

## REMINISCENCE

# Wearer's pride

Saris may change styles and textures over time, but you can never take the charm out of them, writes **GOPIKA NATH**

remember a time when wearing a sari signified maturity into womanhood. And, learning to drape and carrying your five-and-a-half yards well was an art and an attribute of the wearer's elegance. At 16, I proudly learned to tie one from my mother and most of my friends were also taught by theirs. Putting on a sari for the first time was an iconic moment.

The sari has always held a distinct place in the Indian fashion lexicon and in an Indian woman's wardrobe. For the Nair community, a woman receiving the *Mundum Neriyathum* from a man was said to connote marriage itself — *Pudavakoda*. Unique sari hangars were designed to effortlessly hold and slip out the cloth from one's cupboard, and I still use them. Some women also use sari covers to keep them dust-free.

While saris may continue to constitute a substantive section of our closets, it is no longer 'daily wear' for most women. This

cultural emblem is now relegated to occasional fashion, such that draping a sari could be overdressing.

I was in Mumbai for a niece's wedding reception. My aunt, her grandmother, was hosting a lunch to introduce the new in-laws. At the reception-dinner the previous evening, almost everyone was in a silk or chiffon sari, a dazzling array of colours and weaves from different parts of the country. But the next afternoon, when I walked in attired in a simple off-white cotton sari which had a narrow black *ikat* border, I was taken aback when the bride's mother said: "How

sweet, you wore a sari!" I looked around and noted that aside from the groom's elderly mother and aunt, everyone else was clad in casual Indo-western outfits or *salwar kameez*. And, my sister-in-law's remark made me think that, perhaps, I was overdressed for the event.

### What's so strange?

On another occasion, while attending a casual dinner in Goa, I decided to put on a handblock printed cotton Kalamkari, bought in 1997, while working in the Pedana district of Andhra Pradesh. I loved the soft tones of the natural dyes and its agelessness: as timeless as the sari itself. But, as I stood at my host's doorstep, even before saying hello, he commented on the fact that I was wearing a sari. I felt disoriented. I admit that I don't opt for one every day, but my love for textiles ensures that I drape a sari whenever I can. It is a unique costume that requires care as well as aplomb to carry it off well. But, when did donning a sari begin to imply that an extra effort had been made?

With the advent of Western fashion trends, the more cumbersome and 'tricky-to-wear' sari has been overshadowed by trousers, skirts and gowns. This has led to the creation of readymade or pre-stitched saris.

Cited as perfect for those who are not used to tying or walking in a sari, or who've never worn one before, they're advertised as "the latest trend in Bollywood... tuck-into the petticoat, throw it over your shoulder and you are ready to go!"

Some designers have also devised the 'sari-gown'. A single garment worn like a full-length gown, with pleats in the front and a faux *palla* thrown over the left shoulder in the traditional Nivi style.

This waning in the vogue of the sari has had a dismal impact on an already-precarious handloom production and the consequent livelihood of weavers. And in turn, leading

to various social-media events such as the '100 Saree Pact' where women pledge to wear 100 saris and post pictures of themselves, citing region, weave or print style, who gave it to them or where it was bought.

All designed to give a boost to the flagging tradition of sari-wearing. But, there are still some, albeit a few, who are clothed in nothing else each day.

Laila Tyabji, a Padma Shri awardee and a well-known advocate of handloom and handicrafts, is seen only in saris.

She regularly posts selfies — she has a weekly diary on Facebook — attired in her enviable collection: an array of weaves, prints and embroidered patterns that constitute an extensive, visual lexicon of the myriad designs that have been created across India.

This variety is a testimony to its eminence in the history of the costume. While writing this article, I became aware of the people around me who draped a sari (or not) and found that in Goa, women do still choose sari to work in. Two of the house-keeping staff in the complex I reside in, wear one to work every day.

At the local markets and temple festivities, it's worn in the *kaccha* style (closest to the *antariya* of yore) with one end of the sari pulled through the legs and tucked into the back, and pleats falling to their toes in front, and the other end or *palla* circling from behind the waist, from left to right, to be thrown over the left shoulder.

### Sari, not sorry

Some ran a mile when I tried to photograph them, but a couple of generous souls demonstrated how it was worn, chuffed to have a photo taken in their everyday garb. However, a closer look revealed that all those I had seen in the nine-yard *kaccha* style of sari, at the Wednesday Parish Bazar or Siolim Fish market, were greying women who belonged to the older generation.

Some of the younger fisherwomen wore the sari Nivi style. But, as with the rest of the country, here too the trend of sari as daily-wear seems to be petering out in favour of stitched attires. But, a garment that has held the imagination of women for centuries, and one which culturally holds such prestige, cannot vanish into careless oblivion.

As inevitable as its evolution into the single-fabric, unstitched garb, the sari may go through many more transformations, all adding to its ageless appeal.



**EVERGREEN** (Clockwise) A Begumpet sari; sari is the working-class attire in Goa. PHOTOS BY AUTHOR

## AUDIO-VISUAL

# Hear good, see good, feel good

This album is about music that soothes your soul and visuals that make you sit up in rapt attention. Strange Movements, a unique audiovisual (AV) experience created by Mumbai-based producer Tejas Nair, better known as Spryk, and AV artiste Aniruddh Mehta, aka thebigfatminimalist, started off as a showcase and turned into a full-fledged 10-track LP, which is out now on redbull.com. In an interview, the two new-media artistes talk about the album, their inspirations, and the AV scene in India...

### How did the two of you meet?

We were introduced by a common friend, who we kind of owe this whole thing to. She recognised the similarities in our interests and was certain we would end up working together. Over time, we have come to share a space where we don't look at each other as a 'designer' or a 'musician', and that's the key. We're both creative and our interests are rooted in the same core emotion that can be evoked through a medium or tool.

### Did you both always want to make music?

**BigFat:** I come from a design background, but I've always been intertwined with music. I seldom double-up as a DJ, but my main focus has always been visual communication.

Although there was a point where I did want to pursue music, it's all fallen into place, now that I get to collaborate with Spryk, who is an incredibly talented producer.

**Spryk:** I always did want to make music but various opportunities presented themselves before me before I could build a life around making music. It has always been my dream to create something within the spaces of music, art and technology.

### Who are your influences?

Ryoji Ikeda, Max Cooper, Mono Lake & Nonotak...

### Tell us about 'Strange Movements'.

It has been an amazing learning experience. We worked on an hour-long set with completely original content — this gave us a lot of control and a challenging few months. Writing a full-length album with a dominant theme and soundscapes is always fun. We set a few rules and guidelines, and then tried to explore every possible permutation within those boundaries. Interestingly, we never thought about this body of work as an album until the show was actually performed

a couple of times. We had simply set out to build an hour-long piece to perform, but it has been an incredible learning experience to see how it all fell into place. The album is now out via Spryk's new record label, Skip-A-Beat.

### What is the best thing about combining music and visual art?

We'd like to believe they are essentially the same. One can translate as a starting point for the other, and vice-versa. Technology permits us to tie elements together in ways that can make visuals and music feel like a single cohesive medium. That was a defining factor for us from the start, and it continues to be so.

### Where are you planning to tour?

We took the show on tour across four cities in March, but having said that, there has been some new interest from more cities since we put out the album, so hopefully, we might have some more dates to announce soon. The entire project came to life in a place that left us both in awe. It is a small creator's space not far from Mumbai, called Theeya. We spent about a week there

to work on the content, away from the distractions of a city, and the place really has us both inspired.

### Does India still have a long way to go when it comes to audio-visual showcases?

It does, in terms of the ability to host such showcases, in terms of venues. When a venue is built keeping primarily performance art in mind, it opens up avenues to produce future-facing showcases. Without presenting AV experiences the right way, it is always hard to build an audience for it.

### What next for you?

There is one key objective behind each one of our AV collaborations — to create original content from scratch and start each show with a fresh palette.

**DEEPA NATARAJAN LOBO**



Tejas Nair (Spryk)



Aniruddh Mehta (thebigfatminimalist)

## Time & space filler

**Paranoid**, one of the greatest heavy metal rock songs, was written by the band in just under 20 minutes to fill up the last three minutes of one of their albums!

## ARTISTE'S CORNER

# Kernels of kathak

It all began 17 years ago when, after a performance, tabla legend Ustad Shafaat Khan and *kathak guru* Shovana Narayan were relaxing and soon started reminiscing about old times. "That's when we decided to start an annual two-day festival to show our gratitude to all those who had not just recognised and encouraged us but also gave us a platform to perform when we were starting out as artistes," says the legendary danseuse. And thus LalitArpan was born. And its latest edition presented one of Narayan's *shishyas*, the London-based Ragini Madan. "This was my second outing at LalitArpan, the last one was about 12 years ago," smiles the 32-year-old.

For Madan, an interest in dance was kindled early in life, when she would willingly participate in all her school's cultural activities. "Keen that I learn a classical form, my mother took me to Asavari, Narayan's dance institute, for lessons in *kathak*."

### First lesson

And on her first day there, Madan, who was then barely 10 years old, recalls being asked to just sit and observe the other students as they danced. "I remember getting hooked to the happy environment of the place, its positive energy, the sound of *gungroos*, the *kathak bols*, *tatkar* and *chakkars*... from that day itself. Later I realised that it was akin to discovering a new home, one that was full of positive energy," smiles the dancer who, besides pursuing *kathak*, also works as an econometrician at a private firm in London.

And since that day on, her passion for *kathak* has grown manifold. "This form has become an integral part of my life — a medium to express my feelings, thoughts, observations and whatever I believe in," she adds. While her training in *kathak* continued, Madan also completed her undergraduate studies in Economics at the Delhi University, and then, in 2007, left for the University of Cambridge for further studies. In the new environ-

ment where the Indian classical arts were almost non-existent, she soon began to miss *kathak*. It was then, as luck would have it, that she met two other Indian classical dancers — of the *odissi* and *bharatanatyam* styles — at her university. "Since we all shared a similar passion, we decided to form the Cambridge University Indian Classical Arts Society (CUICAS), in 2010, to provide a platform for students interested in the Indian classical dance forms to learn the form and watch recitals," she informs.

### Tough turf

Things for this new organisation weren't all that easy. Madan remembers the challenges the trio faced not just in organising events with limited funds and infrastructure constraints at Cambridge but also in attracting audiences. "It was only a matter of time when, as word spread, our Indian classical dance forms started garnering a fair amount of appreciation among the students."

Madan says that her interactions with other classical dancers through CUICAS led to collaborations in which she got to explore the parallel grammar of different dance styles on stage even in the city of the Big Ben, where she moved in 2014 to study MSc in Economic Policy from the University College, London.

All these activities ensured that Madan, despite the distance, kept in touch with her *guru* in Delhi so that her solo performances had something new to offer.

While her work as an economist keeps her busy through the day, Madan ensures that she takes time out to watch recitals of other classical art forms, collaborate and interact with dance students from different parts of the world and attend workshops by visiting artistes. And, as a *kathak* dancer, Madan also takes time out to read and understand the theoretical aspects of the form.

"This is something that has always been a crucial part of my training sessions with Shovana *didi*," adds the artiste who is also a strong believer in the *guru-shishya parampara* that she says has been the foundation of her dance journey. "Shovana *didi* is not just my *guru*, she is also like my mother, and my mentor," she says.

**PASSIONATE**  
Ragini Madan



**PURNIMA SHARMA**

## BLONDIE

