

The muse behind the word



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Writer and playwright Gowri Ramnarayan presenting a tribute to the legendary M.S. Subbulakshmi at The Hindu LIT For Life 2016 festival in Chennai on January 16, 2016.
Photo: V. Ganesan



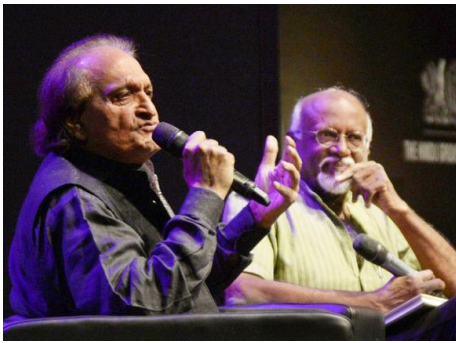
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DIALOGUES INTERPRELATIONS: Laila Tyabi, Yousuf Saeed and Rajini Sarma Balachandran at the Lit For Life Festival. Photo: R. Ragu



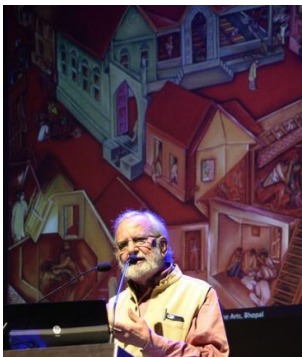
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Curator Sharan Apparao (left) in conversation with historian Chithra Madhavan at The Hindu LIT For Life 2016 at Amethyst in Chennai on January 16, 2016. Photo: R. Ravindran



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Raghu Rai, photographer, in conversation with Sadanand Menon at the Lit For Life Festival. Photo: R. Ragu



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MEMORY DREAMS DESIRE: Gulammohammed Sheikh addressing at the Lit For Life Festival on Friday. Photo: R. Ragu

Lit for Life 2016 had several excellent sessions on art, craft and music, which provided the subtle context behind the written word.

Back in 2010, The Hindu Lit for Life began with an attempt to celebrate literature, and even then, in the year of its conception, it carried within its name itself the idea that literature cannot be contained; that it includes all the ingredients required to light up lives. Since then, this Fest's scope has always been expansive and its ambit wide.

The sixth edition this year was filled with conversation, debate, discussion and laughter. When it drew to a close, it left behind the distinct impression of something gained. That what took place was not just a celebration of literature but of the world it speaks of and reflects on — art, music, politics, religion, health, stories, theatre, photography...

In the 50 sessions across three days, the Fest awarded excellent representation for arts, craft, music and dance.

The session with Raghu Rai inspired creativity in its most raw form. In conversation with arts critic and writer Sadanand Menon, the legendary photographer spoke of the heart behind the lens and the pure, organic connection he establishes with the subject he shoots. It was easy to see the effects of his words on the audience, which broke into applause frequently. "How can I form that connection you speak of? How can I maintain it?" asked a lady, while another young boy wanted advice on pursuing photography. Rai spoke beautifully, his candid words ringing with a kind of honesty that held the room captive. Menon's questions were posed in a way that allowed Rai to expand on the stories behind his most famous pictures and the process behind his latest book, *Picturing Time*.

Later in the day, Menon was also in conversation with artist Gulammohammed Sheikh, in a session on 'Images of the City.' Sheikh shared his paintings on a screen as he spoke movingly about each. From the many parallel narrations in the painting 'City for Sale' and the frightening emptiness of 'Speechless City' to the myriad interpretations of the world in his 'Mapa Mundi' series and the fascinating complexity of his travelling 'shrines' that open up endless images, it was a journey into the world of one of India's most significant artists and scholars, as Menon said.

The idea of creativity was explored in a different but equally important way, in the presentations made by Rajini Sarma Balachandran (on the sari's incredible resilience through time) Yousuf Saeed (the significance of bazaar art as seen in calendar images) and Laila Tyabji (on protecting India's incredible crafts heritage). While Tyabji, designer, writer and founder-chairperson of the Dastkar, said that "the most important thing India can contribute to the world is its Indianness," Saeed's presentation explored the unexpected syncretism behind the most ordinary religious calendar art, whether Hindu or Muslim.

Over the next two days, the synergistic and symbiotic relationship between the written word and its many muses emerged clear and strong.

An early morning conversation on the second day, titled ‘Changing Face of Temples: Status & Structure’ saw Sharan Apparao in conversation with Chithra Madhavan, which drew out the fascinating history of the structural changes Indian temples have undergone over the years. Using detailed maps, photographs and statistics, Dr. Madhavan spoke of the evolution of temples from caves to massive, detailed structures. She said, “The lack of knowledge results in ignorance in the name of renovation. Restoration of temples is done but people are still unaware of the right way.”

Two other sessions, held the same day, explored the lives of legends. In one, Gowri Ramnarayan remembered M.S. Subbulakshmi. “Say M.S. and you think of Bhakti,” she said, adding that she was an inspiring interpreter of poetry, her imagination nurtured by the soft tunes of her mother’s violin. In beautiful, evocative words, accompanied by music and movement by artists such as Anjana Anand, Nisha Rajagopal, **Akhila Ramnarayan**, Aditya Prakash, Sushma Somashekharan and Vedant Bharadwaj, Ramnarayan introduced the audience to MS’ life and work.

The complementary relationship between words, images and sounds played out in ‘Santhal Family to Mill Re-call: An illustrated talk on the 409 Ramkinkars.’ It saw Vivian Sundaram in conversation with RV Ramani, and revolved around Ramkinkar Baij, painter and a pioneer of modern Indian sculpture. Ramani played a clip of his film ‘Santhal Family to Mill Re-call’, giving details of the iconic pieces. The clip, a kind of introduction to the artist, was received with ringing applause. Even in those few minutes, Ramani’s craft, the sensitivity of his camera work and the honesty of his voice carried through.

The final day had two riveting segments on poetry and art. In ‘Mapping the Madras Line,’ S.G. Vasudev and Velu Viswanadhan were in conversation with A.S. Panneerselvan about the geographical, regional and religious roots and identity of an artist.

And the panel discussion on ‘Poetry of Andal and Akka Mahadevi’ saw Anita Ratnam and Madhu Nataraj in conversation with Arundhathi Subramaniam about the work of the two mystic poets, the idea of ‘bhakti’ and how each of them was personally drawn to the work of the two poets.

The session ended with a two-minute Kathak performance by Madhu Nataraj, and gave the audience a sampler of the beauty and sublime imagery that dance can give to words.

The sessions on art, craft and music at Lit for Life 2016 proved again that the written word does not exist in a vacuum of isolation. Instead, it is intrinsically a part of every facet of life, draws from them, thrives on them, lives with them.