

India Foundation for the Arts  
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In the last week of February, the first edition of IFA's **New Performance Festival** was held in Bangalore. The festival brought together four very different performances whose creation was funded under our New Performance programme.

The idea behind the New Performance programme is to support performance artists who take risks by, for example, drawing on different artistic genres and languages of performance. Platforms need to be created to showcase these productions and the festival thus becomes an important extension of the programme.

The four performances, from more than the dozen we have so far funded, were chosen partly because they had not been seen in Bangalore before. Each performance had also experimented in different directions. Dancer-choreographer Astad Deboo collaborated with the Pung Cholom drummers of Manipur in *The Rhythm Divine*. Anurupa Roy's *...about Ram* combined digital animation, puppetry, dance, martial art and music to create an adaptation of the Ramayana.

In *Quick Death*, director Sankar Venkateswaran presented a dramatic genre in which the performance is developed from a script that mainly describes physical actions and gestures. And Anusha Lall and Giti Thadani explored the spatial and architectural aspects of Bharatanatyam by combining movement with light/image installations in *Vyuti – Inflections*.

Each one of these productions was professionally mounted, which demonstrated that, among other things, funding for stage productions enables performing artists to make full and effective use of stagecraft and theatre technology, and produce tightly executed and precise work.

*Quick Death* and *...about Ram* also travelled, as part of the festival, to the village of Heggodu, Shimoga district, Karnataka. This gave the artists a chance to perform before a very different audience.

Please see below for some of the reviews of what we hope was the first of many editions of the festival.

**Anjum Hasan**

**New Grants**



*A Dastangoi performance*

Our recent grants have gone out under four programmes. Under arts education, we have made a grant for a series of theatre and puppetry workshops in and around Karnataka's Dharwad district so as to strengthen theatre arts pedagogy at the school and college levels. Support has also gone out for residencies for fresh graduates of art schools

Under extending arts practice, grantees are variously creating a series of video-audio loops from mobile phone images and still photographs that will be played back on the closed-circuit television monitors of the Metro Railway in Kolkata; composing and performing new dastans (based on the 16<sup>th</sup> century Urdu storytelling form) as well as training dastangos; and producing a video installation based on the documentation of the unique performance language developed by the theatre group, Adishakti.

The 9<sup>th</sup> grant under our Bengali Language initiative is supporting the development of an archive of photographic practices associated with the lives of urban middle-class women in Bengal from the 1880s to the 1970s. A special grant has also been made for a workshop-conference which will enable musicians from western Rajasthan to explore issues that affect their lives as performers.

Painter, photographer and cinematographer, **Manas Bhattacharya**, says of his video loop images that they will "compete with and thwart other mass-produced images like advertisements...The loop films have been imagined as a ploy to both respond to and negotiate the new visual and aural economies, and a personal way of coming to terms with the changing cityscape."

"PEERS has been successful in enabling young contemporary artists to negotiate the often tricky journey from the art academy to the 'real' world...It is a distinct educational experience that foregrounds the spirit of inquiry outside the cosseted context of the academy," writes IFA programme executive, Sanjay Iyer on the young artists residency programme run by **Khoj**, now entering its fourth year with our support.



*Photograph by Manas Bhattacharya*



Still from an Adishakti performance

Filmmaker **Soudhamini**, describing how her filming of Adishakti's work in theatre led her to the fragmentary, open-ended and nonlinear possibilities of video installation art says, "In working with the language of theatre I actually discovered something basic about the language of film."

And **Rahul Ghai**, who under the aegis of the Marudhar Lok Kala Kendra in Barmer, Rajasthan, is facilitating a workshop for the folk musicians of Western Rajasthan asks, "What constitutes and reinvigorates creativity as a community practice? How is it related not only to enhancing incomes and opening market opportunities but equally to notions of well being, dignity and happiness?"

Read more about our support for folk musicians in Rajasthan in *Slant*, *Stance* below.

## Public Eye

### Recognition for *Listener's Tale*

The IFA-funded film, *Listener's Tale*, directed by Arghya Basu, has been awarded the Pierre and Yolande Perrault Grant for young filmmakers by the Cinema du Reel, France. *Listener's Tale* has also been selected in the International Competition section of the Cinema du Reel. The film explores the many meanings that Chham, a Tibetan Buddhist sacred dance theatre, generates in the context of modernisation and ethnic multiplicity.



### New Book on Kathak

Visual anthropologist and Kathak exponent Pallabi Chakravorty received an IFA grant in 1997 to study how women Kathak performers in contemporary India were contesting the elitism, patriarchy and nationalism of the 'classical' idiom. Her just released book, *Bells of Change: Kathak Dance, Women, and Modernity in India* draws partly on the research she undertook with this grant. It is "the first critical study of Kathak dance within the discourses of the modern and the global. The book traces the arc of two centuries of Kathak: the colonial nautch dance, classical Kathak under nationalism and post-colonialism, and 'innovation' and 'new directions' under transnationalism and globalisation."



### Wedding as Performance

*Wedding Party*, directed by Kirtana Kumar and funded by IFA, was performed in Bangalore on January 29 & 30 and March 7, 8 & 9. A high-spirited attempt to portray the theatricality of Indian weddings, *Wedding Party* pulled the audience into the raucous and farcical action. The performance took place, writes Kirtana, “in a fluid space, with the audience’s role constantly shifting and a script dense with irony, nuance and double entendre.”

According to one participant “attending a bourgeois wedding is never going to be the same again.”

Read a review [here](#).

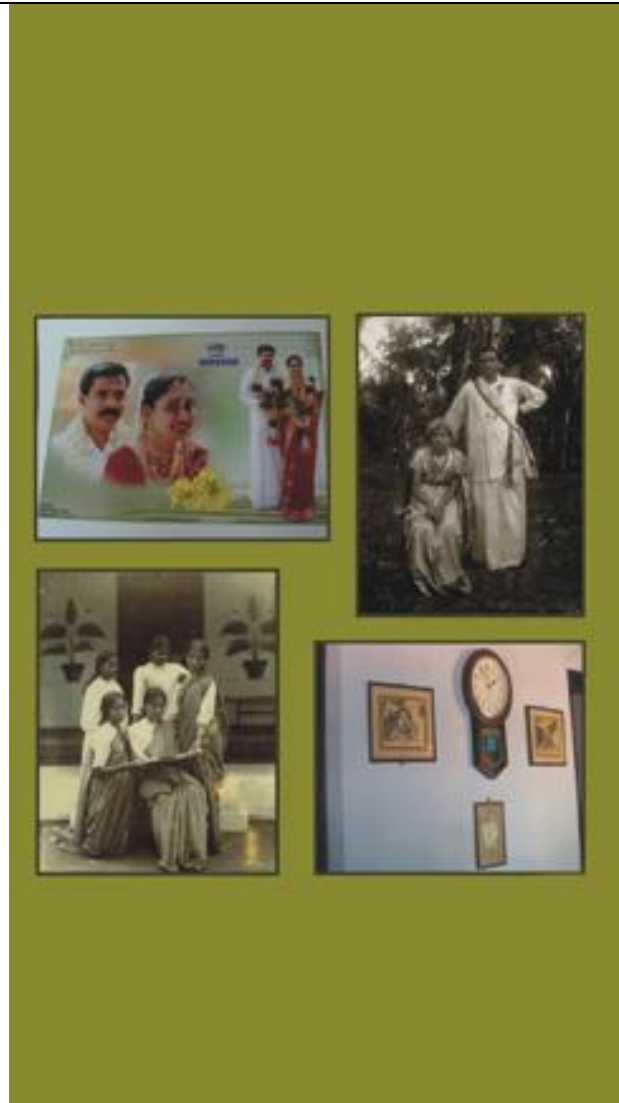
### Exhibition on the Thiyyas

The exhibition *Exploring the Visual Cultures of North Kerala*, put together by Janaki Abraham and Aarthi Ajit and on show in the gallery of the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi between March 5 and 15, was an outcome of a grant that Janaki Abraham received to document the visual culture of the Thiyya community of North Kerala.

The exhibition included marriage videos, photographs and family albums, and asked questions such as: what makes a visual culture? can we talk about community or region specific visual cultures? Photographs from the interiors of the oldest studio in Thalassery, of a woman talking to her daughter in Dubai via a web cam, and of large, digitally printed boards of football teams in Thalassery during the World Cup 2006 were among the images on display.

Janaki writes: "While the exhibition focused on one particular community, many photographs and pages of albums evoked a *deja vu* in some visitors." Janaki is exploring the possibility of putting together a book based on the study.

Read a review [here](#).



### IFA's New Performance Festival in the Press

Read reviews of [...about Ram](#), The [Rhythm Divine](#), [Quick Death](#) and [Vyuti – Inflections](#).

### Theatre Studies Conference

With partial support from IFA, the Institute of Economic Growth, New Delhi, organised a three-day international conference (January 23-25) titled *Reviewing Disciplinary Agendas in Theatre Studies: Cultural Arenas, Policies, Institutions*. Discussion on the forms and practices that go by the name of 'theatre' and the forces (colonialism, the state, globalisation) that have shaped it formed one strand of the conference, while the other centred on the discipline of theatre studies and its relationship with practice. Evaluating the conference, Vaibhav Parel of the Department of English, University of Delhi,

wrote: “The conference did well to refer to the history of theatre and its transitional forms, only to accentuate the glaring gap in empirical regional histories of theatre in India. This would be one of the openings that would need immediate attention following this conference, and the translations that form a part of this project would be eagerly awaited...”

## Announcements

### New Issue of *ArtConnect* is out

If you would like to receive a copy of this issue, please write to us at the address below. And to receive future issues [Subscribe Now](#).

### Apply for Grants

We are currently inviting proposals for the Arts Research and Documentation programme. The last date for applications is June 30, 2008. [Download](#) the Request for Proposals.

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### We are grateful to...

The Aditi Foundation for the Arts and Mr Ashoke Dutt for their support for our Bengali Language Initiative and Bodhaditya Bandopadhyay's documentary filmmaking project respectively.

## Slant, Stance

*Rahul Ghai has been working with pastoral and other vulnerable communities in the Thar desert since 1992. In 2003, he began collaborating with the Mir community based in Pugal, northwest Rajasthan, in an attempt to explore if the community's musical traditions could offer sustainable livelihood opportunities. This project was funded by an IFA grant to Mir singer, Mukhtiyar Ali, while a more recent grant is supporting a workshop-conference to help singers from the region to examine the changes in their music, repertoire and instruments, as well as questions around the material existence and dignity of their communities.*

*The Mirs are hereditary singers of the Sufiana Qalam—a tradition geographically spread over the northwest of the subcontinent and connected with the compositions of Sufi mystics such as Khwaja Gulam Farid and Bulle Shah. Despite belonging to this larger tradition, the Mirs are a 'borderline' community in many ways—their language, Siraiki, is a dialect of West Punjab, they are sandwiched between two dominant centres of Sufi tradition, Sindh and Punjab, and they are known to pay allegiance to both Hinduism and Islam. The Mirs were traditionally patronised by Muslim pastoral communities living in the northwest Thar region. The building of the Indira Gandhi Canal Project in the late 1970s inaugurated the breakdown of their communitarian way of life and intensified the crisis of survival for these pastoral traditions. Rahul Ghai tells us more.*

**The focus of your collaboration has been reinvigorating the musical traditions of the Mirs. What ideas of reinvigoration are you and the Mirs working with given that the traditional contexts of creating, performing and listening to the music are lost or denuded. What sorts of opportunities do new contexts present?**

**Rahul Ghai:** Interactions with the Mirs, sessions of soul stirring music coming from rustic contexts of life, have been reinvigorating for the Mirs as well as for those from the cities who have been involved with their music. The two-way dimension of reinvigoration is very important to keep in mind. Reinvigoration in this sense has been dialogic, uplifting for both.

If reinvigoration means getting a new vigour and vitality in order to delve deeper into Sufiyana Qalam, many of the Mir singers, young and old, as well as their children, are today motivated to hone their skills. Many of the Mirs, even in the absence of any organised programmes and

despite their constrained livelihood options, are pursuing their music—something they were turning apathetic to some years back. The air in Mir settlements has a fragrance of hope that is markedly different from the languor of earlier times.

The idea of reinvigoration itself has been evolving and there are different perceptions as to what it means. We have to remember that in this desert ecology the process of dissipation of the traditional contexts is a very slow one, which is possibly going to throw up its own possibilities for integrating this music that has been part of the tradition for so many generations of Mir singers and their listeners. In this regard, facilitating the local listeners towards creating new contexts of performance is one of the elements in the process of reinvigoration. In that sense the 'old' should give way to 'new'.

The other 'new' contexts come as a result of exposure to the outside world—that itself is a new thing, much of it has happened in the last few years. Both these new contexts present a range of opportunities other than only live performances. To my mind, in order to explore these possibilities and opportunities it would be worthwhile to work with a larger perspective of reinvigoration, something that facilitates acquiring other skills associated with their music, like managing a public audition system, a community radio network, a recording studio of their own, collecting and disseminating their musical traditions, apart from opportunities for live performances.

**Could you tell us something about the process of institution-building that has been central to your work with the Mirs. Have these structures been able to take root, and in what ways will they sustain the music?**

**RG:** To begin with, a word or two of caution on the concept of institution-building would not be out of place. Though there is a lot of talk about the concept, we are less aware of the tribulations and trajectories of the processes that lead to institution-building. And the compulsion to show results in this task of institution-building often invites use of manipulative strategies of manufacturing consent. What we have understood is that the process has to be preceded by facilitating confidence and self-esteem among individuals. And that has happened to an extent. One could say that the Mirs are beginning to engage with the questions of institution-building, each in his own way.

Given the intricate traditional social kinship structures and decrepit livelihood status of the majority of the Mirs it has been very difficult for them to participate in the collective processes associated with 'institution building' in the modern sense of the term. Yet it has to be mentioned that each of them is aware of the problems and gasps with despair at their inability to break the shackles of conservatism. The Mirs' aspiration for something new based on this musical tradition is itself a sign of the fact that, if not the structures of an institution, the process of reinvigoration has taken root and I feel that is more important. A few years back there was only the singer Mukhtiyar Ali talking about this issue, then Abdul Jabbar joined and now there are many of them like Bassu Khan, Razak Ali, Nazare Khan, Nazu Khan, Subhan Khan, Waris Ali, Piran Khan, Manjoor Khan and many more in other settlements in the region. All of them are trying at their own levels to sustain themselves and their music.

In the long term, the process of institution-building has to engage with the possibility of developing different autonomous teams of Mirs from different settlements—independent yet having ties with each other. This understanding has been one of the most important outcomes of the process of institution-building so far. And this is a vision that is shared by many Mir musicians and their local listeners.

**Have the Mirs been able to take advantage of the contemporary interest in Sufi music both in its live and recorded forms?**

**RG:** The live performances of Mirs as a team have been exciting experiences. Not only have these shown flickers of team formation but they have also led to sharp disagreements among them. The first one in Triveni Auditorium, Delhi in 2005 and the second one at India International Centre, Delhi in 2006 were attempts to represent a community tradition. Mukhtiyar Ali is getting offers to perform and is going places—Belgium, Spain, Sweden, China. Part of the reason for this could be related to what you describe as the contemporary interest in Sufi music. Abdul Jabbar has also gone with him on some occasions. The live performances in Delhi, Bangalore, Chennai, Ahmedabad have been well attended and motivating. More such live performances by Mir musicians need to be organised. However, I should point out that the Mirs have found it very difficult to strike a balance between individualism (and the heady mix of stardom that these new opportunities incite) and their own collective processes for presenting a community tradition.