



Singapore is on its way to becoming an art destination

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Tea-based art workshop by Ayushi Agarwal

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Aditi Bhavaraju on how she manages studies and film assignments

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PRABALIKA M BORAH

In 2014, with a zitar, saxophone, acoustic guitar and tabla, the instrumental band Swaraag was launched in Rajasthan. They did gigs, performed at events and also played at weddings. "At weddings, when we saw people rushing to us, with their dinner plates in hand, to listen to us, we knew we were on the right track, because at weddings, the focus is mainly on socialising and food. Yet, we were able to divert their attention to our music," laughs Pratap Singh Nirwan, the man who formed Swaraag.

Swaraag comes from Swa-self, raag-raga, "a person in perfect harmony with music," elaborates Pratap. Swaraag that is acknowledged as a folk-fusion band, features Pratap Singh Nirwan (founder/team coach), Asif Khan (lead singer), Arif Khan (zitar), Tasruf Ali (saxophone), Rishab Rozar (guitar), Arif Khan (kharatal/morchang player), Sajid Khan (drummer) and Saif Ali Khan (tabla player). The band aims to bring the best of traditional Rajasthani music in amalgam with modern instruments to create a mellifluous experience for the audience. Pratap recalls, "Some time after we launched Swaraag, we realised that being an instrumental band restricted our audience. So we roped in Arif's brother Asif and a trained vocalist with Sufi singing as his forte. Along with him we brought in a morsing kharatal player and a drummer."

After the band reassembled and heard each other play together, the team was happy. "The music, the song selection and the mood picked up instantly. We started with Sufi songs and then went onto include three more genres - Rajasthani folk, Indie fusion and Bollywood mashup," says Pratap.

Introduction of drums and morsing kharatal brought in a different energy to the band. And people's curiosity to see an artiste play the kharatal was immense. That made Swaraag explore the option of promoting Indian folk instruments. "When a members of the audience approach us to take a close

Band of the SOIL

Swaraag wowed Hyderabad with their fine fusion of Sufi, folk, indie with Bollywood tracks

look at the different instruments, we allow them to touch and feel it and sometimes, even try it if they want to," says Arif.

With over 1000 performances worldwide, the band's unique blend of zitar and saxophone with drum and tabla in Sufi and Bollywood songs portrays their versatility in performing all possible genres of Indian music. Even though they perform a lot of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's kalam, they also play their own music occasionally. Swaraag's music expresses the deep-rooted thoughts of one's heart with their simple lyrics. "Our shows have made us look at live performances as an 'energy exchange' programme. But the onus to



ignite the mood rests entirely on the artiste/band."

With their sound training, band members know how to help each other for a better performance. "When we are rendering Bollywood numbers, our drummer takes the responsibility to lead the team, similarly when it is Rajasthani folk, Arif leads. The coordination is so beautiful that the members just signal each other without anyone realising and that makes them play flawlessly," says Pratap.

The band members however, insist there's still a lot to learn; every stage performance turns into a learning experience. "We participated in the TV reality show *Rising Stars* to see where we stand, to understand what makes us unique or how we can improve. It was overwhelming to see the support and cheer for that. Having met us at the show, Shankar Mahadevan recorded songs with us; with that our entire recording knowledge took a 360 de-

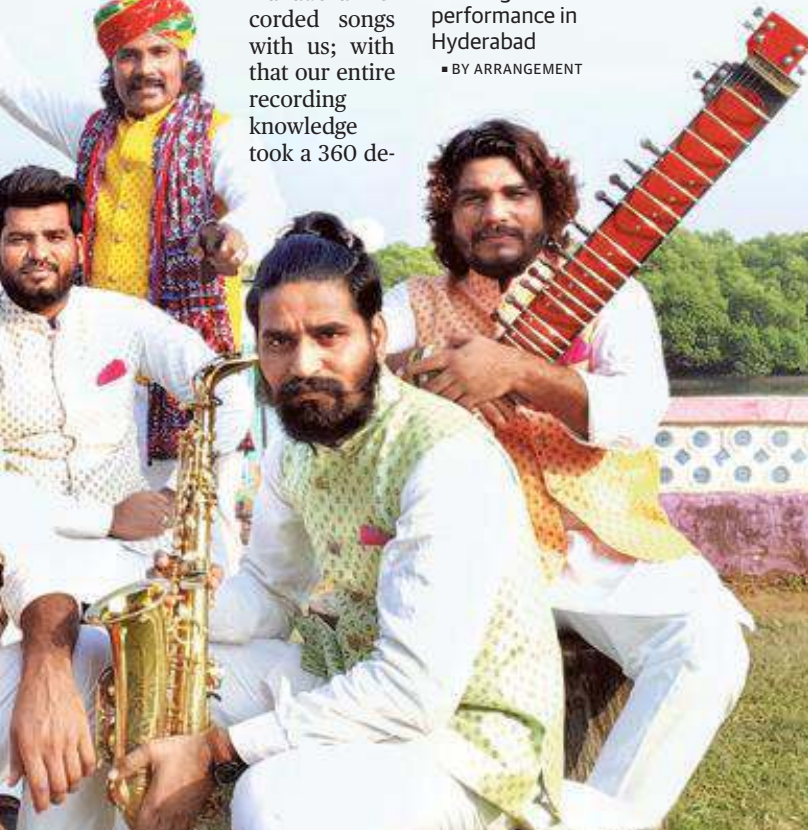
gree turn," shares Pratap. Arif adds, "He showed how one can improve at a recording studio, improvise instantly, use a whistle or a clap to give different moods to the music."

WHAT IS A ZITAR?

Zitar is a musical instrument that musician Niladri Kumar created, inspired by a 'travelling sitar'. In other words zitar is a combination of sitar and guitar. It has five strings. Niladri Kumar prefers to call it a 'five stringed electric sitar'. It's different from sitar, which works on physics of resonance created by the sympathetic strings. He further adds that to cut the resonance, he painted the instrument. The electric pick up of the zitar helps him amplify the sound.

Tune in The team of Swaraag before their performance in Hyderabad

BY ARRANGEMENT



Prog rock and parallel universes

Why Vishnu Ravindran Nair likes to use scientific concepts in his music

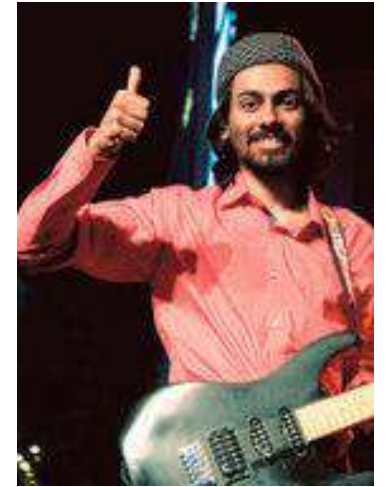
PRAVEEN SUDEVAN

Art and science, in many everyday conversations, are dichotomised. The oft-heard myth of left-brain versus right-brain is used to validate this separation. Sheldon Richmond's research paper, *The Interaction of Art and Science* (published by The MIT Press in 1984), among other studies, discredits this polarisation. The abstract of it says, "Science relies on the imagination of art for new hypotheses; art relies on the critical reasoning of science to awaken the imagination into activity."

Vishnu Ravindran Nair has used science as a source of inspiration for his ninth single, "Through The Haze", which will be released on major audio-streaming platforms on February 20. The track, he says, transitions through three genres: ambient synth music, alternative rock and prog rock.

Vishnu says, "I have a protagonist in the song whose life I portray right after she makes a decision at a crossroads in her life. She is then split into two separate universes. The track progresses to encapsulate how drastically different her lives shape out to be in the two worlds because of the slight diversion she took in one world relative to the other. The contrasting emotions of the characters are reflected in the lyrics, with an introspective and ambient tonal palette in the background."

The song is developed around the concept of 'entanglement theory' in quantum mechanics and its implications on



Not another love song So Vishnu looked at entanglement theory in quantum mechanics

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

the possibility of the existence of parallel universes.

Vishnu says, "We don't have many songs on science or, say, history. Most songs, these days, are about love or, sometimes, politics." He wishes not to follow this trend. He gives an explanation, which, once again, involves science. "The Voyager 1 spacecraft [launched to study the outer solar system] has a golden audio-visual disc [should the spacecraft ever be found by intelligent life forms]. It has music from various countries, which serves as a window to the cultures on earth even if human life perishes by then." He wants to make such music, not just another love song.

Vishnu, 29, wasn't a science prodigy. He is a commerce graduate. "I never liked science at school because of the way it was taught. It was all information; not a revelation. I didn't see its beauty then. Only in my early 20s I realised I have an inkling towards it." He started following the works of Neil de Grasse Tyson, Elon Musk, Richard Dawkins and Sean M Carroll among others. The idea for "Through The Haze" came to him whilst reading Sean's *Something Deeply Hidden*.

The song, which took seven months to complete, was challenging for Vishnu. He wanted some subtle sounds, which he couldn't produce through his guitar. So, he bought a new one - a Fender Stratocaster (used by Jimi Hendrix, Mark Knopfler et al) - just for the song. Vishnu is also learning animation to make a video for the song.



Oh, the joy of reading

Hyderabad-based Food4Thought Foundation operates more than 300 libraries across India and strives to make books available in the remote corners

SANGEETHA DEVI DUNDOO

An installation shaped like a house, built with books, was one of the many attractions at the Hyderabad Literary Festival (HLF). There were smaller boxes of books placed near the installation, labelled Ghar Ghar Pustakalaya (GGP). It's the new initiative of the Food4Thought Foundation. "I think GGP is necessary to boost our country's GDP (Gross Domestic Product)," says Shefali Rao, one of the founders of the organisation.

Beyond the word play, GGP is an attempt to make books available in places where it's tough to set up a conventional library. "Not everyone can maintain a library and catalogue the books. It involves time, effort and money. GGP is an alternative method to take books to remote hamlets and slums. Each box contains about 50 books, and once these have been read, we issue a new set of books," she explains.

Established in 2015,

Food4Thought is now spread across 22 States and 81 cities. The organisation has helped set up more than 300 libraries in schools, hospitals, homes and even prisons.

The organisation came about when Shefali had a collection of books that she had outgrown and wanted to donate. These were treasured volumes and she was eager to know who would benefit from it. "I discussed it with my husband [K Srinivas Rao] and he said it was time to do something on our own," she shares. The couple runs an HR consultancy firm called The Strategist and had been wanting to do something pertaining to social responsibility. They registered Food4Thought as a voluntary organisation.

The first generous contributions came from within their family circles. "They were generous enough to forego the money they had allocated for vacations and birthday gifts," says Srinivas. Food4Thought recently approached a few corporate houses



Srinivas talks about their two-fold approach - to make books available to remote, rural parts of the country, and to rekindle the urge to read among urban children.

to see if they would be keen to help set up libraries as part of their corporate social responsibility activities. "It's still in the early stages," Srinivas says.

Meanwhile, individuals came forward and donated books. Books received are catalogued and circulated to readers, and the donors can track where their books are travelling. "When we began, we wanted



to take books to the farthest of places and explored the north eastern states. It was easier said than done," recalls Shefali. Courier companies wouldn't go

beyond the major cities of the northeastern belt and hired porters/couriers would have to carry the books on their backs for a few kilometres. But this is where



READ AND WIN

Food4Thought has been organising the India Reading Olympiad (IRO) and giving away prizes. The winners of the 2020 edition were chosen in 13 categories and awarded last weekend. To know more about IRO and to donate books, check food4thoughtfoundation.org

Making a difference (from left) Madhavi Sharma, Srinivas Rao, Shefali Rao and Aayush; Visitors to the stall and A young student listens to a podcast from the Save Endangered Stories series

BY ARRANGEMENT

heartwarming stories also came to the fore: "One of the courier agents told us that he's willing to do two trips for free when he heard about the work we do," says Shefali.

The organisation networked with Art of Living which had branches in remote parts of the country and made books available through them.

Srinivas talks about the two-fold approach of the organisation - to donate books to the remote rural parts of the country, and to rekindle the urge to read among urban children. "We say no to text books and religious volumes. The idea is to encourage reading habits not linked to academics," he says. In urban schools, members

of the foundation occasionally play two or three-minute podcasts from their Save Endangered Stories (on YouTube) series that highlight oral tales that used to be narrated by grandparents. "Children get interested and want to know more, and the teacher directs them to related books in the library," adds Srinivas.

The foundation gets language books from National Book Trust periodically and from private organisations like Green Gold Animation which gives away hundreds of Chhota Bheem books. "When these books arrive, we have our hands full. In addition to five full-time volunteers, everyone at The Strategist helps in cataloguing the volumes and there's a lot of joy in doing this. We are in this for good," Shefali says with a smile.