

**Play no more!**



'Don't play Prince's music at your rallies', said the Prince Estate recently to US Prez Donald Trump. The others who've denounced the prez's use of their music include Neil Young and Aerosmith.

## SUFI MUSIC

# Tune into inner voice

**For the group Nizami Bandhu, the spirit of Sufism reigns supreme. They talk to REJI VARGHESE about upholding a centuries-old musical legacy**



**'ROCKSTAR' QAWWALS** The Nizami Bandhu group comprising Ustad Chand Nizami (centre) and his nephews Sohrah Faridi Nizami and Shadab Faridi Nizami.

The shimmer of Kanchipuram silk, whispered conversations in Tamil, the rustle of crisp cotton *dhosis* are not what you would expect from a typical *qawwali* concert.

But this was not a typical event. One of India's best-known *qawwals*, Nizami Bandhu were performing for the first time in Chennai. And the admission was free.

I arrived early and was taken to the press room at the hotel, and was greeted by the organiser Shilpam Rathore. A short while later, three tall men dressed in *sherwanis* and *topis* entered the room — Ustad Chand Nizami and his nephews Sohrah Faridi Nizami and Shadab Faridi Nizami. We sit down to talk...

**This is Nizami Bandhu's first performance in Chennai. What brings you here?**

**UCN:** The story of why we are performing here is of the spirit of Sufism. I have to go back to a cold December night two years ago in Delhi when Shilpam Rathore and her husband Sandeep were coming back from a dinner. Near the AIIMS hospital signal, which is close to the Hazrat Nizamuddin Dargah where we stay, Shilpam sees a lady cooking by the side of the road, and a young girl with her head bandaged. Shilpam gets out of the car and finds out that the mother and daughter were without accommodation nor much money. She goes back home that night, makes some *kichadi* and takes it back to the lady. That small incident has now snowballed into a full-fledged charitable association that has supplied over 1 lakh meals to poor patients at AIIMS. This event is a fundraiser to raise money to feed poor patients at the Egmore Eye Hospital in Chennai.

**Tell us more about how each of you started singing qawwali?**

**UCN:** I started attending *qawwali* shows with my father and elder brother

at the age of seven and by the age of 13, I was doing solo performances.

**Sohrah Faridi Nizami (SFN):** We grew up hearing music and musical instruments were our toys. My five-year-old son prefers a tabla over a toy.

**Any interesting incidents from your performances over the years?**

**SFN:** We once had to perform in a temple a few years back. Initially, all three of us were nervous, but we performed a mix of Sufi songs and Meerabai and Kabir *bhajans*. The response from the audience was overwhelming. The *pujari* thanked us for performing in the temple. This experience reaffirmed our belief that music is above religion, language, ethnicity and caste.

**Who are the famous names you have performed with?**

**UCN:** We've performed with Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Mohit Chauhan, Shankar Mahadevan, Roop Kumar Rathore, and we have been part of musical shows where Asha Bhosle-ji has performed. AR Rahman also visits the Nizami Dargah when he's in Delhi, usually in the early hours of the morning, when there are not too many people, and we enjoy singing with him.

**Tell us more about your connection with AR Rahman?**

**SFN:** We've been singing to audiences for 700 years, but it is AR Rahman who is responsible for taking Nizami Bandhu to the masses, through Bollywood. He enjoyed listening to our father, the late Ustad Gulam Farid Nizami, singing *kalamas*, and he always wanted to compose a song with him. But due to my father's demise, this could not happen. But AR kept his promise and made us part of the movie *Rock Star* and the song '*Kun Faya Kun*' from that movie became a super-hit.

**“ WE PERFORM COMPOSITIONS WRITTEN BY AMIR KHUSROW, BULLEH SHAH, RUMI, KABIR AND SURDAS. BUT WE IMPROVISE, ADD OUR OWN PHRASES...”**

**UCN:** Apart from this, Rahman *sahib* wanted us to be a part of the '*Khwaja Mere Khwaja*' song from *Jodha Akbar*, but because of pre-scheduled events, we couldn't give him the dates. But we are happy that we could sing for him, and it is always a pleasure to listen to his music. Singing his compositions is a blessing for us.

**Tell us more about the 'Sikandra Gharana', from which Nizami Bandhu has evolved.**

The *Sikandra Gharana* is the oldest *gharana* performing Sufi music. It has a history of more than 700 years, and we have been able to sustain the authenticity of Sufism for over seven centuries.

In the early days the singers had only the tabla and harmonium to accompany them, but today we have a whole range of musical instruments to choose from.

**From the last 700 years, could you name a few prominent qawwali singers from Nizami Bandhu?**

**UCN:** Before we got the name Nizami, one of our ancestors, Faiyaz Khan, was a prominent singer in Akbar's *darbar*. Another of our ancestors, Tanras

Khan, was also a famous singer at Bahadur Shah Zafar's palace.

**Are there any albums of your own compositions?**

**SFN:** We have released around 20-25 albums, all of which are dedicated to Sufism. We perform compositions written by Amir Khusrow, Bulleh Shah, Rumi, Kabir and Surdas. But we improvise, add our own phrases and words that add colour and essence to the songs.

After our success in Bollywood, we have planned on a commercial album with our own compositions that would introduce Sufi music to a broader audience.

**Tell us about the spiritual aspect of qawwali...**

**UCN:** We've performed in 70 countries, we've sung for hit movies, but our intent is not to sell records or to become famous. *Qawwali* is a means to bring the audience and ourselves closer to God. For us *qawwali* is a spiritual practice that connects us with our inner being. Sometimes, in the midst of an intense performance, we lose ourselves and an inner voice within takes over.

**What is this inner voice that you talk about?**

**UCN:** We all have an inner voice offering guidance — sometimes very softly, sometimes urgently. Sometimes we listen and at other times we ignore it. When Shilpam Rathore decided to step out of her car that winter night two years back, she was listening to her inner voice. And when we accepted a request to perform in Chennai to raise funds to feed poor patients at the hospital, we were listening to that inner voice.

That, in a nutshell, is what Nizami Bandhu and our 700-year tryst with *qawwali* is all about.

## ARTIST'S CORNER

# Pilgrimage in pigments

Artist Sanjay Bhattacharya, in his studio at New Rajinder Nagar in Delhi, is instructing one of his staff members to carefully carry a painting to the National Gallery of Modern Art for Kerala flood relief donation. "I don't know how much help my contribution will be of," Bhattacharya rues as he settles down to chat about his show *Cosmic Auras*, at the Visual Arts Gallery in New Delhi.

The show promises to take one on a pilgrimage across the country. Bhattacharya visited five important pilgrimage spots, two in east and one each in west, north and south to make these paintings. These include Kalighat Temple, Kolkata (West Bengal) and Kamakhya Temple, Guwahati (Assam) in east, Golden Temple, Amritsar (Punjab) in north, Tirupati Temple, Tirupati (Andhra Pradesh) in south, and Shirdi Sai Baba Temple, Shirdi (Maharashtra) in west, and brought each of these alive on his canvases in his own style.

**The whole picture**

These works depict each temple in its entirety. In fact, the artist also changed his colour palette for these works — he included vermilion, orange and bright yellow, departing from dull shades of brown and green that have been his trademark so far. "I always used to paint deities, gods and goddesses, not in a religious context. This time, I had the urge to paint temples," he explains.

Bhattacharya spent some days clicking the temples and the areas around to understand the environment. He then made the basic layout and transferred the whole to canvas. The canvases are huge: 8x10 ft, 7x14 ft etc. "If the environment I have brought on the canvas brings in an amount of spirituality in the mind of a viewer, I feel I have succeeded," he says. Today, Bhattacharya is an established name. At Tijara in Neemrana, there is a room dedicated to his works called the Sanjay Bhattacharya Mahal. An alumini of Government College of Arts & Crafts, Kolkata, he joined an ad agency as an illustrator in 1982. But being a fine arts person, commercial illustration didn't satisfy him and he quit the job. On the advice of his friend, he migrated to Del-



**DOER** Sanjay Bhattacharya

hi in 1983 and started working with HTA, where, for the next five years, he took up freelance assignments, and also started making paintings. In 1987, he began participating in group shows. At one of the shows held at Sahitya Kala Parishad, he submitted his water colour painting, which won him an award. Soon after, his works started getting sold. In 1987, a review by art critic Krishna Chaitanya gave a boost to the artist. "This was the time when I was frustrated as I couldn't paint to the extent I wanted to, and his words were godsent," he says.

In 1988, at his first solo show at the Aurobindo Art Gallery, art historian Aman Nath was so impressed with his work that "for his folder he needed a water colour painting and asked me to do one. I made 12 and told him to pick one. But he asked for more paintings, which he then exhibited at the show *British, French and Indian Water Colours*. A total of 17 paintings were sold in 15 minutes on the opening day. That was the day I realised that the time has come when I can survive on paintings alone," he says. Bhattacharya then gave up commercial work altogether and immersed himself in his passion.

**Another one**

From then on, alongside doing water colours (his favourite), Bhattacharya began doing oil paintings. There was no looking back for this man from Kolkata after this. Bhattacharya rarely visits Kolkata, though he does frequent Shantiniketan. "My Kolkata exists no more. It is over-populated; even the road outside my college, which just had two hawkers when I was studying, is now full of chaos," he says.

**RAJKUMARI SHARMA TANKHA**



**OF 'COSMIC AURAS'** A painting of Tirupati Balaji Temple, Andhra Pradesh.

## SUTEJ SINGH

# Prog rock & its new poster boy

Sutej Singh's rise in the music scene — more specifically the progressive rock genre — is a lesson in multiple disciplines. The Solan-based guitarist is a self-taught musician who picked up the guitar at the age of 18 with the assistance of YouTube tutorials. Today, at 25, he has an album to his credit in collaboration with some enviable international names in the space, has topped the Apple India Music charts, and counts Katrina Kaif among his many fans.

It was during his mechanical engineering days that Sutej was drawn towards the guitar. "It was more to do with the fact that I couldn't see myself being a good engineer," says Sutej who went on to acquire his degree or "fulfill a social obligation." But his heart was set on music and thanks to YouTube, he could pursue it as a passion.

Sutej's fondest college memories are those of travelling with his then band Wireweed to participate in the various campus festivals' Battle of the Bands. He swears by JustinGitar.com, his online *guru*, and encourages aspiring guitarists to check out the site. "In a place like Solan, Himachal Pradesh, there aren't too many people teaching music. So the Internet was what I looked up to," says Sutej.

After less than a decade of solo practising and listening to music, Sutej was convinced to put together a full-fledged album — *The Emerging*. It is this debut



**GIVE IT UP FOR** Guitarist Sutej Singh, whose debut album is '*The Emerging*'.

that got him attention and accolades. "I remember my friend sent me a screenshot of Apple's chart, and there it was, my name. I didn't have to swipe left or right, it was right there on top! I couldn't believe it," he says especially because he didn't anticipate a purely instrumental album to have so many takers.

Apart from playing the guitar on it, Sutej has also written some notes for other instruments barring the drum and bass. With no formal education in music whatsoever, the Dream Theatre fan credits it all to his obsessive consumption of music

as a listener.

Speaking of other instruments, *The Emerging* features collaborations with international rock heavyweights such as drummers Scott Higham and Raymond Hearne, apart from bassist Kylan Amos. These, apart from instrumentalist Gina Luciani and composer Leon Ross. What's most interesting is that these collaborations were struck online. "I never spoke to them, actually, I reached out to all of them on either Instagram, YouTube or Facebook. We shared our music with each other and decided to write an album

together," he says with a smile.

So, how does he know when a musician is compatible to work with? Instinct, he tells us. "When you listen to someone's piece of work, you know if that connects with you or not. The most important thing is that connect and to work around the space that you're both comfortable with. If you ask a metal drummer to play the blues, it won't translate into the best work, of course," he points out.

Sutej has got compliments aplenty since his album release, but the most flattering one came in the form of a shout-out from Bollywood actor Katrina Kaif on Instagram, congratulating him on the music of *The Emerging*. "I thought it was a fake account initially, but turns out it wasn't. I got so many notifications on my phone for the next couple of days, it was unreal," he says.

But despite all the love, Sutej isn't getting carried away. To celebrate music as a career right now is a bit premature, he tells us. "It's nice to see your name featured on lists and have articles written on you, but there's not that much money coming in, yet. I am hopeful and positive though."

In the future, Sutej, along with his managing team, wants to start performing more as part of a band. That, apart from scoring for films. "I've always been fascinated by background scores in films. I would love to score for films if I have an opportunity," he signs off.

**SUSHMITA MURTHY**

## BLONDIE

