



**ROYALTY REVISITED:** (from left) Prithvija and Madhusudhanan; Parvathy and Shijith Nambiar and Lakshmi Gopalaswamy and Sathyanarayana Raju.  
PHOTOS: K.V. SRINIVASAN



# History interpreted through dance

**N**oted duo Shijith Nambiar and Parvathy Menon wielded emotional expression and vitality in their Bharatanatyam performance to glorify the **Travancore Kings** Marthanda Varma and Swati Tirunal, for Natyarangam's thematic festival, 'Bhoopaala Bharatham,' held at Narada Gana Sabha. Even as resource person Nanditha Krishna put forth an elegant presentation on the Varma kings' role in shaping the destiny of God's Own Country, the dancers gave the theme an added dimension and impressed with their artistry.

Melodious music, texts from authentic sources, a well-knit script topped by intuitive understanding provided fitting inputs for some dramatised dancing. Elegant costumes in cream and gold accentuated the subject.

What moved the conqueror to such an extent that he dedicated his reign to the feet of The Lord? This was the perspective from which the dancers depicted the story of Marthanda Varma. Verses from the Bhagavad Gita placed in the context of the Lord Padmanabha and the king underscored the spiritual connotations. As regards the life of Swati Tirunal, snippets from many of his popular compositions added colour. The haunting lullaby 'Omanathinkal Kidavo' of poet Irayimman Thampi set the soft mood for this tale. It was evident that lot of thought had gone into the composing to move beyond depictions of bravery and prowess and handle the human side of both kings sensitively.

Two sides of love - one unrequited that was a painful part of the life of Marthanda Varma, and another where artistic inspiration flowed from a fruitful romance for

the latter, found apt portrayal in the sections. The motif of Lord Padmanabha appearing before the two kings was a common thread that linked the stories and was used wisely together with special lighting but without over doing the quality of the mystique. The onlooker could appreciate the vagaries of changing times from the portrayals of Marthanda Varma warding off the Dutch invasion, and Swati Tirunal signing a treaty with the British later.

If such tactics as arudis denoting the kingly aspect, prime ragas to evoke power in the drama, and lighting the lamp in the last scene were evocative it was because the composing was unified by the creativity of the dancers. Shijith and Parvathy slipped into many roles with clock-work precision that heightened the sway of the production. Sincerity in interpretation was put forward by pure dance sections and heartfelt emoting and raised the bar in the story of the Kings of Travancore. Music by Edappali Ajith Kumar and singing by Arun Gopinath and nattuvangam by Girish lent lustre.

**Marathas of Thanjavur**  
Occasionally, good ingredients don't make a good pot. Talented dancers K.B. Madhusudhanan and Prithvija, who presented an exposition on the Maratha Kings of Thanjavur suffered this irony.

The dancers, both from Kalakshetra, come highly recommended -- Madhusudhanan has taken part in many group choreographies and is a well-known face in dance circles. He has matured as a dancer, though he can do with a more emphatic style when he goes solo. Prithvija is a young, effervescent dancer with admirable clarity in expression and move-

**NATYARANGAM** The glory of the Travancore kings, the Thanjavur Marathas and the Mysore Wodeyars were brought alive with some superb choreography.

**VIDYA SARANYAN AND RUPA SRIKANTH**

ment. She is also the daughter of eminent Kathakali and Bharatanatyam dancer and retired faculty member of Kalakshetra, Professor C.K. Balagopal.

The dancers presented a repertoire of well-researched compositions penned by the Maratha kings, most of which are rarely heard on concert platforms. With eye-catching props, especially the life size statue of Sarabhoji II and a jute curtain to unveil Siva 'sitting in kolu' in Kailasa ('Koluvaivunnaade Deva Devudu,' Sankarabharnam, misra chapu, Shahaji II) they might have had it all. But the presentation seemed to falter at the finish line, as it struggled to communicate and carry the audience with them.

Resource person V. Sriram, a well-known historian and heritage crusader, had chosen to restrict the discourse to two eminent rulers of the Maratha dynasty, Shahaji II and Sarabhoji II, particularly their contribution to the development of fine arts.

The dancers did not deviate from this template. The first part was dominated by songs from 'Gowri Sankara Pallaki Seva Prabhandamu,' one of the few Shahaji's compositions that exist in its entirety. The tale was of Kamalamba (Parvathi) pining for Siva, her sakhis conveying her feelings to him ('Elukovayya Cakkanayya', Sau-

rashtam) his subsequent journey in a palanquin when the sakhis caution the palanquin bearers to be gentle ('Kadalimpakuroyi palaki,' Nadanamakriya) and ending with his welcome in Kamalamba's chambers with the proper sequence of seva including a lullaby ('Laali lalayya laali,' Madhyamavati).

The dancers were correct, but one felt it was overly so. As a con-

sequence, the warmth of the play including the drama and the humour was lost. The palanquin sequence was one happy exception. An explanation of the sevas beforehand would have been useful.

## BHOOPAALA BHARATHAM

The Sarabhoji II segment must have been more challenging because of the absence of notations. Unusual pieces were set to tune in the ragas mentioned in the text by vocalist K. Hariprasad, and thus we got to see a Pushpanjali composed with sollus in Bilahari, a Vaazhi in praise of Goddess Meenakshi ('Jaya Devi Sarvani', Reetigowla, Ad), a Jakkini Daru with swaras and lyrics ('Tujhya save', Kedaragowla) and a thillana in Neelambari set to khandata tala (14 beats). The dancers did well here, but the tragedy was that most of the details concerning

these rare gems were not conveyed to the audience.

Whatever the merits or demerits of the presentation, the value of the research cannot be undermined.

Inspired by Hariprasad's strong melody, flautist Sruti Sagar provided some memorable highs, while Sri Vidya (veena) kept on the forefront of many raga switches. Vedakrishnam (mridangam) has a low key style that is nimble and unobtrusive at the same time. His effort was supplemented by Koteeswaran (tabla). Girish Madhu (nattuvangam) supported the dancers well.

**Wodeyars of Mysore**  
Just as resource person Vikram Sampath, part-time historian, music aficionado and biographer, breezed through over 500 years of history in Mysore effortlessly in half an hour, the dancers from Karnataka brought history alive through faithful visuals. It was uncanny how much Vikram's observations echoed in the presentation.

Dancer-actor Lakshmi Gopalaswamy and Bharatanatyam-Kathak exponent Sathyanarayana Raju, both students of Guru Narmadha, are artistically mature and confident dancers. While Lakshmi is theatrically gifted and has a charming presence, though a little

heavy on her feet, Sathyanarayana is a lithe dancer with a strong stage personality that holds your attention; they combined to form a formidable talent pool.

There was a quiet sense of authority with which they approached the chronology of events. In a master stroke, they opened and closed with visuals of the famous Dussehra procession that we so readily identify with Mysore. The imagery of the grandeur of the event - with numerous musicians, dancers, on-lookers and most importantly, the majestic elephant carrying the idol of goddess Chamundeshwari was vivid (swarajathi, raga Hamsadhvani, Mysore Vasudevacharya).

This vibrancy they carried through the evening. The presentation started at the beginning when Yaduraya, on goddess Chamundeshwari's command, kills Maaranayaka and marries the princess of Mahishuru to become the chieftain (Wodeyar). This episode was enacted to Bilahari orchestration with the powerhouse vocalist (D.Srivatsa) contributing tanam or alapana phrases to enhance the drama.

As the chronological landmarks of the Wodeyar Dynasty of Mysore were introduced and explored, the musicians and the dancers kept the rasika enthralled - images of the flautist who hardly stopped to take a breath, Mahesh Swamy, now on the morsing as percussive support for a jathi that projects Ranadheera's strength, Sathyanarayana's deft movements as he imitates the minting of coins, Mahesh's well-intonated Paraaku announcing the arrival of Mumtazi Krishnaraja Wodeyar, are just a few instances.

The well-orchestrated show

was educative as well. Under Chikkadevaraya, the Mysore school of Bharatanatyam took root. The event was delineated through a short Poorvaranga piece - a verse saluting the king with a salaamu, a churnike or verse in praise of the rangdevata (god of the stage) and a few short jathis, the first commencing like an alarippu with alapadma and another that sounded like a kavuthuvam with the sollus recited and sung alternately. The movements were delicate, slow-paced and graceful. The movements also included a small sway in the torso.

Another important historical fact was the building of the Krishnaraja Sagar Dam that had been partly funded by King Naalvadi Krishnarajendra Wodeyar and Queen Mother Kempnanjamma Vanivilasa Sannidhana's personal jewellery and artefacts - this was told through one of the most melodious compositions available for Bharatanatyam, 'Mathe,' a daru varnam (Khamas, Muthiah Bhagavathar). If eyebrows were raised at a varnam being performed at 8.40 p.m., then the story brought out in the elaborate Mukthayi section would have appeased them. The story apart, D. Srivatsa's music and the dancers' jathis (enunciated by Soundarya Srivatsa) were simply scintillating.

As part of the skilled orchestra, Nataraja Murthy (violin) added depth to the melody. Harsha Samaga (mridangam) had tuned his instrument to the shadjam, so the beats sounded a bit flat. His earnest following of the music and dance anchored the show.

Befittingly, the show ended with the beautiful Mysore Anthem, 'Kayo Sri Gowri' (Dheera Shankarabaranam, Basavappa Sastry).