



We are pleased to bring you IFA news from the past three months. Since we have, over the years, funded dozens of research and documentation projects, the subject of archives is one which naturally interests us a great deal. Read below about two recent archiving-related interventions.

Meanwhile, several IFA projects (involving performance, film, photography and installation art) have been in the public eye. Among them is Saba Dewan's just-completed film on tawaifs called *The Other Song*. Scroll down to read an interview with Saba. And also check out the catalogue for a unique IFA fundraiser called *The Big Picture*.

## Recent Projects

### Rethinking Archives

The Vadodra-based Association of Academics, Artists and Citizens for University Autonomy (ACUA) received an IFA grant to organise an international conference on **Archiving the Art Histories: Exigencies and Challenging the Pedagogy and Research** over February 5, 6 and 7.

About 50 papers were presented by academics, archivists, students and artists from all over India as well as the UK and USA. Topics presented ranged from the construction of the colonial archive, to the nature of specific archives (such as the image archive at MS University, Baroda), to the issue of archiving works produced across a single artist's lifetime.

One of the highlights of the conference was Vivan Sundaram's presentation on the use of the archive in the creation of an artistic work.

"If an archive is not made available to the people, then it not only remains unused but more importantly it remains 'unenriched'. We are living in an era where knowledge is increased through sharing."

These were the words with which Moinak Biswas, Head of the Department of Film Studies, Jadavpur University, kicked off a day-long workshop on digital archiving on March 7. This was organised jointly by IFA and the Media Lab of the Department of Film Studies, Jadavpur University, Kolkata.

Subjects covered included the role of digital archives, how to create digital archives, ethics involved in the use of these archives, and the relationship between collectors and archivists.

[Read](#) a full report on the workshop.



### Music of the Manganiars

In Jodhpur, the musician Manganiar community, under the aegis of an organisation called Rupayan Sansthan, is excavating and recording their rich repertoire. The project includes music workshops for the children of the community. The first of these was held over March 2 – 7 and involved 12 master musicians and 60 children.

Assistant Programme Executive Sumana Chandrashekar reports that while "conventionally, children 'absorb' the music as elders in the family practise and perform, the workshop atmosphere gave them an opportunity to learn from elders and masters outside their immediate family. It naturally exposed them to different masters, various styles and a diversity of songs. The children played and enjoyed their songs as they challenged their peers in an atmosphere of healthy competition. It was also an opportunity for the senior masters to jog their memory for some traditional pieces."

## Public Eye

### Prestigious Award for IFA grantee

Amit Madheshiya, who along with Shirley Abraham received an IFA grant to photograph Maharashtra's touring tent cinemas called Tambu Talkies, has recently won The Sony World Photography Award in the category Arts and Entertainment for his photographs of the Tambus. Over 60,000 entries from 139 countries were received for this year's awards. The awards will be presented in Cannes on April 14. [Read more.](#)



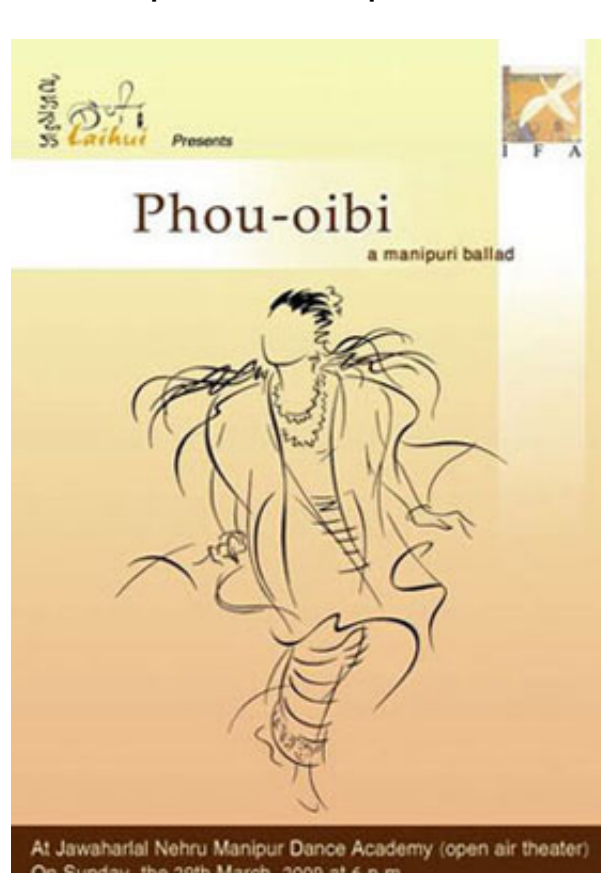
### Mangangsana Meiti's Manipuri ballad Phou-oibi was performed in Imphal on March 29

### Chronotopia in Bangalore and Chennai

The world premiere of Attakkalari's *Chronotopia* – a multi-media dance work based on the Tamil epic Chilappathikaram – was held on February 10 at Ranga Shankara, Bangalore.

The IFA-funded *Chronotopia* was choreographed by Jayachandran Palazhy and his group, and was set to an original score by French composer Mathias Duplessy (in collaboration with Carnatic musicians).

In association with Spinz, IFA also presented *Chronotopia* as a fundraiser on February 18 at The Music Academy, Chennai.



At Jawaharlal Nehru Manipur Dance Academy (open air theater) On Sunday, the 29th March, 2009 at 6 p.m. Supported by: India Foundation for the Arts, Bangalore.



## IFA-funded projects around the world

### The Other Song

Saba Dewan's documentary film *The Other Song* – the result of several years of research into and conversations with the inheritors of North India's tawaif (courtesan) artistic legacy – had its first screening at the India Habitat Centre, New Delhi on March 12.

Read an interview with Saba Dewan below.

### Death Life Etc.

Arghya Basu's *Death Life Etc.* – the second in a trilogy of films about Chham, the sacred dance theatre of Sikkim – will be screened in the Horizonte section of the international documentary film festival, Dokfest Munich (May 8 and 12; [www.dokfest-muenchen.de](http://www.dokfest-muenchen.de))

### Jangarh

Amit Dutta's *Jangarh*, a film that has emerged from his study of the artist's life and work, will premiere in the International Competition section of the 55th International Short Film Festival Oberhausen, Germany (April 30 – May 5; [www.kurzfilmtage.de](http://www.kurzfilmtage.de)).

### Family Tree

Shumona Goel's film installation – *Family Tree* – showed at Bodhi Berlin on February 5 as part of the [Forum Expanded](#) programme of The Berlin International Film Festival.

A section of *Family Tree* is showing at the International Photo Festival Knokke-Heist, Belgium between March 26 and June 7; [www.fotofestival.be](http://www.fotofestival.be).

## Events and Announcements

### The Big Picture

57 well-known as well as up and coming artists have joined hands for an art exhibition called *The Big Picture* to donate the proceeds of their work – in part or full – to IFA.

Read more about this unique effort and view the exhibition catalogue [here](#).

### ArtConnect – latest issue

Issue 4 of *ArtConnect* features an in-depth essay by Art India editor Abhay Sardesai on the many literatures of Mumbai; a graphic short story on football-mania in Kolkata; an essay on violence in Kannada films, and much more.

Write to Joyce Gonsalves at [joyce@indiaifa.org](mailto:joyce@indiaifa.org) to subscribe. The issue will soon be up for browsing on [www.indiaifa.org](http://www.indiaifa.org)

### Giselle in India

*Giselle Ki Kahani* – a dance and puppetry Indian version of the 19th century French ballet Giselle will premiere in Delhi at the Epicenter (At Apparel House, Sector 44, Gurgaon [www.epicentre.co.in](http://www.epicentre.co.in)) on April 5.

The performance has been funded by IFA, conceptualised and directed by Varun Narain and features dancer Rea Krishnatraye.

### Biraha in the folk music of Bengal

Singer-songwriter-researcher and IFA grantee Moushumi Bhowmik and sound recordist Sukanta Majumdar will present *Music as Absence, Memory and Desire: A journey through biraha in the folk repertoire of Bengal*, a performance and talk at the India International Centre, New Delhi on April 2.

[View details](#)

## Slant, Stance

**Filmmaker Saba Dewan's *The Other Song* is the result of a long journey in search of the tawaif and her musical legacy. Saba travels through Varanasi, Lucknow, and Muzaffarpur, tracing a forgotten thumri by the celebrated singer Rasoolan Bai, and in the process, introduces us to a range of feisty women characters.**

### She talks about the process of making her film

**1. You've been involved with this project for eight years. What were the most surprising discoveries you made about the present-day inheritors of the tawaif legacy when you started out?**

**Saba:** I think one of the most surprising discoveries for me in the early months of research was the extent to which families with tawaif background had moved away from the arts as well as the lifestyle and sexuality associated with the earlier tawaif tradition.

The present generation of family members of those women who had occupied the highest echelons of the tawaif community, for instance the Hindu Gandharva and the Muslim Dereydar tawaifs of Varanasi, have over the past decades generally moved into the lifestyle associated with middle class 'respectability'. The girls of these families are not exposed to any training in music or dance and have mostly been married off. The sons, because the families had the resources to afford it, have been educated and encouraged to seek jobs in the government or private sector or even begin their own businesses. There has been a deliberate attempt within these families to erase the earlier customs associated with the tawaif community. In a marked reversal of earlier practices, sons are preferred to daughters, who are now seen as liabilities fit only to be married off and 'settled'.

However the descendants of less well-off or poor tawaifs have had to make different life choices. There was an economic compulsion here for the women to continue earning for the family though not necessarily the resources or patronage to receive the intensive training in music of the earlier generations. Many of the girls in these families have therefore moved on to perform in the dance bars of Mumbai and Bangalore, in the orchestra parties that perform at family and other celebrations especially in smaller towns and in dance troupes that form the staple of the nautanki performance in its new avatar.

**2. By recalling the two different versions of a thumri that Rasoolan Bai recorded – one of which talks about wounds of the heart and the other, wounds of the breasts – you place the subject of sexuality before the film's audience in a very interesting way. Would you like to comment on this and on the response you got?**

**Saba:** The story about Rasoolan Bai's lost thumri was told to me in Varanasi by Shiv Kumar Shastri, grandson of the well-known nationalist Madan Mohan Malviya and a renowned vaidya and musician in his own right.

What is the significance of the seemingly minor difference in poetry of the two versions sung by Rasoolan Bai? Shastri ji had not enlightened me about this and in my literal understanding of jobanwa as yawan or youth/youthfulness, I could see nothing particularly reprehensible in the 1935 version sung by Rasoolan Bai.

I noticed, however, the discomfort with the term 'jobanwa' among everyone I spoke to subsequently. Several people insisted upon the literal translation that I too had given the term. Others spoke of it at a more metaphorical level, locating in the term youthfulness, playfulness, prime of life, ascendancy etc. There were still others who felt too embarrassed to discuss the term with me at all. Soon enough though I realized that in poetic usage and in colloquial use joban or jobanwa also refers to breasts, especially young women's breasts. Lagat jobanwa ma chot, jhul gendwa naa maar therefore would mean – My breasts are wounded do not throw flowers at me.

The other question that I wanted answers to was about Rasoolan Bai. She remains an enigmatic and mysterious figure in the tawaif history of Banaras. Though the response to any query related to the contribution of tawaif singers includes an almost ritual incantation of Rasoolan's name, few people, including her contemporary musicians and patrons, seemed inclined to share with me the texture of her life. I noticed the subtle ways in which attempts were made to remove Rasoolan from her tawaif lifestyle and background, now perceived as unsuitable, even unsavory. Her absence in popular memory interested me because although her career as a musician coincided with attempts by nationalist reformers to stigmatise the tawaif and her arts, Rasoolan Bai along with Siddheshwari Devi and Kashi Bai, were successful in forming the triumvirate that defined Banarasi thumri in the 20th century.

Why did Rasoolan Bai never sing the jobanwa version of the thumri again? Was it just the spur of the moment whim by the artiste? Did the fact that the jobanwa thumri (performed perhaps primarily within a small mehfil) was not being recorded for a mass audience, play a role in Rasoolan Bai's decision that were taking place in the early 20th century in the recasting of Hindustani music and of the lifestyle of its women practitioners?

Increasingly I felt that the story of the lost thumri encapsulated the many issues related to the links between the tawaif's identity as an artiste and her lifestyle and sexuality as also the transitions that had taken place and I therefore decided to structure the film around this.

**3. All the four protagonists of your film – Saira Begum, Rani Begum, Daya Kumari and Zarina Begum – hardly perform any longer and have in different ways distanced themselves from their tawaif identities. Yet they still take a lot of pleasure in the music and remember with pride the tempestuous passions they evoked (there are frequent references to knives and guns being whipped out on their behalf). Would you say something about how their view of themselves has been affected by the views of others about them?**

**Saba:** Saira Begum, Rani Begum, Daya Kumari and Zarina Begum are very different from each other as people and their views on life are individualistic though of course framed within shared circumstances.

Saira has consciously distanced herself and her family from her background. Once her children were born she stopped performing for patrons within her own house, preferring instead to perform only outside Banaras where few people knew her personally. Her extended family, which has over the decades moved away completely from any connection with their tawaif past, played a major role in putting pressure on her to avoid bringing any 'shame' upon them. Saira however loves music and her identity as a musician is central to her being and she stood up to the pressure to quit performing altogether. Her dilemma revolves around her love for music but an equally strong desire to move away from her tawaif background.

Zarina Begum has also made similar but not such conscious or complete choices as Saira Begum. An extremely gifted singer with strong emotional attachment to her music and pride in her identity as a performer, Zarina ji's choice to move away from her tawaif identity was as much a product of the social and cultural circumstances surrounding her as her personal decision. She had always performed for a select set of patrons belonging to old aristocratic families of Lucknow and its neighbouring taluqdari states. As the fortunes of this class dipped so did the occasions for her to perform. She has had the most doors to new performance venues opened to her including film and radio. However, being temperamentally steeped in the earlier tradition of a more personal relationship that existed between musicians (whether women or men) and their patrons, Zarina Begum has found the more impersonal new equations alien and difficult to negotiate.

Rani is very different from either Saira or Zarina. An extremely confident person Rani is the undisputed leader of the tawaif community in Muzaffarpur. She is now making her mark as a politician in the area. Despite the pressures of politics to conform to a 'respectable' image she is proud of her tawaif background and very open about it. I remember that when I met her initially, in deference to an unspoken rule amongst the women, I had avoided using the term 'tawaif'. Rani surprised me completely by using the term proudly for herself and was enthusiastically part of the film from the very beginning.

Daya Kumari, on the other hand, views her tawaif identity as secondary, even as an impediment to her identity as a successful theatre actor on the Calcutta stage through the 1940s. Her ambivalence towards her tawaif past is not shaped, I feel, due to a fear of stigma or sense of shame but more from a feeling that she lost her true calling as an actor because of her mother's insistence that she pursue the more lucrative career as a tawaif performer at weddings etc. Daya Kumari has a very strong sense of herself as an actor and a musician and whatever her ambivalence about being seen as a 'mere' tawaif performer feels no hesitation in embracing as her choice the non-marital sexuality of the tawaif which she feels provided her the space to pursue her calling as an artiste.

**4. The commentary is personal and in your voice, and also includes a second person 'you'**



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

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

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

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

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

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