India Foundation for the Arts

India Foundation for the Arts, in my opinion, is a truly wonderful organisation that has been working on the education and awareness of creative arts for a long time now. Their commitment towards the arts has been evident in the various projects they have undertaken, and I always feel privileged to be part of their initiatives.

Events and Announcements

3. By recalling the two different versions of a thumri that Rasoolan Bai recorded – one of

2. By recalling the two different versions of a thumri that Rasoolan Bai recorded – one of

1. A music workshop held for young students of all ages – a platform for them to

The Big Picture

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Meanwhile, several IFA projects (involving performance, film, photography and installation art) have

Subjects covered included the role of digital

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himself. He would have been the family heir, the family would provide him with all the resources and

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especially in smaller towns and in dance troupes that form the staple of the nautanki performance in

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The Big Picture

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with whom you keep a conversation going throughout the film. Are there ways in which your own thinking about this culture changed as you went along? Were there any stumbling blocks along the way?

Saba: I had begun this project, I realise now, with a somewhat simplistic, even romantic need, to celebrate what some feminist scholars have termed the `free' space available to the tawaif for inversion of socially sanctioned gender roles. The most striking example of this being that the birth of a daughter was celebrated with far greater enthusiasm than that of a son who was viewed as an economic liability.

The inversion of gender norms was reflected within the wider kotha community as well. Tawaifs along with male accompanist musicians formed the core of this community. In Varanasi, for instance, till well into the 1940s, senior tawaifs were traditionally nominated the choudharayin or leaders of the musicians' panchayat called the saat taat – or the seven mats – empowered to resolve all internal disputes and issues within the community.

As a woman filmmaker, it was tempting to read in the reversal within the kotha of normative gender norms, a woman-centered space liberated from the domination by men as a group, the bedrock principle of all patriarchies. However as I proceeded in my research I realised that this construction posed not only the obvious danger of romanticising the material reality of the art forms and lifestyle of tawaifs but also of fragmenting female sexualities within a simplistic binary division – for example, the Madonna and the whore. Binary oppositions are born out of patriarchal anxieties to control and do not reflect the real, lived or imagined desires and experiences of women and men which often traverse a much larger area than what is socially ordained.

Within pre-colonial cultural economy, given the dependency of all performers, men and women, on patronage of individual male members of the aristocracy, the tawaif was not, and neither could she afford to be a social rebel. As a professional woman artiste and entertainer she occupied space perhaps on the margins of patriarchy but not in opposition to it. Through history these `feminine' spaces have stood on the margins of the patriarchal order, neither totally engulfed by it nor entirely liberated but negotiating an extremely thin strip of space pregnant with possibilities.