

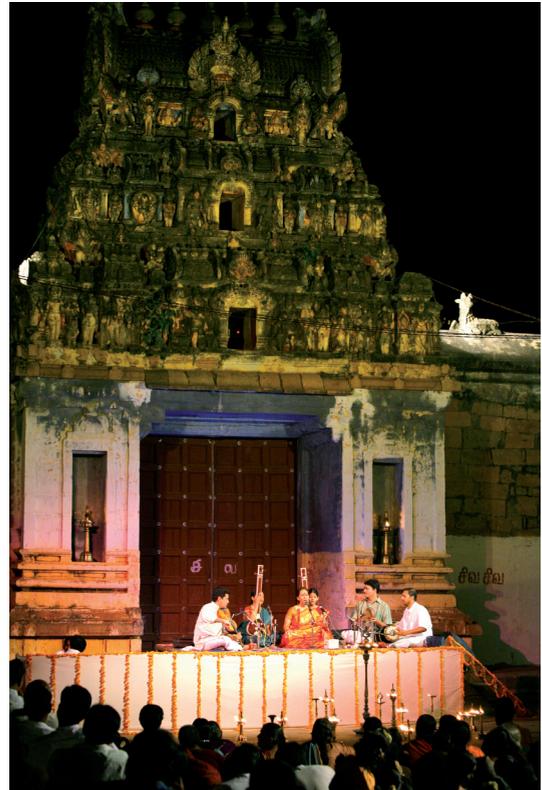
Bringing back old Tiruvaiyaru Music in sacred spaces

A religion and culture editor, a psychotherapist, a poet, a housewife, and a writer – women formidable by any standard – made great company! We made a motley group with a musicologist from the Netherlands travelling to witness the first “Tiruvaiyaru on Kaveri – a festival of Sacred Music” organised by Chennai based Prakriti Foundation. Though associated with Prakriti Foundation, as its cultural coordinator from its inception, this time I was going only as part of the audience as I did not play any role in the organization of the festival. Ranvir Shah, founder of Prakriti Foundation was standing in the scorching sun of Tiruvaiyaru as he got the Panchanadeeswara temple cleaned for Bombay Jayashri’s concert. Theatre actor and director Pravin Kumar worked on the mood lighting. Together they created discreet lighting on the temple gopuram which was the backdrop for the concert and soft lighting on the musicians. The many bronze lamps of varying sizes that Ranvir had carted from Chennai were lit in front of the dais.

Ranvir wanted to host three kutcheri-s at three different and unique venues in the town. So on Day One (February 26), Bombay Jayashri performed at the Sree Panchanadeeswara Temple, sitting on a stage surrounded by glowing earthen lamps. She sang compositions on Siva. The silence and the stillness and the sense of peace that pervaded the Panchanadeeswara temple were reflected in the soulful music of Jayashri. Particularly haunting was the *Dwijavanti Akhilandeswari*.

Pravin and the sound expert Kalai Selvan moved all the equipment after the concert to Pushya Mandapa by the Kaveri for Jayanthi Kumaresh’s veena concert the next day (February 27). We headed for the sprawling space leading off from the main road and on the river bank. The mandapa was recently spruced up but Ranvir converted the whole area into a fantasy land with little lamps flickering in between the Nagastones under the five great trees and a yellow fabric neatly ironed hung on the 55-foot wall behind the dais. Although great care was taken on the sound, the amplifier packed up suddenly during the *tani avartanam*, but the entire audience revealed a great sense of *laya* and patience in keeping the *tala* and keeping quiet even as children played making *gopuram*-s in the sand. Jayanthi played a superlative *ragam-tanam-pallavi* in *Pantuvrali*. A group of us had come in after spending time on the sands in the middle of the dry river bed of Kaveri, looking up at the night sky and telling each other stories of the stars. Jaynathi made us see brightness beyond the moon through her music. About 200 people attended this concert. Dr. R. Kausalya and her local team had created the buzz and the festival was a bonus for the students who study at the local music college.

Just when we thought nothing better could be achieved, the whole lighting and sound equipment was



Bombay Jayashri in concert at the Panchanadeeswara temple

again shifted in the night after this concert to the nearby Rajah’s college quadrangle to create an ambience of peace and lights for the flute concert by Sikkil Kunjumani, Neela and Mala Chandrasekhar. There was discreet lighting in the trees behind the big wall, fabrics were hung on the 55-foot high walls and not just behind the artists. Great kolams were made with little lamps on the floor in front of the dais and big brass lamps behind the artists. A light breeze playing with the fabric and the flames gave a surreal feel. When the three of them played, it was like one sound, but each one brought out her own tonal quality when they played individually. Mala Chandrasekhar’s elaborate *raga*

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alapana in Mohanakalyani had the audience almost jumping up.

The stage had been specially designed to accommodate the inability of the Sikkil Sisters to sit crosslegged for the flute concert. They are battling ill health and find it difficult to even walk. Special arrangements had been made to bring them from Chennai to Tiruvaiyaru and antique chairs kept on the dais were concealed and made to look like they were seated crosslegged too just like Mala Chandrasekhar. The enthusiasm and spirit of the veteran flutists was amazing.

Why Tiruvaiyaru? Ranvir Shah explains: "Tiruvaiyaru is so charmingly placed on the banks of the Kaveri and has so many charming spaces like the ghats, the Raja's music college with its quaint atmosphere

for intimate and large scale concerts to bring back an element of pride for various stakeholders to reclaim those spaces as sites for sacred music, so intrinsically connected through the Tyagaraja aradhana. But then that is 'a once a year' spectacle and people forget Tiruvaiyaru after that. We want to revive the polycultural Tanjavur cultural space during the Tanjavur Maratha rule. If we are successful in creating this festival as a one-stop international festival, then the people of Tanjavur can welcome guests to their homes, arts and crafts spaces and for Tanjavur cuisine. The ghats which are now public toilets can be cleaned up for cultural experiences. This sacred space needs to be returned to people in a democratic way."

Ranvir Shah also wants to get simple things done - get people

to keep the place neat and clean, help local artisans find more outlets to increase revenues and get local musicians to perform more often.

Dr. R. Kausalya, the local partner in the festival agrees. "Belonging to this place, I wanted to do something for it. Which is why I started the Marabu Foundation that is working on bringing the classical music experience to everyone here. I believe a festival of this kind will bring back all the glory to Tiruvaiyaru. The Kaveri paditurai, coconut groves, traditional buildings should be brought to the notice of the world and music can do that."

Marabu Foundation based in Tillaisthanam aims at bringing back traditional arts and cultural practices like traditional games, children's rhymes, kummi-kolattam,

The Sikkil trio in concert at the Rajah's College quadrangle



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and traditional songs to unite and bring in harmony and peace. “We give workshops to music teachers on lesser known kriti-s of composers like Tyagaraja and Oothukadu and others,” says Kausalya.

Ranvir Shah adds: “We feel lucky to coordinate this festival with Dr. Rama Kausalya (former Principal of the Music College) who is working with many underprivileged children, and the generosity and openness

of Babajirao Bhosle, scion of the Maratha kings. He is very keen to bring back a multicultural milieu to Tanjavur and the local chapter of INTACH.”

We, the visiting crowd, also had the pleasure of not just great sightseeing trips during the day to the Brihadeeswara temple and Darasuram but also being received by Babajirao Bhosle, the senior prince and being treated to an elaborate pooja and

abhishekam to the collection of crystal and jade lingam-s of the Tanjavur royal family. We also watched the ceiling paintings of Devashraya Mandapam of the Tiruvarur temple being cleaned up and restored.

Hopefully, the festival will help to clean up and transform this jewel of a town. This will be a public-private partnership of important historical heritage value.

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