a placeholder or digit in the decimal number system, zero as an algebraic entity used in arithmetic operations, and the perception and application of zero across cultures in philosophy, poetry and mathematics were highlighted. The exhibition also showcased the journey of zero from the Indian subcontinent through Central Asia to the West, using posters that featured images of ancient manuscripts accompanied by explanatory text.

There were five sections: 'Conceiving of Nothing', 'Signifying Nothing', 'Zero Across Cultures', 'Around Zero' and 'Zero

Fills the Void'. The first section concentrated on the emergence of *shunya* from the Vedic period, its connections to Panini's *Ashtadhyayi*, a treatise on Sanskrit grammar, and its conceptual significance. The Yajurveda (1200 BCE–800 BCE) has several verses in which salutations are made to numbers going up to a trillion. Specific words were used for the multiples of 100, starting from *shataya* for a hundred to *parardha* for a trillion. Panini (7th–4th century BCE) used the term *tasya lopa* to describe the elision of certain sounds, foreshadowing zero. Pingala's *Chandahsastra* (3rd–2nd century BCE) includes the terms *rupe shunyam* and *dhvihi shunye*, which are among the earliest references to zero denoting absence.

The second section focussed on the development of the symbol for zero from a placeholder in the decimal system to an algebraic entity. The first appearance of the decimal system is possibly in the *Yavanajataka* (3rd century CE). A copper plate from Mankani, Gujarat, from 595 CE, has a record of decimal place value numerals. A stone inscription in the Chaturbhuj temple in Gwalior, dated 876 CE, also depicts the circular symbol for zero. The symbol first originated as a dot, as seen



in the Bakhshali manuscript (799–1102 CE), before morphing into a circle. Evidence of the use of zero as a placeholder in the decimal system comes from Aryabhatta (476–550 CE). Brahmagupta (598–668 CE) described mathematical operations using zero in algebra. He also introduced negative numbers and their mathematical operations. With this, zero gained a position on the number line between positive and negative numbers.

The third section highlighted the use of zero by the Mayans as a placeholder in their base-20 numerical system and can be dated back to 36 BCE. The Mayans used a shell to depict zero. There were also around 35 Arabic manuscripts from the 9th to the 19th century that describe calculations using Indian numerals or *hisab al-hind*.

The fourth section examined zero as a cultural, religious and philosophical concept, including the connection between the Sanskrit word *shunya*, the Arabic *sifr* and the English cypher; examples of dissolving self-awareness; and the Buddhist doctrine of *shunyata*, which denotes the absence of innate nature. The fifth section explored the metaphysical concept of *shunya* in music, ghazals and poetry.



Overall, the exhibition shed light on the origins of zero as a mathematical concept that emerged from India, was accepted by mathematicians and numerical systems globally and is now an integral part of our digital world.

■ GEETHA VENKATARAMAN

## Bihar's Repositories of Knowledge

**EXHIBITION:** *Ink and Eternity: Priceless Collections of Nalanda and Darbhanga*

**COLLABORATION:** Lalit Narayan Mithila University, Darbhanga; Kameshwar Singh Darbhanga Sanskrit University; Nava Nalanda Mahavihara, and Nalanda University

10 to 14 October 2025

There was something quietly moving about the exhibition that aimed to evoke Bihar's long and layered relationship with knowledge. The display highlighted the state's historical and ongoing engagement with learning—its monastic traditions, royal patronage, and later, the institutional custodianship of manuscripts and rare books. While the premise was rich and multi-layered, its realisation within the compact confines of the conference room offered both intimacy and limitations.

The curatorial approach was straightforward and unadorned. Panels along the walls introduced the participating institutions and their histories, outlining Bihar's intellectual and linguistic diversity. At the centre, a long table held the exhibition's most precious objects—four manuscripts from the collection of Nava Nalanda Mahavihara. These included a late-15th-century Tibetan *Ārya Astasahasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, illuminated in gold and silver; a red-and-gold lacquered *Kammavācā* ritual text in old Burmese script; a Pali grammar written on a banana stem in Khmer script; and a *Visuddhimagga* in Sinhalese script.

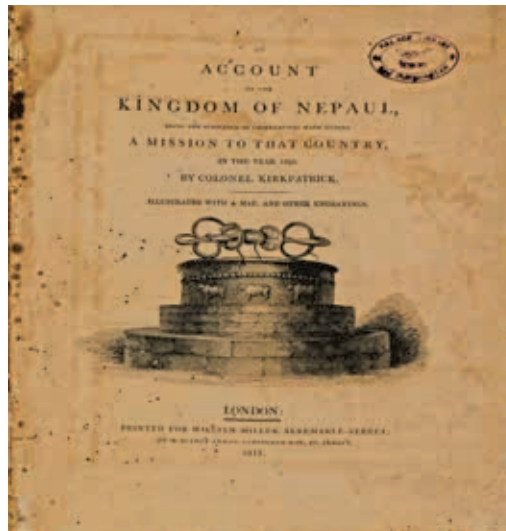
Remarkably well-preserved, the vivid pigments and intact leaves of the manuscripts reflected the careful conservation

undertaken at the Mahavihara. Yet, their presentation remained fragile. Without protective glass or dedicated cases, the manuscripts rested openly on the table, accompanied by handwritten notes and improvised labels—some doubling as gentle reminders: 'Do Not Touch'. The interpretive panels, though informative, were placed at a distance from the objects, creating a disjunction between reading and viewing. For visitors unfamiliar with the manuscript tradition, the experience risked remaining at the level of aesthetic wonder—ancient texts admired for their beauty, but only partially understood for their intellectual depth.

Equally evocative were the 12 rare-printed volumes brought from the library of Lalit Narayan Mithila University. Among them were *Description Historique Et Géographique De L'Inde* by Joseph Tieffenthaler; *Asiatic Researches* (Vol. 1), *An Account of the Kingdom of Nepaul* by Colonel Kirkpatrick; and works by F. Max Müller and Ganganath Jha. Though worn and termite-bitten, they bore witness to Bihar's once-thriving networks of scholarly exchange—between royal patrons, Orientalist scholars and early university presses.







Their presence hinted at an older geography of learning, one that linked Mithila's courtly scholarship to the cosmopolitan circuits of colonial knowledge.

Surpassing conventions, the exhibition served as an assertion of presence—a modest yet significant reminder of Bihar's enduring repositories of knowledge. For the participating institutions, it was less about displaying treasures than about self-representation, an effort to re-establish their

collections on the map and perhaps invite new scholarship to engage with them.

If the setting felt confined, it also symbolised the state of such repositories—rich in material but limited in resources and reach. The ink, as the exhibition's title promised, endures; eternity, for now, appears to await a more fitting frame.

■ SINDHURI APARNA

## Representing Women in Sculpture

**EXHIBITION:** *Forms in Continuum: Narratives in Modern Indian Sculpture*

**COLLABORATION:** DAG

**10 to 14 October 2025**

The exhibition featuring five artists—S. Dhanapal, K. S. Radhakrishnan, Navjot Altaf, Kiron Sinha and Latika Katt—was sparse and spaced out, allowing ample room for cogitation and wonderment.

Sculpture has traditionally been a significant medium of artistic expression on the Indian subcontinent. Typically sacred and used to teach religious beliefs—whether Hindu, Buddhist or Jain—it was often limited by norms and traditions that suppressed artistic individuality. The primary materials were stone and terracotta, as the subcontinent's climate restricted the durability of organic materials.

A shift occurred with Western influences, the establishment of art colleges in major Indian cities and the advent of technology. A diverse range of styles, traditions and materials began to flourish in different parts of the country, where originality, individuality and freedom of expression became the key concepts. Numerous modern Indian sculptors found their niche and gained recognition for their creative excellence.







Chennai-born Dhanapal (1919–2000) was not only a sculptor but also a dancer, who dabbled in theatre and cinema. A legendary figure in the art world, he bridged classical South Indian forms with modern sensibility, pioneering post-Independence sculpture and infusing new life into portraiture. On display was his lifelike bust of Gandhi sculpted in bronze.

Meerut-born veteran artist Navjot Altaf, usually known as Navjot, was represented by a set of three gleaming, life-sized dogs crafted in Batsar's bell-metal traditions. Steeped in feminist ideologies both artistically and personally, Navjot has engaged in diverse activities rooted in her beliefs. Living and working between Batsar and Mumbai, she tends to 'blend tribal legacies with contemporary form'. In this instance, a purpose may have been considered fulfilled if one followed the viewing by studying Navjot, the artist.

Kerala-born and Shantiniketan-trained sculptor K. S. Radhakrishnan, known for his signature archetypal male and female figures, Musui and Maiya, has firmly adhered to his self-styled idiom, experimenting with various combinations to expand or reduce his chosen vocabulary. His 'The Ramp' or 'Standing Musui' depicted aspiration and collective humanity through male and female figures moving forward.

Latika Katt (1948–2025) was revolutionary in her own way. Specialised in stone carving, metal casting and bronze sculpting, her displayed work 'Fence' showed 'both boundary and openness, strength and reflection'. With her penchant for 'letting things be' and her reluctance to disturb even an inanimate object, Katt could embody intangibles within the materiality of her creations, where notions of culture and community manifested and endured.

Kiron Sinha (1916–2009) was part of the Shantiniketan school of art, known for being well travelled, multifaceted and versatile in his artistic pursuits. As a painter, sculptor, designer and teacher, he turned to sculpting in concrete as his eyesight waned in his later years, describing how the touch of his hands served as his eyes. This transition occurred soon after the demise of his 27-year-old daughter Bulbul, his only child. The three life-size concrete works on display—'Bulbul', 'Purnima' and 'Angel with Flute'—serve as a personal memorial dedicated to his daughter.



With such a vast corpus of artists and sculptors practising modern Indian sculpture, one had expected and hoped for more works and artists to be showcased in the extensive space accorded to the exhibition.

■ ARUNA BHOWMICK



# Celebrating a Cinematic Star

**EXHIBITION:** A Star Named Arundhati

**CURATED BY:** Tapati Guha-Thakurta and Mrinalini Vasudevan

**11 to 25 October 2025**

Considered one of the most educated and aristocratic actors of her time, Arundhati Devi (1924–1990) was among the few women producers and, possibly, the first female director in Bengali cinema.

And yet, until Devi's niece, Tapati Guha-Thakurta, and grandniece, Mrinalini Vasudevan, began researching her, there was almost no information available on this multifaceted artist who had been a singer, composer, actor, director, writer, producer and costume designer. She also travelled to Hollywood in 1952, as part of a film industry delegation that included Nargis, Raj Kapoor and Prem Nath.

The exhibition, which celebrated a hundred years of Devi's life, featured family archives, photographs, memorabilia and scenes from her films, most of which were preserved and labelled by Devi and her daughter. Anindya Sinha, Kakoli Mukhopadhyay, Rakesh Sahni and Sounak Chakravarti also contributed. However, many of her films no longer exist and her legacy remains largely forgotten.



Born into the artistic Guha Thakurta family in Barisal in undivided India, Devi's family moved to Calcutta, where her businessman father had to start over. After his death, Devi and her brother studied at Shantiniketan, where she completed her postgraduation and honed her skills in music and dance under the tutelage of prominent mentors. She went on to sing Rabindra Sangeet, including making some records. Devi's cinematic debut in *Mahaprasthanar Pathe* (1952) was a portent for her career in challenging societal norms. Her most famous role was as Sister Nivedita in *Bhagini Nivedita* (1962), which won the Best Feature Film award at the National Film Awards in 1963. Devi's first husband, Prabhat Mukherjee, worked for All India Radio and later became a screenplay writer and director. She met film director Tapan Sinha at the Berlin International Film Festival in 1957 and turned producer with *Bicharak* (1959), directed by Mukherjee. In 1967, she directed her first film, *Chhuti*, which received a Certificate of Merit at the 1967 National Film Awards. It also won several



Bengal Film Journalists' Association Awards, including Best Director. This was followed by *Megh o Roudra* (1969) and a film for children, *Padi Pishir Bormi Baksha* (1972). Then came *Deepar Prem* (1983) and *Gokul*, a telefilm, in 1985.

Devi was only 54 when she suffered a cerebral stroke in 1978, which forced her to move away from the limelight. However, she occasionally assisted with Tapan Sinha's films, worked with children with special needs and conceived of more film projects, including a documentary on Sinha.

The files that Guha-Thakurta and Vasudevan found in Devi's home reveal many films that she had planned but could not complete. Devi passed away on 16 October 1990, aged 66, due to a cardiac arrest. Many of the films she acted in and directed have not been preserved, making it extremely urgent to safeguard this family archive and digitise the works of this multifaceted star of Bengali cinema.

■ RITIKA KOCHHAR



## A Literary Occasion

### RELEASE OF THE IIC QUARTERLY, AUTUMN 2025; AND INDIA AND AFRICA: LEGACY OF EXCHANGES AND CULTURAL AFFINITIES

by N. N. Vohra

13 October 2025

Initiating the proceedings, K. E. Priyamvada welcomed the distinguished panellists, guests and audience, emphasising the *IIC Quarterly* as the Centre's flagship publication that embodies its rich, multidisciplinary character. She thanked Omita Goyal, the former Chief Editor, for her curation of this issue. She also welcomed Sudha Gopalakrishnan, Executive Director of the IIC International Research Division, which brought out the collection of essays edited by Ambassador H. H. S. Viswanathan and Director, IIC, K. N. Shrivastava that was released concurrently.



The Gandhi-King Plaza wore an air of gentle repose. The sun had slipped beyond the horizon, leaving behind a hue of gold and rose that lingered in the sky. The air was crisp, and the lawns buzzed with the fluttering and chattering of birds settling into the trees as guests gathered beneath the open sky. In this tranquil setting, the Centre celebrated the release of the *IIC Quarterly*, Autumn 2025 issue, and the edited volume *India and Africa: Legacy of Exchanges and Cultural Affinities*.

Shrivastava commended Goyal, who guided the *IIC Quarterly* with discernment and dedication for over 14 years. He traced the journey of the Africa volume, one of four volumes conceived under the visionary late Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan, and lauded the editorial perseverance that brought it to completion; a tribute that befitted her intellectual legacy and vision of cross-cultural scholarship.

N. N. Vohra, Life Trustee, IIC, made his remarks with the quiet authority of experience and continuity. He recalled the *IIC Quarterly*'s tradition of publishing one combined theme and two general issues, and praised the Autumn 2025 volume's selection of articles that range from

reflections on the caste census to essays of cultural depth. He wished Goyal many more years of creative engagement and expressed confidence that her association with IIC would continue.

As twilight deepened over the plaza and conversation gave way to soft laughter and shared recollections, the evening closed as it had begun—serene, thoughtful and suffused with the enduring glow of ideas shared in literary fellowship.

■ PRABIR KUMAR TALUKDAR

# Grace Personified

**PERFORMANCE:** *Bharatanatyam Recital*

**PERFORMED BY:** *Malavika Sarukkai*

**ACCOMPANIED BY:** *Neela Sukhanya S.; Krithika Arvind; Nellai Balaji Azhwar; and S. Venkata Subramanian*

**LIGHT DESIGN:** *Sharad Kulshreshtha*

**COSTUME DESIGN:** *Sandhya Raman*

**10 October 2025**

Through her expressive interpretations and fluid movements, Sarukkai brought to life the journey of the celestial Bhagirathi River as it flowed through the dense matted locks of Lord Shiva and conjoined with the sensuous Alaknanda River at Devprayag to form the Ganga. She used pure dance interludes to depict the distinct moods and characteristics of the two rivers, while also capturing the vibrant presence of devotees and the rituals performed in reverence to the sacredness of Ganga.

In 'Thimmakka', her second piece, Sarukkai aligned her presentation with the theme of this year's festival of the arts, 'Sā-Vanītā: Thus She Speaks', by paying tribute to Saalumara Thimmakka, the 114-year-old environmentalist born in 1911 in a small village in Karnataka (she passed away over a month

after this performance). Thimmakka, who did not have biological children, devoted her life to transforming an arid region by planting over 385 banyan trees and raising them like her own offspring. She later went on to plant over 8,000 trees. Thimmakka was awarded the Padma Shri in 2019 for this nurturing act. Sarukkai expressed through her *abhinaya* the poignant despair of a young, newly married Thimmakka, unable to conceive despite following the local custom of planting a banyan tree to become pregnant. But the act of planting a tree and its growth brought so much joy and fulfilment to her life that she continued planting trees and became popularly known as the Mother of Trees. This transformative journey from hopelessness to hope was well portrayed.

For her concluding piece, 'Vrindavan', Sarukkai chose verses composed by the

Tamil poet-saint Andal, who lived in the 8th century CE and was known for her love and devotion to Krishna. It is not easy to express abstract feelings of faith that connect persons to their deity. However, through DanceSpeak, a technique that she has developed, Sarukkai can make the body speak and

get the audience to see what she sees and feel what she feels. Whether it was the joyfulness of Krishna's presence in Vrindavan or the passionate emotions of longing he invoked in the hearts of women who heard his flute and saw his celestial abandonment, Sarukkai used her exceptional *abhinaya* skills to express a range of emotions that touched the audience.

The brilliance of the accompanying musicians and the well-designed lighting arrangement further enhanced Sarukkai's outstanding performance.



Malavika Sarukkai believes in reimagining the conventional narrative and its presentation. The accomplished Bharatanatyam danseuse's decision to begin her first piece, 'Gangavataran', with her back to the audience, showed why the Padma Shri awardee's choreography does not follow the beaten path. The effect of only her silhouette being visible in the darkness, as she stood with her hands raised, was dramatic and immediately captured attention to her retelling of the mythical story of the river revered by many as Mother Ganga and Goddess Ganga.

■ SWAPNA MAJUMDAR



# A Magical, Musical Evening

**PERFORMANCE:** *Diva: The Triumph of Woman in Opera*

**PERFORMED BY:** An All-Women's Ensemble from The Neemrana Music Foundation (TNMF)

**11 October 2025**

'Diva: The Triumph of Women in Opera' amply illustrated the theme of this year's festival, 'Sā-Vanītā: Thus She Speaks'. In this instance, perhaps the theme should read as 'Thus She Sings', as it featured 11 young sopranos and mezzo-sopranos, singing in six languages, accompanied by a talented young pianist, Nadine Jo Crasto. The programme was imaginatively divided into three thematically organised 'Acts' and an 'Epilogue'.

Act I, 'The Dream of Love', commenced with all the singers joining in the well-known 'Bridal Chorus' from Wagner's *Lohengrin*. The experienced Cheryl Bains then took centre stage to sing Juliette's aria 'Ah! Je veux vivre' from Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette*, tackling its coloratura elements very creditably. Renie Mathew, supported by the rest as chorus, followed with 'Nel giardin del bello' from Verdi's *Don Carlo*. The singers again sang as a chorus to support Aditi Jain in the beautiful 'Vilja Song' from Lehar's popular operetta *Die Lustige Witwe* (The Merry Widow). Bains and Mathew then joined forces in the sensuous Barcarolle from Offenbach's only serious opera, *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* (The Tales of Hoffmann).

Act II, 'The Seductress', opened with the duet 'Via resti servita' from Act I of Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* (The Marriage of Figaro), sung with an amusing display of competitive spitefulness by Aditi Jain and Aadya Sinha. Jain then launched into 'Stizzoso, mio stizzoso' from Pergolesi's landmark comic intermezzo *La Serva Padrona* (The Maid turned Mistress). Jain was joined by Nikita Tiwari and P. S. Devyani, turning a solo aria into a clever opportunity to showcase two novice singers as well. The true operatic seductress emerged with Musetta's waltz song 'Quando me'n vo' (When I go along), from Act II of Puccini's *La Bohème*, sung by Sinha. The operatic seductress, Bizet's *Carmen*, came to the fore in 'Chanson Bohème', sung effectively by Sharmishtha Samal, with the rest joining in the chorus.

Act III, 'The Defeat', featured operatic excerpts of a more tragic nature, commencing with a choral arrangement of 'Lascia ch'io pianga' (Let me weep) from Handel's *Rinaldo*, sung a cappella, with Philippe Engel joining discreetly from the audience to conduct the singers. Jain then sang 'Oh quante volte' from Act I of Bellini's *I Capuletti e i Montecchi* (The Capulets and the Montagues) with great feeling. This was followed by the centrepiece of the evening: a technically assured and emotionally riveting performance of 'Tatiana's letter scene' from Tchaikovsky's *Yevgeny Onegin* (Eugene Onegin) by Bains, capturing the volatile emotions of uncertain first love. Sinha followed with a deeply felt 'Ach, ich fühl's' from Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* (The Magic Flute). The tragic note continued with Mathew singing 'Vivan los que rien' from Manuel de Falla's *La Vida Breve* (Life is Short) and Samal performing the same composer's 'Dance of the Game of Love' from *El Amor Brujo* (Love, the Sorcerer).

The 'Epilogue' lightened the atmosphere with Anne Trulove's mock-heroic aria 'I go, I go to him' from Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress*, with words by W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman, sung with panache by Bains.

The evening was a triumph for TNMF, highlighting their success in training young operatic voices. The 11 young ladies exhibited a growing confidence in their voices and stage presence. The programme was a commendable manifestation of the feminine voice.

■ SUNIT TANDON



# The Power of Devotion

**PERFORMANCE:** *Stree Ratnas: Women Composers of Bharat*

**PRESENTED BY:**  
Vishakha Hari

**ACCOMPANIED BY:**  
Idappally Ajith Kumar (violin);  
and S. J. Arjun Ganesh (mridangam)

**12 October 2025**

The nectar from the ocean of devotion was the theme of Vishakha Hari's performance, in which she led the audience on a sacred journey. This spiritual pilgrimage from Brindavan to Kashmir, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, Odisha, Tamil Nadu and back to Brindavan, was ideational, created through the universe of Vaishnava bhakti, weaving philosophy, mythology and belief into an intricate tapestry. Accompanied by violin and mridangam, Hari punctuated her Harikatha, a genre of folk performance combining music, dance and *pravachana* (religious discourse) aimed at conveying the glories of Hari (Vishnu), the one who removes evil, with anecdotes and humour.

A disciple of Sri Krishna Premi, the proponent of *prema* bhakti, Hari began with a couplet paying obeisance to Krishna, followed by Mirabai's allegorical '*Thothi Maina*' as the introductory bhajan. The quest for the liberation of the soul using the confined bird's yearning for the skies was beautifully rendered by the artiste. From Braj, the audience was transported to Kashmir, where Lalleshwari carved her

iconoclastic path in the 14th century. She represented the ethos of harmony for the Kashmiri people—Hindus referred to her as Lalla Yogini, while Muslims called her Lal'arifa. Hari sang her deeply philosophical *vakh* set in raga Durga, '*Dehace Lare Dare Bar Troparim*'.

Muktabai, the sister of Jnaneshwar, was the first woman saint of the Varkari movement, centred around the deity Vithoba of Pandharpur in the 13th

century. The account of Mukta advising her brother Jnanadev to discard his anger and 'open the door' inspired the '*Thathiche Abhang*', a part of which Hari sang. Tharikonda Vengamamba's '*Muthyala Harati*' for Venkateshwara on Tirumala, where her poems became part of the *ekanta* seva, the last service for the deity, was beautifully rendered. Hari did not mention this, but the syncretism that devotionism fostered, as in the case of Lalla, is seen in Vengamamba's disciple Murrasahib propagating her message after her *mahasamadhi* (consciously leaving the body for spiritual liberation). The song of Karmabai, born in a Rajasthani Jat family, whose *khichdi* became the offering for Jagannath of Puri, added one more gem among the *stree ratnas*. The story of Andal, whose offering of a garland to lord Ranganatha after wearing it first herself, brought the harikatha back to *prema* bhakti as a moving life force for women devotees. Hari ended with the moving Mira bhajan, '*Payoji Maine Ram Ratan Dhan Payo*'.

Hari offered an immersive experience, where each woman's journey on the path of devotionism became an anchor for the message of love and harmony. Each story showcased the strength of conviction of women in times when social pressures sought to constrict them. Breaking free from these shackles, the women carved a radical path towards self-realisation and *moksha*, while also leaving behind a rich legacy. Through her mesmerising storytelling and singing, Hari conveyed the much-needed message that we can coexist, share common values and embrace each other with love, despite our differences.

■ R. MAHALAKSHMI





# A Pleasing Fusion

**PERFORMANCE:** *The Splendour of Malay Dance: From Tradition to Contemporary Dance*

**PRESENTED BY:** *The ASK Dance Company, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*

**PERFORMED BY:** *Zulkarnain Zuber; Jackson Janda; Nadhirah Rahmat; Yu Jun; Sera Nina; and Shan Tie*

**12 October 2025**

A colourful mosaic of Malaysian traditional and contemporary dance pieces, presented by the ASK Dance Company (ADC) from Malaysia, was more than just a dance performance. It showcased the historical and cultural connections of Malaysia to the Portuguese and Arab nations, and how the amalgamation of these different cultures has enriched Malaysian traditions and dance styles. With the younger generation increasingly interested in popular urban dance cultures, many traditional forms are gradually fading. ADC has not only revived these traditional dances through research and free training for young dancers but is also bringing them back into the spotlight with performances both within and outside Malaysia.

Joget, one such traditional dance being revitalised, gave a glimpse of this cultural confluence. Beginning with slow and languid hand and body movements, the male and female dancers moved in harmony, as they circled each other and danced in coordinated patterns. The dance movements, especially the coordinated footwork, spins, jumps and joyful twirls, reflected the Portuguese influence imbibed during the time Malacca, a port city on the Malay Peninsula, came under their control. The musical influence was also evident in the use of accordion, violin and fiddle. The men wore their traditional attire with a *songkok* (Malay cap), while the women were dressed in vibrant long blouses and skirts with flowers in their hair. The Joget style shares many similarities with Goan celebratory dances due to their common Portuguese heritage.

Another traditional piece presented was Zapin, a dance with roots in the Arab world. It was brought to Malaysia by traders from the Middle East many centuries ago. Such was the influence that the name Zapin originated from the Arabic word '*Al-Zafn*' or quick foot movements. Initially adapted and developed by the Malay indigenous community, Zapin was performed only by male dancers, probably because the music and dance were used as a medium for preaching Islam. It was much later that women were allowed to perform it. The ADC presentation featuring pairs of male and female dancers began with smooth, flowing movements and then picked up pace with quick, intricate footwork. The performers were well harmonised and visually pleasing.

Equally charming was the next performance by two female dancers, who used small hand fans as props. A common characteristic seen in all the traditional Malay dances presented was slow yet fluid body and hand movements. In this piece too, both dancers performed at a languorous pace but managed to hold attention with their beautiful synchronisation.



The final two dances were from ADC's contemporary repertoire. Both were skilfully choreographed with sharp, precise and energetic movements combined with the artistry of ballet and contemporary dance. All six dancers showed great body control, flexibility and poise.

■ SWAPNA MAJUMDAR

# Classical Elegance

**PERFORMANCE:** Hindustani Vocal Recital

**ARTIST:** Sniti Mishra

**ACCOMPANISTS:** Ajeet Pathak (tabla); Milind Kulkarni (harmonium); and Hrishikesh Majumdar (flute)

13 October 2025



The recital offered a profound journey through the landscape of Hindustani classical music, presenting a repertoire that balanced depth, devotion and spontaneity. The evening unfolded with a carefully selected sequence of *bada* and *chhota khayals* (slow and fast tempos, respectively), as well as genres such as *thumri* and *bhajan*, creating an experience where melody (*raga*), rhythm (*taal*), and poetic expression seamlessly intertwined. The performance celebrated the timelessness of the classical tradition, blending structure and improvisation to evoke both emotional and spiritual resonance among the audience.

Trained by eminent gurus, Sniti Mishra's foundation lies in the Gwalior Gharana under Raghunath Sahu. Later, she refined her craft in the Kirana Gharana style under the guidance of the venerable Dilshad Khan. The evening's performance included compositions by her gurus, reflecting the *gayaki* (singing) tradition.

Mishra moved effortlessly between Hindustani classical, Sufi, ghazal and film music genres, each performed with sincerity and depth.

The recital began with an evening raga, Puriya Dhanashree, presented first in *bada khayal*, followed by a *chhota khayal* and a Tarana composition. '*Lagi Mori Lagana*' in *bada khayal*, infused with swift passages of Bol Taans, seamlessly led into the evocative lyrics of '*More Ghar Piya Ajahu Na Aawe*' in *chhota khayal*.

This was followed by the Farsi Tarana '*Khabaram Raseed Imshab ki Nigaar*', attributed to Amir Khusrau. The composition carries both romantic and spiritual connotations—interpreted as a lover's anticipation for the beloved or, metaphorically, the devotee's longing for divine union. It evolved dynamically as the flute, harmonium, tabla and tanpura interplayed to create a layered crescendo, emphasising the ensemble's synchronisation and aesthetic unity.

Responding to a special request by Shyam Saran in attendance, Mishra presented *madhyam-pradhan* ('Ma' note dominant) raga Malkauns, characterised by its meditative gravity. The composition '*Hara Hara Mahadev*' invoked the cosmic and ascetic essence of Lord Shiva. Her rendition captured both spiritual austerity and the grandeur of the composition, evoking deep reverence.

The recital then shifted to lighter classical pieces with '*Naina More Taras Gaye*', a *thumri* in raga Bhairavi, associated with Bade Ghulam Ali Khan. A composition portraying the longing of a lover awaiting her beloved, it captures the *birha* (separation) and desire that are central to the *thumri* style. Mishra's expressive voice and subtle ornamentation highlighted the poignant beauty of Bhairavi, ending the classical segment on a deeply emotional note.

Mishra concluded with the ghazal '*Jalte Hain Jiske Liye*', popularised by Talat Mahmood, offering a lyrical and nostalgic finale. The smooth transition from classical to semi-classical and light compositions demonstrated

Mishra's versatility and skill. The recital was not just a musical performance but a comprehensive aesthetic experience—an offering of melody, devotion and emotional transcendence that reaffirmed the enduring power and elegance of Hindustani classical music.

■ KRITIKA AGRAWAL





# When Myths Come Alive

**PERFORMANCE:** Nangiar  
*Koothu: Emancipation of Ahalya*

**PRESENTED BY:** Usha Nangiar

**ACCOMPANISTS:** Rajeev P. P.;  
Vineesh; Unnikrishnan P. P.; and  
Athira Hariharan

**14 October 2025**



A rapt audience was treated to an episode from Indian mythology rendered in an ancient form of dance-drama from Kerala. Traditionally performed by a solo female artiste, Nangiar Koothu is an allied form of Koodiyattam or Kuttiyattam. Included in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO, Kuttiyattam is among India's earliest theatrical traditions that continues to be performed today.

*Ahalya Vimochanam* (Emancipation of Ahalya) depicts the story of Ahalya, wife of the sage Gautama, her seduction through deceit by Indra, the subsequent curse by her husband—angered by what he perceives as her adultery—that she be turned into a stone and her eventual release from this harsh penance by Rama. Usha Nangiar brought this ancient tale to life through minimal gestures, subtle facial expressions and sensitively conveyed emotions.

Beginning with a slow tempo, the performance invited the audience to enter a space of contemplation as Nangiar created an imaginary world on stage. Nangiar transformed herself into each character, conveying the vulnerability of Ahalya, the playfulness of her pet fawn, the cunningness of Indra, the fury of Gautama, the suffering of Ahalya petrified as a stone, and the grace of Rama as he frees her from the curse. Nangiar's effortless transformation through minute *neta abhinaya* (eye movements) and emotive *hasta abhinaya* (hand gestures) was immersive. Skillfully using a table as a prop, which became an altar, a seat and Indra's throne, the otherwise bare stage became a world rich with colour and imbued with meaning.

The accompanying artistes on the *mizhavu* (large clay drums), the *idakka* (a small hourglass-shaped drum) and the *talam* (vocal and rhythmic support) effectively complemented the lead performer, making the performance mesmeric and unforgettable.

While the story of Ahalya has had several modern retellings, including in film and theatre, Nangiar stayed true to the 2,000-year-old tradition that depicts Ahalya as chaste and deceived by Indra's trickery, who seeks her company disguised as her husband. While Indra too is cursed for his role in the episode, the latter part of the performance dwelt primarily on Ahalya's travails as she is rendered immobile, suffering hunger, thirst and the onslaughts of inclement weather. Nangiar's rendition of the young, devout Ahalya, who served her husband faithfully, was tricked into a perceived transgression, and patiently endured the imposed penance, was impressive and heartrending. That a woman is shown as seduced, cursed and freed by men raised the question of the powerlessness of women in earlier times.

In Hindu mythology, Ahalya is considered one of the five maidens (*panchakanya*) who epitomise 'feminine' virtues. As feminist thought questions patriarchy, including its portrayal in the epics, this depiction made the audience question the role of power in gender relations, while marvelling at the expressive rendering of an ancient myth.

■ K. E. PRIYAMVADA

# When People Rescue Pachyderms

**FILM:** *The Last Migration – Wild Elephant Capture in Sarguja*

**DIRECTOR:** Mike Pandey

**CONVERSATION BETWEEN:** Mike Pandey; and  
Rita Banerji

**MODERATOR:** Madhur Nangia

**11 October 2025**

Veteran wildlife documentarian and conservationist Mike Pandey's seminal 1994 documentary, *The Last Migration – Wild Elephant Capture in Sarguja*, breathtakingly chronicles an unprecedented account of man-animal conflict and its resolution in a remote corner of India.

Before the state of Chhattisgarh was carved out of Madhya Pradesh in 2000, a herd of wild elephants was forced to migrate there from the neighbouring state of Bihar, owing to rampant 'development' that had devastated their forest corridor. Adrift and angry at their loss of habitat, the herd found itself in pastoral land and began raiding tribal villages for sustenance. Over 45 Chhattisgarhi tribal people lost their lives, and many more suffered the destruction of their property and livestock by these marauding elephants.



Finally, the forest department, in collaboration with a team of conservationists and veterinarians, decided to capture the wild elephants, lest they were harmed by the afflicted local tribals. The forest department was aided by a crack team of Kuruba nomadic tribals from Karnataka, experts in capturing wild elephants, supported by their retinue of expertly trained pachyderms known as *kumkis*.

Pandey documented the capture and rehabilitation of the wild herd of elephants with economy and technical finesse, producing visuals of rare beauty that bear witness to the intelligence and sensitivity of these majestic creatures, as well as recording a once-in-a-lifetime conservation effort. From evidence of the destroyed villages and testimonies of the distraught tribals to the thrilling tracking down of the wild elephants in the undergrowth; from the efforts of the Kurubas who braid hemp ropes to tether the immobilised and tranquilised wild creatures; to the remarkable intelligence of the kumkis who are fiercely loyal to their Kuruba mahouts, yet display a deep compassion for their captured brethren, Mike's fluid, unhurried camerawork records each detail.



Finally, after the wild elephants are enclosed in massive wooden stockades built by the kumkis in seven days, it is decided that the wild herd will be trained and put to use in forest reserves rather than being translocated and set free, as 'elephants never forget' and have a habit of returning to their natural habitat. The tribals heave a collective sigh of relief, reassured of being able to return to their daily lives without fear of another elephantine raid.

It is with mixed emotions that one realises this once free elephant herd will never roam the forest and grasslands with abandon again. Ironically, the capture and imprisonment of these elephants is what will safeguard them. Neither the elephants nor the tribal people are aware that it is urban man and his insatiable appetite that has led to this unenviable outcome.

Recipient of the Wildscreen Panda Award in 1994, also known as the Green Oscar, *The Last Migration* is a thrilling, thought-provoking film that offers a rare insight into man-animal conflict and its root cause.

■ **SIDHARTH SRINIVASAN**

## Cinephile's Corner

**FILM FESTIVAL:** *Women at the Centre*

**CURATED BY:** Shivendra Singh Dungarpur

**10 to 14 October 2025**

An array of 13 memorable films featuring predominantly women-centric works from Indian and world cinema was screened during this year's festival.

*Rear Window*, directed by the British-American master Alfred Hitchcock in the early 1950s, continues to fascinate viewers. A convalescing photojournalist with a broken leg watches his neighbours' lives through an open window. Their droll existence, which he observes through a pair of binoculars, is his only connection to the outside world—apart from his upper-class lady love who brings him gourmet meals. His constricted world suddenly turns violent when he discovers that a henpecked neighbour in a flat opposite his has murdered

his invalid wife. The culprit notices the photographer spying on him. Hitchcock creates a masterful portrait in miniature of a middle-class world falling apart in urban America.

*Meghe Dhaka Tara* (The Cloud-Capped Star) by Ritwik Ghatak explores the impact of India's partition in 1947 on a family from East Bengal that migrated to Calcutta (now Kolkata). The family of an ageing schoolteacher struggles to survive, supported by a daughter who secures a clerical job, sacrificing her happiness and working herself to death—literally. Ghatak's profound study of how mass displacement affects individuals caught in the grip of ruthless politics and politicians, and blind history, is both illuminating and heart-wrenching.

Tapan Sinha's *Kshudhita Pashan* (Hungry Stones) is based on a story by Rabindranath Tagore. It was written in 1895, after Tagore visited Ahmedabad, Gujarat, and stayed in a palace built by Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan, believed to be haunted. The story follows a cotton tax collector stationed in an old town who insists on staying in a palace with ghostly antecedents. In the film, Ahmedabad becomes Barich and



the Sabarmati River is renamed the Susta. It features evocative black-and-white photography, haunting music composed by Ali Akbar Khan and uniformly fine performances by the supporting cast, with a stellar role by Arundhati Mukherjee (better known as Arundhati Devi), who conveys her existential state as an Arab slave girl almost entirely through facial expressions. She makes a 'believable' ghost who takes charge of the tax collector's being when they are together on screen. The worldly and otherworldly elements in Tagore's story are conveyed in an oblique, poetic way.

*Mary Poppins*, with Julie Andrews sparkling in the eponymous role, is a film of joy and hope, despite its melancholic moments. It is a very entertaining children's film, energetically directed by Robert Stevenson and produced by Walt Disney. Set in turn-of-the-century London, this studio-based production effectively evokes a bygone era and the moral and ethical values that were often overlooked by a grossly materialistic world, even at the time of its making in 1964. The ideas of loving, giving and sharing with everyone, regardless of their socio-economic status, come through gently.



These four films reflect the humanity of their makers as much as their aesthetics. Hitchcock's portrayal of a specific time and place in *Rear Window* through Robert Burks' camera, along with the performances of James Stewart and Grace Kelly, is exemplary. Supriya Choudhury's performance in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, Arundhati Devi's in *Kshudhita Pashan* and Julie Andrews' in *Mary Poppins* elevate their films.

■ PARTHA CHATTERJEE

## Festive Flavours

**FOOD FESTIVAL: Celebrating Women Chefs**

**10 to 14 October 2025**

Aligned with this year's festival theme, and curated by Sourish Bhattacharyya and Pushpesh Pant, women of 'We The Chefs' presented a delightful selection of cuisines for gastronomes.

The tasty tour began with 'Spice Route: Culinary Journeys Along the Coromandel Coast', curated by Rekha Rigo, highlighting Andhra-style cuisine. From appetisers to desserts, it offered an explosion of flavours, textures and a savoury-tangy-sweet experience. The vegetarian spread featured distinctive hints of raw banana, coconut, raw mango and aromatic spices in the appetisers and main course dishes. Highlights included Marina Beach *sundal chaat* (a legume-based snack), soft and spongy *kal dosa* and *pesarattu* (green gram dosa). The non-vegetarian options included coastal flavours, with dishes such as *mulakkada mamsam* (mutton curry with drumsticks); *guntur kodi masala* (a chicken dish) and *meen varuval*—a crispy fried fish that paired beautifully with *thayir pachadi* (tempered



yoghurt) and *kosambari* salad. The desserts captured the authentic essence of Coromandel-style cooking, featuring creamy *javvarisi payasam* made from tapioca pearls and *kavuni arisi halwa* prepared from black rice, coconut milk, nuts and jaggery.

'Ruposhi Bangla: A Bengali Culinary Tapestry', curated by Samita Haldar, offered a delectable spread of traditional dishes. The starters included vegetable *chop* (croquettes), with the right balance of crisply fried exterior and softly cooked filling. The highlight was *murgir paturi* (chicken escalopes in chilli-mustard paste, steamed in a banana leaf). The spicy pounded chicken was delicious.

The main course included *chhanar shukto* (vegetables and cottage cheese in mustard-poppy seed gravy) and *dhokar dalna* (fried lentil cakes in a ginger-cumin curry). The *chingri pitha* (steamed prawn cakes) and *bhetki jhal* (fish fillets in mustard sauce) were crunchy and tasty. *Basanti pulao* (rice with a touch of sweetness), *motorshutir kochuri* (fried flatbread stuffed with peas) and *loochi* (fried flatbread made of refined flour) were pleasantly filling. The desserts—*bhapa doi* (steamed yoghurt), *gur diye chaaler payesh* (rice pudding with date palm jaggery) and *sandesh* (sweetmeat)—perfectly completed a delicious meal.

Amidst delicious dinners was nestled a comforting 'Sunday Brunch: Flavours of Gujarat', prepared by members of SEWA, Gujarat. This vegetarian feast began with the region's signature spongy *dhokla* (steamed savoury cake made from gram flour), highly addictive *arbi patra* (pan-fried taro leaves rolled in layers of spiced chickpea-flour batter) and *khandvi* (tightly rolled, bite-sized pieces made from gram flour batter and yoghurt or buttermilk), a personal favourite. The sweet, tangy and spicy flavours of *undhiyu* (seasonal vegetables with spices and fenugreek dumplings) paired well with *methi thepla* (fenugreek and wholewheat flatbread) and *bajre ka rotla* (pearl millet flatbread). Other main course dishes included *kadhi* (yoghurt and gram-flour-based curry) with its familiar Gujarati sweetness and *panch dhan khichdi* (made with five lentils and rice), a complete meal in itself. Continuing in the realm of familiarity and comfort, household favourites like *jalebi* (spiral-shaped deep-fried sweet snack made from fermented flour batter) and *shrikhand* (strained and sweetened yoghurt or curd, flavoured with cardamom and saffron) compellingly called for an afternoon siesta.

The 'Begum-e-Dilli: Street Food of Delhi', curated by Gunjan Goela, transported one to the lively lanes of old Delhi. The *chaat* counter was a major attraction, and the *aloo tikki* (shallow fried stuffed potato patties), *pani batashe* (hollow semolina shells filled with spicy potato mash and mint water) and *dahi saunth gujiya* (deep-fried, lentil-based dumplings stuffed with dry fruits, served with yoghurt and tamarind sauce) were especially enjoyed. The main course featured comforting vegetarian options, including *bharwan gatte* (gram flour dumplings in a curd-based gravy) and *arbi methi* (taro root cooked with fenugreek leaves). Meanwhile, the *tali machhli* (marinated and fried fish) and *murgh* (chicken) biryani were flavourful without feeling overly heavy. The accompaniments, particularly the *aloo-bedmi* (lentil-stuffed deep-fried wheat bread served with potato curry) and *baqar khani* (sweetened flaky bread), complemented the dishes beautifully. The desserts—*phirni* (rice pudding) and *bharwan gulab jamun* (soft dumplings made of milk solids, filled with nuts and saffron)—provided a melt-in-the-mouth finish to the meal.

'La Table Française' was prepared by the Centre's own Vijay Kumar Thakural. Faced with an impressively extensive menu, which included four starters and six salads, my taste buds tingled with anticipation. While each starter was a delight, the *poisson à l'orly* (white fish fillets) and the olive tart truly stood out. Seeing a friend pile his plate, I wondered how he would manage to finish it until I found myself doing the same. The baby potatoes and onions in brandy sauce, the ratatouille pancakes and the leek quiche were simply divine. The non-vegetarian offerings—*escabeche pescado* (meunière fish with capsicum and tomato), *suprême de volaille* (chicken breast and mushroom in wine sauce) and lamb *argenteuil* (asparagus sauce)—might have been mouthfuls to pronounce, but they



were sensational on the palate. Topping it off, the chef's special ice cream was a perfect sweet ending to a memorable meal. The table agreed: 'Très fantastique!'

Curated by Shacchi Anand, 'Baghar-e-Magadh: Earthy & Flavourful Bihar' was a tribute to Bihar's soulful cuisine. *Sehjan shorba*, a light, tangy drumstick soup, set the mood for a comforting feast ahead. Among the starters, the smoky *kathal* (jackfruit) *kabab* and crisp *kala chana* (black chickpea) fritters were vegetarian highlights, while the *gosht tawa* (slow-roasted mutton) *kabab* was delightfully tender and aromatic. The main course captured Bihar's earthy essence with *sattu litti* (roasted whole wheat dough balls stuffed with chickpea flour) served with *chokha* (grilled and spiced mashed brinjal, potato and tomato) and Bihari *dum aloo* (baby potatoes cooked in spiced curry). However, the signature slow-cooked Champaran mutton emerged as the undisputed star of the spread, pairing well with *kesari pulao* (fried rice with a hint of saffron) and *chana dal poori* (deep-fried flatbread stuffed with lentil). Concluding with *malpua* (sweet pancake) and *makhana kheer* (creamy foxnut pudding), the evening provided a perfect finale to the festival's gastronomic journey.

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