



SUANSHU KHURANA

WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE

Thaikkudam Bridge is a little overpass in Kochi. It is also the moniker for a band which has the virtual world in a tizzy with its wild musical mishmash

A STANDARD E-minor chord opening, which surfaced somewhere in the middle of 1991, had nothing standard about what it did to a host of headbangers across the world, the ones who paused and paid attention. What followed the opening arpeggio was philosophy conveyed "sweetly" by one of world's foremost metal bands. Metallica's frontman James Hetfield was crooning *Nothing else matters* from their eponymous album through radios and cassettes, and many metal detectors in many parts of the world listened in rapt attention, the pared down melody lines and "sacred" text from a band that revelled in the distortions of thrash metal and ostentatious compositions otherwise. In the next few years, while Hetfield was touring the US with this power ballad, charting out a different route, a young boy in the small village of Irinjalakuda, almost 60 km away from Kochi and 10,000 miles away from Metallica's North Hollywood recording studio was playing the song on his violin with all the gamaks and khatkas (perils of Carnatic classical instrumental music) in place. "I would only do this at home and never in front of my friends, unless they found out and made fun. Iconic songs need to be treated with respect," says Govind Menon, the lead vocalist of Kochi-based band Thaikkudam Bridge.

So when a violin prelude follows after an acoustic guitar intro and an-

nounces the arrival of a more "classical" version of Metallica's track, it's hard not to sit up and take notice. In this video floating around on YouTube, which has been taken from a little-known South Indian music show called *Music Mojo*, Menon plays the tune and makes it sound like a rich mishmash of metal and Carnatic classical. What Govind had never factored in was this — the song went viral within minutes of upload, same for the 11 other tracks that the band came up with earlier this year.

In another track, Menon has his father, 65-year-old Pithambar, singing a soulful melody paired with electric guitars and drums. It was also the lullaby that Pithambar, a PWD employee until two years ago, sang to his son. Titled *Thekkum koonadiya*, we don't understand the words (it's in Malayalam) of the song but the melody rises and falls so unassum-



(Top) Members of Thaikkudam Bridge; (From left to right) Govind Menon, his cousin Siddharth Menon, Mithun Raju

ingly that the idea of words ceases to exist. "I remember our trips in rickety buses to our ancestral village. Once at home, my uncle (Pithambar) used to sing this song to both of us. We decided to put this one as one of 12 songs we had to do for *Music Mojo*," says Siddharth Menon, who is the other lead vocalist of the band. Some

other members include Mithun Raju (of Motherjane) on electric guitar and Ashok Nelson on rhythm guitars.

Thaikkudam Bridge, is the latest entrant in the vast universe of new bands. What makes them stand out is their small oeuvre of songs which is marked by versatility. While on one hand they have made versions of

Sonu Nigam's *Abhi mujhme kahin* from *Agneepath*, there is a cutting edge rap-meets-progressive rock piece called *Fish Rock* on the other, of course with Govind's dreamy violin preludes and interludes in place. "It's been quite a journey so far. We weren't even a band. We were just a few friends making music together. 14 of us got together for a set of 12 songs. But almost immediately people began writing to us, asking us when were we coming for a gig," says Govind.

As for the band's unique moniker, it was just something they came up with. "All the hunky, funky, lean, mean, fat, brat members of the band got themselves jam packed in a room near Thaikkudam Bridge". And that is how one of the band members arrived on a name. Isn't 14 people a number too many? "It's good as it results in many ideas," says Govind. Nepotism isn't a problem with the band, who are all very fond of Govind's father, who sings often. His sister Dhanya also helps in writing the lyrics. "It is a band born out of love of family and friends. It works," says Govind. As of now Thaikkudam Bridge, the members do not typify themselves under a particular genre. "It is a very melody-driven sound. We bounce different ideas and come up with a mix. We can't be put into neat little boxes of any particular genre," says Siddharth. The band is busy performing all over the world and are also composing for a Malayalam film starring actor Fahadh Faasil.

Comic Caper

Archie will live on, in his original avatar

IN A WORLD where it's becoming increasingly hard to keep up with change, there is a comforting continuity about comic book heroes. They don't age and generally don't die. So it's a little heart-breaking to know the lovable red-head from Riverdale, Archie Andrews, has been killed off.

Compared to dashing superheroes like Batman and Superman who are extremely busy trying to save the world, Archie's problems have always been trivial. For 70 years, his biggest quandary has been whether he likes Betty or Veronica more — but his quest for true love resonates with the reader. Should he go with the rich, hot and volatile girl or the nice, steady one devoted to his happiness? We've all been there. The comics eventually allowed Archie to grow up by exploring his adult life in alternate universes with both Betty and Veronica. They aren't a patch on Archie the teenager. *Life With Archie* where he's killed off has themes of infidelity and racism. In these gloomy times even a comic book hero can't be permitted an entirely escapist existence — especially since the readers are stoically toiling away at life. In a fledgling economy with far fewer readers, publishers need to be innovative, so characters must evolve to reflect our current world where strife, tragedy and war are the norm. About Archie's grisly end, publisher Jon Goldwater has said on record, "We hope by showing how something so violent can happen to Archie, that we can — in some way — learn from him".

To quote Calvin from *Calvin & Hobbes*, "Nothing spoils fun like finding out it builds character." The thought of Archie meeting a violent end makes me weary and tired. Him too? There is enough reality in daily life as it is. All readers know Archie & the Gang's gloriously extended teenage years are fanciful reverie. In fact their Utopian lives are so fantastically out of the realm of possibility, they allow us, for a brief spell to dispense entirely with realism. Of course, the publishers must spoil it by trying to attach meaning to everything. Must absolutely everything be socially relevant? If the reader was looking for profundity in a comic, there's Batman where they've tackled issues like the use of drones and evil warfare. And if he wants still more meaning there's always Tolstoy or Albert Camus. We read Archie because we want his problems — he can drink ice cream soda without worrying about getting fat and come last in class without it diminishing his popularity one bit. His prospects are not great but he is the quintessential good, if average, guy who still wins. Except this time he loses. For most readers however, he will remain a clumsy, bumbling un-Superhero who taught us how cool it is to be just plain and simple — nice..

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On the Loose



LEHER KALA

Collector's Edition

A series of rural and royal pieces collected by art collector RK Bharany and his son CL Bharany are on display at the National Museum

VANDANA KALRA

SEATED at the entrance of the hall at National Museum, a 10th century stone Ganesha from Central Asia is having an interface with another representation of the elephant god across the room. This comes from 20th century Rajasthan, a pen and ink on paper. In the backdrop are parrots woven on a 19th century Kashmiri shawl, delicately embroidered in intricate patterns. For CL Bharany and his father RK Bharany the medium did not matter. All art was one. "The intention is to highlight the role of one collector and the huge donation made," says Dr Giles Tillotson. Having worked on a book on the collection, he is also co-curating an exhibition featuring it at the National Museum along with Pramod Kumar KG and Mrinalini Venkateswaran. "We have juxtaposed the pieces to showcase how RK Bharany had extremely diverse taste. He was not interested in hierarchies and did not distinguish between rural, folk and courtly," adds Tillotson.



The over 100 artifacts in the room testify his opinion. Collected over several decades, the pieces speak for the owners and their varied taste. Donated to the museum in 1976, while some pieces from the collection are part of permanent exhibitions, the remaining are usually in storage. "There is no central piece. All are equally important," notes Tillotson.

There are highlights though. So Tillotson

points out that the early 20th century painted Kathakali villain figure in wood is not common. "I know of only two more of them," he says. Placed at the entrance in one of the inside rooms, the 17th century wooden *Dwarapala* from Kerala is also magnificent, much like the 18th century temple toran from Nepal.

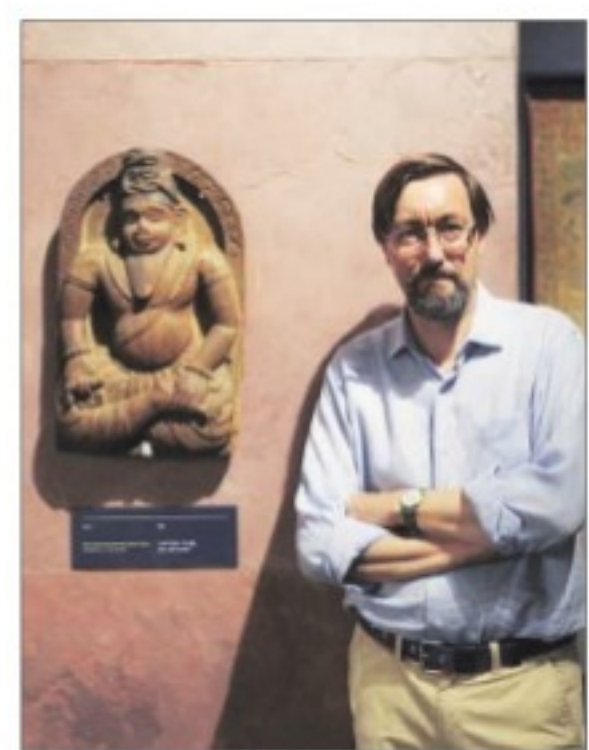
There are lessons to take back home too.

Dr Giles Tillotson (far left); exhibits from RK Bharany's collection

Pichwais might have the deity as the central figure now, but in the past its focus was varied. To present a 20th century Rajasthani pattern in a contemporary manner, the curators have it suspended behind a bronze Vishnu. The corner also has other mythological representations of Vishnu, from Ramgopal Vijayvargiya's watercolour of Radha and Krishna to Hritikdas's gouche of Sharda Devi and Ramakrishna goddess Kali.

The energies spent on exhibition design are also evident. For instance, shawls aren't on the walls in a frame, but hung in corners, acting as backdrops. A 19th century phulkari creation is on the roof, above it's reproduction on a plastic sheet which can be walked over. "The aim is to have an interaction with the collection," notes Tillotson. So walk in and look for the reproduction of a 19th century embroidered shawl from Kashmir hanging as a canopy at the door. The original is inside the exhibition is believed to be used as one, once upon a time.

The exhibition at National Museum, Janpath, is on till August 14
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American photographer Jill Peters turns her lens towards the eunuchs of Mumbai for her photography series titled "Nirvan, the Third Gender of India"

PALLAVI PUNDIR

Jill Peters' first encounter with the eunuchs of India was in 2007 when she was on her way to Ladakh. "It was my first trip to India and I was with a guide. He was very negative and told me to stay away," says Peters. "So of course I didn't," she adds. In 2013, the 45-year-old spent two months meeting members, organisers and leaders of the *hijra* community.

"I began to see a personal side to their public persona. I saw beautiful human beings trapped in the harsh light of prejudice and judgment. I wanted to take them out of that state and show them in the way I saw them," says Peters. Her endeavour has resulted in "Nirvan, the Third Gender of India", a series of staged portraits

The Third Eye

taken in a Mumbai studio and Marve Beach, depicting eunuchs in all their regality and poise.

The photographs exude a vintage charm and urge the viewer to question sexuality as defined and limited by stigma and prejudice. Having contributed to various US-based publications, taken portrait shots of Hollywood actors such as Angelina Jolie, and exhibited in New York and San Francisco, the photographer's main work involves the subjects of gender and sexuality. "Coming from the West where we have a very narrow view of gender, I am intrigued with the way

different cultures perceive gender and sexuality outside the binary. I am also fascinated with gender in a historical context and concentrate on documented populations," says Peters, who divides her time between Miami and New York.

With overwhelming support from friends and organisations such as Mumbai-based

Humsafar Trust, Peters' project looks at the subjects in neither a pitiful light, nor with anger. The portraits are absolved of all the background stories of each subject. We see them sitting against a maroon studio curtain and adorned in artificial jewellery and ornate saris. We also see them in breezy chiffon saris against the sea.

"Maybe we are looking at the past, or maybe the future. That is for the viewer to reflect upon," says Peters. The series is available for viewing on jillpetersphotography.com, and has never been exhibited in India, but Peters hopes to



Jill Peters' photographs that are part of "Nirvan, the Third Gender of India"

bring it to the country soon. Her explorations have also led her to direct the critically acclaimed documentary, *Sworn Virgins of Albania*, which explores the "sworn virgins", a term given to women in the Balkans who choose to take on the social identities of men for life to enjoy rights and privileges of male population. "My intent is to open a dialogue that challenges our long-held beliefs about gender norms by looking outside our own culture. By doing this, maybe we can come to recognise that we are all living within the same spectrum of natural human variance, whether we find ourselves planted firmly in the black and white, or a gray area somewhere in between," she says. Her upcoming project will take her to the Fa'afafines, the third-gendered people of Samoa.