Blood On The Crown – a film from Malta and its Historical synergy with Indian History



Film Review: *Blood on the Crown*
Directed by Davide Ferrario | Starring Harvey Keitel, Malcolm McDowell, Tom Prior

Blood on the Crown (originally titled *Just Noise*) is a historical drama that brings to screen one of the most pivotal yet underrepresented events in Malta's history—the Sette Giugno (June 7) uprising of 1919. With an international cast and a subject deeply rooted in national identity, the film aims to spotlight a moment of civil unrest that marked the Maltese people's resistance to British colonial rule.

Historical Context

The film recounts the events surrounding June 7, 1919, when British troops opened fire on unarmed Maltese civilians protesting inflation, food shortages, and political marginalization under colonial administration. The uprising resulted in the deaths of four Maltese citizens and galvanized the movement for greater self-governance, which would eventually lead to Malta's independence decades later. It was presented by Reuben Gauci, High Commissioner of Malta in India on 1st May, 2025 to celebrate 60 years of Malta-India diplomatic relations and also to mark 106 years of Jallianwala Bagh massacre and the June 7 uprising in Malta, parallel events from the contemporary history of the two countries.

Story and Execution

Blood on the Crown attempts to balance dramatic storytelling with historical accuracy. The narrative alternates between perspectives—those of local protestors, British administrators, and foreign journalists—giving viewers a panoramic sense of the tensions on the island. Tom Prior plays a young journalist who uncovers the human cost of colonial suppression, while screen veterans Harvey Keitel and Malcolm McDowell lend weight to the roles of the high-ranking officials caught between imperial duty and conscience.

The film succeeds in portraying the injustice and brutality of colonial authority, especially in scenes depicting the shooting of protestors and the desperate attempts of civilians to assert their dignity. However, some aspects of the script feel overly expository, and at times the emotional resonance is undercut by uneven pacing and production constraints.

Visuals and Atmosphere



Shot on location in Malta, the film leverages its historical setting beautifully. Narrow streets, baroque architecture, and sunlit piazzas add authenticity to the period setting. The cinematography is evocative, though the limited budget occasionally shows in crowd scenes and action sequences that could have benefited from more scale or realism.

Cultural Impact

For a Maltese audience, *Blood on the Crown* is more than just a film—it's a cinematic reckoning with national trauma and pride. By dramatizing a moment often relegated to textbooks, the film contributes to a broader international awareness of Malta's struggle for sovereignty and the sacrifices made along the way.

Verdict

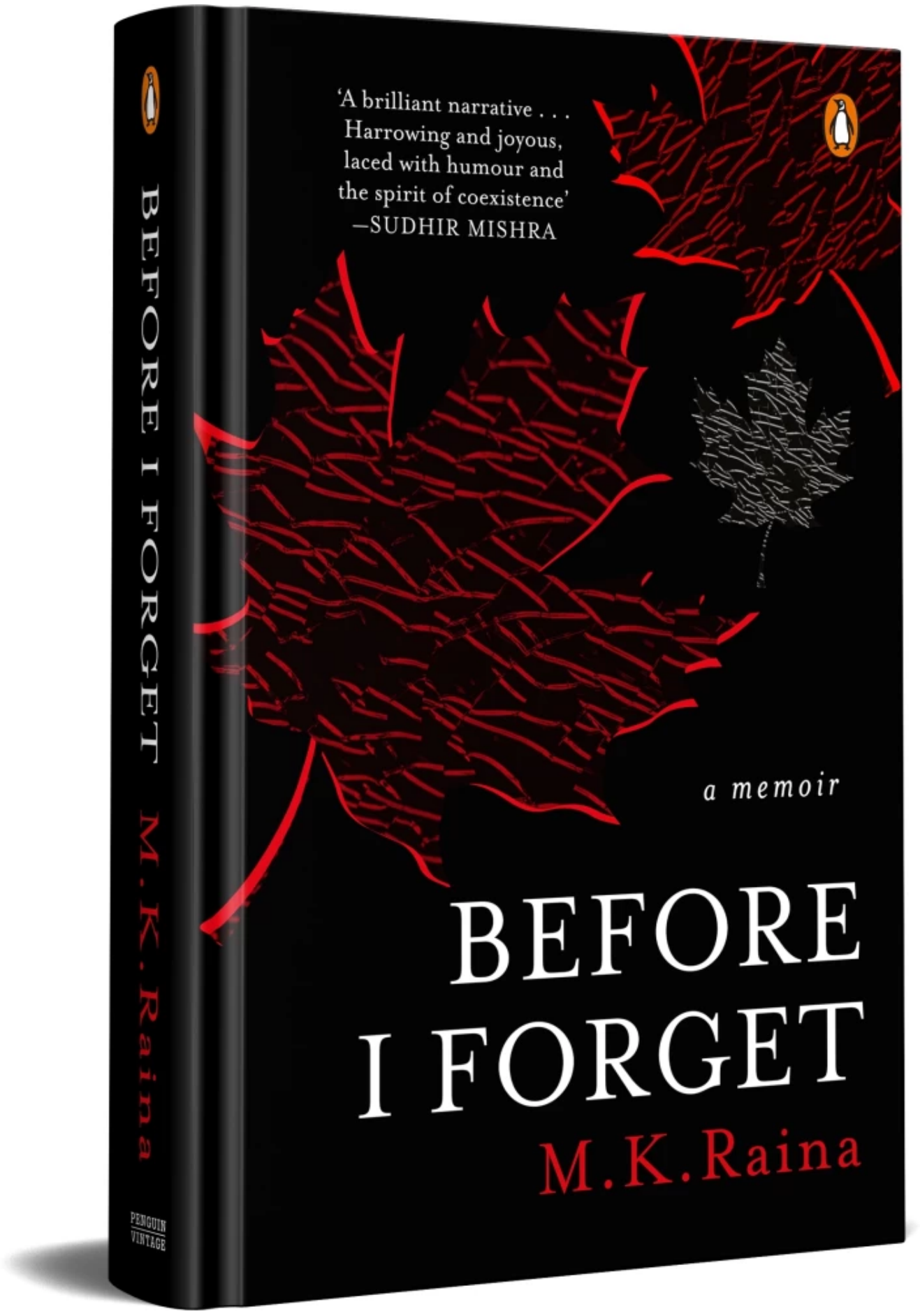
While not without its flaws, *Blood on the Crown* is a bold and important film that sheds light on a forgotten chapter of colonial resistance. It serves as a tribute to those who stood up against oppression and is a meaningful addition to the limited canon of Maltese historical cinema.

Rating: 3.5/5

An Unforgettable Book Discussion Conducted by Sujata and Oroon

Conversations: Before I Forget

Reviewed by **Manohar Khushalani**



M.K. Raina's memoir, "Before I Forget," is a deeply moving chronicle of his multifaceted life as a theatre actor,

director, and cultural activist. The memoir weaves through various stages of his life, from his serene childhood in Kashmir to his influential role in Delhi's theatre scene, and his poignant experiences during the turbulent periods of Kashmir's history. At IIC,



Sujata Prasad and Oroon Das, conducted an extremely engaging and memorable conversation with the author.

His narrative began with memories of his early years in Kashmir, painting a picture of harmony and cultural richness. He describes the idyllic days in the Sheetal Nath Sathu Mohalla, where Hindus and Muslims lived together in peace, and his nurturing education at Lal Ded Primary School. This nostalgic recounting provides a stark contrast to the later chapters, which detail the descent of Kashmir into violence and chaos in the 1990s.

The core of Raina's memoir focuses on his efforts to use

theatre as a tool for social change and healing. Despite the insurgency and violence in regions like Kashmir and the North-East, Raina set up theatre workshops aimed at reviving folk traditions and fostering community spirit. His work often put him in danger, yet he persisted, driven by a cause greater than activism—a belief in mending the fabric of society. One of his significant achievements was the successful theatre workshop in Kashmir in 2000, where he taught young locals not just theatre, but values of rationality and responsibility.

Raina's reflections on the political and cultural history of India are profound. He recounts witnessing turbulent times, the Emergency period, Indira Gandhi's assassination, the Delhi riots, and the death of playwright Safdar Hashmi. These events are narrated with a historian's precision and a poet's sensitivity, capturing both the joy and sorrow of living through India's tumultuous times.

The memoir delves deeply into the traumatic period of the 1990s in Kashmir. Raina's mother's illness during the violence-ridden winter. Amidst curfews and security checks, he navigated the challenges of getting medical care for his mother, only to face the heartbreak of her passing. The exodus of Kashmiri Pandits during this period is another painful memory, highlighting the erosion of centuries-old communal bonds.

Raina's narrative does not shy away from the complexities and mistrust that grew among communities: How even brothers became strangers, emphasizing the profound impact of fear. His return to Kashmir in the 2000s to conduct theatre workshops marked a significant effort to rebuild trust and revive cultural practices like the traditional folk theatre, Bhand Pather.

Raina balances personal anecdotes with broader socio-political observations. His encounters with cultural luminaries in Delhi, such as Shabana Azmi, Naseeruddin Shah, and Om Puri, are interspersed with reflections on the decline of the city's

once-vibrant theatre scene

“Before I Forget” is a testament to M.K. Raina’s unwavering dedication to his craft and his cause. It is a poignant reminder of the importance of cultural heritage in fostering understanding and unity in times of conflict. His declaration, “We should never forget but always forgive”

First Published in IIC Diary April-May 2024



A Rich Tapestry of Events and Anecdotes

TALK: *Before I Forget*

CONVERSATION BETWEEN: *M.K. Raina, Sujata Prasad, and Oroon Das*

COLLABORATION: *Ahad Ashad*

29 May 2024

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The core of Raina's memoir is his efforts to use theatre as a tool for social change and healing. Despite the insurgency and violence in regions like Kashmir and the northeast, Raina set up theatre workshops to revive folk traditions and foster community spirit. One of his significant achievements was the successful theatre workshop in Kashmir in 2003, where he taught young locals not just theatre, but values of rationality and responsibility.

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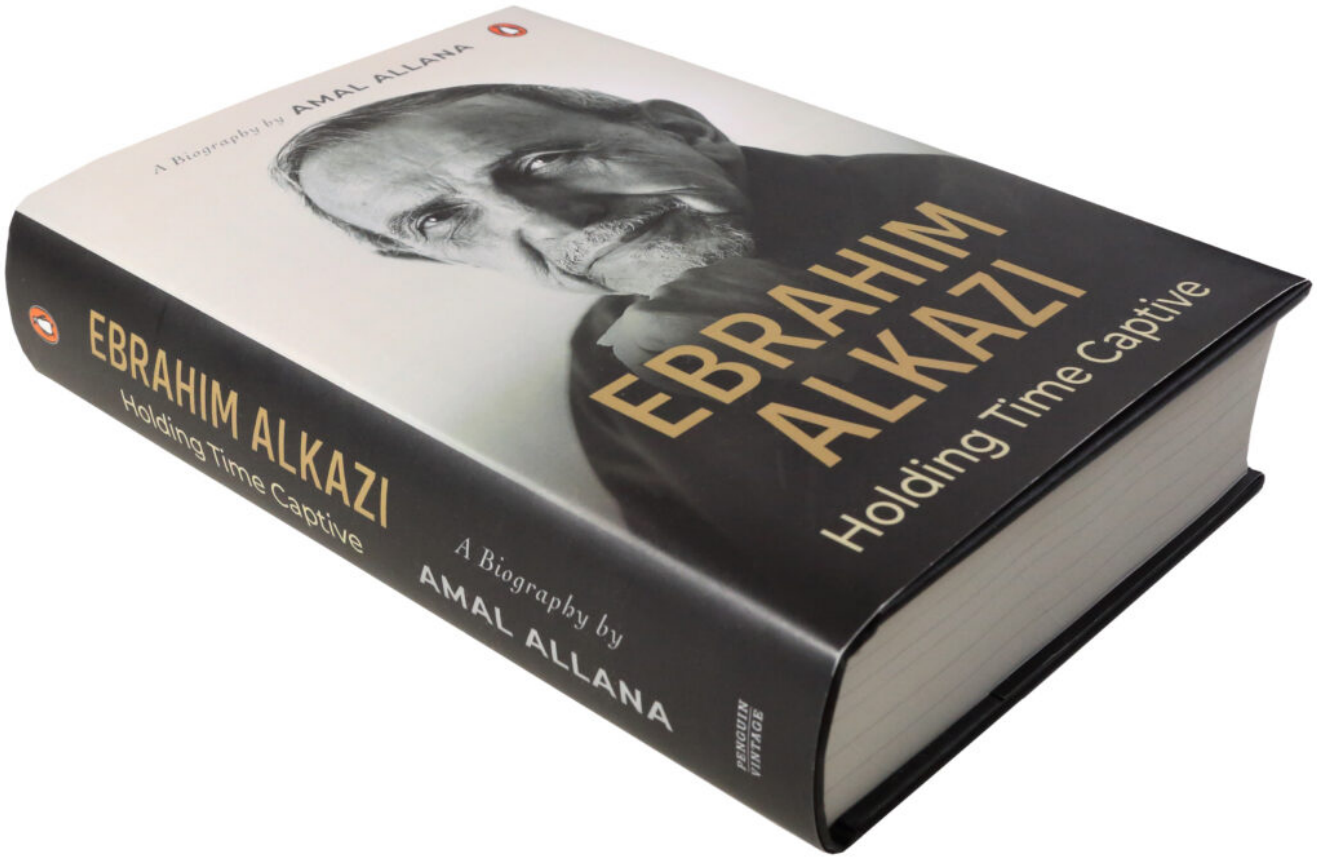
• MANOHAR KHUSHALANI

Ebrahim Alkazi: An uninhibited scholarly Tale of a Towering Thespian

Review by **By Manohar Khushalani**



The launch and discussion at the India International Centre (IIC) of a multilayered narrative, “Ebrahim Alkazi: Holding Time Captive,” shed light on the life and legacy of Ebrahim Alkazi, a towering figure in twentieth-century Indian theater and visual arts. Amal Allana, Alkazi’s daughter, presents a meticulously researched account of her father’s life, offering insights into his role in shaping the cultural landscapes of Mumbai and Delhi from the 1940s to the 2000s.

Ebrahim Alkazi, renowned as a theater doyen and pedagogue, passed away at the age of 94, leaving behind a monumental legacy in Indian theater. His career spanned an impressive 74 years, during which he directed iconic plays such as Girish Karnad’s “Tughlaq” and mentored generations of actors, including Naseeruddin Shah and Om Puri. Alkazi’s upbringing, education, and early associations with the Bombay Progressive Artists’ Group laid the foundation for his groundbreaking contributions to Indian theater.

As the longest-serving director of the National School of Drama, Alkazi revolutionized Hindi theater with his visionary

approach and technical precision. His establishment of the Repertory Company and the School of Dramatic Arts showcased his commitment to nurturing talent and promoting theatrical excellence. Beyond theater, Alkazi's influence extended to the visual arts, as evidenced by his founding of the Art Heritage Gallery in Delhi with his wife, Roshan Alkazi.

Allana's biography not only celebrates her father's professional achievements, but also delves uninhibitedly into his personal life, providing a nuanced portrait of a multifaceted individual. Through interviews, archival research, and personal recollections, Allana, herself a renowned and celebrated theatre director, offers readers a glimpse into Alkazi's emotional journey and his profound impact on modern Indian cultural history.

The discussion at the IIC, moderated by Naman Ahuja, further enriched the narrative, with Allana engaging in conversation about her father's legacy and the process of writing his biography. Dramatic readings by two actors, Sonam Kalra and Rehaan Engineer, added depth and resonance to the event, underscoring the theatricality inherent in Alkazi's life and work.

Overall, "Ebrahim Alkazi: Holding Time Captive" stands as a testament to the enduring legacy of a cultural icon. Allana's narrative, both enthralling and critically astute, pays homage to Alkazi's monumental contributions while situating him within the broader context of modern Indian cultural history.

First Published in IIC Diary February-March 2024



An Uninhibited Tale of a Towering Thespian

BOOK LAUNCH: *Ebrahim Alkazi: Holding Time Captive by Amal Allana (Penguin Random House: 2024)*

DISCUSSANTS: *Amal Allana in conversation with Naman P. Ahuja*

READINGS BY: *Sonam Kalra and Rehaan Engineer*

COLLABORATION: *Penguin Random House*

22 March 2024

The launch and discussion of a multilayered narrative, *Ebrahim Alkazi: Holding Time Captive*, shed light on the life and legacy of Ebrahim Alkazi, a towering figure in 20th-century Indian theatre and visual arts. Amal Allana, Alkazi's daughter, presents a meticulously researched account of her father's life, offering insights into his role in shaping the cultural landscapes of Mumbai and Delhi from the 1940s to the 2000s.

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VAIDEHI-Shruti Verma’s Rendition of Pivotal Scenes from Sita’s World



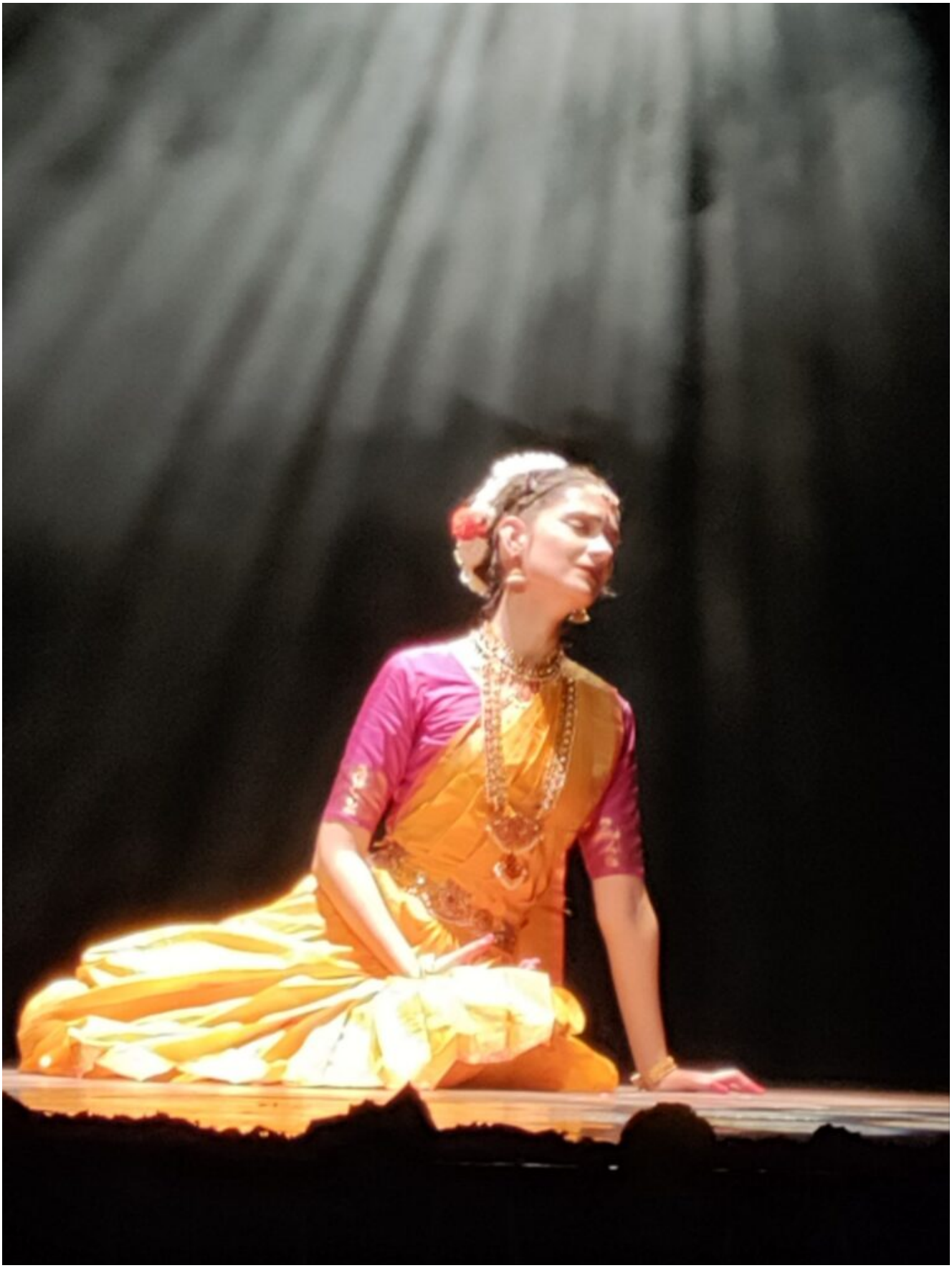
Sindhu Mishra’s Aayam presents VAIDEHI: Sita’s World in Tulsidas Ramayana

This rendition offers a fresh perspective on the Ramayana, focusing on pivotal scenes from Sita’s viewpoint—a rare approach. The choreography and concept, curated by Guru Smt. Sindhu Mishra, provide a captivating retelling of this timeless epic. Shruti Verma, a senior disciple under Guru Smt. Sindhu Mishra’s guidance, displays a profound dedication to Bharatanatyam, infusing passion and determination into her pursuit.



The Visionary ***Guru Smt. Sindhu Mishra***

Shruti’s performance brings every aspect of body and soul to life. Bharatanatyam, as an art form, embodies the essence of the world around us. It encapsulates the movements of trees, flowers, breeze, birds, animals, and all living beings, enabling the dancer to communicate with both the external and internal worlds. This synergy between Bharatanatyam, nature, and self-expression goes beyond mere aesthetics, delving into profound narratives such as the Ramcharitmanas, vividly portrayed through the dancer’s solo performance.



Agony in imprisonment

Shruti embodies a spark of vibrant, contemporary creativity. Supported by her unwavering Guru, she explores modern

interpretations of this traditional art form, crafting soul-stirring experiences through her dance, both for herself and her audience.

A vital member of the Aayam dance troupe, Shruti has amassed significant on-stage experience through enthusiastic participation in numerous group performances. Her portrayal of the iconic Sita in Aayam's thematic production, *Vaidehi*, breathes new life into the character, offering a fresh interpretation of the epic narrative.

Shruti's dance is a harmonious blend of exuberant joy and profound emotion, channeling grace and divinity with each movement. Alongside her Bharatanatyam training, Shruti is currently pursuing a Bachelor's in engineering, exemplifying a balance between tradition and modernity in her artistic journey.

Performance Highlights:

Each segment of *Vaidehi* encapsulates the essence of Bharatanatyam, blending intricate footwork, expressive gestures, and emotive storytelling to transport the audience into the heart of the Ramayana's narrative, offering a fresh perspective on timeless tales.

● **Shri Ram Chandra Kripalu Bhajman:**The performance starts with Shri Ram Chandra Kripalu Bhajman – a well-knownbhakti piece on Lord Ram. Written by Saint Tulsidas, this profound poetry expresses a deep admiration for Lord Ram's awe-inspiring and beautiful characteristics. With each verse overflowing with adoration and humility, the piece exalts his divine magnificence.

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Set to Ragam Sindhu Bhairavi (□□□ □□ □□ ◌□□□□□□) and Talam Misra Chapu (□□ □□□ □□□)◌□
Sung on stage by Shri G. Elangovan

● **Varnam**: This was the longest and most elaborate segment consisting of jathis (rhythmic patterns) and abhinaya. The poetry is taken from Baal Kand of Tulsidas' Ramcharitmanas. In the narrative, Sita finds herself deeply captivated by Ram's beauty upon seeing him in the gardens of Mithila, but soon grows dejected as she worries about him not being able to break Pinaak, Shiva's bow. She heads to Devi Bhavani's temple, expressing her devotion and humility through prayers and offerings. Devi, moved by Sita's sincerity, bestows upon her a divine blessing,assuring her that her heart's desire will be fulfilled, and she will have the one she adores as a beloved bridegroom.This moment marks a turning point in Sita's journey, where her faith and devotion are rewarded with the promise of divine intervention in her love story with Ram.

Set to Ragam Bageshri (□□□ □□□□□□□□) and Talamaalika consisting of Chatusra Ekam (□□□□□□ □□□) and Misra Chapu Taal (□□ □□□ □□□)◌ Composed and sung by Shri Nitin Sharma

● **Padam:** "Suno Kapi " is a pure abhinaya piece, based on the poetry of Surdas. The Padam depicts an emotional moment from epic Ramayana – when Hanuman reaches Ashok Vatika and gives Ram's ring to Sita. In the confinement of Ravana, Sita, an incomparable beauty and an epitome of dedication, self-sacrifice, courage and purity, has turned into a picture of grief. In his inimical style, Surdas's rendition of Sita diverges from her typical portrayal, highlighting her sarcasm amidst despair, showcasing a spectrum of emotions—from disillusionment to profound suffering and emotional anguish due to her prolonged separation from Ram.

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Set to Ragam Sarangi and Talam Adi
Composed and sung by Shri Nitin Sharma

● **Thillana:** This is a rhythmic piece in carnatic music that is generally performed at the end of the repertoire. Thillana uses Tala phrases in the Pallavi, Anupallavi and lyrics in the

Charnam. The Charanam of this thillana honors Shri Ram, the valiant son of Dashrath renowned for vanquishing Ravana and reuniting with Sita, and revered as the master of Hanuman.

Set to Ragam Bhimpilasi (□□□ □□□□□ □□□□) and
Triputa Taal (□□□□ □□□ □□□) in Khanda Jaati (□□□ □□□□)
Composed by Guru Govind Rajan Sung on stage by Shri G. Elangovan



Shiva-Shakti: Divine love and power personified on stage



Ria Gupta delivering the Bharatanatyam recital titled ‘Shiva-Shakti’.

Shiva, in Hindu philosophy, the dynamic interaction between the feminine and male energy in the cosmos is symbolized by

the profound idea of Shakti. It represents the coming together of Shakti, the divine feminine energy that animates the entire creation, and Shiva, the cosmic awareness. The manifestation, maintenance, and disintegration of the universe depend on this union. Shiva Shakti encompasses a multitude of Shakti aspects or expressions, each with distinct attributes. The divine couple Shiva-Shakti, viewed from a metaphysical perspective, represents two fundamental aspects of the One: the feminine principle, which stands for Its Energy, the Force that acts in the manifested world and life itself, and the masculine principle, which represents the enduring aspect of God. Here is where Shakti is.

It was a personification of divine power on stage as Ria Gupta, disciple of Guru Smt Sindhu Mishra, presented a Bharatanatyam recital titled 'Shiva-Shakti – The Cosmic Union'.



Guru Sindhu Mishra explaining the concepts of the Dance

The recital, organised by the cultural society Aayam at Delhi's LTG Auditorium, mesmerised the audience with its harmonious blend of tradition and innovation, technique and artistry.

Ria presented a compelling exploration of Shiva and Parvati,

the cosmic pair representing the opposing forces of destruction and creation that form the eternal cycle of the universe. Equally compelling were the creative choreography, unusual choice of poetic texts, and juxtaposition of Carnatic and Hindustani styles of music.

Conceived and choreographed by Guru Smt Sindhu Mishra, the presentation described aspects of Shiva and Parvati through little known verses from the Ramcharitmanas. Ria's talent and training were on full display as she portrayed the contrasting deities with layered precision and emotion.

In her first solo recital, Ria proved herself as an accomplished Bharatanatyam dancer. Her passion and dedication were evident as she created an ambience of divine love and power through her nuanced abhinaya and intricate jatis.

The evening unfolded with a Ganesh Kriti, 'Ananda Narthana Ganapatim Bhaavaye'. Marked by vivacity and depth, the piece described the divine bliss emanating from Ganesha's dance, which accompanies the captivating music of the gandharvas playing the lute, mridangam and veena. The choreography was an energetic blend of rhythmic and expressive movements, executed with ease by Ria.

Growing up, Parvati—the daughter of Himavan and Mainavati—heard stories about Lord Shiva. In addition to her curiosity about who this Shiva was, Parvati also harbored dreams of marrying him as she had begun to adore him. According to folk lore Parvati did penance for thousands of years to please Lord Shiva and woo him. Finally the Lord was pleased and married Devi Parvati!

This aspect of the epic tale was enumerated by a Pada Varnam, created especially for this presentation. The poetry, from Baal Kand of Tulsidas' Ramcharitmanas, describes the episode where Parvati is encouraged by Narad Muni to undergo penance in the forest to prove her love to Shiva and become his

consort. Seeing this, Shiva sends the Saptarishi to test Parvati’s devotion. Ria explored the narrative with intense expressions and sophisticated rhythmic patterns. Set to Ragam Shahana and Talam Adi, the composition was composed and sung by Shri Nitin Sharma.

The following piece was a Keerthanam – the well known ‘Natanam Adinar’. In a vibrant rendition, Ria portrayed the joyful dance of Lord Shiva in the golden halls of Chidambaram, which was so powerful that all eight directions trembled, the head of Adishesha swayed, and drops of Ganga’s water scattered all around from his matted hair. Set to Ragam Vasantha, the Shri Gopalakrishna Bharatiyar composition was sung by Shri G Elangovan.

The Padam was another unusual excerpt from Ramcharitmanas. In this, Ria explored an episode from Shiva and Parvati’s wedding celebrations, where the people of Himachal, upon seeing Shiva’s wedding procession, were shocked to see a terrifying band of ghosts, demons, spirits. Maena, the mother, attempted to convince Parvati into abandoning the wedding, to the extent that she was ready to give up her life for it!

The tale of Parvati imparts to us the significance of metamorphosis. She endured great penance in order to gain Lord Shiva’s favor because of her undying devotion and love. Her path of introspection and personal development highlights the capacity for transformation that exists in all of us. It motivates us to welcome change



Ria Gupta

The evening concluded with a scintillating Hindolam Thillana, composed by Shri Dandayudhapani Pillai and sung by Shri G

Elangovan. The charanam was an invocation to Shiva, the lord of dance, the one whose auspicious feet are cherished by his devotees. It was a fitting end to a powerful performance, which elevated the audience with its richness and depth.

The distinguished orchestra included Shri G Elangovan on Carnatic vocals and flute, Shri Nitin Sharma on Hindustani vocals, Shri Sachin Sharma on the tabla and Dr Ramamurthy Kesavan on the mridangam. Nattuvangam was by Guru Smt Sindhu Mishra.

Ria’s mastery of Bharatanatyam techniques as well as nuanced understanding of literature were evident throughout her performance. In her first solo stage appearance, she succeeded in making an impact, with her dedication and dynamism apparent. She presents yet another young artiste flowering under the tutelage of Guru Smt. Mishra.

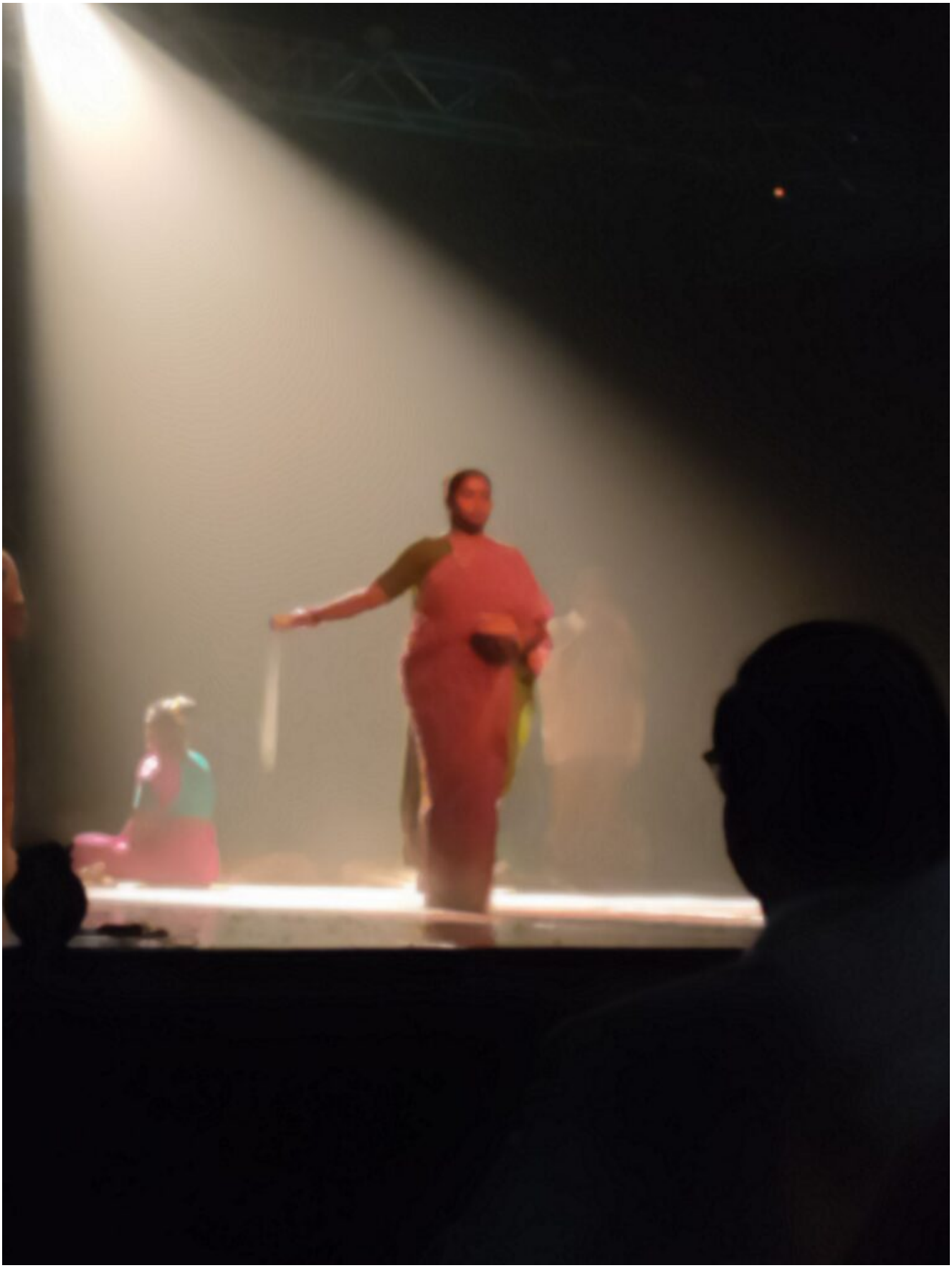


File Photo of **Guru Sindhu Mishra** as a young Bharatnatyam Danseuse

Guru Smt Mishra distinguished herself as a performer in the

classical milieu under the guidance of eminent Gurus Shri KN Dakshinamoorthy, Shri KJ Govindarajan and Smt Kamalini Dutt. She emerged as a choreographer with a unique and compelling style, and played a vital role in conceiving, organizing and choreographing high-profile events and festivals across the country. The recipient of awards and fellowships from the central and state governments, she is also the founder of the cultural society Aayam.

Daklakatha Devikavya – Provoking and Contemplative



A review by Manohar Khushalani for IIC DIARY

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’s .
It was Directed by Lakshman K.P. It presents the inner workings and external
experiences of the Daklas – a Dalit community.

*Presented by Jangama Collective, Bengaluru with Bindu Raxidi (Dakla Devi,
Kadiramma); Santhosh Dindgur (Dakla, Cheluvaiah)l; Bharath Dingri (K.B.
Siddiah & narrator); Narasimharaju B.K. (Narasappa); and Ramika Chaithra
(Gangavva, Munivenkatamma)*

*Accompanists who also added tone and tenor to the performance were: Poorvi
Kalyani & Skanda Ghate (vocal); Bharath Dingri (tamate); and Narasimharaju
B.K. (arevadya)*



The Flower Sellers

*The setting of the play had **flower sellers** squatting in the background and*
rising in turns as actors with robust voices. The traditional Folk device, a half
*curtain, known as, **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 Traditional Yavanika

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 appear on the stage playing tamate (hand drum) and arevadya (urmi), 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 of, the female roles were done by women and not female impersonators. These women unhesitantly lighted beedis, and were not coy about

using cuss words,
which is true to their life. It is also true of contemporary OTT films, which claim
to be more modern and truer to our life.

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.

Here in the above context the poet brings out 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 luminous display of improvised spinning fire wheels urns with radiant
charcoal cinders. All elements in the play contributed to an experience of a
magical night to remember.

Watch the entire play on You Tube:

The article as published in IIC Diary (Oct-Nov 2023)

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. Siddiah & 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 unhesitantly 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**

Voicing Gender Fluidity

Maharashtra Sanskritik Sandhya at IIC

A review by **Manohar Khushalani** First Published in IIC Diary



Maharashtra Sanskritik Sandhya, is an annual feature at IIC. This year, they presented dramatized readings, Beyond Gender, on LGBTQ communities, from two plays: **Satish Alekar's 'Begum Barve'** & **Mahesh Dattani's 'Seven Steps Around the Fire'**. It was brilliantly and imaginatively directed by **Sohaila Kapur**, who has a knack for choosing very powerful and relevant themes . Six actors read the two plays. The event began with a mesmerising dance by Kaustav Ghosh, doing the role of Begum Barve, the female impersonator. The performance was also interspersed with carefully curated soulful marathi music played in the background.

Begum Barve, the Marathi musical, features a quartet of characters: Begum Barve, an exploitative employer, Shyamrao, and two clerks, Jawdekar and Bawdekar, who, trapped in a life of penury and prejudice, use their caprices as an escape from it. In the selected excerpt for performance, Begum Barve and Jawdekar celebrate a fictitious pregnancy during a baby shower, helping Barve to fantasize that (s)he could conceive. The scene ends in his humiliation, ***Shyamrao*** strips ***Barve*** off his fantasy and robes and scorning his manhood. The script explores the intertwining of fantasies and reality through the creation of a female fantasy character, Nalawadebai, bridging the impersonator's male identity and the clerk's desire for a traditional family life. This complex narrative challenge's conventional storytelling, weaving a tapestry of gendered social meanings and re-evaluating contemporary perceptions of womanhood.



Seven Steps Around the Fire, depicts the miserable plight of eunuchs who make a living performing at marriages and child births. A eunuch is murdered at her wedding. Her friend, Anarkali, is arrested without proof by the SP, Suresh Rao. His wife Uma, a journalist, who is also the daughter of the DCP, decides to catch the culprit through investigative reporting. The performance was just an excerpt where Uma is interviewing the imprisoned Anarkali.

Although the murderer is known, the police traps Anarkali to protect the actual criminal who is a powerful person. The subaltern hijaras are too scared to speak. Anarkali says, “They will kill me even if I tell the truth. If I don’t tell the truth, I will die in jail.” The dramatist shows how the murder of Kamla has terrified other hijaras that they cannot reveal the truth and cannot get justice for the dead soul. Anarkali says, “One hijra less in this world does not matter to your husband.”. In self-defense, Anarkali reminds Uma, that she treated the deceased Kamla as her sister. Uma realises the bond of love among the hijaras is even greater, because they are isolated from society.

The event was introduced by Suhas Borkar, Trustee IIC. It was concluded rather dramatically by Kaushal Kumar, a fine arts university professor with an intriguing body painting improvisation involving audience participation.

Voicing Gender Fluidity

PERFORMANCE: *Maharashtra Sanskritik Sandhya*

DRAMATISED READINGS: *Beyond Gender—Extracts (in Hindi and English) from Satish Alekar's Begum Barve and Mahesh Dattani's Seven Steps Around the Fire*

PRESENTED BY: *Three Arts Club and Katyayani*

SOLO PERFORMANCE: *Human Spirit—by Kaushal Kumar*

COLLABORATION: *Maharashtra Sanskritikani Rannaniti Adhyayan Samiti*

23 September 2023

'Maharashtra Sanskritik Sandhya', an annual feature, comprised dramatised readings, 'Beyond Gender', on LGBTQ communities from two plays—Satish Alekar's *Begum Barve* and Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps Around the Fire*. They were directed and produced by Sohaila Kapur and Anuradha Dar, respectively.

Begum Barve, a Marathi musical, features a quartet of characters—Begum Barve; an exploitative employer, Shyamrao; and two clerks, Jawdekar and Bawdekar, who, trapped in a life of penury and prejudice, use their caprices as an escape from it. In the selected excerpt for performance, Begum Barve and Jawdekar celebrate a fictitious pregnancy during a baby shower, helping Barve to fantasise that (s)he could conceive. The scene ends in his humiliation; Shyamrao strips Barve of his fantasy and robes, scorning his manhood. The creation of a female fantasy character, Nalawadebai, bridges the impersonator's male identity and the clerk's desire for a traditional family life. This complex narrative challenges conventional storytelling, weaving a tapestry of gendered social meanings and re-evaluating contemporary perceptions of womanhood.

Seven Steps Around the Fire depicts the miserable plight of eunuchs who make a living performing at marriages and childbirths. A eunuch is murdered at her wedding. Her friend, Anarkali, is arrested without proof by the SP, Suresh Rao. His wife, Uma, a journalist who is also the daughter of the DCP, decides to catch the culprit through investigative reporting. The performance was just an excerpt where Uma interviews the imprisoned Anarkali.

Although the murderer is known, the police trap Anarkali to protect the actual criminal who is an influential person. The subaltern *hijras* are too scared to speak. Anarkali says, 'One hijra less in this world does not matter to your husband.' In self-defence, Anarkali tells Uma that she treated the deceased Kamla as her sister. Uma realises the bond of love among the hijras is even greater because they are isolated from society.

The evening concluded dramatically with Kaushal Kumar's intriguing body painting improvisation involving audience participation.

■ **MANOHAR KHUSHALANI**

Seasoned With Humour: Ajib Dastan Hai Ye!



Ajiib Dastan Hai Ye!
A Review by Manohar Khushalani
Originally published in IIC Diary

Wings Cultural Society presented, at IIC, Ajib Dastan Hai Ye, which was a collection of two dramatised soliloquies, in Urdu and Hindustani, that lampooned the absurdities of human behavior. The humour was created because of the imaginative craft of the authors, and the punctuated timing with which actors narrated the tales.

Bey is a hilarious anecdote penned by Shaukat Thanvi about a gullible protagonist who is warned by Tripathi, an astrologer, to beware of the Urdu alphabet ‘Be’ as his impending death will be caused by it. Thus begins, the narrator, Rajguru Mohan’s, roller coaster ride to avoid anything and anyone remotely connected to this alphabet, only to discover, that the whole universe was nothing but ‘Be’. It included objects he handled, his family members, friends and even strangers he came across. This first performance had the audience in splits and set the pace for an equally well paced and uproarious next performance

True to the style of the production of investigating comic text through soliloquies, the performance of Patras Bukhari’s, Marhoom Ki Yaad Mein was engagingly delivered by Tarique Hameed. The tale, as told, begins with an uninspiring conversation between two friends who have known each other for decades and have said it all, so there is nothing new to communicate. To spice up the conversation, the protagonist decides to impress Mirza Sahib, by boasting that he intends to buy a motor car. Amused and knowing his limitations, Mirza advises the narrator to think more realistically about buying a humble bicycle instead, which too it appears was way beyond the narrators means. At what appears to be a bargain, Mirza offers his own bike at a steal of a price. Thus, unfolds a hilarious series of disasters, when the author discovers that he has been taken for a ride on a contraption that he can’t even ride. So, ends his fantasy to be the owner of a motorcar, when he couldn’t even afford to repair the antique bike, in which each part had a mind of its own

As Published in IIC Diary June-July 2023

Seasoned with Humour

PLAY: *Ajiib Dastan Hai Ye!*
PRESENTED BY: *Wings Cultural Society*
DRAMATISED NARRATION IN URDU AND HINDUSTANI BY: *Rajguru Mohan (Bey); and Tarique Hameed (Marhoom ki Yaad Mein)*
25 July 2023

Wings Cultural Society presented *Ajiib Dastan Hai Ye*, which was a collection of two dramatised soliloquies, in Urdu and Hindustani, which lampooned the absurdities of human behaviour. The humour was created by the imaginative craft of the authors and the punctuated timing with which the actors narrated the tales.

Bey is a hilarious anecdote penned by Shaukat Thanvi about a gullible protagonist who is warned by Tripathi, an astrologer, to beware of the Urdu alphabet 'bey' as his impending death would be caused by it. Thus began the narrator Rajguru Mohan's roller-coaster ride to avoid anything and anyone remotely connected to this alphabet, only to discover that the whole universe was nothing but 'bey'. It included objects he handled, his family members, friends, and even strangers. This first performance had the audience in splits and set the pace for an equally uproarious next performance.

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■ **MANOHAR KHUSHALANI**

A Scene from the play Ajib Dastan Hai Ye performed at IIC on 25th July 2023

'AFWAAH' the Sudhir Mishra thriller opening 5th May

Rahab Ahmed, a top notch advertising professional takes an ill fated detour through his hometown and unwittingly rescues

Nivi, a political heiress running away from her father’s legacy. This fateful night becomes a journey through hell as rumors run rife and social media becomes a lethal weapon.

Afwaah is a quirky thriller that explores the power of rumours in our society. Directed by **Sudhir Mishra** and produced by **Anubhav Sinha**, the film features **Nawazuddin Siddiqui** and **Bhumi Pednekar** in lead roles. The film is set to release on May 5, 2023.

Look out for this space tomorrow for a detailed analysis and review of the film by Poet, Thinker, Author: Dr. **Madhup Mohta**

