

Business Line

Corporate celebration of community and culture

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Mr T. T. Srinivasaraghavan, Managing Director, Sundaram Finance Ltd, Chennai

The topic of discussion during a recent meeting with T. T. Srinivasaraghavan, Managing Director, Sundaram Finance Ltd, Chennai was not finance but fine arts. And the venue of the meeting with TTS was apt for the topic: The opening concert of 'Sundaram Finance Mylapore Festival' was on at the Chess Square in Nageswara Rao Park, Mylapore; and the energetic rendition by a group of children kept the audience engrossed despite the morning chill of a Madras maargazhi.

To TTS, the Mylapore Festival is the closest experience to a 'Thiruvizha' that you can get in a bustling metropolis. "It is a celebration of our culture," he says, in the course of the interaction with Business Line. We continue our conversation right through the festival...

Excerpts from the interview.

You have just completed ten years of the Mylapore Festival. What were the objectives when you started out and how has this progressed over the last decade?

The 'kolam' competition was the precursor to the Sundaram Finance Mylapore Festival, but that was largely confined to a few ladies, mostly drawn from Mylapore. However, for many of the earlier-generation people who had experienced Thiruvizhas in their youth, there was this unspoken desire to recreate the Thiruvizha atmosphere in the city, at least for a few days every year.

Mylapore is a repository of culture, heritage and history, and quickly we realised that this had to be way beyond the kolam contest. Vincent D'Souza, the architect of the festival, came up with a format and we started to look at how we could expand this event and make it into a festival giving it a 'Thiruvizha flavour'. The whole idea right from the inception has been to use the public spaces, pulling in as much of the community as possible and to showcase art forms, some of which have slipped into oblivion. We saw it as a celebration of the flavours of Madras.

Mylapore was the ideal magnet and provided just the platform we needed. There was so much diversity in Tamil Nadu, not to speak of the other Southern states, waiting to be showcased. They ran the whole gamut, from art, craft, dance, music and handwork, encompassing traditional forms like Therukoothu, Stick Walkers, Pallankuzhi, Aadu Puli Aattam and Dayakattam.

After all these years, I would say that the list of traditional forms that we cover is still not exhaustive; such is the richness of our culture and heritage. Each year, we have added events to give it a new flavour and dimension. A few years ago, we had a 'sound and light' show which I think has been one of the high points of the festival. This year, we had 'Vanna Mayil,' a presentation through dance, music, visuals, narration and acts that told the story of the lesser-known communities of Mylapore, who have enriched this region of the city.

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Having seen the festival expand over the last 10 years, I can say with some pride that the festival is in many ways, the closest experience to a Thiruvizha that you can get in a bustling metropolis! It is a celebration of our culture. You find people come out in large numbers in public places, with admission being free. There is gaiety, colour, food, dance and music. There is generally a buzz around the streets. Shops and business establishments do brisk business and the fact that it is in the Margazhi season, with Pongal just around the corner, also lends it an aura of festivity. That is an integral part of the spirit of the festival.

How much of investment goes into this initiative?

The Sundaram Finance Mylapore Festival is not about a big budget flash. Hence I would not lay too much focus on the financial investment. A lot of investment in time, effort and passion has gone in, from designing of the collaterals, conducting auditions for the Kutcheri, working out the logistics of handling nearly three hundred, high-energy children, and active participation and presence of senior management at the various events. The joy that the festival spreads is our return on investment!

What kind of expansion has the Mylapore Festival seen during this period?

The Sundaram Finance Mylapore festival has expanded on all fronts – from one location to ten, from a kolam contest to over 30 traditional events. And most importantly, the participants have grown manifold from around 200 kolam contestants to several hundreds of participants this year.

At the Kutcheri in the park event alone we had over 100 children who presented group Kutcheris at the Nageswara Rao Park over the four-day period. Several thousands of young school- and college-going children (both as participants and visitors) have now become an integral part of this festival.

Any secret behind the long sustenance of this initiative from a corporate point of view?

I think the objectives were clear right from the beginning. There was absolutely no commercialisation of this format in any form. This was meant to be a community festival and it has remained that way all through these years. The so-called unknown participants are the real stars of the festival. The college students are the stars of the Art Street. The puppet show this year was anchored by people from Andhra Pradesh. We have stilt-walkers from Ranipet. There are no celebrities, there is no glamour attached to it.

We have had young children who are not yet into their teens who have shed their inhibitions and performed in front of a large audience. We had a couple of men displaying their kolam skills a couple of years ago. We had an energised 70-year old lady displaying her analytical skills against a 15-year old kid in Pallankuzhi. Not to forget the Mylapore icons – Alwar, the bookseller, Late S Rajam, Dabba Chetty shop and Rasi Silks – whom we have recognised through the 'Spirit of Mylapore' Award. They are the ones who are integral to this festival; they are the real stars of our festival.

Were there any hurdles that you faced? And how have you overcome those?

Given the fact that festival uses public spaces, there have been a few challenges and hurdles long the way. But we have to remain sensitive to this and work within these constraints.

For example, at the kolam contest, we are acutely aware of the fact that we are operating on an arterial road alongside the Kapali temple and on a weekend. Hence, you will find that the place is cordoned off only for a few hours and even that only a part of the North Mada Street.

There have been times in the past when shops have expressed unhappiness at the huge crowds in the area, considering them a possible disruption to their businesses.

This year, the festival took place right in the middle of the Kapali Temple's utsavam. On two days, we dismantled the entire main stage for well over an hour for the deity's procession.

This was also one of the main reasons we decided to stay away from mikes and speakers at the Kutcheri in the park. We have always been mindful of the fact that we operate in public spaces.

How would you measure the success of the festival? Have you received feedback from the audience?

The success is seen from the participation from the community; the feedback we receive from them drives us to do even better each year. There have been many students – visual communication students, fine arts students – who have done a project study and dissertation on the Sundaram Finance Mylapore Festival. They have covered the festival extensively, taking photos and videos and doing interviews with the participants and the visitors.

The festival has certainly evoked interest from research people. There is enough within the festival format for people to research, especially from a sociology point of view.

The visitors, each year, including overseas visitors, have gone up significantly. A couple from Germany has been visiting every year during the festival. The Kutcheri in the park has had participants from the Middle East and the US.

Your 'Kutcheri in the park' initiative has also completed 6 years this month? How has that progressed since the time you launched it? How would you reflect on that initiative at a time when there has been so much talk about the December music season and the Sabha concerts?

Interestingly, it was the spirit of the Sundaram Finance Mylapore Festival that led to the spin-off of the Sunday Kutcheri in the park. We wanted to bring in an informal atmosphere and encourage the children to display their natural ability without really being under the pressure of 'formal' performance.

Even with the larger events of the Sundaram Finance Mylapore Festival, you will find that the audience is always within touching distance of the performers. So there is a certain element of touch and feel about it and a close interactive format about the whole festival.

We expanded Kutcheri in the park a couple of years back to have a Navarathri Kutcheri in the park series because we had a happy problem. The number of children who made the cut in terms of the audition grew manifold and there was a long waiting list of children wanting to perform. Thus Sunday Kutcheri in the park series expanded to Navarathri Kutcheri in the park series.

We have always borne in the mind the fact that we did not want to over expose any of what we do. That is one of the reasons that the novelty factor still exists and children still look forward to presenting at the Kutcheri in the park as their first Kutcheri.

Also, there is a constant lament that there is not enough outdoor activity for children these days. We just don't seem to have the time to 'smell the roses.' To that end, I believe that the children's activities at the park and the Mylapore festival provide a number of opportunities for children and the youth to actually get a breath of fresh air and to feel the wind in their faces, away from the confines of the air-conditioned rooms.

That is exactly what we are doing with the expanded park activity format. We are getting 30-40 children every quarter for art workshops and origami and painting workshops where they not only learn new skills but also become aware of the environment and the park and the trees and the birds.

What is the message you would like to send out to corporates looking to launch such programmes?

When we started off the Sundaram Finance Mylapore Festival 10 years ago, what we had visualised was that this would act as a catalyst for others to start their own festivals, in whatever format suited them. Some of it did happen. There was a Triplicane and a Thiruvanniyur festival that came up a few years ago. Similarly, there are a couple of other parks in Chennai where our Kutcheri format has been replicated. That itself is a satisfaction and we are happy that the seed and original thought came from our festival. There is so much of a buzz around CSR these days and we draw quiet satisfaction from the fact that we have been able to sustain the commitment to preserve and showcase the rich cultural tapestry of this part of our country.