



ARTS CONNECT

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Contributors

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Taran Khan is an independent writer and filmmaker currently based in Mumbai. She received two IFA grants to make a documentary film in collaboration with her writer grandfather, SM Mehdi, on Sufi practices in the Awadh region of UP. She can be contacted at taran.khan@gmail.com.

Bhooma Padmanabhan works as Programme Officer at the Foundation for Indian Contemporary Art in New Delhi. She has an MA in art history from the MS University, Baroda.

Moushumi Bhowmik is a singer-songwriter of Bengali music with several albums to her credit. She is part of a band (with four British musicians) called Parapar. She has also composed music for documentaries and features. Moushumi received IFA grants to research, document and disseminate the folk music of eastern India and Bangladesh which involves the element of *biraha* (longing in separation). Her recordings of this music will go into archives in India and abroad.

Kamal Swaroop graduated from the Film and Television Institute of India in 1974 and has been writing and directing documentaries and feature films for the last thirty-three years. IFA has supported Kamal to conduct workshops with students towards generating a storyboard on the life of Dadasaheb Phalke as well as to document these workshops through a series of films.

Jagan Shah received professional training in architectural design, history, theory and criticism but has maintained a continuous involvement with theatre and media since high school. After graduate studies in Cincinnati and New York, he returned to Delhi and has since been immersed equally in architecture and filmmaking. An IFA grant helped him research the history of the Indian People's Theatre Association.

Lalit Vachani's previous documentary films have been on the starsystem and the social worlds within the Bollywood film industry, and on the indoctrination, ideology and the politics of Hindutva propagated by the Hindu fundamentalist organisation, the RSS. His current project is a road movie style documentary filmed in Gujarat that follows the trail of Gandhi's salt march of 1930. He received an IFA grant to make a film on the street theatre group, Jan Natya Manch.

Vasudha Thozhur is a Baroda-based painter who has exhibited widely in India and abroad. She has been visiting faculty at MS University of Baroda, NID, Ahmedabad, and IICD, Jaipur. Vasudha received IFA grants to conduct art workshops with the rehabilitated victims of the 2002 Gujarat riots in collaboration with Himmat, an activist organisation based in Vatva, Ahmedabad.

Editorial

One of the most fascinating things about a creative project is how it, by definition, morphs in its very doing. This inherent dynamism is both exciting and risky. The artistic process has been viewed through all manner of lens—spiritual, psychological, mystical, everyday. However this process works, forms like the biography and autobiography, the diary, the interview and the personal essay, reveal how an imagination at work can be as riveting as a finished piece of art.

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Perhaps one of the reasons why we at the India Foundation for the Arts are particularly interested in the work-in-progress and the project in the making is that a large majority of the very diverse things we have funded take the form of an engagement with an “outside” rather than being pure acts of imagination. This “outside” could be the archive, an arts community, another artist, a new medium, an older form. It is always interesting, therefore, to track the thoughts that cross people’s minds and the developments their projects (as much as their self-perceptions) undergo during such encounters.

Not much is achieved, though, by just celebrating the fluidity of the artistic process as an abstract principle: as funders we are obliged to seek articulations of why and how this process is significant. Generally, well thought-out reflections while in the thick of an arts project can both document a transient flow and generate discussion on how this flow acquires meaning, shape and justification. The language in which an artwork in the public domain is described and judged is different from the language in which an artist speaks of her own work. We need more of both, but it is especially the latter that *ArtsConnect* will strive to create a space for.

In this inaugural issue, we bring you the personal, reflective voice such as that of Taran Khan, Moushumi Bhowmik and Vasudha Thozhur, describing journeys that often take on the urgency of quests. Kamal Swaroop speaks as one artist seeking, alone as well as collaboratively, to enter into the imagination of another—in this case that of the pioneering filmmaker Dadasaheb Phalke. Finally, you have the critical voice of Bhooma Padmanabhan commenting on the work of her peers at a young artists' residency, as well as Ashoke Chatterjee's urgent questions regarding the recent attack on an art student at the M S University of Baroda by those who found his artwork obscene and offensive to religious sentiments.

Mr Chatterjee's essay reminds us why more discussion and debate on the arts in India is the need of the hour. He makes two vital points. One, that cultural and educational institutions in India need to engender independent thinking and articulate defences of intellectual and artistic rights. And two, that in a country as culturally heterogeneous as India, the exercise of individual freedom implies the assuming of significant responsibilities. In our increasingly polarised environment, *ArtsConnect* will attempt to provide, in Mr Chatterjee's words, "the stamina for uncertainty and debate on which democratic freedoms ultimately depend".

We welcome all responses and suggestions!

Anjum Hasan

Editor

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Censorship & Hate: Learning from Baroda

Ashoke Chatterjee

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“The Talibanisation of India is underway. What else do you call a republic where artist after artist is feeling insecure?” (Pratap Bhanu Mehta, President, Centre for Policy Research)

Events at the Faculty of Fine Arts at MS University are the price of indifference to violations of intellectual freedom over many years. Significantly, the political system which is supposed to uphold our Constitutional rights is either silent on the Baroda catastrophe or encourages its instigators. The May 9 attack on student Chandramohan Srimantula and Dean Shivaji Panikkar can be interpreted at several levels: a law and order problem, a

violation of academic space and of individual privacy, a threat to rights of free expression, as the issue of responsibilities that should accompany rights—and the impact of all these on artistic freedom. The Baroda episode comes at a time of other crises of expression. An advertisement released in Punjab brings that state to the brink of disaster, a venerable research institute in Pune supports the vigilante censorship that wrecked its own library, media institutions in Tamil Nadu and elsewhere are savaged because of opinion polls and celebrity kisses, the director of a great dance academy is attacked as unorthodox, and audiences in Gujarat

are denied access to *Parzania* because state-supported hooligans of the Baroda variety fear exposure of the 2002 pogrom. Because its perpetrators are still at large and in high places, we now have the Baroda attack. Yet the crisis goes well beyond Baroda, and there will be much more to account for if Chandramohan's fate is unattended. The attack on him is an act of terror directed at the entire nation, adding another blot on the human rights record of a state that was once the vanguard of values associated with Indian progress.

"Progress" and notions that often accompany it could be reason for these current portents. Politicians of all hues have either supported or implemented censorship that serves vote-bank calculations. Godmen join the fray with fatwas and demands of obeisance to their wealth and power. Industry, the other member of India's power triumvirate, measures advance in stock market dreams. Clients in a thriving art market, few have spoken up to protect the talent they celebrate at Page 3 events. For this nexus, the status quo offers security that the moral police can protect from unsettling ideas. In an era of political, religious and entrepreneurial expediency, the defense of artistic freedom must find immediate allies elsewhere.

Baroda suggests the need for focus on at least two of the many issues that have been raised by the attack on its students and teachers: academic and other freedoms of expression, and the roles and responsibilities which should accompany them. The first demands restoration of free dialogue between teachers and learners. Within academe, the mind must be free of every constraint. When university authorities themselves connive with hooligans to desecrate this space, recourse is needed but to whom? The law exists but it can be violated with impunity (the student was arrested in Baroda, not those who attacked him). While legal recourse is slow and clumsy, it is an essential path and is being courageously followed. The UGC seems helpless beyond token noises. Akademis and parishads lack credibility or authority. Ministries concerned with education and culture are tainted by long histories of political interference. Students have their unions, but these are remote-controlled by politicians. The least that could happen after Baroda is the mobilisation of independent student opinion, particularly in institutions of the arts and social sciences, which are the first targets of attack. Dean Panikkar needs the solidarity of university professors, comparable perhaps to the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) in

the USA which brings pressure to bear whenever academic freedom is threatened. Protection against future Barodas may therefore require fresh Indian institutions capable of uniting academe toward vigilance in its own defence. This will not be easy, but it could be a way to give pause to hooligans and to their political masters. Could the courage of Dean Panikkar catalyse such a movement, led by the academics fighting his cause?

8 For the artist community, the immediate priority has rightfully been expressions of solidarity. The debate they have initiated on rights must now extend to other implications, such as those articulated by scholar Alka Pande who observes that contemporary art has often more to do with irreverence and sensationalism than with being provocative (*Outlook*, May 28). Offence and conviction are notions that can neither be accurately defined nor wished away. They can only be understood through discussion and example. Yet there are experiences on which we can draw from India's past (the campaign that banished the art of the devadasis and the one which resurrected it) and present (bans on *Parzania* and *In the Name of God* are rich examples), as well as from other democracies. None have found clear answers. All have

had to develop the stamina for uncertainty and debate on which democratic freedoms ultimately depend: "The most compelling argument is to know my beliefs and freedom of expression will always be protected, because I know even expression I don't like is protected. That is the surest guarantee of my safety" (Pratap Bhanu Mehta in the *Indian Express*). Recognising the importance of core civil and political rights, such as academic freedom, for the protection of economic, social and cultural rights could be an innovative response to current threats. Prof. Balakrishnan Rajagopal (Director, Program on Human Rights and Justice at MIT) advocates the defense of academic freedom as a human right: "Protecting such a right does not depend on national legal systems, but on international law; and transnational action, including that by international agencies, becomes legitimate for protecting such rights..."¹ The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights demand attention in the Baroda context.

In this process of analysis, it is important to accept that in a society as diverse and insecure as India, sentiments are easily bruised. Punjab offers the most recent evidence, and this reality cannot be wished away. The

¹"Academic Freedom as a Human Right: An International Perspective", Balakrishnan Rajagopal. ACADEME, May-June 2003.

consequences can cost lives and often have, providing ground for political mischief. The social context for exercising individual freedoms must therefore include responsibilities, for artists as much as for others. If the artist has a right to expression, has the citizen a right for her notions of sanctity to be respected? What is the balance? Who sets it, how is it informed, and how is it sustained? The need is to foster understanding through reflection, which is possible only if the sanctity is respected of spaces where debate can be encouraged, nurtured and drawn upon. It is that sanctity that has been so terribly violated at MS University. It is that sanctity that demands our solidarity with Chandramohan and Dean Panikkar. It also demands some knowledge, in this instance, of what the teacher/learner dialogue may have been before the goons and the police rushed in. How did these works evolve? How were they to be evaluated? Were there any genuine issues of public sentiment? If so, how were they regarded? Were any distinctions seen in matters of art that is “private” and art that moves into public spaces? Are such matters discussed in classrooms? What happens, if they are? Which reference points do students and teachers use to assist comprehension of art as a social and political vehicle? After all, if the mission of art is

to push the frontiers of human experience, then controversy is inevitable and the politics of democratic confrontation need understanding. The alternative is to be left to lawyers or to goons, as has been the case of one of India’s greatest sons.

The roots of Baroda’s violence may lie in a national inability to deal with the history of attacks on M F Husain. His work and his dignity have been violated without any serious response to the issues Husain represents. The public hears loud accusations of disrespect to “Hindu” sentiment. Because there are no institutions that speak for him, it remains ignorant of the evolution of Husain’s genius and the contemporary language in which he communicates Indian tradition. The artist’s suffering is treated as events, not as fundamentals. It would be interesting to know if Baroda students (and others elsewhere) have debated Husain’s situation. What lessons may they have drawn from the exile of India’s most renowned painter? Is it a possibility that learning from Husain could be a precondition to learning from Baroda’s catastrophe? Does that suggest an interpretive role for those, like IFA, that strive for an artistic environment worthy of this land?

10 Taran Khan, a young filmmaker and writer, and her grandfather, S M Mehdi, a journalist and translator, are on a journey across the Awadh region of UP. They are making a film on Sufism in the small towns or *qasbas* of Awadh. In their imagination a *qasba* is not just a geographical entity but also a repository. It was in the *qasbas* that over the centuries Sufi thought provided the basis for a commingling of religion with local culture. The resulting music, poetry and everyday practices around Sufi shrines or *mazaars* is what the film will try to capture. It will also capture the journey of this grandfather-granddaughter pair. The generational differences between an older man who has grown up in a syncretic, tolerant, small-town milieu and a younger woman who has not and is trying to envision that milieu, form the crux of this fascinating project.

*In Search of Aseemun:
Sufism and Everyday Life in Awadh*

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Taran N Khan



Like most journeys, this one also began with a story and a song. Or rather, with the story of a woman, a singer named Chuhara, and her varied, magical music. My grandfather told me about her, a regular at family functions in his ancestral home at Mustafabad (near Rae Bareilly, UP). The first time I heard her sing, he said, I was amazed at her repertoire. She knew songs for every conceivable occasion. She knew folk songs and classical compositions. She

sang in Urdu, Awadhi, Farsi and Sanskrit—from *bhajans* to *naats*, *sufiana kalaam* to local ditties. In particular, one of her *sohars*—to celebrate the birth of a child—embedded itself deep in his memory.

“Allah mian, bhaiyya ko deho nandlal”. Nandlal, Krishna, a son. The naturalness with which the concept of Krishna was adopted in a Muslim setting was breathtaking in its simplicity and beauty. Chuhara, or



Aseemun as she was named by her “maulvi-type father” (her own brilliantly succinct description of him), became my gateway to these incredible traces of a culture of co-existence. Her mother Badaam, herself a *mirasan* (folk performer), discerned real talent in her daughter and with canny foresight, placed her under the tutelage of the legendary Baba Alauddin Khan in Maihar. Here Aseemun shared living space and a tutor with his children, Ali Akbar

Khan and Annapurna, whom she affectionately referred to as “*bhaiyya*” and “*didi*” till her death. The fluid devotion of her music was further developed by her attachment to the *khanqah* (Sufi centre of learning) of poet-Sufi Shah Naeem Ata of Salon. She learnt many of his Awadhi compositions, which spoke of the search for the elusive and ever-present Beloved using the symbols peculiar to Awadh and the mythology of the region. Her songs are imbued with



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imagery of the *panghat*, of *gopis* and Krishna, of the face of the One who comes with many names. But this is not really the point of Aseemun. In itself there is nothing striking about a Muslim singer knowing a lot of *bhajans*, or even in the idea of an illiterate village singer reciting chaste Persian and Sanskrit compositions. What is striking is the milieu which made it possible for her to sing a *bhajan* in praise of Krishna and a *naat* in praise of the Prophet with equal naturalness and appreciation. This fascinated me, a media professional and a young Muslim woman growing up in a world where the loudest voices were those raised in strident hatred. Aseemun's music, with its easy blurring of divides and graceful

syncreticism seemed to mock the notions of exclusivity that defined my context. It felt at once alien and familiar to me. My grandfather has been opening doors to new territories for me for as long as I can remember. So when I considered exploring these notions more fully in a documentary film, it was but natural that he be the guide. He set the course, because it was his world we were entering. The idea of using Sufism as a gateway to explore the traces of syncretic culture left behind in Awadh's *qasbas* could only have come from him, for whom these wide open spaces that bewilder and enchant outsiders were a mirror of his own life. The rituals and music that were the raw material for our film were things he had grown up around.

In a way, his was the everyday life our film's working title—"The influence of Sufi thought on everyday life in Awadh"—used. Always at ease, fluent in his exchanges, he was at home. I, with my laboured understanding and intermittent acquaintance with these ways of being, could only function as the worst kind of tourist. Taking pictures of whatever I saw, driven by the fear that by the time I got around to understanding it, it would be gone. The film is in part a document of our diverging visions and different baggages—two people on a journey across a territory that is part-memory, part-myth—armed with maps that don't even match.

One of the stops we knew we had to make was Salon, a small *qasba* near Rae Bareilly where Aseemun's pir Shah Naeem Ata lived. Unlike other star *mazaars* on the Sufi circuit, his tomb is a quiet little oasis of whitewashed walls perched on top of a small hill. Mirza sahab, as he is commonly known, is a remembered for many reasons, but foremost for his love of music. Performers from all over would come to him with their compositions and he would listen and guide them. He was also a poet, writing in Persian as well as Awadhi.

Bhaj rasna har dum Ali Ali
Sher Khuda ke Mahabali

Naeem Ata's choice of language was by no means random but in keeping with the tradition of couching the Sufi messages of peace and brotherhood in the language of the people. His use of the idiom and the reference to Ali as Mahabali also showed the same heady mingling of myths and symbols from the shared culture of the region.

Our guide in Salon, a retired government clerk, came from a family of *khadims* (servants) of the *khanqah*. One day, he recalled, Mirza sahab took him along with two others to a nearby *tehsil*, where the *pir* was to receive Rs 4000 as compensation for his land. As they left the office, a devotee approached Mirza sahab with a request. He had collected Rs 4000 for his daughter's wedding. Could the *pir* help him by praying for Rs 4000 more? Immediately, Naeem Ata emptied out his pockets and gave the man his cash. Which was all very well, said our guide, except that it left the four of us stranded with no fare for the *tonga* home. Never fear, said Shah sahab, Allah will provide. Having said that, he told the *tonga wala* to drive into the red light district of the city, where one of his *murids* (devotees), a leading prostitute, lived. He waited in the street and sent a young boy to fetch her. Hearing his name, she came running, and was promptly asked for a loan of Rs 50 by her *pir*. "*Dekho Khuda ke liye manaa mat karna*," he said. Whenever I thought of the Sufis,

I imagined them as having lived a long time ago, and as being austere men of God, detached from the hurly-burly of ordinary life. The idea of them being occasionally so hard up as to need loans from ladies of decidedly ungentle occupations made Shah Naeem Ata at once more human and saintly.

Salon is only a little distance from Mustafabad, our ancestral home and the quintessential Awadhi *qasba*. One of grandfather's favourite lines is "*Hum qasbati shurafa ka yehi andaz raha hai*" ("This is only natural for us *qasbati* gentry"). It's a great line, one that shows his affection for his home as well as his understanding of the centrality of these settlements to the kind of culture that came up in the region. In the small estates of influential, shaukeen (connoisseur) landowner-thakurs and Muslims, *mirasans*, *bhands* and assorted folk artists flourished along with their particular brand of syncretic culture. To my grandfather, growing up in these communities was marked by the rhythms and rituals of passing seasons, births, weddings and deaths. Bumping along the dusty roads of India's heartland, I am perpetually amazed at how these "backwaters" could have fostered such an epiphany of art and learning. I meet the most incredible people, especially those from my grand-

father's generation—erudite, feudal gentlemen with socialist leanings, who have travelled the world and kept company with the best minds of their times but call their havelis home. They talk of cosmopolitan youths spent in trade union meetings and mushairas, of names they casually let drop whom I know as giants in the realm of literature and ideas. Above all, they speak of a life connected to the wide, gracious spaces of their *qasbas* yet entrenched in the turbulent political currents of their time. For them, the *qasba* was where the action began, before it moved to the cities—not the other way round.

There are other changes in the landscape I travel—spaces that I remember as being empty maidans from childhood trips have been swallowed up by monoliths masquerading as "luxury" apartments. The big cities now have bigger suburbs, sprawling ever outwards towards the countryside, decorated with billboards showcasing the great Indian dreams of investments, English speaking classes and sales at Big Bazaar. Even the old parts of the cities have been defaced by plastic coated shopping malls, their yellow panels managing to make the crumbling facades of once graceful buildings look even more wasted. Travelling back after a day in Makanpur, on the outskirts of

Kanpur, the neon lights of the city streaking past my tired eyes, I am left with the vision of these *qasbas* less as being backwaters than reservoirs—the last places where the graceful “everyday life” of our film and its historical roots find shelter.

Makanpur houses the mausoleum of Zinda Shah Madar, patron saint of *madaris* and performers, who gather during his *urs* to participate in unique rituals of their trade—performances, dances and special offerings which are shrouded in some degree of secrecy. Zinda Shah is one of the few saints who have two *urses*—the second coincides with the festival of Basant and is dominated by Hindu devotees. But even other than these high points, the *mazaar* is bang in the centre of routine life in the *qasba*. Hindu shop-

keepers do not open their businesses until they have visited the saint each morning. All new brides are brought here first and then taken to their marital homes. Grooms from Makanpur are also brought to the *mazaar* after tying their *sebras*. They set out to their weddings only after seeking the saint’s blessings. The *tazias* of Moharram are kept here, and the funeral prayers for all Muslim souls are offered at the mosque adjoining the tomb. In many ways, Makanpur provides the most tangible link between Sufi thought and everyday life that we seek, in all its resilience as well as its fragility. Things are changing here, we hear in whispers. The long-established practice of a Muslim setting fire to the effigy of Ravan at Dussehra has been skipped for the past five years. And a group of



orthodox Muslims have been preaching against the celebration of Moharram at the shrine, colouring it as a Shia custom rather than a community event. This, then, is the fading.

There are times during our shoots when I feel I am snatching at shadows, following a trail of clues that hint at a grand design, but time and again it eludes me. This motif of ambiguity causes a constant bickering with my grandfather, who suffers no such qualms. We are making a documentary, he says, and you don't get to tell any more than what does exist. For him, it is simply a matter of presenting what we have found and leaving the audience to draw its own conclusions. He is comfortable with the distance of our voices from the film, whereas I seek to leave our fingerprints all over it. It is important to me that the film communicates this way of life—not as a quaint throwback but as living, breathing resistance to the conflict and exclusion that defines my everyday life. I see it as weapon and talisman, an article of faith that Aseemun's world did exist, that the madness I live in is not the way we were, not the only way we have to be.

But how do you mean to show all this, my grandfather asks me, exasperated. How indeed? There have

been moments when, bumping along the roads of inner UP, the strains of a tragic love song favoured by our driver filling the car just beyond the level of endurance, I have had moments of pure panic, faced with that most dreaded of questions—what if it doesn't exist? What if this documentary we are seeking is pure fiction, created by romantic minds in search of a cause?

I have no easy answers to these questions, but even as I write this I am aware that much will change in our crafting of the film. The road is still unfolding and many of the words that I commit here will transform over time, as they already have since we began. Perhaps it is this shifting design that tells our story the best, rather than a carefully fashioned end product. "Does it even exist?" is not just a question we ask each other and ourselves throughout the film, but which the film seeks to ask its viewers. I suppose the idea is to invite the audience to be part of the quest—to share in our discoveries and our mapping of divergent travels across the same terrain. It's a good thing my grandfather loves me a lot. Faced by my flow of incoherent yet verbose attempts to explain these things to him, he says quietly, "I suppose in the journey itself is the goal we seek." It seems like a sentiment the saints would approve of.



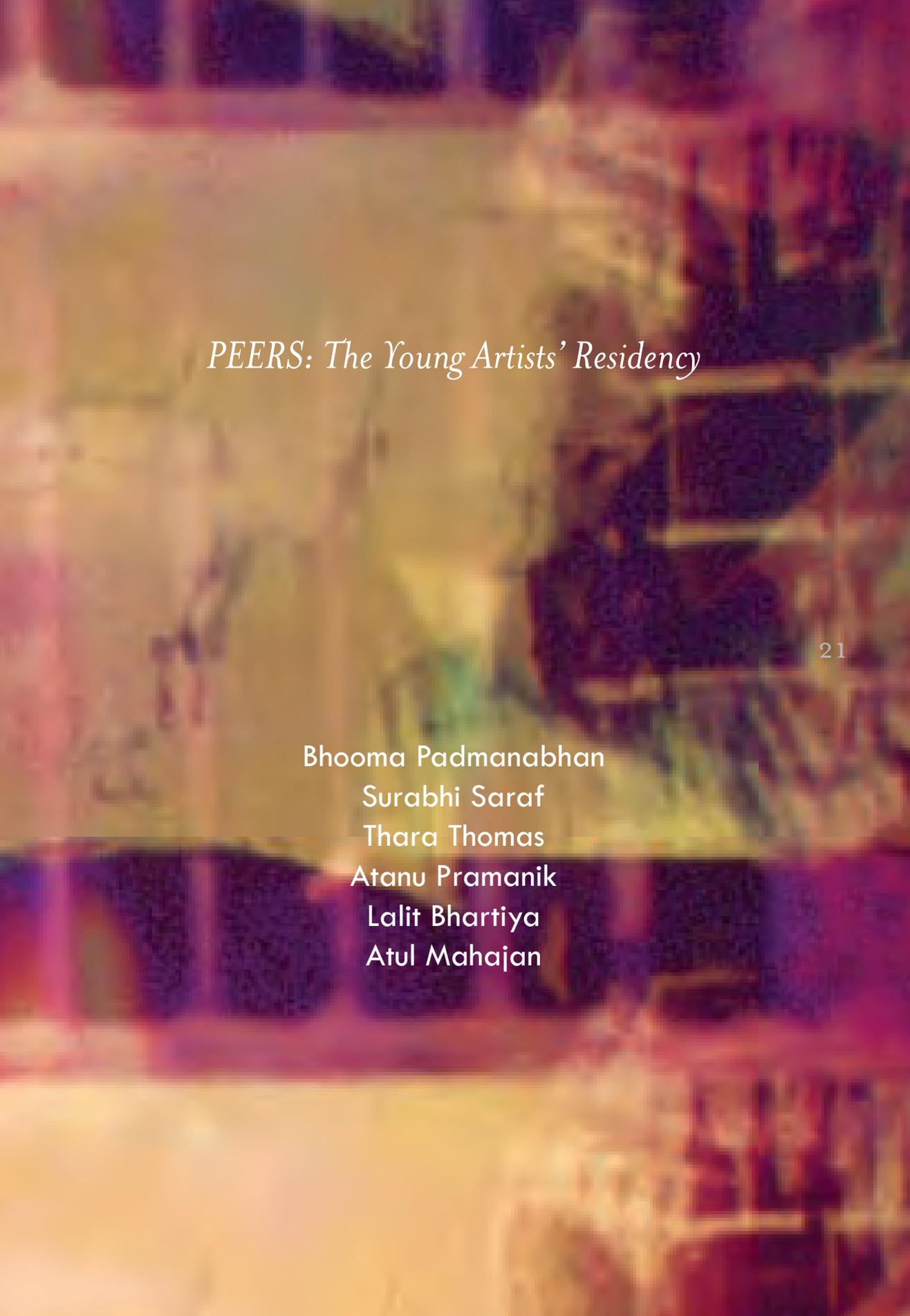
The name **Khoj** has become synonymous with artist-driven initiatives in and for the visual arts. An artists' collective that organises residencies, workshops, and exhibitions, **Khoj** emphasises experimentation towards pushing the visual arts in new directions, and encourages exchange among artists from all over the world.

Peers is an annual four-week young artists' residency that **Khoj** hosts in its studios in Khirkee Gaon, New Delhi. This unique residency brings together fresh graduates of art schools (one of whom functions as a critic-in-residence) to live and work together, comment on each other's projects and receive feedback from the Delhi arts community. *Peers* consciously blends graduates of various art schools in order to make for some degree of exchange between institutions that generally operate in isolation of each other.

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Another important goal of *Peers* is to encourage reflection on the process of art-making. Bhooma Padmanabhan, critic-in-residence for *Peers* 2006, writes in her critic's essay that "One of the most significant experiences for us all was the process of research, experimentation and production. The process might not be manifested in full in the final work but it is this that has shaped the artists' practice. To emphasise the importance of the process in their *Peers* experience I decided to make it a part of the final Open Day. A video-loop with images of the artists-in-process played the whole time, much like a work in itself. The *Peers* 2006 blog was also projected as a backdrop, thus making the everyday process very much a part of the final presentation."

What follows is a presentation, in the voices of six young art-school graduates, of *Peers* 2006.



PEERS: The Young Artists' Residency

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Bhooma Padmanabhan
Surabhi Saraf
Thara Thomas
Atanu Pramanik
Lalit Bhartiya
Atul Mahajan

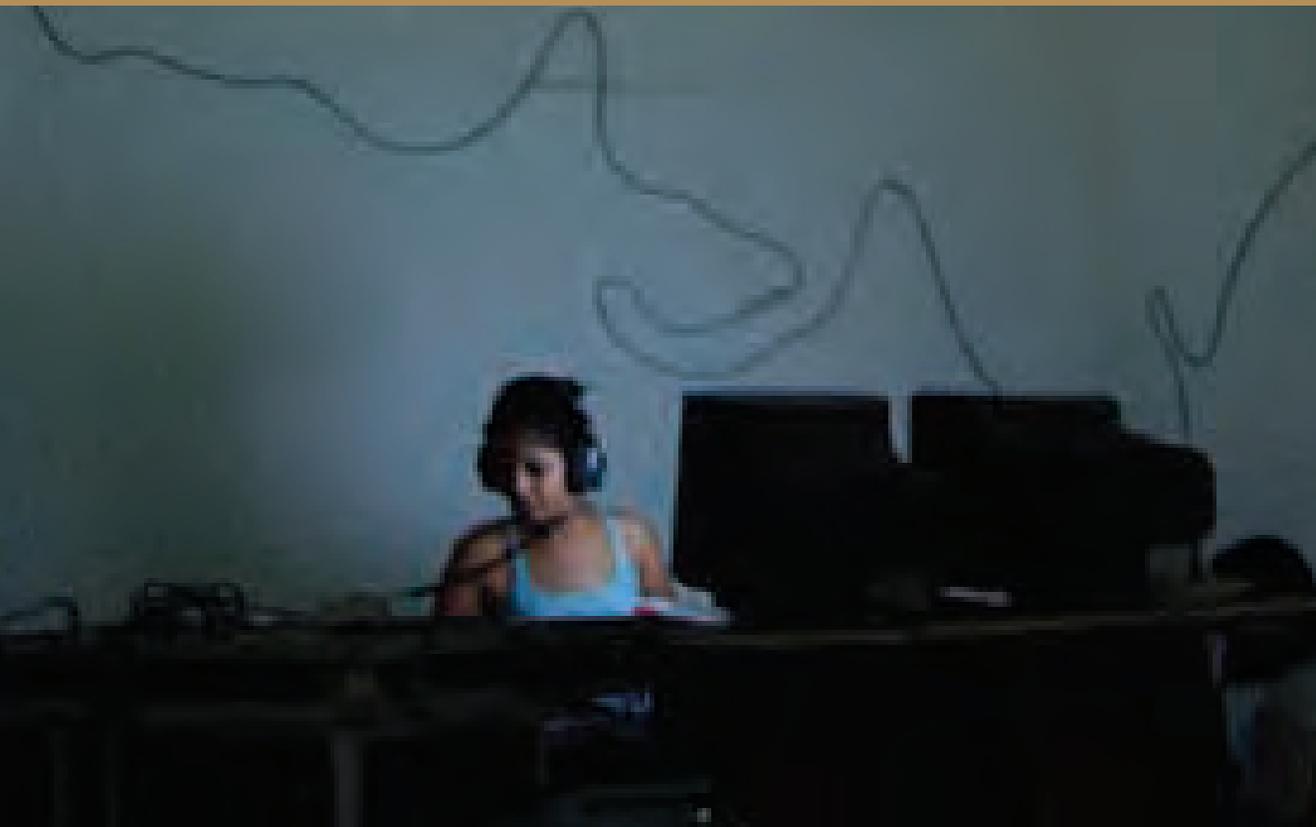


SONIC ART

Surabhi Saraf (Kanoria Centre, Ahmedabad)

Surabhi:

My work began the moment I entered **Khoj**. The first thought that came to my mind after choosing my studio was how could I use this space to create a piece of work using minimum external materials. I happened to notice the dusty old fan because of its creaking sound resonating to the good acoustics of the room. I started walking about the room, humming a song... there were three prominent sounds: the percussive creaking of the fan, the crushing sound of the dust made by my shoes on the floor, and the echoing sound of me, humming. Without thinking much I started recording it using my little mp3 player and modulating the sounds a little bit by changing my walking and humming pattern. The recording sounded okay, though I didn't know how to go further. I put it aside and did a little bit of research on sound art, listening to artists experimenting with mechanical, natural, electronic sounds and creating various acoustic environments, also urging me to create my own. Lots of ideas started popping up.



Bhooma on Surabhi:

The work emanates from her room (the room is sort of like a nerve-centre) and runs across the entire studio space, up and down, in and out of the archways. The set-up is highly technical, with multiple speakers, amplifiers, sound mixers and live recording mikes. These gadgets are themselves like an installation, creating a stage for her performance. Much of her work came together as a result of continuous practice with the mixing equipments and composing the primary track.

The final work is a “performance”—live and spontaneous. Performance not in the conventional sense, where there is a “body” performing, but her mixing the sounds was in itself the main act. The performance is heard and seen.

Modulating, distorting, and remixing the native and mechanical sounds (the creaky old fan being the predominant feature) in the studio, she put together compositions. This set the rhythm to her work. The final performance involved her mixing “live” in front of the viewers, using “live” recordings of the creaky fan along with these recorded compositions.

Through this work Surabhi created an ambience where the sounds flowing across the space sensitise the viewer

to his/her surroundings. The work is conceived as a “virtual web” of sounds, criss-crossing one another across the studio spaces. As one moves about the space, their experience of the space constantly changes and is determined by their position in space. To further enhance this experience was the web of wires (of the amplifiers themselves) that ran across the walls and video projections. (The sound of the creaky fan was accompanied by (a) a video projection of a rotating fan on the corridor wall, (b) a video projection of the sound waves on the actual fan). The audio and the visual mutually reinforced each other and enhanced the final experience. Surabhi’s working method is vigorous, as she combines practical experimentation with theoretical know-how. Her final work though “live and spontaneous” was born out of days of practice and one cannot ignore the process in the making of her work. Although the concept didn’t materialise and communicate quite as effectively as conceived, it provided her with great pointers for her next work. In this project, which she later named NOMONOSOUND, she takes her first steps towards experimenting with “sonic art” and she hopes to continue further from here.

VIDEO INSTALLATION

Thara Thomas (Srishti School of Art & Design, Bangalore)

Thara:

Khoj, as we know, was an initial brave step towards the idea of alternative art spaces in India. It is a great platform to start as a beginner and a space for experimentation. The project I was working on right before I started the residency was on signage and spaces and I was hoping to, in fact, find a thread that would take the same project forward. More than anything else, *Peers 2006* was a grand opportunity to get away from Bangalore and explore a new city and also meet a new set of people involved in arts practices.

Bhooma on Thara:

Coming from a rapidly developing city such as Bangalore, Thara had already extended her personal critical enquiry into the public realm. In her search for alternative spaces for art practice she had already ventured into working in public spaces and with the residents of these spaces. This had led her to looking at already existing art in public spaces, such as signage. Signage is a constant in every urban space, and determines the way the space is conceived.

This was her point of departure for her work here. She arrived with no preconceived idea as to what she

wanted to do and went about searching for inspiration from the city. Much of her energy went into the initial travel across the city, into the old and new, as she captured on video images that told her story. Her major concern was that her work had to have relevance to this city and her experience of it. It was also her (dis)location and the new relationship between the city and her self that initiated this project. When she viewed the city spaces she saw an order or structure through the use of signage. The signage to her is a mechanism for social conditioning—the road signs, traffic lights, the row of

reflectors on the road. They determine the nature of viewing a space.

The work finally came together as a video installation, which brought her experience of the city and the people into her studio. Her public experience into a private space. To extend the idea beyond the 2D video screen, the work extends into an installation. The thread pillars recreate the feel of the crowded streets, where one has to manoeuvre carefully for a space of one's own. As the video runs in the background a line of dots, like the signal on an air strip or the reflectors on the road, appear and disappear in the foreground. The dot-dot-dot-dot sets the mechanical visual rhythm to the video—the monotony beneath everyday life. Thara uses the protagonist in this video to lead the

eyes of the viewer over the screen. In one transitory moment, when the protagonist's eye looks right at the viewers, the thin screen between the reality of the viewer and that of the video completely shatters. This completely subverts the viewer-object binary; the gaze is turned back upon the viewer himself/herself.

To Thara this is an experiment with the image itself, where the image isn't used to replicate reality but to re-inforce the viewers' experience of their reality. Though the video communicated with great strength, the installation didn't materialise and function as envisioned. To Thara this was a reminder that installation with all its possibilities is as complex a medium as any other and needs a great deal of thought.





FOUND OBJECT SCULPTURE/INSTALLATION
Atanu Pramanik (Kala Bhavan, Santiniketan)

Atanu:

I have just finished my MFA exam, so it is a time of relaxation. But the question “what will be my next step”—the indefinite future—is unsettling me. This question inside me has come out through my work. The rocking chair which generally symbolises an object of relaxation can’t award me any stability as I am in trouble.

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Bhooma on Atanu:

As a graphic artist, Atanu found great enjoyment and excitement in experimenting with new surfaces and techniques. His journey into working with found objects and three-dimensional surfaces started in his college days, where he took to etching and printing on unconventional surfaces. At **Khoj** he chose to extend his earlier practice and work with a found object—a rocking chair.

Through his work he set about translating his discomfort with his present situation in life—at a crossroad, with difficult decisions to make. His state of confusion during this period of transition from a student to a professional is manifest in his work. He also pours into the work his experience of dislocation, as he finds himself suddenly in the large buzzing metro

after being accustomed to the quiet environs of Shantiniketan. This found-object sculpture/installation manifests his extreme dissatisfaction with his own life, where he finds no comfort and cannot capture what he desires. The bed of nails draped on the rocking chair frame and on the floor unmistakably portrays this discomfort. The multicolored apples which are strewn just out of reach are metaphors of his unfulfilled desires.

To Atanu the process is of great significance and he finds working on different materials highly challenging and adventurous. Usually an artist of very few words, this forum prompted and encouraged him to be more articulate about his work. The highly personal nature of his work, however, didn't allow for exchange to happen beyond the material level.



SCULPTURE/INSTALLATION

Lalit Bhartiya

Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi

Lalit:

As I am from Delhi, I reflect Delhi's condition through my work. It is a hilarious statement on the sealing and demolition under the law going on in the Delhi. As the Commonwealth Games 2010 are just around the corner, the government has given orders to seal illegal construction near residential areas. In my work I pretend that if the Olympics were going to take place in Delhi, then maybe there would be an order passed to ban all vehicles as they create a disturbance and frequently jam the roads. If such a law is passed, then vehicles may be used as alternative furniture such as my "Bar Table" scooter.





Bhooma on Lalit:

Lalit's works, prior to *Peers*, were part-sculpture, part-installations. Through his works he articulates his strong views on the contemporary social conditions.

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As an urban Indian, and particularly a Delh-ite, Lalit expresses obvious concern over rising population, increasing urbanisation and skyrocketing land prices in urban India. His work here is built around his hypothetical perception of the future of Delhi where public space becomes extremely scarce, to the extent that personal vehicles have no place on public roads! He consciously chooses to portray the "life of the scooter" (not a car), finding it an apt analogy for the middle-class population. The scooter is transformed into household decorative furniture, a showpiece, completely losing its original identity. He completely transforms the very look of the scooter, welding flowers to its surface and giving it a glass top. The scooter stands on a "No Parking" sign, which reads like a subtext to the main story.

Lalit poses a question, a thought to ponder over, rather than providing the answers. The scooter is presented as a bizarre piece of art, displaced from its original space. Aesthetically, what could have been dismissed as baroque became the most interesting aspect of his work, as it provided the vital contrast necessary to recognise the underlying questions.



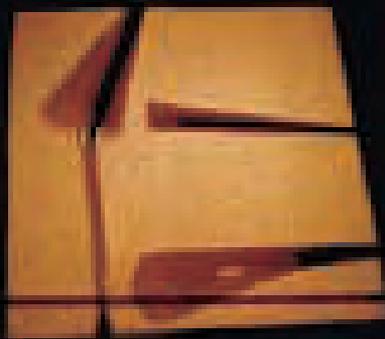
SCULPTURE/INSTALLATION

Atul Mahajan (MS University of Baroda)

Atul:

I realised I had come to a place where I'd have plenty of freedom to work. I thoroughly enjoyed myself during the workshop; I liked the library at Khoj as well. I enjoyed talking to many senior artists there.

I found the one-month duration of the workshop too short. Perhaps the others there didn't feel the same, but going to a new place, understanding new things takes time for me. It was my first experience at such a workshop and was extremely enjoyable. In the future, if Khoj ever invites me to such a workshop again, I'll consider myself lucky.



Bhooma on Atul:

Atul's interest in space, and more specifically "air", came about during his college days in Baroda. As a sculpture student, his first enquiries began as he searched for newer materials for his sculpture. In his attempt at breaking away from the conventions of sculpture-making, he started working with latex/rubber and therefore inflatable rubber "sculptures". The impermanence of inflated rubber sculptures, opposed to the permanence of wood or stone, was an aspect he particularly enjoyed.

32 Although he had worked on several such works earlier, he found the environment of **Khoj** very appropriate for further experimentation along the same lines. Practically speaking, this was a chance for him to work on a larger scale as he had always wanted to.

His work plays a dual role—as food for critical thought and as entertainment. There is a cheeky sense of humour in his works (especially earlier works), which he consciously presents to the viewer. Atul is particular that his work provoke a response from the viewer—surprise, laughter or just shock, and this is exactly what his "sculptures" do at first glance. However, as one looks more closely they will notice the critical statement he makes or the question he puts forth to the audience.

The final work is something like a performance of shadow puppets, serpentine forms that come to life as the viewer steps in, casting a shadow on the surface of the coffin-like box. Connected to air pillows these forms spring up as the viewer walks around the work. They are alive only for the brief period when the viewer is present, thus making the viewer the most integral element in his work. The

humour in the work wasn't lost on anybody, it was provocative and mischievous.

Through this work Atul enquires about “space”—not only the space that a body occupies, but the space it displaces. The intangibility of space is given a form—the form of shadows. Atul also reads this work at a deeper level, where he looks beyond the veil of humour. His interpretation turns the whole coffin, the forms inside and their shadows, into metaphors for death, the body and the soul.

Atul's experimentation was through art practice itself. He challenged himself by trying new materials and attempting to present a large-scale work. He also came to acknowledge that pushing the envelopes and breaking boundaries shouldn't be confused with setting personal limitations. Experimentations such as this were, after all, stepping stones and not the final goal.



Moushumi Bhowmik is an accomplished singer and a sensitive listener and she brings both these gifts to bear on her project on *biraha* in the folk music of Bengal. Just as the term "*biraha*" evokes a recognisable but hard-to-define mood, the word "Bengal" becomes, in Moushumi's research, an imaginative rather than geographical category. It is possible for her to be as moved by an encounter on a busy London street with an immigrant from Sylhet, quoting the poetry of his Sufi grandfather, as by a Baul singer in a railway station in Bolpur who teaches her "something about discernment". It is through her encounters with such vividly sketched figures that she begins to understand what *biraha* might mean in music and in life.

*I Hear the Drums Roll:
Lessons in the Art of Listening*

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Moushumi Bhowmik

The evening light was descending on all things as the train moved in a slow rhythm, stopping from time to time. It was the end of November, the fields were shorn of crop, and people were returning home from work. My companion, Sudheer Palsane, was looking through his cinematographer's lens. I think I said something to him about how this light always fills me with sadness—this light which does not last. Remember that Impressionist painting of a man and woman standing in a field, by their cart loaded with crop, heads bowed in prayer? Sudheer asked. He could not remember its name; I did not know it either. But after returning home I identified it—Francois Millet's *Angelus*.

*Ore bela gelo bhaber haate,
Aar dinomaan boshilo paate.
Ami aar katokshan thakbo boshe?
Ghire elo andhakar.
Pare jabi ke bhabanodir?
(Bengali folk song)*

The day went trading life
Now the sun sits on the horizon.
How long shall I keep waiting?
It is getting dark around me.
Who will go across this river?

This was in 2003 when I had gone on a recce to Birbhum and Siliguri in West Bengal to make my first contacts

for a project on *biraha*, that I had proposed to the IFA (Songs of Love, Loneliness and Longing; *Biraha*—the pain of separation and the quest for union with the beloved as expressed in the folk music of Bengal; a musician's journey into a world of music). I wanted to collect and archive songs and interviews and also write about my travels. The word "*Angelus*" has stayed with me ever since that first trip, it is like the muezzin's call to the maghrib or evening prayer. Both words conjure up an image and a sound; one is a reminder of the other. I think that some words acquire special meanings for some people—they become more than just words. And throughout my journey I have come across words which are infused with such music that they make bearable the inevitability of love, loneliness and longing.

I remember the locality of Shobharampur on the banks of the Kumar river in Faridpur town in western Bangladesh, where as the sun set in the horizon, sound recordist Sukanta Majumdar paused his work, while the call to *maghrib* was given out from a nearby mosque. Ibrahim, our main singer that day, lit a cigarette. He was the same blind Ibrahim whose dark voice I had heard once in the dead of night, leading a community through *milaad* (community readings from the holy texts and chants of the Prophet's

name to mark an occasion, usually birth, death or some anniversary). The whole congregation was repeating his words in a rhythm which sounded like oars beating the waters of a river: Al-lah, Al-lah, Al-lah, Al-lah. Ibrahim had then become the boatman who would take everyone to the other shore, including me, for I too was drawn into his trance. That is the story of my travel—a journey into worlds of sound, all the time taking lessons in the art of listening.

In the beginning the word was *biraha*, which I had put down as the “longing for union while in a state of separation” in my IFA proposal of 2003. But now that seems a little dictionary-like; it leaves much unsaid. How

was one to show that the stress could be on any of those words—“longing”, “union” or “separation”, depending on the context of the song and the perspectives of the singer and listener? I think of what Eva Hoffman wrote in *Lost in Translation* about leaving Poland. “I am suffering my first attack of nostalgia, or *tesknota*—a word that adds to nostalgia the tonalities of sadness and longing.” I am tempted to say that *biraha* is one such word—it is a waiting and to that waiting are added “the tonalities” of the sadness of absence, the desire for union as well as the joy of anticipation. It is almost like a trance, which is broken once union takes place. Around the late 1990s, I became interested in exploring expressions of *biraha* in the folk music of Bengal for both



Moushumi with Debdas Baul at Santiniketan, Birbhum
Photograph: Sukanta Majumdar

personal and aesthetic reasons. While my own work as a songwriter was bringing out my alienation within home and in art, a sense of waiting to go somewhere I was not (*Shorirtari bhitore poran namer ki jeno ke thake/Tari dake ami ghar-bahir kori*). There is this thing inside me/That goes by the name of life/It's what pulls me out/It's what takes me home), I was also listening more keenly than ever before to songs of *bichched*, *kirtan*, and other folk forms which are built on the theme of *biraha*. I had at that time left Kolkata, the setting for my life and work for more than fifteen years, to go to London. By early 2000, I began to write the first draft of my proposal to travel in the trail of songs of *biraha*.

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In concrete terms, this journey across West Bengal, parts of Assam, Bangladesh, and also in places far away, such as the Bengali/Bangladeshi quarters of East London, has yielded over 75 hours of field recordings of rare music and interviews, video footage, seminar papers, new performance, soundscape design, further grants and more research and documentation. But there are things beyond all this. For me (as well as for Sukanta) whole new worlds of experience and understanding have opened up, and we have been initiated into new ways of listening and seeing. At one level, songs and stories are such solid things: you can almost touch them, especially if you are working in audio

recording! But then there is so much emotion and imagination that goes into the making of a song and so much abstraction that can come out of it. Then the song itself becomes a story—it does not stand on its own but is part of a larger narrative, a greater scheme of things. That has been one of my most important realisations from this journey. I was looking for songs of waiting, songs of longing, songs of desire. But all that longing and waiting and desire is part of our lives as singers and listeners; pluck a song out of the entanglement of life, and it loses something of its life.

The Kumar River meanders through Faridpur town in western Bangladesh. It must have been a fuller river once, but now it has silted and dried up in places. Besides, the month was January. I wanted to record some *bhatiyali* songs that the boatmen sang, and I had asked if we could get some actual boatmen, whose music this was. Our friend, Salamat Khan, said it would be good to go down to a *char* (temporary island formed by alluvial deposits on the riverbed) in the Padma and we could stay the night and record songs. But the plan did not work out, so we thought instead to go on a boat along the Kumar, with a few boatmen who lived along its shore in Uttar Shobharampur. These boatmen came from Bedepara—home of the *bede* or the gypsy.



*Kanai Baba, the blind singer of the Tarapith Kali temple in Birbhum, at his home
Photograph: Moushumi Bhowmik*

We went on a boat on the Kumar one afternoon with friends and boatmen. The boat could not go very far, nor could the songs, because these boatmen did know many *bhatiyali* songs. Yet there were moments of beauty in the music of that afternoon, as the songs mingled with the sound of the water gently rocking the boat and people talking. You hear all those sounds in the recording session of that afternoon, which is called Kumar Nodi. “I don’t really know how to sing,” one boatman said, “but can I try a new song of Shanal Fakir?” “*Firayo na khali haate*, Don’t send me back with empty hands”—the man was shy and his voice soft and feeble. “Don’t send me back with empty hands. I sit here waiting like an orphan, like an *etim...*” The Kumar and its people have marked me with humility and submission. On another trip to Faridpur I met Hajera Bibi who also lives in Shobharampur, near where the gypsy boatmen live. Hajera Bibi is more than 90 years old and although she has lived a whole life in song-writing and singing, today she spends her final days in obscurity, in the company of her nearest relatives. If anyone asks her, then she talks a little about her past; if you insist then she might also sing for you a few lines from one of her own songs. She has lost most of the exercise books in which she had written the songs.

*Tumi antarer antarjami
Tomay ami bolbo ki?
Je haale rekhechho murshid
Shei haale thaki*

You live deep within me,
What can I say to you?
O murshid, I live in whatever way
You keep me.

Deluge!

We did not know it could rain like that in October. We should have realised, of course, because when Sukanta came in a taxi to pick me up to go to the station early in the morning, the road outside my house was flooded—it had rained through the night and was still raining. Yet we set off; why, I cannot say, but it seemed like going or staying back was not in our hands. No one in their right mind would go out on such a day. That was in 2004, and it was one of my early field trips. From Howrah station the Ganadebata Express started on time and we got ourselves two window seats, although the shutters had to be pulled down because of rain. We were going to Rampurhat, from where we would take an auto-rickshaw to Tarapith. I had fixed up to meet Kanai, the blind singer of Tarapith Samsan (crematorium) and Kali temple, protagonist of Ranjan Palit’s documentary *Abak Jai Here*.

When the train reached Sainthia, a couple of stations after Bolpur-Santiniketan, I saw the Mayurakshi river fuming and panting away; fields and houses were partially submerged; people were carrying things on their heads and wading through waist-deep water. But we still did not stop—as though we had to see the end of this. What happened after this is really the theatre of the absurd. We reached Tarapith floating in a raft-like van rickshaw. “I don’t know how to swim,” I confessed to Sukanta, clinging to our bag with the mini-disc recorder and microphone. We felt light in our heads I think, because we said something like, “what dedication to field work! IFA should reward us!” I don’t think we had much of an option but to take in whatever was coming our way. Ahead of us was another van covered in blue tarpaulin, tied with a rope. There was a soft chant of “*bolo hari hari bol*” coming from somewhere and it took us a while to understand that under the blue tarpaulin was a dead body and the van was headed for the *samsan*. I feared I might see corpses floating in Tarapith’s stale waters. But Kanai, who was sitting on the steps of the temple, waiting, was quite unmoved. He looked the same as he did many years ago, in Georges Luneau’s film *Songs of the Madmen*. In it you hear one of the most gentle renditions of the song “*Nodi bhora dheu, bojho na to*



*The involved listener. During a kirtan session at Jaidev Mela in Kenduli, Birbhum
Photograph: Moushumi Bhowmik*

The late Ghulam Shah Fakir at Sashpur,
Birbhum, West Bengal in January 2005

Photograph: Sudheer Palsane



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keu, Keno mayar tori bao bao re? Why row your boat of illusion in these turbulent waters?" We began to interview Kanai and he talked about growing up with music. Music has been his saviour, he said. Otherwise, what could a blind man have done?

That evening we decided to return home. Because, after floating about as we did, we could not wait to see when the flood water would go down. So I stood by the roadside while Sukanta went to find out if a car would take us to Sainthia. A woman bent with age, wearing a white sari with a red border and an enormous red bindi on her forehead, was gleefully coming towards me, muttering something to herself. As she passed by I heard her: "*Bhashchhe, bhashchhe*, they are floating away!"

We promised Kanai we'd return in less madder times and the following week we went again for his songs. He

was pleased to see us. The rains were gone; the temple and the streets were thick with people. We went to Kanai's house. The man talked and sang in his gentle manner and there was a smile printed on his face. "*Krishnakatha shunte lage bhalo*, It is a joy to hear Krishna speak," he sang. It was indeed a joy to listen to Kanai. While he was talking and singing, his wife was cooking in the outdoor kitchen. The sound of frying and stirring and boiling are mixed together with Kanai's songs in our soundtrack.

When it came to taking leave, our blind singer said, "How can you go without eating rice?" "*Anno*" is the word he used. *Anno*, rice—what a beautiful word! The wholeness of the grain fills up the inner space of the mouth.

Debdas Baul has a meal of rice and mutton curry with his little daughter, Kali, every Sunday. First they go and

take a dip in the Ajoy, then go to a hotel to have lunch—it is something of a ritual with them. Kali is the only girl Debdas has; the rest are boys, much older and in life's struggle to become men of some means. For them the option is between getting into some kind of business or following in the footsteps of the father and becoming Bauls too.

The Bauls are the most celebrated folk musicians of Bengal, whose songs, performance and lifestyle have attracted generations of artists, scholars and listeners from all over the world to their homes and their festivals of music. The Bauls are also the most travelled folk musicians of Bengal. Purnadas Baul appears on the cover jacket of Bob Dylan's 1963 *John Wesley Harding* album; there are wax cylinders of Adrian Bake recordings of Baul songs from the 1930s, kept at the National Sound Archives in the British Library, London; British scholar of religious studies, Jeanne Openshaw, has been studying and writing about Baul philosophy for the past 30 years; countless films have been made on them; musical collaborations have taken place such as the Real World Album of Paban Das Baul and Sam Mills, *Real Sugar*. This is a complex world of art which

intrigues me. I think that here many interests come together, one of the common points being the question of *anno* or livelihood. There is much debate about who the "real" Baul is: the *sadhak* (practising) or the *shilpi* (singer), and much exoticising of the mystical elements in this art. I don't understand these questions very well and they don't interest me that much either. But I thought what Paris-based Paban Das Baul said about his life and art is quite incisive. He was talking with British anthropologist, Laura Roychowdhury who was researching the role of Anglo-Indians in the Indian Railways. "I am just a singer trying to make a living," shrugs Paban. "Don't ask me about Baul tradition. But I know a thing or two about the railways. That's part of your research, isn't it? I've travelled on them since I ran away from my village as a boy. I'd sing to the commuters on the local trains to make a little money ..."

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The boatman's song. On the Kumar river in Faridpur, Bangladesh. Seen in the picture are singer Sadek Ali, the majhi, another bede or gypsy singer and recordist Sukanta Majumdar.

Photograph: Moushumi Bhowmik

Once on a train back from an early field trip in Birbhum, I had written this in my notebook: "Why is it that the Bauls I meet often seem to lack in the dignity that becomes an artiste? Is it because: a) they live so close to the city; b) the city/Western world have been interested in their art; c) they are caught in the problem of having to "be"/"live" their songs. So they are not at peace with themselves, with their lives as performers. Even he who shrugs and says "So what?" is being apologetic. I do not see this problem among practitioners of any other genre. The Bauls carry the burden of wisdom, and that is sometimes too much of a load to carry.... From when the train started I had paid the Bauls, then the boy who came with a stick of a broom to sweep the floor of the train, then a little girl came, dressed as a miserable and shabby Father Christmas and later the one-eyed woman. By the time the mute *bijra* came and started clapping her hands, I had had enough of this procession of fringe people, so without hesitation, I paid her too."

Looking at the notes now I think that my views were partial then because I had not yet met the likes of Debdasda or Ghulam Shah Fakir. Debdas Baul is a man of minimal personal needs; he sits in the railway platform in Bolpur and smokes away, talking with the people who come and go. He has become our friend

and guide, he introduces us to music and instructs us on composition and forms. He teaches us something about discernment, the art of listening. He brings two women singers, Nandarani and Gitarani Dasi, to my Santiniketan guest-house room and the three of them sing baul and kirtan, which we record. Then Nandarani asks me to also sing for them.

Those days wherever I went, I used to sing a song of Pratima Barua, the legendary folk artist of Goalpara in Assam. I loved her bittersweet voice and the way she let the words roll on her tongue. "*Mori he mori he mori he Shyam,/ Shayane shopone tomar naam.* I am dying, I am dying, I am dying O Shyam (Krishna)/ I call for you in my sleep and my dreams." When I finished Nandarani said, "*Bolihari jai*" (You leave me speechless).

Bolihari jai is what I have felt like telling so many people whom I have met on the road. Much of this journey leaves me speechless. I do not know how I can best respond to the sounds I carry with and within me, so I think it is best to keep silent. The songs are many; then there are interviews, pictures, roadmaps, travel plans. Seventy-five hours of field recordings to be archived in India and England, more field recordings to make in East London, amongst the Bangladeshi community, on the

theme of *biraha* for the homeland and notions of home. There is a quest in these people, a search for home in a land that is far from home. Second-generation, third-generation immigrants, who cling to the sound of words and songlines like artifacts from home.

I have begun to see how people take sound and the memory of sound with them wherever they go. In remote St Andrews in Scotland, an island known for its golf tourism, there was a restaurant called “Balaka”. It is such a strange coincidence that many years ago, in the early 1950s, my father and his friends as young men had gone

from their home in Bengal to a hill town in the northeast of India called Shillong, to work. There they had named their shared residence “Balaka”, after Tagore’s collection of poems. Words awaken remembering in us.

Kushira is an old and famous business house in London; one of the few businesses in which the Sylhetis have made it big. Kushiara, the river that runs through Sylhet in Bangladesh, is also the dividing line between Cachar in Assam, India, and Sylhet. As a little girl I saw this river when I went to Karimganj in Cachar with my father—“That is Bangladesh,” someone had pointed to me. Now,

The late Ghulam Shah Fakir at Sashpur, Birbhum, West Bengal in January 2005
Photograph: Sudheer Palsane



in March 2007, I was walking with journalist Ahmed Moyez down East London's Commercial Road. Moyez comes from a family of Sufis in Syedpur, Sylhet, and he is a poet at heart. I think that for him home is wherever poetry is. He touches the listener with his own faith in poetry and the song

The big red buses are running along Commercial Road—cars, eight-wheel goods transporters. They make a lot of noise. Moyez does not care—he is busy talking about his Sufi grandfather Majiruddin and his son, Moyez's father, and about Shah Sultan, another Sufi poet from his region. He quotes from old texts with ease, now reciting, now breaking into song. He sings of the abstraction of sound: *Mridange uthichhe dhwani/ Shuni tar padadhwani re/ Shei dhwanir-i kampan amar/Hiyate sunilam amar/ Mon, mon re, kyane ba tare chinilam?* It is a longing to listen to the Sound of the Universe that he is talking about, about hearing the footsteps of a Coming as it were, of an Awakening.

Moyez sings on, ignoring the sounds of the big city, which try to overwhelm him. I hear in his song the celebration of poetry, of words which fill the inner space of the mouth like food; I hear the celebration of music which lulls the child to sleep and which makes loving so beautiful. All that I want to say is: "*Bolihari jai. I am speechless.*"



*The Gadadhar river of Gouripur in Assam features in many folk songs of the region such as “Gadadharer paare paare re” made popular by the singer of Goalparia geet, Pratima Barua
Photograph: Moushumi Bhowmik*



Dadasaheb Phalke, creator of the first Indian film, *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), and director of more than seventy others, is credited with having given birth to the Indian film industry. Phalke has been the lifelong obsession of filmmaker Kamal Swaroop. Swaroop regards Phalke not just as a pioneer of India cinema, but one of its few innovators. With his rootedness in the Indian epics and puranas, his education as a visual artist, his training in photography, printing and magic, and his strong entrepreneurial spirit, Phalke came to make films that were unique combinations of all the “industrial arts”. This is an approach that has largely been left un-explored in Indian cinema, believes Swaroop, which on the whole has lapsed into what he describes as “lifestyle merchandising”.

Swaroop has long wanted to make a full-length feature film on Phalke. Rather than write a screenplay for this film on his own, he decided to produce it collaboratively along with students of all the art forms that inspired Phalke. IFA funded Kamal to conduct workshops with young writers, designers, visual artists and filmmakers towards producing a “graphic narrative” that would form the basis of the film. The workshops were based in the cities associated with Phalke—Nasik, Kolhapur, Baroda, Bombay and Pune.

The following piece presents one strand from Phalke’s filmmaking history and the response to this strand in the workshops. Phalke followed up his first film with a series of films on mythological themes—*Lanka Dahan* (1917), *Shri Krishna Janma* (1918) and *Kaliya Mardan* (1919). While the making of all Phalke’s films forms an remarkable narrative, the story behind *Kaliya Mardan* especially sparked a great deal of interest in the workshops, perhaps because of the important role played in it by Phalke’s daughter, Mandakini.

What follows are various takes on Dadasaheb Phalke and his art with special reference to *Kaliya Mardan*—an attempt to replicate the style of Kamal’s workshops.

Bees Raniyon ka Bioscope

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Kamal Swaroop
with
Mandakini Phalke
Bapu Watve
Leela Mayor
PK Nair
Radhika Ganorkar
Sadashivrao Tapkire
and
Dadasaheb Phalke



Kamal Acharya on Badarshi's Shalok

Who am I? A father adding to the thirty crore population of India? My wife's husband? A servant of India who has not paid his dues to his motherland? A victim to the desires of moneylenders? A man bereft of worldly wisdom, obsessed by only one aim, and thus ruining his family life?

Who am I, then?

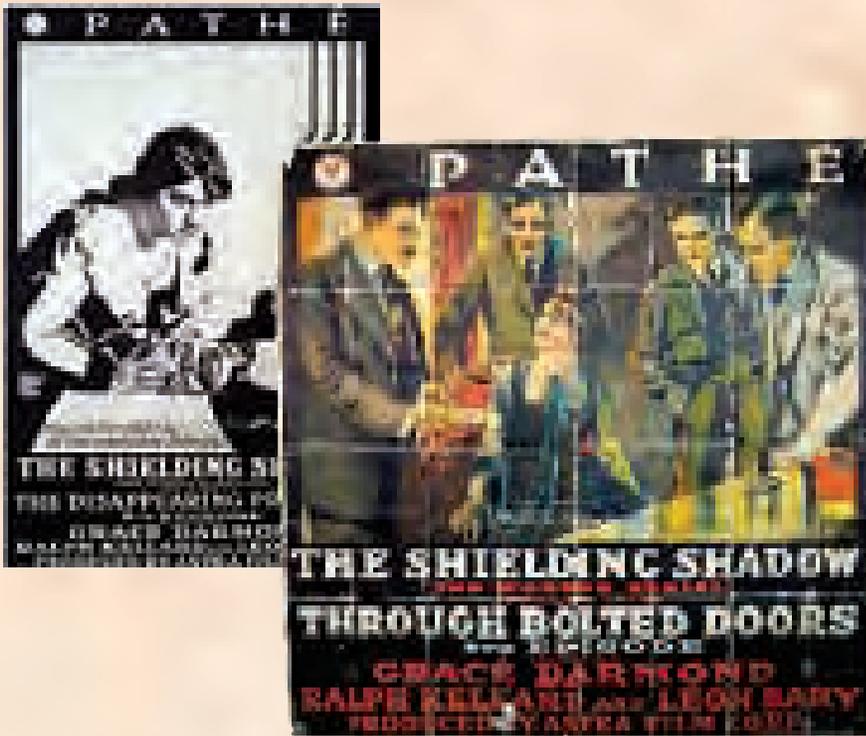
(Thinks for a while)



Or perhaps it is true that I don't know this concept of "I", I don't claim anything to be mine. I am beyond the perception of happiness and suffering. So, enough of this prolixity.

O my fellow beings! O learned men! O appreciative men who know all the arts! O pioneers of this new era of reforms! Your appreciation of my works has not decreased in spite of the stories of my misfortune. It is only through your grace that I have been able to establish this beautiful art of the motion pictures for the entertainment of the people. Kindly appreciate the analysis of this art.





Ragu Katre, Phalke's Biographer

When Dadasaheb was in Pune, he was chatting with his friend, the owner of Aryan cinema, Gangadharpant alias Bapusaheb Pathak. The question of Dadasaheb's next movie came up casually during the conversation. The movie, Shielding Shadow, was then on at the Aryan. It had a scene showing a mammoth creature of the ocean breaking the ship into pieces. It was a thrilling scene. Bapusaheb Pathak suggested that Dadasaheb should show some such scene in his picture. Dadasaheb, therefore, saw the picture and the idea of Kaliya Mardan occurred to him.

Dadasaheb Phalke

It is well known that every illusion which is seen on the screen takes place before the camera or is recreated for it. The screenplay is actually enacted by the actors in front of the camera. Mountains, rivers, oceans, houses,

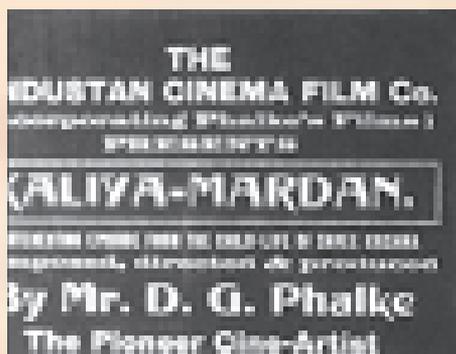
human beings, animals, birds—everything on the screen is real. The miracle of the visual appearance of objects is sometimes caused by the play of light and shadow. This is the magic of the filmmaker. A film must have good photography. Even with an interesting story and highly skilled actors, all the efforts of the filmmaker will come to naught if the photography is unscientific and of low standards. The moon and stars will not shine brightly if the sky is cloudy and foggy.

Rapu wata on Kaliva-Mardana

Early pioneer of Indian cinema D G Phalke directs this tale about the hijinks of child-god Krishna.

After getting splashed by a group of women villagers, Krishna (played by the director's daughter, Mandakini Phalke) and the

young deity's playmates vow revenge by swiping the women's butter. When the women respond by disciplining them, the children strike mischief again. Later, Krishna sneaks into the house of a rich man and ties his beard to his wife's hair. The eventual result is a crowd of angry villagers bitterly complaining about Krishna to his mortal caretakers. This film is the most extant of Phalke's early films.





Giant Camera Episode by Isela Mayer
(participant in the Baroda Workshop)

The crows buzzed maddeningly overhead. It was a hot summer afternoon on a small but crowded street with vegetable sellers, small shops, houses, people milling around, animals vying with humans for space, street performers, handcarts, horse carts, bullock carts and the like. Amidst this tumult of human life a strange procession wended its way through the street, arousing both the curiosity and fear of those around. It was a man with a giant bellows camera. The camera was mounted on a camel cart and the man was intent on documenting all of human life as he saw it pass. This was not an unusual idea in the nineteenth century but to do it on such a scale certainly was.

That was the period when such inventions and their effects were bewildering to people. They perceived it as the incarnation of the devil himself come to swallow up their souls. Regardless of the effect he and his contraption were having on people, the man, the camel

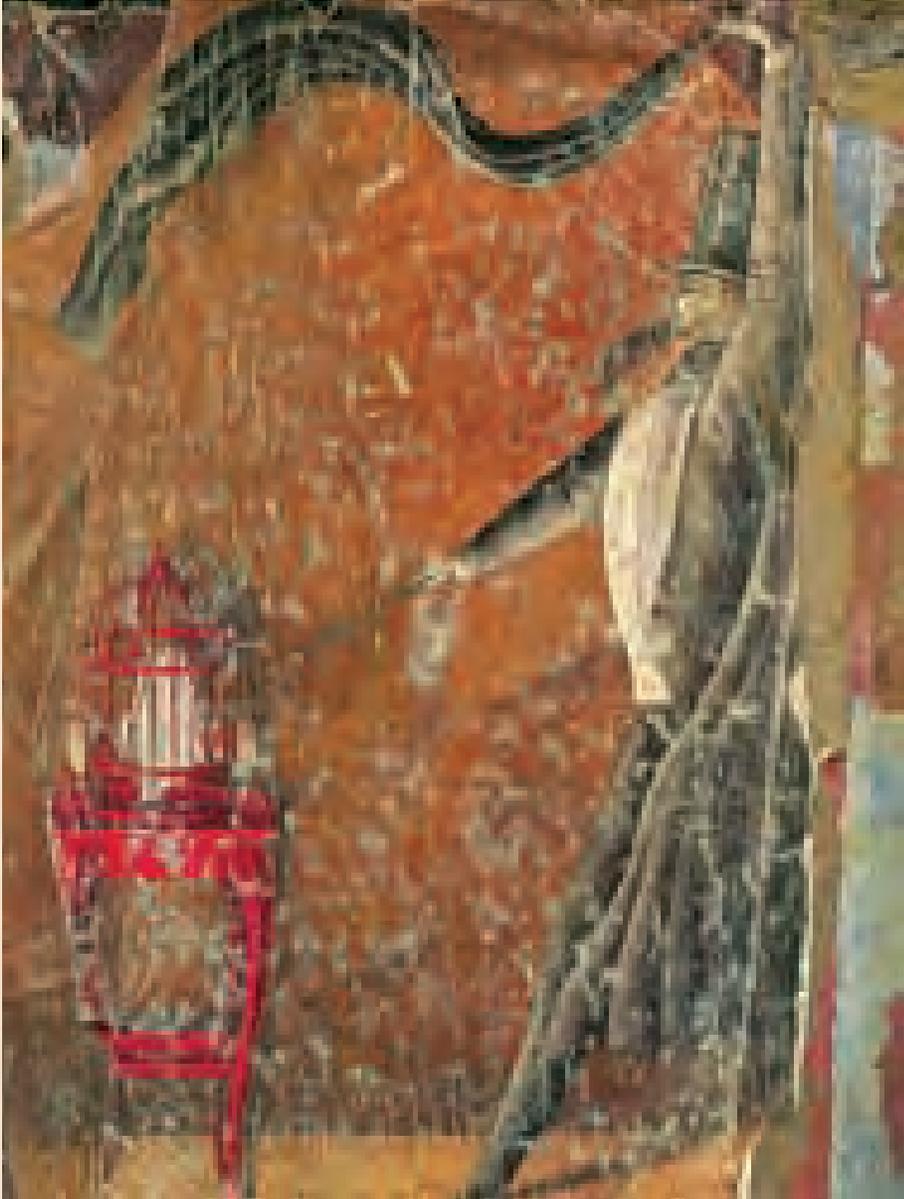




cart and the camera crawled their way through the street. He had his eye glued to the eyepiece except for those moments when he stopped to coat yet another plate with a silver or bromide salt in the makeshift darkroom tent that partially obscured the rear of the cart. In fact, all the onlookers saw was the camel and the giant camera with its rear shrouded in a kind of black tent. Something having no human agency but a contraption with a will of its own.

He was mesmerised by what seemed to be coming through the lens towards him. A juggler danced his way through the lens and in the blackness of the large bellows he saw coloured balls whirl through the air and seemingly defy gravity in the hands of a loincloth-clad juggler. The silver of the film seemed to adhere itself to two of the balls while the third remained a glowing fireball red. The silver balls started to reflect the other scenes that seemed to swoop in. As he imagined the washing of the plate, the curved distorted image on the surface of the silver balls turned into a scene of a crowded street where space lost its linearity and seemed to curve away from itself. The red ball rolled back into this image and then faded out as the next silver ball zoomed in to fill the screen with the distorted image of a person whose body curved into a never-never land. The person was dressed in green and white and was carrying a basket of vegetables on his head. Stretched out of proportion and affected by the movement of the cart, snake gourds







became real-life grass snakes that seemed to twist themselves around his head in an ethereal dance. There was now the juggler juggling this image in the frame, the image dancing around with the movement of the ball the red ball almost metaphorically bloodying each frame. As with old cameras, the focus was always shifting and these images faded away.

As the cart moved on slowly and he replaced plate with plate, a vestigial silver ball seemed to turn into a flat sheet of shimmering glass, half-mirror, half-lens. Its surface seemed to both reflect and be transparent. Through this he saw images of himself inside the camera and also the strange image of a street urchin who seemed to have walked into this image. The urchin seemed, metaphorically, like some kind of reflection of his childlike adventure. The eyes of the child filled the screen and he saw himself being sucked into this image, taking him into another world where he was walking as if through mirrors, each mirror bringing with it another reflection of the life outside. For a brief moment in this image he would see images of his hands coating the photographic plates, then washing them; then, for a brief moment, the fixed image.

The images on this series of six mirrors (say) could be those of a close-up of a house where there are people sitting outside watching the street fading to sepia. Next, this morphs through the next mirror into an image of a bale of straw carried in an elephant's trunk, which then morphs into an image of a turbaned man with a large moustache, which next morphs into the image of a piece of fabric that flutters sinuously in the wind, which then morphs back into the semi-

transparent mirror on which he suddenly sees imprinted a sepia-toned image of himself which has turned into a dwarf. The dwarf gestures like a magician and seems to cast a spell which breaks the reverie he is in.

We then cut back to the camera lens and are sucked vortex-like into a dazzling world of the various images we have seen in this sequence floating about on photographic plates which reflect the entire street the cart has walked through. The balls come back as a metaphor and we see the juggler not only juggling the balls but also the images. The juggler exits from the interior of the camera through the lens and all the images float out slowly after him.

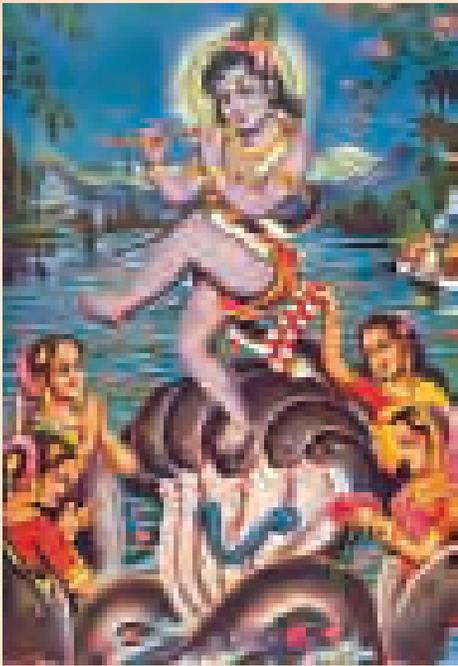
We cut back to the camel cart and then zoom into the interior of the tent where we see the photographer dazed and exhausted, sitting on a stool with a photographic plate in his hand, which is the sepia-toned image of himself and we zoom into the eyes of this image and through these eyes to the reality of the street outside.



P.T. Vaidy, Film Historian

No magician likes to reveal his bag of tricks, but magician-turned-filmmaker Phalke had other ideas. He was convinced of the need of taking his audiences along with him. Or else, how could he ever have conceived the idea of recording the process of making the first Indian film? His one-reel short--How Films are Prepared(1913)--is a study film primarily designed to inform his audiences that there is nothing dirty in the profession and not to look down upon filmmaking as a menial job. On the contrary, it is as arduous, painstaking and creative as any other decent profession. This short study film was designed by Phalke to inform his audiences about the various technical aspects of filmmaking. It is in fact an eloquent testimony to the vision of a man, a creative genius, who believed the role of cinema even at that infant stage is not only to entertain, but also to inform and educate.



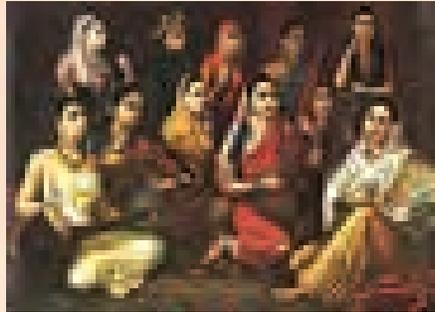


Mandakini Phalke

I was about six years old. I had just returned from school. The table was laid. I was sitting next to Dada. While we were eating, Dada started telling me the story of Kaliya Mardan. He told the episode of Krishna leaving the house, getting angry with his mother, bowing to the house while leaving and starting for the river Yamuna. He narrated it so interestingly that I started weeping. After a while he asked me, "Sonu, will you do Krishna's role?" I joyfully agreed immediately.

P. K. Halli

The opening of Kaliya Mardan (1919) gives one the impression that the screen test Phalke took of his daughter Mandakini, has been inadvertently spliced onto the main film. Judging from what he did earlier by making a study film on the making of Raja Harischandra, his present attempt seems to be a conscious decision with a definite purpose. He could very well have made another short film explaining the dos and don'ts and the basic principles of acting before a movie camera, to accompany the main feature. But he preferred not to repeat himself and devised a novel method of introducing his daughter to the audiences to get their approval for her legitimacy in the film--also a kind of pioneering activity.



Make-up artist Sadashivrao Pajkire's story:

This pertains to the time of Kaliya Mardan. The Hidustan Film Company had put out an advertisement in the newspapers: "Wanted children for roles in movies". In those days, working in movies was frowned upon. However, my father was modern in outlook. He had a good knowledge of medicine. Besides, we lived in Nasik. He took my elder brother and me to Dadasaheb's house. I was eight years old. My brother was my senior by three years.

My father said to Dadasaheb, "I don't expect any salary for them, but please arrange for their education." He had only agreed to that, but also paid us a salary of Rs 10 per month. He kept me in his own house. To begin with, he gave me the role of one of Krishna's playmates in Kaliya Mardan. His daughter Sonutai (Mandakini) did the role of Krishna. I called her "Tai". In the same movie, I had to do the role of a girl in one episode.

Dada was furiousness incarnate. His children never strayed near him. Only Sonutai and I could be near about. Sometimes he lovingly told us stories too. He would never tolerate lies. A liar would have no mercy at all. Dadasaheb would give him the severest punishment. Because of this, the children had decided that they would rather not tell a lie....

Everyone had to work in every department. I had developed an interest in make-up. However, after about a year, Dadasaheb's relations with the partners were askew and he went to Kashi. Some of us, therefore, left

Hindustan Film Company. For a year, I stayed at home. Later, I started acting in plays. When Dadasaheb rejoined the company after about a year and a half, those who had left were also taken back in the company.

I started doing my own make-up, copying Ravi Verma's paintings, as I had got to act in each movie. Gradually, I started doing the make-up of others too. Once Dadasaheb came to the make-up department and saw it. Finding that I spent more time in the make-up department and did not go to the other departments, he sentenced me to work in the make-up department only. For me, the punishment was a boon and I started concentrating on make-up.

My inborn artistic talent did not escape Dadasaheb's notice. He began to encourage me. A master of the art of make-up, he suggested improvements in my work which increased my enthusiasm and self-confidence. Even then, my doing different roles in movies continued, along with the work of make-up. When he came to know that I did make-up by copying Raja Ravi Verma's paintings and had compiled a collection of such paintings, he said that I had done the right thing and gave me some paintings from his own collection. They were very useful to me. My make-up work began to be appreciated by the company. I was with Dadasaheb up to Gangavataran. Thereafter I began working with other companies as a make-up man. My fame reached Madras and a famous company like Gemini invited me and selected me. Later on I became their chief make-up man. There were twelve persons working under me. Such was my lifestyle that I lived in a bungalow and had a car at my disposal. I worked with them till 1972. The fame and prosperity that I achieved was all due to Dadasaheb's blessings. I will never be able to forget his debt. Truly speaking, I realised when I grew up that I did not have the physiognomy for becoming an actor and so I became a make-up man. Dadasaheb not only made me an expert in this art, but my cultural development in his home was also useful to me throughout my life. Even today, I become emotional when I think of him.





Mandakini Phalke

I did roles in two of Dadasaheb's films, Shri Krishna Janma and Kaliya Mardan. In Kaliya Mardan, he gave me the central role of Krishna. I was only six or seven years old, yet Dadasaheb said that only my maternal uncle should do my makeup, no one else. He did not like it if I mixed too much with the boys. He lovingly called me Sonu.

Dadasaheb got a short film made showing him, mother and us (children) sauntering in a park. Before actually acting in films, he taught me how to show emotions like anger, love, joy, fear etc. and made me act accordingly. He would do it himself for me to see. At the time of actual shooting, he would do the acting and I would imitate him. When he said, "Go on," the camera would start and I would act out the scene. When he said "Stop," the camera and my acting would stop. However I was not allowed to enter the studio at other times. After I got married at the age of fourteen, my association with the studio became less and less, even though I lived in Nasik!

Dada was a terror in the house. If any child made a mistake, he would immediately make him hold his big toes. Worse still, after the child bent over, he would place a utensil full of water on his back. It ought not to shake a bit. If it did, more severe punishment would follow. This gives one an idea of his nature.

He also petted me, appreciated me quite a lot. But if he got angry, he could not control himself. One day, I was acting out in front of his shaving mirror the emotions he had taught me himself. As he entered the room, he saw me, lost his temper and severely slapped me in the face. "What are you making faces for before the mirror?" he roared and warned, "Look into the mirror" only at the time of make-up, you understand? If I ever see you again before a mirror, I will give you a good hiding."

Kamal Swaroop

The first film to be produced under the Hindustan Film Company banner is Shri Krishna Janam.

After this, Phalke decides to make Kaliya Mardan with his daughter Mandakini in the role of the mischievous child-god, Krishna. The shooting begins. One day, during the shooting, Mandakini is making faces at herself in the mirror. Dada sees her and slaps her face.

The apparatus with the glass tank for the trick photography showing the serpent in the water explodes, injuring Dada in the leg.

When Krishna leaves home, Mandakini gets carried away and sheds real tears.

During the shoot one day, she falls into the water, but refuses to allow her father to pack up the shoot.

When it is finally released, Kaliya Mardan is a huge success.





Filmmaker Lalit Vachani, and writer, theatre director and architect Jagan Shah have been working on distinct but related projects on Indian theatre.

Lalit has made a documentary film on Jan Natya Manch (JANAM), the Delhi-based street theatre group started by the charismatic Safdar Hashmi, which today continues to actively pursue its agenda of doing meaningful political theatre. JANAM grew out of the Delhi chapter of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) in the 1970s.

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Jagan Shah, meanwhile, has been putting together the IPTA story—from its formation in 1943 and its heydays in the 1940s and 50s, to its slow decline over the last forty years. Jagan feels that the history of IPTA in some way mirrors the cultural history of the nation—a trajectory “from revolution to acquiescence”.

Lalit's film, *Natak Jari Hai*, was released in 2005 and has been very wellreceived. Jagan Shah has completed his documentation and is contemplating using it as the basis of a screenplay for a film on IPTA.

In the following interview Jagan Shah and Lalit Vachani discuss a range of fascinating issues to do with the documentation, portrayal and self-representation of political theatre in India.

*Political Theatre Today and Yesterday:
A Conversation*

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Jagan Shah
&
Lalit Vachani



Jagan Shah: Lalit, I'd like to start by asking how you got interested in making a film on JANAM. Also, how important did Safdar Hashmi become to the film?

Lalit Vachani: I'm going to rewind a bit. The original proposal I had written was not really just about JANAM. The film on JANAM was going to be a small part of a larger film. I was going to be doing a fair amount of archival research on IPTA and the live component of the film was going to be on JANAM. To cut a long story short, India Foundation for the Arts really felt that I had two films here. And I think they felt that I wouldn't be able to do justice to either. Initially I was naturally a little resistant but as I got into the process of making the film on IPTA, I realised that it didn't really work. It would be very difficult to make that film and I would probably still have been working on it today. Doing archival work on IPTA, the way you are, would have exhausted all my energy and resources. So eventually we decided to focus on JANAM and this film came out. So I'll address Safdar later.

But talking about your archival project, I'd like to ask—what are the nodal centres of your research? When I spoke to Mala Hashmi [of JANAM] about the idea of research-

ing IPTA, she said, "If you are doing something on IPTA, there is a chance that you'll get lost. Because, which chapter do you pick up? Do you just look at the heydays of movement in the 40s and early 50s?" So was this a problem at all? What are the kinds of decisions you had to make?

Jagan: Well I think the two nodal centres were today and 1943. Certainly a lot of effort was to try and recreate the 1943-49 period. (The last successful IPTA conference was held in 1949.) And then the present is a very important nodal point because there is a need to understand in the contemporary period what the mechanisms of a political theatre are. Does it take the form of a movement? Is it most effective in the form of a movement? Or should the strategy be to create a multitude of minor, singular initiatives? And are the two in opposition at all?

I found in the study of the archive, that the IPTA story had been institutionalised through some key texts, mainly three books by Sudhi Pradhan [three volumes of *The Marxist Cultural Movement in India*]. But I found that that was a very limited source, because Sudhi Pradhan gives you a single snapshot of the IPTA movement seen from the perspective of one who had assumed a very



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Woodcuts by Chittaprasad Bhattacharya
gifted to dancer Gul Bardhan in c.1955
(Picture courtesy Gul Bardhan, Ranga Sri
Little Ballet Troupe library, Bhopal)



radical stance within the debate at that time and who was an extreme believer in the operative use of theatre for propaganda. The movement was made out to be a lot more revolutionary than it perhaps actually was.

Whereas oral history archives like the one in the Nehru Museum, especially, I think, the interview with Govind Vidyarthi, reveal that there was a very ad hoc nature to the so called movement. It was a lot about the Communist Party recruiting people on a daily basis almost. He mentions many cases of a radio play having to be done in the evening. So he calls up people to come and perform that radio play. So there was this whole network of local sympathisers and workers who were not all card carrying party members but who could be recruited for doing, quote-unquote, revolutionary messages. So that gave a totally different light to the material. It made the IPTA movement potentially a much more alive sort of movement.

Shifting to the present, one finds that that sort of conflict between the party and the artist is still alive and still needs to be resolved. It is a big question. Does people's theatre derive from a large, organised Sanghatan which creates people's theatre across

the country or is people's theatre actually the obverse of that—a non-organised, completely disseminated representation of the kind of consciousness which manifests itself in many different conflicts? Those to me are the two nodal points and that is where the conflict plays itself out.

Lalit: I was reading up on the IPTA at the time I was applying to IFA; my reading was really based on a little bit of Sudhi Pradhan and a lot of secondary sources. Now what I came across was almost a kind of a romanticisation, a valorisation. We all recognise that it was a very important era in terms of political artistic work. But I also began to think there must have been fissures. Did you come across material that showed up these fissures?

Jagan: The real point of weakness to my mind is the problem of ascription. Because it is such a loose overarching movement it tends to assume the privilege of co-opting anybody into it. That to me is a big fissure because the IPTA movement has also tried to cash in on connections that were not very strong—the Uday Shankar connection, for instance. Built into the received narrative of the IPTA is the idea that Uday Shankar, the great dancer, was somebody who espoused the IPTA cause and became one with

it. But there is archival evidence to suggest that Uday Shankar did not give two hoots about the IPTA. He did perform at one large workers' rally. It was organised by the party and it was then assumed to be an IPTA programme.

The archival research, I guess, throws up many such “untruths” which are built into the telling of IPTA. Another crisis in IPTA, to my mind, was that after a certain period, there was no new content. Whatever had been created was mainly because of Bijon Bhattacharya. Then Utpal Dutt created his revolutionary idea of theatre. And IPTA makes some claims to that as well, whereas it was a complete rebuke to the IPTA point of view. These are not necessarily fissures, but I find a lot of myths that have been created about IPTA and I think the material explodes those myths.

Post-1949, IPTA came under pressure because these cultural workers espoused an ideology which was, obviously, not the right ideology to espouse at that time. It put them outside the fold of the national structure, the Congress party's view of things. And so post-1949 and in the 1949 conference itself—this is my interpretation—you see evidence of IPTA reaching out—wanting to

create ways in which the artists could become part of the national institutional structure. They make a shift from what would be called a voice of dissent to one of oneness or co-optation with the dominant discourse. And that moment is, to my mind, where IPTA more or less kind of loses that thread of its history. And then it is revived in the 1980s and I think that revival is entirely based on what you said earlier—sentiment. It was a completely sentimental revival—as all revivals are. But it has lacked all the elements of a revolutionary movement since its revival.

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I think in your film, something you set out to do and succeed very well in doing, is portraying a little microcosm that is created as an end result of this large movement. I found that very nice and very well captured. I was curious whether the film began by looking at the character of the creator of JANAM—Safdar Hashmi, who came out of the Students' Federation of India. Or was the idea to look at the group JANAM and its contemporary standing and to find Safdar in the middle of that? What was the trajectory for you?

Lalit: I wanted to look at Safdar in terms of some of the important historical plays of JANAM's like *Machine* and *Aurat*. I thought him a

brilliant playwright and the use of language in these plays was really powerful. The idea initially was to just follow the making of one play from the beginning to the end—from the scripting stage to the rehearsal stage to going out and test-casing a play to coming back, perfecting it. And this, as it turned out, was absolutely not possible because at the time we started filming JANAM, they were not rehearsing or writing a play, they were going out and performing all the time. So that, in a sense, becomes the shape of the film.

I realised that Safdar would just be much more important in the film than I'd thought—just the very nature of the tragedy of Safdar's death and what it did to JANAM. His spirit is so much a part of the group today. Safdar always had a problem getting people to act in the JANAM plays but after his death many more people started coming in. JANAM came, in a sense, to the forefront and was asked to take a kind of leadership role in the people's theatre movement. And it is in the way JANAM's members spoke about him that Safdar's place really became apparent.

Jagan: It seems to me that the IPTA movement has lost its steam mainly because there are no leaders of this





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nature—the really active, younger protagonists of the whole story. One of the rewarding things for me has been meeting some of the younger people...sort of quasi-Safdar. One in particular was someone called Tanveer Akhtar in Patna who heads the Bihar IPTA—a very interesting figure. Someone who has spent years doing what he does. It has to be granted that Safdar was unique. He created plays which were also of a certain power. But Tanveer also creates theatre out of issues which are contemporary. And he always has this message which is very much in line with a contemporary understanding of what is subversive or a theatre of dissent. That has been very rewarding for me because I feel that qua movement, a movement is as much its leader as it is its followers.

I felt that in your film the most powerful scene, the most disturb-

ing also at some level for me, is the scene where you finally end up with Sudhanva in the space where Safdar was actually killed. And that was a very disturbing scene because you've brought so much emotion to that scene. You have built it up. You are walking through the streets. I had participated in the rally that came out after Safdar's murder. I remember that day. It was quite an amazing feeling in Delhi that day. I think one brought all that to bear and then one just comes to the emptiness of this space, obviously it is not a monument. And one felt this amazing sense of isolation. I felt that on Sudhanva's face and I could tell behind the camera that you are feeling this. How do you actually recreate this experience? It's horror and how do we recreate that horror? We cannot. That was where one saw the limits of the film as a medium as well. You can't capture the horror of



A proscenium staging of JANAM's play, Machine (from the film Natak Jari Hai)

that man being murdered. It's tragic. But I'm so glad you made this film because it does fill in what I felt was one of the important gaps that needed to be filled in my project.

Lalit: You have been planning to build a cinematic archive on IPTA. Tell me a little more about an archive that lends itself to the cinematic form.

Jagan: I was a freshly-trained historian when I began thinking about this project. I felt that the creation of a history of something like the IPTA, of which a major component was live action, live performance, could not take place without access to the subjective inputs of these artists. That, for me, was the driving force in the project—to capture the emotional content of the movement.

The idea of a cinematic narrative meant that one could trace emotional

links with the narrative which were not in the realm of ideology necessarily. It is driven by this sort of visceral experience of protests, dissent and questioning of events as they unfolded. That's why I chose the metaphor of a cinematic narrative. I did not think any of the dominant modes of writing history that I was trained in could give me access to that.

An example is in the story that I heard from Shaukat Azmi, about her getting married to Kaifi Azmi and the whole romance of it. She completely presents it in this romantic mode. And I felt that obviously, if I had taken the dry historiographical stance here, that kind of detail doesn't really matter. It is of no consequence that she was in love with this poet and she asked her barrister father in Hyderabad, can I marry this poet who lives in a commune in Bombay? Which is why I felt that the story could not



JANAM's *Woh Bol Uthi* staged in Delhi and Sahibabad (from the film *Natak Jari Hai*)

have been told if one were to simply retrace the events and tell what happened.

78 I always remember Shaukat and Kaifi in that sense. Today they are upheld as great IPTA people. But, heck, it was just romance. I don't think it would have mattered to Shaukat that Kaifi was a communist. She was just drawn to this poet living in a commune. I feel that just this particular dilemma between the artist and the ideologue is to me enough of a conflict to create a whole narrative around. I feel that very strongly. And it is at the heart of the whole business.

What I would like to develop is a screenplay based on this archive, although "develop a screenplay" sounds like a petri-dish kind of activity. But I would like very much for a film to be made on the subject, a feature film. I had a question about the form you used in your film when you had these

figures in the dark and then turned the spotlights on them. Why did you choose that mode?

Lalit: Well, see, the original plan was to do something with the old black and white photographs of *Machine* and *Aurat*. Then, increasingly, as I started spending time with JANAM, two things happened. First I realised that *Machine* and *Aurat* were JANAM's most important plays, and had been performed the most in the street theatre form. Another filmmaker, Sherna Dastoor, had already documented parts of these two plays in her film. So I reverted back to the original idea of doing something as cut points from black and white photographs of these plays.

I also felt that a play like *Machine* was harking back to the era of Soviet formalism—the films of Eisenstein came to mind. My cameraman Mrinal and I decided to show

Machine on stage. Use the advantages of cinema, isolate the action, break up the action and cut it together. Lots of the decisions were made—we didn't have the time to plan it—they were just made there and then. JANAM showed up having done their lines, we just blocked the stage. We never directed JANAM at any point. That is the only point in the film where we blocked them. The other interesting thing is what happens when you take a group that has been doing these plays in the street theatre form, and place them on a stage.

Interestingly, JANAM liked this stuff. I think part of the motivation was that these were both plays that had been done a lot. So it was as if they were coming from another era. So you say, okay, we'll do it in a stylised form. It's almost like a tribute.

Jagan: I found it interesting because you do also have street performances in the film. I particularly liked this one performance in Uttaranchal. The

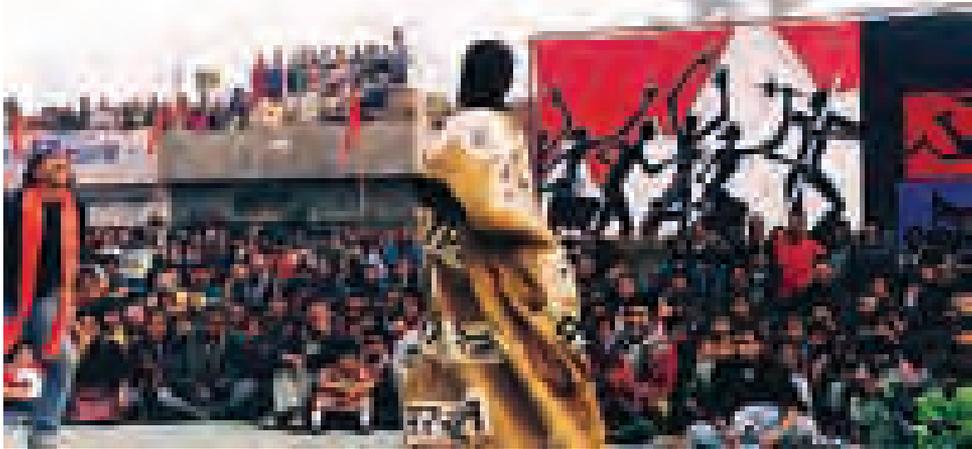
play finishes and you start walking with one of the spectators and you ask him what he has to say and he kind of avoids the question and he walks off. I found that very interesting.

I think something has happened to street performance. An audience which is perhaps knowledgeable about the background to JANAM and its street work probably won't get the same stimulation as they would by looking at what you have done—transposing it into a proscenium format. Perhaps because ultimately on film you can't capture street performance adequately. You have to capture all of these other reactions and only then you get the full experience of it. And yet you can't. People aren't forthcoming with reactions.

Lalit: I think you have touched on a very important point. This is something that I was really finding very difficult to do, to capture a street play in its totality. When you are filming, it is always fragmented, you are picking

JANAM's Woh Bol Uthi staged in Delhi and Sahibabad (from the film Natak Jari Hai)





JANAM's *Nahin Kabool* staged at Sahibabad. (Picture courtesy Jan Natya Manch)

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up on little bits. And of course that is the nature of the video film medium, where you take fragments and you put it together. But you still can't capture the feeling of the street theatre form because somebody is laughing behind you, somebody is reacting. You can hear some of these things and pick up that energy. But to try and film those fragments is inevitably to lose stuff.

The other thing is capturing the audience response to a play. I remember Anjum's [Hasan of IFA] comments on the film. She said, "What do people really think about JANAM's plays, that's something we don't really get an idea of." Sudhanva [Deshpande of JANAM] had a different kind of response. There was a feeling, at least in the beginning when they saw that first rough cut, that maybe JANAM doesn't look so good. The response from the audience ranged from indifferent to the negative. Indifference mostly, I would say.

The most honest kind of response that I got was when something happened there and then. So if I was able to capture laughter during a scene, then that was an honest response. The moment you went to people after the event, everybody just came up with these clichés — "Oh yes, yes! Very good play! There should be Hindu-Muslim harmony. Politicians should not instigate riots." But there was no insight about the play. I was just getting these completely canned, thought-out responses. I'm sure if we had more time we could have gone back a day later and sat quietly and got people to reflect—okay now, what did that play do for you? What are the parts of the play you understood? What are the parts of the play you didn't understand?

Also, JANAM uses such a diverse range of components. For instance in the play *Yeh Dil Maange More Guruji* [on the 2002 Gujarat riots], they use

text, they use pictures, the photographs of the riots. Then they use these very powerful poems. And then they use a lot of slapstick humour. Now what is the part that is working for audiences in general? Of course there are different responses. But what are the parts that are working and what are the parts that are not working? I think, if you really want to get into audience response and reaction, you will have to go more into details like this.

Jagan: I find it fascinating because the aspect of live performance is again integral to the whole IPTA story

and is the most celebrated part of it—Amar Sheikh standing in front of 20,000 farmers and belting out a song without loudspeakers. This is the aura of performance, which perhaps because of the influence of television, we have lost. One almost feels that one is doing children's theatre when one has to do political theatre in that way. It's proselytisation of a certain kind, the feeling that you can't defer that responsibility. You have to educate. What I got from your film was really to see those two things together in one film—the more abstract pro-scenium mode and the actual live street performance. I've got to admit

THE PEOPLE'S THEATRE



The importance of the Central Assembly session is eclipsed by the Cabinet Mission deliberations and the attendance is falling steadily. Members might imitate I.P.T.A activities and make the session lively.

The Hindustan Times, Saturday, April 6, 1946

that I found the abstract mode far more communicative in some strange kind of way. And I think that's got to do with the formation of our own viewership really. I think even the street play needs to be re-invented. And perhaps it's got to do with what kind of consciousness one is appealing to. I think we assume that class is an issue for everyone. We assume that a struggle, for instance, is a reality for everyone. And yet perhaps it isn't. Perhaps it is a projection onto the common mass that we deal with as an audience.

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Lalit: I'm going to pick up on something very interesting you just said, which is about the aura of the performance. Now talking about JANAM, I saw their photographs from the late 1970s and 1980s and there were these incredible photographs, where there are huge audiences, masses, swarms of people, just watching. Obviously we are talking about a time that predated television as it exists now. When I talk to JANAM about it, one aspect that they talk a lot about is how difficult the State has made it to perform in spaces. So you can't have big performances in Connaught Place, you can't perform outside embassies, you can't perform at the Boat Club [in Delhi] anymore. But it's very interesting how one sees a change in a lot of JANAM's work in the sense that the plays are now crafted to bring in

a television-watching audience. For instance—this is not there in my film—but in the play *Yeh Dil Maange More*, *Guruji* the very theme song is based on a Pepsi commercial. The tune is taken from there. And they do this a lot with some of the contemporary plays. It's sort of drawing in a television audience with a few gags. Now I'm getting back to IPTA. When you talked about the aura of street performance there were these big proscenium productions done for which huge stages were erected, and masses and masses of people came. Did you find photographs of stuff like this? There must have been oral testimonies also of people just talking about the feeling. Can you just tell me a little about that?

Jagan: There is a lot of oral testimony. But there is very little photographic information that I could get out. I found in doing the research—and I think this is a comment on our consciousness really—that there is a high level of appreciation now for the value of an image. And so increasingly I found, as I met more and more people, that they were not as forthcoming with photographic evidence as they were willing to talk. There is the aura to the photograph and there is a value to it. I found that very interesting—the notion that a photographic image or a photographic record is something that has value and you don't have to

necessarily share it with somebody until you get a certain price. Why it mattered, of course, was that I had hoped to find a lot of photographs and make copies of them. But people weren't willing to let me do that.

Lalit: It's very interesting to me that you say that you came across people who were trying to hold on to the photographs until they got a price. Because with JANAM, they could have very well turned around and said, "Look, there is a certain set of photographs that we think are relevant that you can film and there is another set of stills. That we are absolutely not sharing with you." But there was just this complete openness. Despite the fact that they knew that I was not making a film for them, that I was eventually going to make my film independently. This is a group that is around and performing today and they have that much more at stake.

Jagan: They don't. What I mean is that the larger IPTA organisation is so loose and so fragmented. There isn't the oneness. There isn't the identification with a single IPTA. It's become a banner. I mean, it's become only a banner. And people who are part of the IPTA organisation admit that it's a banner. Whereas I came in with the view that if it has to be IPTA, then it must have some semblance of connection with what IPTA stood for in the beginning. Now I find it to be a sort of wishy-washy attitude.

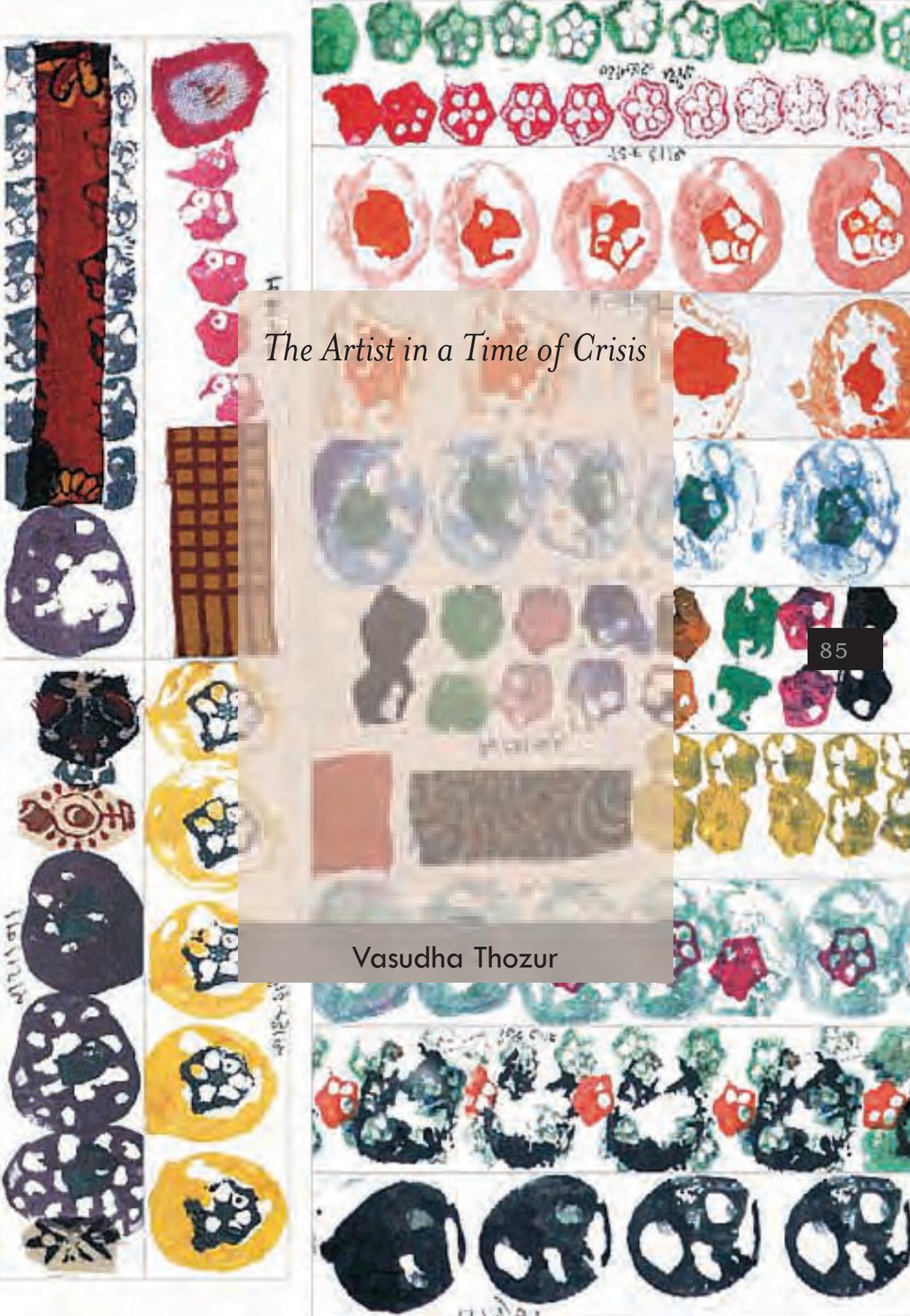
I think it's a chapter that needs to be looked at in a certain way. Some things might need closure and other things might need to be opened up. But I think the IPTA story is certainly not over. But it's not a story which can be told again and again in the same beaten way.



*JANAM founder Safdar Hashmi
(from the film Natak Jari Hai)*

Baroda-based painter Vasudha Thozhur responded to the Gujarat riots of 2002 by raising questions about what it means for an artist to engage meaningfully with her political environment, by collaborating with local activists who were working with the rehabilitated victims, and by keeping a detailed written account of what was happening around her and her responses to it.

- 84 Vasudha has also been closely documenting her work—which started right after the riots—with a group of adolescent girls whom she met through the Ahmedabad-based NGO, Himmat. She has introduced painting, photography and filmmaking to this group as mediums to represent personal loss and displacement. Some glimpses from her journey over the last five years.



The Artist in a Time of Crisis

Vasudha Thozur



A filigree screen at the Sidi Saiyad Mosque, Ahmedabad

The Search for Authenticity

The rationale for the proposal I drew up for IFA was really quite simple. How does one continue to function as an artist in a politically disturbed state? Does one shut oneself off? Or engage actively with what's going on? Given one's lack of experience with such things, how does one go about it? Therefore, the thrust of the project was precisely this— to discover ways in which one could engage with the socio-political environment and still remain an artist. And I must stress that I do not see this environment as an area of specialisation, but a vital part of one's own make-up; the

connectivity can manifest itself in overt and covert ways, but without this underpinning, the authenticity that in the final analysis marks a work of art, or qualifies whatever we do, cannot exist nor create a healthy situation or a real future in any field. And somewhere, apart from the immediate response to the prevalent violence, the quest for authenticity continues.

*From my Journal —
April 2002*

I was walking along a street, I did not feel at all well, and could not open my eyes: they felt gummy and encrusted. I was dressed like a beggar. I was a

beggar, I certainly was not myself. I sensed a blinding heat and light around me, the heat of the approaching summer in Gujarat. Someone, a vendor, walked across the pavement towards me and alongside, insistent, repeating— Pudi! Pudi! (Hold this! Hold this!)—in Tamil. I couldn't see what it was that he wanted me to hold, and did not want to anyway, I could not—I screamed at him in frustration. A burden whose contents and sense were unknown to me.

Days later, another nightmare.

Building a Collaboration

I knew that I could not do a project on my own, and at that point I very much admired some of the activists who had the courage to intervene directly, sometimes even risking their lives—and who, further, had the experience of handling all the different aspects of such intervention. I spoke to an activist writer friend, Bina Srinivasan, who seemed interested in working out some sort of a partnership and the first phase of the project was carried out from the end of 2002 to the beginning of 2003. The idea was to have two supporting activities happening simultaneously—one substantiating the other. The goal was to intervene and to document. And, in the process, rectify

gaps in one's own practice, to build relationships between professionals in both fields, to provide artists with yet another area to function in. Bina had worked for several organisations, interviewing the riot-affected, writing articles and recording minutes of meetings and public conventions. She had a specific relationship with a group of women and children in Naroda Patia, which had witnessed some of the worst killings. Part of the work was to do workshops with this group, which had by then been rehabilitated at Faizal Park, Vatwa.

How to Intervene?

The political situation was still very disturbed at the time and the elections were coming up—and it proved impossible to carry out any kind of organised activity. Therefore we decided to make posters that could be put up on the walls of the city. Later, we got to know that the Election Commission had banned the use of posters for campaigning—but we printed them anyway; we thought we could use them in rallies, and have NGOs buy them for their use.

from "Story of Five Posters"

18th November, 2002

There will be those among you who will not be able to look

At a woman again,
The mere look of the wound, the smell
If you survive it at all, will be enough...

Zsuzsa Takacs, "The Perennial
Lament" in *The Colonnade of
the Teeth*

26th November

Yet another poster, with an inscription by [the writer Aziz] Kadri—the translation, from Urdu: "Who knew that a time such as this would come, when innocence is punished, when doors of homes are shattered and the living consumed in flames!"

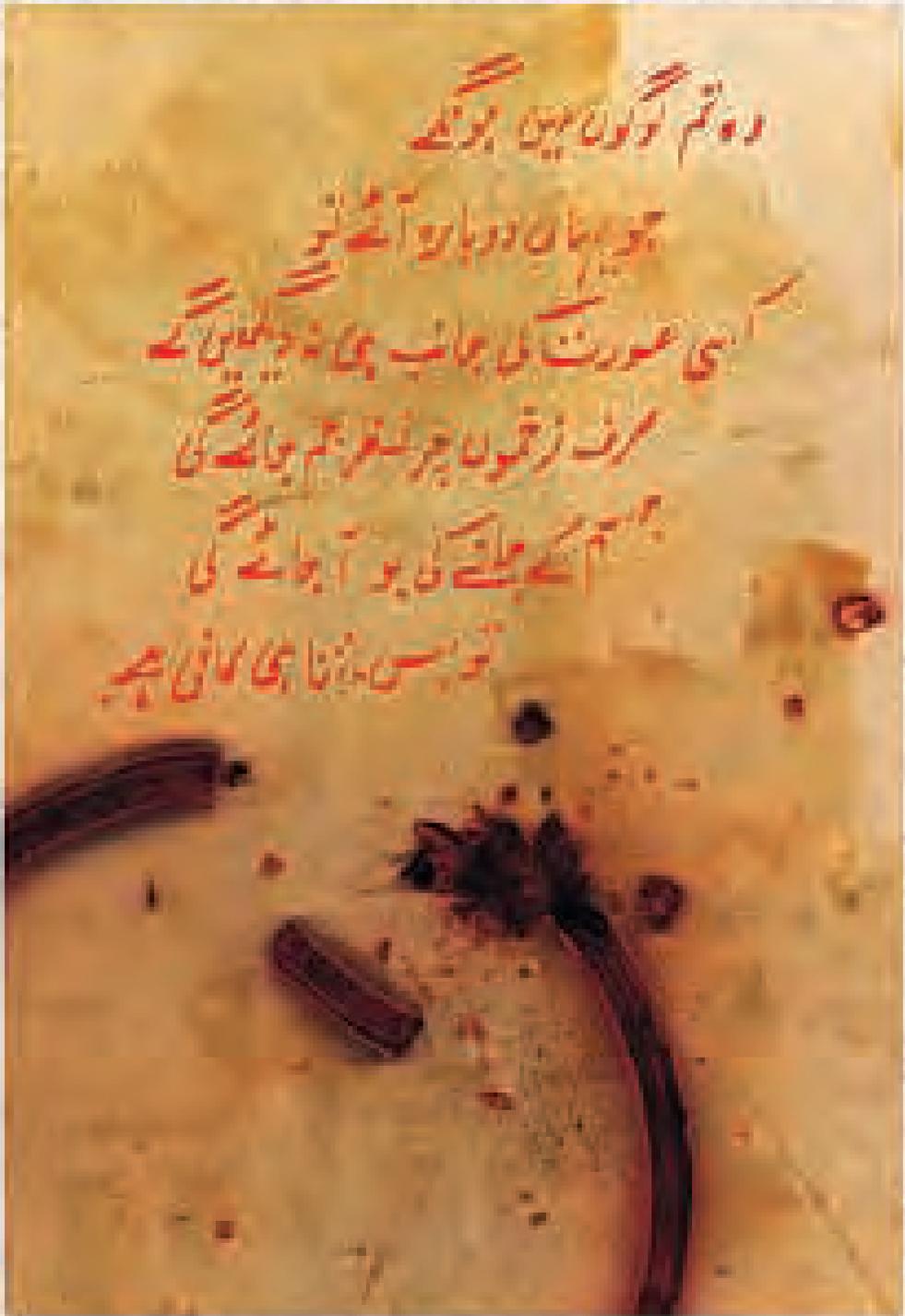
29th November

88 ...On the shelf behind him was displayed a bangle in a glass case. He

pointed to it and said—that belonged to a girl who was raped. The image stayed with me, more haunting than many others more gruesome—the papers, magazines, were full of them. Charred bodies, slit open, innards exposed. Young children, babies, unnamed adults. In Baroda on the way to class, a bangle-seller passed by, pushing his *lari*. I chose different shades of red, my favourite colour, and put them on, enjoying the jingle as I moved, a sound that I did not normally wear. There was the comforting feeling of subscribing to given notions of femininity. One way less that I stood apart. I asked Ilesh if they could be scanned, he said yes; we scanned them, they were beautiful images. To me it spoke of sisterhood with an



આર્ટિસ્ટ એક્ટિવિસ્ટ કોલેબોરેટિવ • ડિસેમ્બર ૨૦૦૨ • વાડેદરા • ગુજરાત



Artist /Activist Collaborative • December 2002 • Vadodra • Gujarat



Concept and design: Vasudha Thozhur in collaboration with Bina Srinivasan

identifiable symbol rooted in the collective consciousness: a symbol which in addition extended beyond gender. I had used the vermilion circle innumerable times in my own painting, long before I thought of it as a bangle. I broke one and scanned it, pasting the pieces on a card with glue. In the scanned image, the glue looked like dried blood. We scanned one of Ilesh's photographs as well, one that he had taken in Kutch after the quake, of a house in ruins, and juxtaposed it with the image of a bangle—so easy to break trust, so hard to rebuild. I hoped to create an area where images of the quake and of the riots would overlap into a complex message which would speak against violence/destruction—natural or man-made.

*From my Journal—
6th February 2003*

I had expressed my apprehensions about visiting the victims, but Monica [Wahi, of Himmat] had reassured me that things would seem almost normal on the surface. People were carrying on with their lives; they had no choice. Many, especially the men, had remarried. She specially wanted me to meet Shahjehan, a young girl of 17, who had saved herself and her younger brother from a fiery death by rolling over in the soil. She was illiterate, but keen to learn anything.

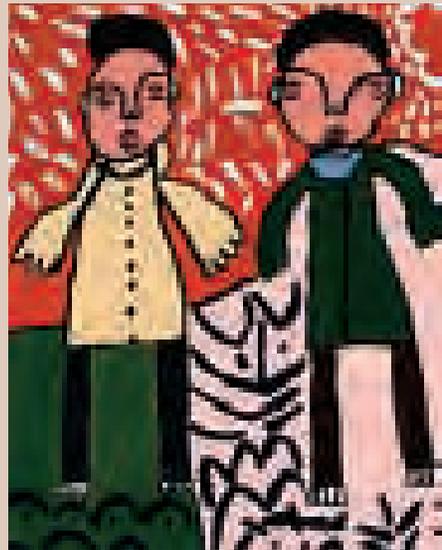
Monica was keen that I should work with her during the course of my project. She was undergoing, among other things, a series of surgeries for her burns, in Bombay. Monica gave me three photographs of the girl; I carry them with me in my purse. They

keep me from growing complacent with delusions of normalcy. The first house that we entered was where she lived; we met her aunt. Shahjehan had left for Patia. Monica pointed out to me that the houses of those from Naroda-Patia were stamped outside in stencilled, turquoise-blue lettering: Faizal Park had been bought by the Citizens' Relief Committee, an Islamic organisation. Most of the relief camps had also been run by them.

From those whom we met that day, the stories were identical—loss of business, lack of work. Income was the main concern. Many of the women were proficient with the sewing machine, in making “Chinese suits” (salwar suits)—their husbands would find them custom. The husbands were dead, and the women did not have a direct relationship with the client, who in turn did not know them, and was loath to give them business.

There was a terrible despondency about the place, lightened by the few children that were there. There had been a visit from the ice-cream vendor—they held in their hands multicoloured iced candies, frosted maroons and yellows, purples and greens. I asked a young girl—is this something that you eat every day?

Her reply was quick—no, on special days, he comes as you have come. There is a light-eyed child of three with her, very active and bright—he had seen his mother on fire and had repeated the story many times, to visitors and reporters, as he would describe a spectacle, a tamasha. The girl would prompt him—tell them what you saw.



Detail of painting by Tehera Pathan

The Himmat Workshops—2005

Monica progressed from the relief camps to playing with the children in Vatwa to training about 18 women to sew and thereby find ways of making a living. She seemed open to the idea of an artist in their midst—we discussed the idea of art as therapy—and as communication. We also agreed that if anything were to be done on a sustainable basis,

income generation was of prime concern, and that would be her area of operation. She identified for me six young girls [Tahera Pathan, Tasleem Qureishi, Shahjehan Shaikh, Rabia Shaikh, Rehana Shaikh and Farzana Shaikh] whom I could work with, and we decided that I would do about a week every month—workshops that would initially explore their hand skills, and then direct these into three areas—painting, creating posters/visual material for campaigns and rallies, and work in fabric—basic sewing techniques which would be developed further into a means of income generation in future.

92 Digital photos and short films was yet another idea.

January and February, 2005

The first couple of sessions that I did dealt with colour—we started with marbling on paper, some tie and dye, some drawing—and went on a visit to the Kanoria Art Centre [in Ahmedabad], where we met Sharmila Sagara who invited us to participate in the art festival that was scheduled for February. We also visited NID—where the staff took us around. We had the benefit of short demos in every department and interactive meetings with the students—the girls enjoyed it all tremendously. With the output from the first session, I formatted some posters for the sale of garments which Monica had

organised in Bangalore and Goa.

The second session took place at the Kanoria Centre—some of the girls attended a Madhubani workshop conducted by a young student that I knew from Baroda—Shatrughan Pandey. The others did batik with vegetable dyes with Pravina Mahicha. We continued with the drawing, painting from imagination, from life observation. I gave them notebooks that they could draw or write in, and keep with them at home.

March, 2005

We did some collage with paper, working out animal and bird forms—and then ways of animating the human figure. I taught them basics of colour mixing—the colour wheel, shades, tints, tones—fragments of colour theory. Early in March, I had shopped for cut pieces and fabric with Romanie Jaitley, and prepared



*Madhubani painting workshop
at Kanoria Arts Centre, Ahmedabad*



Photograph by Vasudha Thozhur

some cartoons by enlarging, digitally, some of the drawings that the girls had made in their notebooks. Two sets—one for an exercise in using the running stitch, and the other for overlapping and collaging fabric on a base—with net and tissue in different colours [...]

I felt the need to market some of the things that we had done, to give a functional slant to the activity. But I also realised that marketing would be another area of work altogether, requiring meetings with people, organisations, sourcing information, etc.—I could not schedule it in.

April and May, 2005

We were finally able to begin working in our own space upstairs, convenient for several reasons. There was privacy, less interference from the women—earlier, fights and arguments would break out between the two groups. We began the work on fabric, and Sharifa, one of the women, was our resource person. She was the only one amongst them who could work on the *haat*, and knew embroidery and basic appliqué. She showed us how to transfer our cartoons on to fabric, and guided the girls whenever they needed help. We might incorporate this into our programme on a regular basis—to teach the girls to work on the *haat* [...]

The girls began their sessions with Shahana and by May were able to sign their own names on the voucher book. Zaid [Ahmed Sheikh] and I had earlier discussed the gap between sessions as non-productive and in fact harmful of the continuity required to engage their minds; Shahana's classes helped to address this gap, and were indeed part of the strategy [...]

Also felt the need to have Zaid talk to them regularly in order to organise them better— timetables for cleaning up, etc. —and also to defuse the tensions which periodically built up. His skills as a social worker lie in that direction—the methodologies which they probably take for granted are a revelation to me. This has become an integral part of the programme. More discussions as well, about what we have done, why we do it—becomes relevant now; earlier we were occupied with acquiring practical knowledge, and talk centred around that.

June and July, 2005

A VCD was hired, and set up in the centre. Shahrukh and Zaid screened *Bombay Hamara Sheher* by Anand Patwardhan and also some Bollywood films; apparently the discussions were very good. It was managed by Zaid and Sharukh—in July, the floods in



A detail from the "Ahmedabad Hamara" poster by Rehana Shaikh

Baroda prevented me from attending any of them, but I was thankful that work continued regardless—including the literacy classes. The discussions culminated in a set of collages, using old newspapers, magazines, around some specific themes—Ahmedabad Hamara (a topic that the girls chose) from different perspectives— the male, the female, the rich, the poor. The collages were more in the form of collections of photographs relating to these issues.

August 2005

Made tracings from the photo-montages, the choice of the images was left to the girls. This simplified



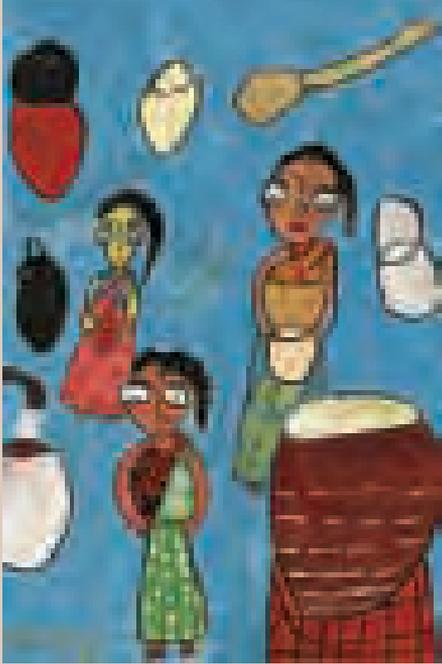
Vividha & Himmat

**Invite You to an Exhibition
of Exclusive Organic Dyed Khadi**

Printed By The Earthquake - Affected Artisans Of Kutch

&

Tailored By The Flood - Affected Women Of Ahmedabad, Gujarat



*Painting by Shahjehan Shaikh, detail
from a narrative scroll titled Mother*

96 the forms. They were rearranged into compositions pertaining to different topics; I guided them as to how to convert the completed drawing into a graphic black and white format suitable for silkscreen reproduction. The earlier posters had been done digitally, the medium an expensive one. I was thinking in terms of something more affordable, requiring hand skills that the girls could learn. In Baroda the drawings were scanned and printed on transparent film. The image could then be transferred on to the screen through a simple photographic process [...]

They had been instructed to fill up their scrapbooks, but this was not happening. A brainwave—why not ask Shahana to discuss what they were doing, to help them articulate drawings, to guide them with writing about them? This could be done on a regular basis, about a week every month.

In the meantime, Bina [Srinivasan], who was visiting, (and earlier Nandini Manjrekar) had told me about an all-India poster exhibit being organised by Urvashi Butalia of Kali for Women. They were insistent that we send our work. I digitised all the posters that we had made, put them on a CD to send off as an entry.

September 2005

A very successful session at the Kanoria Centre. The screens were ready, the girls learnt how to coat them with the light sensitive liquid and then to print them. We made six editions of 12 prints each.

October 2005

Monica was in Ahmedabad very briefly, and did a session with the girls—based on three questions that they were to ask each other—one about someone dear that they had lost; they made rough sketches based on what they told each other. Apparently, they had not known these details before. Hopefully the session will help in building closer relationships between them.

Sahiyar had organised a workshop for the purpose of collecting posters for the exhibit. There was to be an informal presentation of the posters and discussions—I felt this would be an opportunity for the girls to make contact with a viewership for

their work, help them place it within a context, understand why they were making them [...]

The Sahiyar workshop itself was a success from our point of view. Seeing our posters with the others, I was able to see the essential difference between the marginalised speaking for themselves as opposed to having others—either cartoonists or artists—speak for them. Tahera, Tasleem, Shahjehan and Rabia attended the workshop. Tahera takes the lead in speaking out as a rule; she explained the process, the intention as well as the occasion for which the posters had been made. After lunch, she took the lead in the song session that is part of such meets—the girls were in fact the stars of the show—the rest of which was rather lacklustre. They had brought their books along, and showed them to those that were interested. Zaid and myself remained very much in the background.

For me, it was something of a triumph, though I would not take full responsibility for it—there have been inputs from several quarters, including from outside the framework of the project.

Postscript:

Last October, Vasudha was Artist-in-Residence at the Khoj Studios in Delhi and was joined by Monica Wahi of Himmat and Zaid Ahmed Sheikh, one of the collaborators. The resulting exhibition included six films made by the group. One of these films—*Cutting Chai*—was screened as part of Experimenta, the experimental film festival held in Bangalore in March 2007.

More recently (in April), Vasudha exhibited “Paintings from 2001 to 2007” at the Sakshi Gallery in Mumbai, which also featured a painting made up of thirteen panels that the collaborators jointly made.

Vasudha continues to seek ways in which to disseminate the work that has emerged from this collaboration.



Painting by Shahjehan Shaikh

Acknowledgments:

Himmat, Sharukh Alam,
Shatrughan Thakur, Shanta Rakshit



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IFA's mission is to introduce new approaches to philanthropy in the arts. Moving beyond existing support for the presentation of artistic expression, IFA gives focused and consistent attention to strengthening underlying artistic processes, overcoming constraints on creativity, seeding innovation and connecting the arts to other fields of human endeavour.

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ArtsConnect

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