



# India Foundation for the Arts

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## Recent Projects

### New Grants

Performance has been the theme of several recent IFA grants. Some grantees are creating new performance pieces while others are working on performance as a subject of study and documentation. Manipur's Mangangsana Meitei, a balladeer and musician, is developing a performance based on the mythical story of *Phou-Oibi*. Puppeteer Varun Narain and ballet dancer Rea Krishnatraye are collaborating on a dance and puppetry combination called *Giselle ki Kahani* - an Indian version of the 19th century French ballet, while Thiruvananthapuram's Jyothish M G is working towards staging a Malayalam adaptation of *Macbeth*. Meanwhile in Kolkata, theatre director Santonil Ganguly is reworking a children's story into a stage production using the patachitra narrative tradition. (Read more about this project below.)



**Puppet-in-progress: Giselle's mother**



**Assam's popular Mobile Theatre**

Under our Arts Research and Documentation programme, we recently made five new grants. Grantees include Merajur Rahman Baruah who is making a film on the mobile theatre of Assam, and Sashikanth Ananthachari who will make a film on the annual Draupadi Amman Mahabharatha Koothu festival that is celebrated in over 200 villages in Tamil Nadu. In Pune, playwright and scholar Makarand Sathe is embarking on research towards a book on the socio-political history of modern Marathi theatre.

We are grateful to the Infosys Foundation for underwriting part of our grant to Merajur Rahman Baruah.

Meanwhile senior Rajasthani folk musician and teacher, Nathu Khan Bagadwa, is developing a system to teach the Maand musical form to a group of young people from folk musician families from the Bikaner region.

And M K Raina – veteran theatre director and actor – is continuing with his work in reviving the Bhand Pather performance form in Kashmir. (Read an interview below with Raina on his experience of working with the children of Bhand Pather families and his plans for the future.)

### **Haddu Hakki Habba: A Carnatic Music-themed Festival for Children**

Our grant to Bangalore's Ananya GML Cultural Academy in 2007 led to the production of 13 episodes of a radio programme on Carnatic music for middle school children. This was broadcast on All India Radio, Karnataka. As a part of this project, Ananya organised the Haddu Hakki festival in Bangalore and Mysore in the last week of November. An essay and collage competition and opportunities for children to interact with senior musicians were the highlights of the festival.

IFA Assistant Programme Executive, Sumana Chandrashekar, who helped to organise the festival, reports that she was taken aback by some of the views about Carnatic music expressed by the 10 to 16 year-olds in their essays. The essays revealed an obsession with performing well in music exams, a need to defend classical music against other musical forms and a tendency to view association with Carnatic music as a 'status symbol'.

"It seems to me," says Sumana, "that our music education system is perpetuating a belief that limits the spirit of music – to religion, to exams and to performance; where learning is driven more by the need to perform than by the joy of exploring; and learning itself seems to have become an insipid process of mechanical reproduction with absolutely no sense of inquiry.

She feels that Ananya's Haddu Hakki project, where the emphasis is on cultivating a spirit of fun, acquires added relevance in such a situation.



**A collage made by one of the festival's participants**

### **Scroll Painting meets Children's Theatre**

The young members of the Kolkata-based theatre group, Jahalapala, were recently part of a workshop led by a group of patachitra performers (These performers – called patuas – sing stories with the aid of painted scrolls.) Santonil Ganguly, one of the founder-members of the Jahalapala, is collaborating with children to create a new patachitra performance based on a story by well-known Bengali writer Upendra Kishore Roy Choudhury, the grandfather of Satyajit Ray.

Malini Mukherjee, evaluator for the project, who was part of the workshop, reports that "children were exposed to the history of patachitra, its artistic context and content, its social aspects. Interestingly, they were also made aware of the demands of the market, how the art form has changed with such demands, and the artists' reaction to this." The patuas helped the children paint patas on the theme of the play.



**The first show of the performance is slated for June 2009**

## Bengali Language Initiative

Our Bengali Language Initiative is now two years old and in this time nine Kolkata-based grantees have been working on various aspects of Bengali cultural history and contemporary cultural practices in Bengal. Some of the areas covered have been: the documentation of historically valuable materials such as Bengali little magazines, materials connected with Bengali theatre and photographs portraying women from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards; scholarly research into subjects such as the connected histories of the gramophone, the radio and Bengali music or the relationship between public life and Bengali cartoons; and research towards artistic outcomes such as a travelogue on the fakirs of Bengal and their music.

A meeting of all these grantees was organised in Kolkata in mid-November to enable them to make presentations of their work to each other and share their experiences. While Bengal (including Bangladesh) is the thread running through these projects, a few grantees were interested in seeing how their projects connect to and can draw from research and documentation done in other languages on histories similar to the ones they are interested in. Most grantees found it useful to learn and raise questions about each other's work and understand how their projects are part of this larger initiative. Many were eager to share information about resources and networks with each other.

We have appointed an advisory panel that will provide us with a road map for how to take the Bengali Language Initiative forward. Watch this space for more news about the future of this unique project.

## Events and Announcements

### Vacancy at IFA

Applications are invited for the position of **Project Officer** for a IFA-administered project under our Arts Education programme. Applicants should be mature professionals with four or more years of experience in teaching, research or arts practice.

Applications must be received by **January 19**. For more details click [here](#).

### Ismat Apa Ke Naam Returns to Bangalore

Motley's *Ismat Apa Ke Naam* – a series of short performances directed by Naseeruddin Shah and based on the stories of Ismat Chughtai – will be performed in Bangalore in support of IFA.

**Date : February 4, 2009**

**Venue : Chowdiah Memorial Hall**

**Time : 7.30 pm**

Call us on 2341 2681/ 82/ 83 for information about tickets



### Abhishek Hazra's Solo Exhibition on the Social History of Science

Abhishek Hazra, who received an IFA grant to research science pedagogy in Bengali towards the creation of various artwork, will exhibit his work in Bangalore in a solo show titled *Inheritance of Alphanumeric Characters*.

Venue: Gallery Ske, St Marks Road, Bangalore

Date: January 17 to February 21.

### Caravan to perform in three cities

The French jazz quintet – Caravan – will perform in three cities in Karnataka this month. These concerts have been organised by Alliance Francaise de Bangalore and the Kannada and Culture Department, and co-ordinated by IFA. **All concerts are free.**

January 10, 7.30 pm: Alliance Francaise Bangalore

January 11, 6.30 pm: Vivekananda Hall, Mysore

January 13, 6.30 pm: MGM College, Udipi

### Retrospective of Adishakti Plays

Himalaya Herbal healthcare supported a retrospective of three Adishakti plays over December 19-21. In addition to two older plays from their repertoire the – *Impressions of Bhima* and *The Hare and the Tortoise* – the group performed Eugene Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* for the first time in Bangalore.

IFA has supported Adishakti's work since 1996 with the most recent grant funding the production of *The Hare and the Tortoise*.

### **Slant, Stance**

**Last year theatre director and actor M K Raina conducted a month-long theatre workshop with IFA support in Akingam village of Kashmir. The workshop participants were children from families that have traditionally performed Bhand Pather. Bhand Pather is a form of farcical theatre that is said to have entered Kashmir from Persia through the Muslim courts in the 14th century and then spread through the rest of north India. Kashmir's Bhand Pather has been a vibrant tradition but the form has suffered over the last two decades of unrest in the state. Raina's aim was to restore the self-confidence of the once-active performers of Akingam village as well as start a process of training children in this theatre.**

**Raina tells us more about Bhand Pather, the experience of the workshop and his future plans.**

#### ***What does a typical Bhand Pather performance consist of?***

**M K Raina:** It is an open air form performed around Sufi shrines during the annual Urs of Sufi pirs. Thousands of people gather around the shrines during the Urs. They watch the performance and pay the Bhands - sometimes with cash but mostly in kind. The Bhands also perform around Hindu temples. They go into villages during harvest time and they could turn a village courtyard or an orchard into a performance space. They climb trees, they go into houses and peep at their audience from windows, they act entirely according to their whims and fancies.

The performance starts with a wind instrument called swarnai – if you hear the sound of the swarnai, you know the performance is about to begin. The music is dominant and then there are the maskaras or jesters – there could be five or eight or or ten maskaras. They are the spirit of the performance. There is often the figure of a ruler from outside who is exploiting the natives; the jesters fool him and bring him to some kind of an understanding. He will normally speak Persian or gibberish English or Punjabi. They will speak in Kashmiri. He cannot understand them and they cannot understand him. He has a whip which creates a sound of a pistol when he cracks it and that's a very vivid element. Sometimes the stories are mythological; sometimes you find traces of the Ramayana.

Each performer has a special musical score called mukam. Each mukam has its own name and comes from the classical Sufiana qalaam tradition of Kashmir. The Bhands sometimes sing Sufiana verses too. They mix these with theatre songs and peasant songs; it's a distinct repertoire of music. They play two percussion instruments - the dhol and the nagara - along with the swarnai and thalej or cymbals.

#### ***Bhand Pather has been suppressed by militants over the last two decades. What were the greatest challenges you faced conducting the workshop in Akingam village?***

**MKR:** The performers of Akingam lost their mentor and teacher Guru Mohammed Subhan, a SNA awardee. He became a victim. The militants didn't want Subhan to perform Bhand Pather, they considered it unIslamic. They put him under house arrest for nine months. Eventually he died from extreme humiliation and shock. His death

was a big blow to the performers and they lost their self-confidence. Yet I chose Akingam village because one of the oldest Bhand theatre companies in the Kashmir valley – the Kashmir Bhagat Theatre – is based here. Also Akingam is surrounded by many heritage and sacred sites and there are villages around which also have groups performing Bhand Pather. A village called Muhurpur next to Akingam used to have Kashmiri Pandits Bhand performers but they left the village in 1990. The people of Akingam are deeply Sufi and philosophical in outlook – you start chatting with them and before you know it you are involved in an intellectual discussion on the meaning of existence.

The villagers took us in. The whole village was galvanised into action. The women started cooking for us. The young participants of the workshop staged a performance at the end of the four weeks. A huge crowd turned up from Akingam and from the surrounding villages. I am certain that this was the first time in 19 years that that such a large crowd has gathered together for a cultural event in Kashmir. Some of our friends from Srinagar who had come for the performance could not believe that such a gathering was possible without government support and without any security or police. It is also true that though we met with some resistance along the way it was minor. The militants do not oppose the Bhand Pather today as much as they used to.

***You have said: "Kashmiri children have lost their power of imagination and self-expression ...perhaps it has to do with the collapse of the education system and two decades of violence." Can you tell us how children and young people responded to the workshop and what you did to draw them out?***

**MKR:** Because of the threat of violence, children have to be indoors by 3 pm. They suffer from a lack of exposure. Nobody asks them to think for themselves, to imagine. All adults tell them is – shut up, keep quiet, don't go out because this or that will happen. A people who have traditionally lived their lives in forests and among nature have had to confine themselves to their houses. I went to the houses of Bhand performers in three or four villages and told them – look you have to send your kids for this workshop. They sent them gladly. These elders themselves visited the workshop and performed too – we had a week which was like a little folk festival. We got a flavour of Bhand from other regions of Kashmir.

When working with the boys, my collaborator Rakesh and I woke up to the fact that their bodies were not in the right proportion. There was a stiffness, a distortion, a lack of grace. I started asking myself whether these problems were due to the stresses and tensions that their mothers had gone through before the children were born or if they were a result of the atmosphere they had grown up in.

Initially, it was difficult for the boys to understand that meaningful images and ideas can be communicated just by making an instrument out of the body, like any musical instrument. But eventually they got it. Performance is in their blood after all.

***You will soon embark on a two-year IFA-supported project wherein young performers will be trained in different aspects of the form by Ustads. What are the ways in which you see these younger performers making Bhand Pather their own?***

**MKR:** I am hoping to set up a little school in Akingam. My worry has been that the elders will die. Two are very old and they are the best. I've told them – I will come to the village when you die and shower rose petals on your grave only if you've taught children. Otherwise, I'll only say you were a good man, but I won't come with rose petals!

The thing is that these Ustads have a methodology for teaching what they know, but they are very tough and they tend to get impatient. I have to teach them to be patient with young people. But they've seen me working so I think they understand the importance of making a child relax. One of my conditions is also that the children will have to continue with their formal schooling.

They will have to understand the basics of the form first. Later they can experiment. I don't necessarily want them to only perform the traditional repertoire. My dream is to do King Lear with them.

But right now the focus is on setting up this school. Akingam has been designated a heritage tourist village. The

government is making a campus where a small building has already come up which has been given to us to use as a rehearsal and teaching space. The idea behind the heritage tourist village is that since Akingam is on the way to Pehelgam and Amarnath, maybe tourists will stop here. And if they do we can perform for them.

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