

Section 2

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A performance of *Cryptograph* at the theatre festival

In these troubled days of heightened terror, A Mangai found it heartwarming to see artistes travelling from Afghanistan and Pakistan to Delhi for Asia's largest theatre fete

by evening a pleasant curtain of fog descends upon wintry Delhi, as if to instil curiosity about the kind of plays that are to unveil before you in the next few hours.

And even as you sit draped in sweaters and woollen shawls for the show to start, the element of suspense is intact — for the main venue itself is open-air. Surely, this is one element that's very striking about the national theatre festival, Bharat Rang Mahotsav, which held its ninth edition in mid-January. The nine-day event, organised by the National School of Drama (NSD), has over the years become Asia's largest theatre festival. As if to further stud the crown, international productions have also been included with the fare for the last five years.

The festival evidently aims to showcase the diverse practices of Indian and global theatre and also reflect the role and function of the art today. Along with the fete, an exhibition was held on Badal Sircar, the doyen of third theatre. "Rejecting proscenium theatre with its class and caste barriers, Badal proposed an alternative theatre practice," said NSD chairperson Amal Allana Allana. "Thus streets, parks, simple, non-formal spaces or villages became his venue. Such exhibitions become a burning reminder of the vital role theatre can play in harnessing us to concrete thought and action in these troubled times."

And these were indeed troubled times! The fete comes in the aftermath of the Mumbai attacks and blasts in various Indian cities, including Delhi, and loud slogans of fighting terrorism within and across borders. Not surprisingly, theatre productions from Pakistan and Afghanistan faced great difficulties in



SOME OF THE PLAYS PERFORMED AT THE FESTIVAL: (clockwise from left) *Traitors*, *Sangeet Giribala* and *Dakghar*

attending the festival.

With fundamentalist voices seeking a ban on cultural exchange between Pakistan and India, it was a great measure of hope and optimism when theatre artistes travelled across borders to assert friendship and harmony. Tehrik-e-Niswan, a Lahore-based women's group that was established in 1979, works for freedom of cultural and artistic expressions in Pakistan. The group staged *Jinnay Lahore Nahin Vekhya*, written by Asghar Wahajat and

directed by Anwer Jafri and Sheema Kermani, at the festival.

It's the story of an immigrant family accepting the old Hindu lady, who once owned the haveli it has moved into. It narrates the story of acceptance. Famous Urdu poet Nasir Kazmi is a character in the play. The songs interwoven in the performance were ample evidence of shared heritage of the communities across the borders. One could hear members of the audience joining in the humming

of songs and in the final scene, as the actors joined the singing from stage, the audience did too. M K Raina, a theatre stalwart from Kashmir, congratulated the enthusiastic audience for giving the right reply to the censoring, terror-gripped state machinery that made its presence felt right from the morning of the show. The spirit with which the audience welcomed the appeal of theatre to heal and bridge gaps was heartwarming!

Equally moving was the play from Israel. *The Days of Adel*, directed by Issac Ben Abu, was set in the psychiatric ward in Jerusalem. Adel, a Palestinian schizophrenic is convinced he is a Jew. The play's director claimed it wasn't a political one even as the play traced Adel's vain fight to prove he is a Jew.

Cryptograph from Japan, *The Black Tie* from Germany, *Amputation* from Bangladesh and *Letters of Suffering* from Afghanistan dealt with contemporary crisis of existence, survival and struggle. They explored the dynamics of power and hegemony.

Tagore's texts on stage were a unique feature of this festival. From Badal Sircar's guidance of *Rakto Barobi* to Kanhaailal's *Dakghar* in which Sabitri played the eight-year-old Amal to Chetan Dattar's *Giribala* in Marathi and *Bidhushak* and *Matyabartini*, the power and range of Tagore came alive on stage.

This festival hoped to emphasize young talents and it was a pleasure to watch M S Sathyu and Sohag Sen along side Vikram Iyengar and Muruga Bhoopathi. From highly experimental productions like *For the First Time* in which light became the primary actor on stage throwing the real actors into an alertness to *The Elephant Project* where the actor-performer made everything else on stage seem secondary, the

fete threw open a whole gamut of contemporary productions. *Manto Aur Manto*, *Traitors* and *Main Istanbul Hoon* addressed the growing fundamentalism in the region against the backdrop of culture, memory and survival.

A festival of this stature cannot be summed up in any way. It can't be called representative of various states or regions of India as 14 of the 51 Indian productions were from Kolkata (including two Hindi and English plays each); it was certainly not showcasing the highlights of Indian theatre (there was not a single Vijay Tendulkar play); it was neither purely avant-garde nor completely establishment-based. But

The songs in the play were ample evidence of shared heritage of the communities across the borders. One could hear members of the audience hum the songs along with the actors

it gave one a sample of the heady variety that India is capable of. It also threw open questions on actor's training, technology, forms of theatre and choice of content. Its refusal to be defined is perhaps the strength of the form called theatre and its ever-renewing power of communication, suggestion and critique.

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unwinding the many spools of hurdles

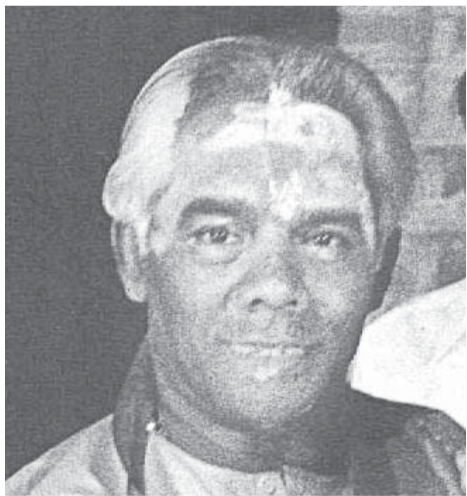
Archivists need to be tenacious, tech-savvy and tasteful. But a bigger challenge stands before them today — as T K Sreevalsan finds out from a Chennai-based Carnatic music collector

When Narasimhan (below) had the liberty to record live music, he owned unwieldy machines that weren't high on quality. These days, when he has hi-tech gadgets, the archivist finds it's not that easy to get sanction to record

as a teenager in the late 1970s, S L Narasimhan had only a bicycle to move about in his city of Chennai to devour Carnatic concerts with an amazing appetite. And much of the *kacheris* those days were staged in the Adyar area, from where returning home after the programme would be a problem. "By nightfall, the place used to seem haunted...not many buses, very few people too," he recalls with a gap-toothed smile. Luckily for him, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, a peer-group boy next door, had a moped. Together they would set for sabhas animatedly discussing ragas and *kritis*, unmindful of the chaos on the roads.

Today, Sanjay is a top classical vocalist. Narasimhan's mission was a shade different: archiving. He went on to record many of the live concerts he attended, besides the vintage collections that All India Radio used to air religiously. On a more passionate side, Narasimhan took the pains to collect old-time spools and gramophone discs featuring south Indian musicians. And that's one task that he still pursues — with the additional engagement of digitising each of them.

Narasimhan, now 44 and working with a digital marketing solutions firm, has music records measuring — if that's the right word — up to 1.8 tb (terabyte), a chunk of it Carnatic. More intelligibly, here's an archivist with a classical music collection spanning roughly 17,500 hours or 5,800 concerts — some of them dating back to the 1930s. "It's a very pain-staking process...this digitising," Narasimhan says, as he plays on his laptop a record of an evidently yesteryear musician — a rather loud, less ornate voice. "You know who this is? Thuraiyur Rajagopala Sharma. He taught Musiri Subramania Iyer (1899-1975). You can imagine how old this concert should be..."



DOYENS AND DISCIPLES: (Clockwise from left) Veena Dhanammal, Madurai Somu, Musiri Subramania Iyer and Sanjay Subrahmanyam

vocalists and instrumentalists. All this, without compromising on the originality."

It's not as if Narasimhan began with little archival capital. His father, Saranatha Gopalan, was a government employee and a music buff. "He was posted initially in Tiruchy, where he had (maverick musician) Madurai Somu as a close friend. My father had already quite a good collection of spools, but he couldn't bring them to Chennai on his transfer. But I managed to later gather all of them and digitise." During his initial Chennai days, Saranatha Gopalan was part of the committee that ran the Triplacane Arts Academy. And that's where Narasimhan used to listen to concerts as a toddler. "Those days, archiving was tough. Cassettes were the only means of recording, and they used to cost Rs 40 a piece," he points out. But help came in the form of the benevolence of certain musicians. "Sanjay introduced me to (late) S Kalyanaraman, who never minded lending me whatever records he owned."

This kid of broad-mindedness is what Narasimhan finds lacking among most new-age musicians. Of late, the gay abandon with which he used to record live concerts has slowed down with a whimper. "Frankly, I don't have many records of concerts since the 2000s. The youngsters protest recording their *kacheris*...copyright issues, you know."

That's the irony. When Narasimhan had the liberty to record live music, he had unwieldy machines that weren't high on the quality side. These days, when he has hi-tech gadgets, he finds it's not easy to get permission to record. "Only my collection of the old masters continues," shrugs Narasimhan, who runs *vesse.l.blogspot.com*. Clearly, the rare blend of being tech-savvy and an aesthete is not enough to be an archivist in the coming days.

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