

When art takes over life in a Metro

As part of the Chennai Kalai Theru Vizha, artistes engaged commuters in musical and theatrical acts. The passengers' reaction made for interesting observation...



Trading places
Sunandha Rangunathan (centre) during her solo performance
• B VELAMKANNI
RAJ

✶ PRADEEP KUMAR

It is quarter past 10 in the morning. We are on platform one at the Airport Metro Station waiting on a group of performing artistes from the Chennai Kalai Theru Vizha to turn up, when a man in his 30s walks across and asks: "Are you guys here for the Metro music festival?"

He heaves a sigh of relief when we reply in the affirmative. For *rasikas* of alternative forms of musical concerts like him, the Chennai Metro Musical Week, organised by Chennai Metro Rail Limited (CMRL), signifies a pleasant day out. For the average commuter taking the blue line from Airport to Washermanpet, it is a pleasant surprise.

Art of storytelling

Four different acts (theatre, Carnatic and pop music, parai and oviyatrani), each seamlessly interwoven with the other, constitute the entire performance.

The first act is Pravekha Ravichandran and Tharun Sekar of the two-member indie pop band, Othasevuru. Dressed in matching opposites, Pravekha takes position in the concourse area and starts singing, beginning first with the story of a crow. As he hits the song's interlude, he goes: "Kaa... Kaa... Kaa", and that catches the attention of the housekeeping staff on duty at the Airport Metro. By the time Pravekha is done and the parai dancers take centrestage, a few foreigners – overcome by curiosity to check out the sounds welcoming them to a new city – start moving their bodies to the beats of the drum.

The action shifts to inside the train in the next few minutes. Before the performances start again, CMRL staff inform the group that the parai is not to be used inside the train because "it would be too loud". Taking the restriction in their stride, Tharun starts strumming his guitar, and Pravekha starts with another story-song.

Engaging commuters

But life in a Metro isn't the most spirited. People inside the Metro train are focussed on a solitary object: their mobile phones, which they tightly grip and guard. "A metro train for me..." says Pravekha, "...defines the most urban quality of a city. Only when art starts to flow into them will there be more space for

conversation opening up in a Metro."

However, when it seemed like engagement was going to hit a nadir, Sunandha Rangunathan enters with her solo act. As Kannagi, she questions someone who has just entered the compartmental Saldapet Metro station. Her confrontational questions are in Tamil; she asks: "Are you on the way to office?" The puzzled man nods in the affirmative. "Got your lunch packed from home?" The man draws a blank stare. But Sunandha does not stop, she goes after the next person, and another.

Before long, her agenda becomes clear. Her act discusses the need to shoot down the concept of deifying villainous characters from our history. "I'm not the hero. I'm the bad guy here!" she yells, before stomping her foot down and holding the pose of the Kannagi statue one finds at the Marina Beach. "The seductive thing about writing political theatre is putting ourselves on a pedestal and pointing fingers at others. I prefer to implicate myself," Sunandha tells us later.

Preoccupied phase

A couple of elderly gentlemen look on, disapproving of some of Sunandha's ideals (feminism, anti-CAA). But she powers on because any engagement is worthy enough. Naveel Singha, a Bengaluru resident, in Chennai on a business trip, is taking the ride from Airport until Washermanpet. Despite the language barrier, he figures out the concepts powering the performances. "It is the first time I'm experiencing a Metro train becoming the space for such acts. This is not the case in Bengaluru," he says. What does he make of the lukewarm response from commuters? "It really depends on how preoccupied you are."

But Manikandan, a Chennaiite, is not satisfied. Before he gets off at Teyranpet Metro station, he opines that it is time people show "some enthusiasm" and wake up to issues of social interest. He barely finishes saying this, when a fellow commuter, who too gets off at this station, notices Tharun with his guitar, and stops to take a peek inside the train he had just gotten off from. As the doors slide shut, the shock on his face is apparent, as he realises that he missed live music because he prefers to travel with his eyes and ears shut from all engagement.