



From left: Bhargavi Raju, Aarti Lohia, Arundhati Ghosh, Spandana Bhowmik, Menaka Rodriguez, Shalaka Redkar and Shubham Roy Choudhury

FOCUS

A SENSE OF PLACE

Among the Khasi tribes of North-East India, the tiger is called khla, and is regarded as an ancestral spirit. While the predator is dreaded as a man-eater in most Indian myths, in Khasi folktales it is depicted as a protective figure. Three years ago, when Shillong-based researcher Avner Pariat decided to explore this unique narrative of the tiger as a social, emotional, and political symbol in Khasi cultural practices, he sought a grant from the Bengaluru-based India Foundation for the Arts (IFA). The grant enabled Pariat to travel for a year across Khasi regions to investigate the influence of deforestation and Christianity on the tiger cult of Meghalaya. He video-documented festivals, folk dances and conducted interviews with village elders, priests, and mendicants. This massive volume of oral narratives and video footage has been funnelled into a repository of information that points to the many environmental and societal influences that could change the future of the Khasi tribes. And all of it is now accessible

Alternative history of those from the margins now finds permanent space and spotlight in the newly-opened India Foundation for the Arts Archive, finds
RAJASHREE BALARAM

through the IFA Archive launched in October, in collaboration with the Lohia Foundation, a charitable trust which works in the area of education, healthcare and conservation.

HISTORY UNFILTERED

“Five years ago when I first met Arundhati Ghosh, who heads IFA, and learned about the staggering breadth of projects they support with their grants, I realised the organisation will have a huge impact and influence in our country’s artistic history,” says Aarti Lohia, a well-known art patron, who is spearheading the Lohia Foundation. Over the past two decades, the IFA has supported 540 projects that essentially attempt to reinterpret identity, otherness, and community through mediums as diverse as paintings, text, films, theatre, installations, and performances. Though talks about the possibility of a physical and digital archive were initiated in 2015, Lohia reveals that the legwork that went into the project was more >

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- AARTI LOHIA

than backbreaking: “The IFA had to go through 540 projects, add metadata and fill gaps in information.” The more tedious part was tracking down the artists spread all over India.

It didn’t help that the works pack differing heft and focus points. For instance, writer Sapan Saran’s play revolves around gender testing in sports, while educator Prajna Hegde’s project interprets government school syllabus through local Karnataka folk art forms. Another project explores the art forms of the minority Muslim community in Char Chapori in Assam, and the sense of alienation they experience in the wider world around them.

WE THE PEOPLE

The IFA Archive is also more significant to the modern world as it is one of the rare few that focuses on the alternative history of the ‘other’, voices that are often erased or ignored in mainstream history. “This is the history that is not dictated by those in positions of dominance, be it politicians, bureaucrats, the powerful and privileged, but by the people themselves,” says Lohia. The physical archive, located in a 1,200 sqft climate-controlled space in Bengaluru, now houses material covering projects supported by the IFA in 2011 and 2012, while the digital archive can be accessed at Theifaarchive.org. “The process of dipping into this archive is like dipping into our unconscious—unsettling, rewarding and bringing the gratification of rediscovering forgotten selves. You don’t know what you’ll find, in fact you don’t know what you’re looking for until you find it.”

Author Stephen Hawking once mentioned that his abiding wish was for humanity to step into the future in a state of collaboration rather than becoming ever more fractured. “To me, this archive resonates that spirit of collaboration and unity,” says Lohia. ■

1. Still from Mohanakrishnan Haridasan’s short film on artist K Ramanujam
2. Still from Ayswarya Sankaranarayanan’s animation film based on miniature Pahari paintings
3. Illustrator Vidyun Sabhaney’s work on picture-based folk performing traditions
4. Yousuf Saeed’s *Tasveer-e-Urdu* archives vintage printed images from popular Urdu magazines