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This issue’s cover image, ‘Once Upon a Time’, is a Polaroid photograph taken by Manas Bhattacharya. Manas says, “Polaroid will soon be extinct as a direct consequence of the advent of the digital. Polaroid factories worldwide are being shut down and the company has stopped producing Polaroid films since February this year. This image is, therefore, a requiem for Polaroid, which is not only a singular photographic format, but also a way of looking at and imagining the world.”

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Himanshu Burte, an architect and writer based in Goa, has an established interest in the poetics and politics of place-making. His first book, *Space for Engagement: The Indian Artplace and a Habitational Approach to Architecture* (Seagull Books) will appear this year and is the result of research and writing he undertook with IFA grants received in 1997 and 2003.

Manas Bhattacharya is a painter, cinematographer and photographer. He received IFA grants for new media projects in 2002 and 2008. He is currently preparing for his first solo exhibition to be held at the Seagull Arts and Media Resource Centre in Kolkata in March 2009 as well as completing his studies in cinematography from the Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute. Aria Abraham teaches literature in Darjeeling, West Bengal. A cycle of her poems—a collaboratively-produced photograph-poem palimpsest called Slow Loss—recently appeared in the online journal Crossing Rivers Into Twilight (CRIT).

Vijay Nambisan has worked and written for various Indian journals. His poems have appeared in the volume Gemini as well as in various anthologies. He is the author of *Bihar is in the Eye of the Beholder* (2000) and a long essay, *Language as an Ethic* (2003), both published by Penguin India. Nambisan’s translations of medieval Malayalam poets will be published by Penguin India this year.

Manjula Padmanabhan’s books include *Hot Death, Cold Soup, Kleptomania, Getting There, This is Sukil and Hidden Fires. Harvest*, her fifth play, won the Onassis Award for Theatre in Greece. Her comic strip character SUKI appeared weekly in Bombay’s Sunday Observer (1982-86) and daily in New Delhi’s Pioneer (1991-97). She has illustrated twenty-four books for children including her own two children’s novels *Mouse Attack* and *Mouse Invaders*. She has infrequent exhibitions of her paintings and prints, most recently at Art World, Chennai in December 2004. Visit her blog at: http://www.marginalien.blogspot.com

Urmila Bhirdikar received an IFA grant in 2005 to research the history of Marathi Farce in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. She is writing her PhD thesis on the practice of female impersonation in Marathi theatre, teaches English at The Mahindra United World College of India, Pune, and is a Hindustani music vocalist.

Rahul Ghai is an independent development processes facilitator and researcher. He has worked with the URMUL Trust and undertaken development facilitation projects for Oxfam, Plan International, Tearfund and grassroots NGOs and community organisations. In 2003 he began collaborating with the Mir community to explore if the community’s musical traditions could offer sustainable livelihood opportunities. Ghai can be contacted at: rahulconsult@gmail.com
Editorial

One of the underpinnings of IFA’s support for the arts has been the belief that this support must encompass as wide a range of arts projects as possible. We have emphasised range not just for the sake of a healthy eclecticism, nor only because we believe in creating space for multiple viewpoints, styles and languages. The range covered by our two hundred-odd grants is the result of funding programmes specially designed to address needs and lacunae in the arts that are not matched by available resources.

The authors of four of the six pieces in this issue have been funded by IFA and their essays are indicative of some of the different concerns underlying our programmes. Both Himanshu Burte and Urmila Bhirdikar were supported under our Arts Research and Documentation programme, but they come to the idea of ‘research in the arts’ from entirely different directions. Burte’s exploration of the architectural design of art-spaces is ultimately aimed at stimulating new thinking on the kinds of spaces best suited to the presentation of the arts; he thereby seeks to generate action in the spheres of both cultural policy and architectural practice. Bhirdikar’s research on Marathi theatre occupies a more straightforwardly academic space; she is creating an archive of materials as well as producing scholarly writings on aspects of the genre.

Manas Bhattacharyya has received grants under our Arts Collaboration and Extending Arts Practice programmes—both of which have facilitated arts practice in different ways. The multi-layered nature of his work, which draws on the fields of painting, digital art, photography and filmmaking, as well as his tendency to seek out collaborations with other artists, is illustrative of how these two programmes have supported artists who stretch and blur the boundaries of what otherwise tend to remain insular arts disciplines.

Also concerned with arts practice, but from the point of view of artists whose practices need a fresh lease of life, is Rahul Ghai. Under our Special Grants programme, which focuses on issues of livelihood, revitalisation and sustenance, we supported a Mir musician from the Thar desert, Mukhtiyar Ali. Ghai collaborated with Ali and his peers to recover the repertoire of Sufi music that the Mirs have traditionally performed and to place this marginalised practice on a firmer footing.

We are proud to be also carrying pieces by Manjula Padmanabhan and Vijay Nambisan. The former is well known as much for her fiction, plays and critical writing, as for her highly original artwork, some of which, along with an essay written specially for us, is featured here. Writer Vijay Nambisan’s essay on two Bhakti-era Malayalam poets is impressive for the erudition and wit with which he lays out the context of Malayalam literature. Both these pieces reflect the IFA interests discussed above, while also furthering ArtConnect’s attempt to showcase the best writing and artwork by our own grantees and others in the arts.

Anjum Hasan
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“I exist, therefore my job is done.” This, says architect and writer Himanshu Burte, is the existential stance of most artplaces in India. Burte uses the term ‘artplaces’ for public places that present the arts, such as theatres, museums and art galleries, most of which wholly fail, architecturally, to be the congenial, inviting, dynamic places they could be. One notable exception is the Kala Akademi in Panjim, Goa—the subject of this essay and a space whose “foundational act of design... is that of opening up”. 
The Open Plan of Conviviality: Kala Akademi, Goa

Text: Himanshu Burte
Images: Ameeta Mascarenhas and Himanshu Burte
Every place has a programme. Homes are shaped around the rhythms of movement and rest we call daily life. Playgrounds are empty so they may be filled by the energy and action of sport. But places can also transcend their conventional programmes. They can be much more than the common noun—house, school, post office—that describes (and usually circumscribes) them. While fulfilling their mandated programme, they may also play a role that transcends the common sense of common nouns. This transcendence may be thought of as a core responsibility in some kinds of places. For instance, one expects museums, theatres and other such spaces, devoted as they are to joining private utterance to the public, to also become sites of dialogue and loci of engagement for different players in the city. Sadly, very few places devoted to the arts do that in India. One way in which the majority of such spaces fail (and a minority succeed) to
transcend their mundane programme is through architecture. Part of the successful minority is Kala Akademi, designed by Charles Correa and sited along the river Mandovi in Panjim. The architecture of this artplace (my catch-all term referring to spaces like theatres, museums and art galleries) is the main source of its potential for transcending the narrow institutional programme common to Indian artplaces.

A small confession is in place here. I awoke to the real significance of Kala Akademi’s architectural achievement rather late. Of course, the boldness of its approach was instantly evident when I visited it from Mumbai, where I then lived, in the course of research for a book on the architecture of artplaces in India. Though sprawling wide in comparison with other engaging artplaces like Prithvi Theatre, Mumbai, I had found it a place that was easy to soak into. Less a building than a public space roofed by a building, it extended an expansive invitation without lapsing into serious monumentality. In fact, there was none of what one tends to associate with the term ‘architecture. Kala Akademi’s drama lay in its enterable, traversable space, not in sculptural, impenetrable form. But it was only after I moved to Goa and began visiting Kala Akademi regularly, that I began to understand the real nature of its architectural achievement. Three years down the line, it is clear to me that the architecture of Kala Akademi has nudged it towards becoming much more than just another multi-arts complex. I have seen art shows, performances and films there, of course. But more importantly, I have often chosen to go there, like many others, just for the pleasure of being with a sprinkling of other people in a stimulating public place. Kala Akademi is that scarce resource—a generous and truly convivial space right in the bustle of a small city.

Now that it is there, it appears almost natural that an artplace should be the riverside veranda for a city like Panjim. But look around anywhere in the country and you realise how rare such a place is. The institutional culture of cultural institutions in India is a fascinating object of study. In a moment of frustration, but without compromising our national taste for hyperbole, one may say that the worst aspects of our culture and our institutions seem to come together when we play the two words together.

To put it gently, museums (may
their tribe increase), theatres (may their tribe improve), art galleries and multi-art complexes in India are remarkably blasé about winning the affection of the very people for whom they are built. Put equally gently, it appears as if the existential stance of the majority of artplaces in India is: I exist, therefore my job is done. This deft (if dubious) conflation of ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ finds two expressions that form opposite ends of a spectrum. The ‘mature’ expression of this philosophy leads to artplaces that take a transactional view of their programme and of their duty towards artists and rasikas: buy the tickets here, that way to the exhibit an artplace is often snooty, or at least dismissive of all kinds of low-life that throngs to enjoy the goodies of culture it offers. It is devoted to upholding the prestige of culture and also to protecting it from the grubby paws of all those who want a piece of it.

Artplace architecture often offers an eager mirror to these institutional attitudes. Thus the Gallery of Contemporary Art at the Government Museum, Chennai, is simply non-committal in its expression. The bare box of a building neither invites you in nor does the default design of the exhibits try to hold your interest. It simply stands there, offering neither a space to linger at its entrance nor any

(or performance), go round the corner to search for the toilets, once you are done, leave, do not loiter (or litter). Sorry, no food, except for fifteen minutes during the ‘interval’.

The other kind of artplace builds on the self-congratulation implicit in the conviction that merely existing is the same as doing your job well. Such visual pleasure to arrest your flight. Like an employee warming his seat enough so a paycheck lands at his table, the building seeks to fulfill its programme by merely existing.

The architecture of more elite spaces like the National Centre for the Performing Arts is more purposively directed. Built in the 1980s, it
seeks to invoke the fading prestige of an abstract Western modernism by offering 'pure form'—that is, elegant building blocks that have the minimum differentiation, do not appear very penetrable, and therefore actively refuse us any purchase on their meaning. By opening each of the four main buildings on campus in different directions (and on to three different roads), it also ensures (probably unwittingly) that visitors to one facility never encounter those coming to another one. By looking over the heads of visitors and by disabling contact and solidarity among them, it succeeds in keeping them peripheral to the life of the institution, at bay Books, 1976). He calls it a 'convivial' institution, as opposed to another kind that he calls the 'manipulative' institution. The difference between these two types, again occupying two ends of a spectrum, is fundamentally about the sense of control and choice given to the user. Convivial institutions, as Illich characterises them, are basically open in programme within realistic limits. Sidewalks, small bakeries, telephone networks are the examples he invokes. People use them voluntarily. They need neither aggressive advertisement nor force (the way manipulative institutions like schools do) for people to want to use them. More importantly, convivial institu-

even, in more ways than one.

Rare is the Indian artplace that, like Prithvi Theatre, Mumbai, actively reaches out, says 'come in', and lets you decide how you want to have a good time. Ivan Illich, implacable critic of institutional culture, has a nice term for the Prithvi kind of institution (De-schooling Society, Pelican tions involve users in activity rather than reducing them to passive consumers. Not surprisingly, therefore, they empower users and help them grow in personal terms. The question then is: what kind of architecture would be supportive of the agenda of conviviality?

The design of Kala Akademi’s
public spaces provides some answers. The foundational act of design at Kala Akademi is that of opening up. The architecture of Kala Akademi clears the ground, literally, letting the gaze (and moving feet) sweep clean through from the pavement outside to the river beyond. In principle, this place says it is open to the city. No architectural sign of exclusion is visible from the footpath to discourage us from entering—apart from the gate which is kept generously wide and low. This is a building without a plinth, walls and doors with which to keep the world at bay. The ground simply runs in into the shaded heart of the building and out to the open beyond of the garden and promenade by the river. The building extends a notional porch to the pavement, made suggestively grand by a pergola at the roof level of the first floor. This suggestion of a dramatically welcoming civic ‘porch’ (and not some impenetrable sculptural mass) is the big architectural gesture of the building in the direction of the city.

The gesture is apt, since the Kala Akademi building is fundamentally a pavilion (or unattached porch), where the upper floors housing the academic and administrative spaces form a continuous roof over a sprawling and unenclosed public space at the ground level. A pavilion transcends enclosure, and thereby also the paranoia (and schizophrenia?) of the closed building box. In abjuring walls, it also transcends the strict enforcement of any limited programme of use, leaving the dweller of the moment to fashion it anew each time. I have seen films, performances (including my son’s school’s ‘annual day’ programme in the huge open-air theatre) and art exhibitions
at Kala Akademi. I have also been in a small reading group that appropriated different spaces in the campus for its weekly meetings. And I have watched my son turn the seat-clusters sprinkled across the covered plaza into play-sculptures that may be climbed, jumped off, peeped through, and slid across with a forever incomplete hug. At all times, I have learnt to be amazed at the way the static seat-clusters become dynamic people-sculptures as bodies perch, nestle and depart.

Openness of space does not itself guarantee an open programme. The absence of walls and of enclosure can itself be repressive, as at Le Corbusier's Capitol Complex in Chandigarh, where we find ourselves cast adrift. Places need to have discernible shape and structure. The fragile body—forever breaking out into sweat—needs shelter, seat, and yes, food. The eye likes to make sense of every place, and know what time it is 'outside'. Most of all, however, in a place like Kala Akademi, every one of us hopes for some contact with unknown others. What is the city, and every public place within it, if not a mechanism for putting strangers in touch with each other?

By sheltering an uninterrupted space, Kala Akademi reveals that space can be fruitfully left open in either direction, vertical or horizontal. Where the typical comforting courtyard (an example of vertical openness) gathers a space together towards an inveigled centre, the horizontal freedom of Kala Akademi's covered plaza prompts us to move away and out towards the gardens, the river and other sun-dappled spaces around. There is no single centre that the architecture sacralises on the ground,
and no sense of any agent with the power to say 'no' waiting to jump out from behind some wall. Instead, there is a multiplicity of centres in the gridded spread of columns as well as the casual scatter of seat-clusters configured to be minor sculptural presences. These seats are an unusual kindness towards the tiring body hanging around for the show to start, or restart. Or just plain hanging around with no particular productive end in mind.

When a public space is open in (and to) many senses, and also kind to the body (and being), can urbanity be very far? The canteen (deep inside by the rear garden, but visible very early on through the penetrable covered plaza of the foyer) offers other kind-

nesses. A beautiful view, breeze from the river, an inside-outside ambiguity (inside because covered, outside because of the breeze, and the dogs and crows who stand by patiently), loose chairs to allow different group-sizes, and food for cheap. The canteen—the only one I have seen that actually begs to be called a café—is where the action is, some action or the other. The late William Whyte, social scientist and student of what makes public spaces tick across the world, put it very simply. People attract other people, he said. And people come to a place that is kind and hospitable to them. They then bring along other people and make a place buzz, which in turn makes even more people want to come there. And so on.

A matrix of spatial hospitality encourages people to bring a space like Kala Akademi alive. It invites them to invest their imagination and time to do things within its space that the most creative institutional
programmer may never catalyse. These small practices of conversation, argument, dream-selling, solo rehearsal, etc., are the cultural foundations upon which the formal artistic efforts being shaped in the academic spaces on the upper floors (or being presented professionally behind the auditorium walls) will stand or fall. But being inevitably conducted under the radar of the official gaze, these practices—lubricated effectively by cheap, good tea and snacks—populate the fringes of institutional acceptability. They can swing from being 'simply irrelevant' to 'avoidable nuisances' to 'possibly subversive'.

According to a new and prominently displayed notice, it is no longer legit to use the Kala Akademi canteen for any other purposes than 'availing of snacks and refreshments': no unauthorised meetings, no business to be discussed, no nothing, period.

Architecture cannot cure social ills. But it can push for health. This is one government-run building that just cannot be locked up, except at its gates as they do during the International Film Festival of India every year. Kala Akademi also shows how much ground architecture can claim for conviviality. Traditions of institutional management can still win of course. Some time ago, during a recreational visit to the place, I was amazed to find the large main toilet block locked. Enquiry revealed that an administrative order had decreed that this hitherto taken-for-granted facility would only be kept open while a performance was underway in either the main Dinanath Mangeshkar auditorium or the Black Box. I would have to use the much smaller toilet placed outside the building by the parking lot. I was glad it was not raining. Of course, it probably made perfect sense from many different angles. Except that it went directly against the very welcome writ large over the 80,000 square feet or so of space outside that comparatively small, even if generously red-tiled toilet block. The contest for conviviality is on at this artplace (as it always is, everywhere). Watch that space.
Manas Bhattacharya explores the resonances between painted, photographed and digital images in order to develop what he describes as "a new paradigm of transdisciplinary image-making practice". In 2002 he received an IFA grant to create a body of digital artwork in collaboration with two other artists. Based on images produced during that project, this visual essay stitches together photographs of two, often conflicting, traditions of representing the body—the clay idols of the Hindu pantheon made by the artisans of the Kumartuli area in North Kolkata, and the male and female mannequins displayed in shop windows in metropolitan India. A third group of painted-over digital composites of the Kumartuli photographs extends the scope of the essay from film to digital.

The essay is imagined as complex, multi-layered interaction between image and text, image and image, and between texts. The function of the text is neither illustrative nor descriptive—it instead aspires to open up a fragile, liminal space somewhere between discursive writing and poetry, without becoming one or the other.
Bitter Bodies: A Catalogue of Incompleteness

A work-in-progress

Images and Design: Manas Bhattacharya
Text: Aria Abraham and Manas Bhattacharya
A text is not a text
unless it hides
from the first comer,
from the first glance,
the laws of its composition
and the rules of its game.

Jacques Derrida, *Plato's Pharmacy*
digging for a structure of oppositions.
of correspondences.
echoes and mirrors.
replications that whisper to and become another.
frame that cuts through divine anatomy.

here film.
there digital.
treatment that transforms.
cropping. overlay.
persistent becomings.
image born of image.
image within image.
without. against. between.
chain reaction.
image in progress.
image in process.
relentless.
infinite.
irreducible.
clay. wet, therefore pliant.
dry clay. stressed. cracking up.
promise of a vein in one frame.
a crevice in the next.
body as form. body as code. syntax.
clay dries. the code hardens and cracks.

body as landscape. techtonics.
and, a possible cartography.

photographs of aging. aging of photographs.
this summer, photographs will shed their skin.
bodies that matter.
for faith. for fashion.
body, but not quite.
incomplete.
anthology of discrete parts.
part for the whole.
synecdoche.
limb. torso. breast. muscle. curve.
catalogue of an infernal factory.
or, perhaps, floating in bell jars.
formalin.

handmade to photochemical to digital.
organic to synthetic to virtual.
successive mutations.
thinning dimension.
three. two. scan.
binary language.
depletion of the tactile.
trompe l'oeil.
hands human knead clay to forms more than human hands that make earth and water flesh.
clay that becomes brittle skin.
Arid skin like parched land.
So much summer.

Made by hand,
Unmade by water.
The birth of gods.
Momentarily so.
So that they can die.

Clay to clay.
Ceaseless cycle.
A flicker of divinity between.
unbreakable,
from the factory to the shop window.
machines sculpting bodies.
always alike, burnished, ageless.
plastic congregation.

skin that doesn’t weather.
synthetic,
immutable.
no seasons for plastic.
so unassailable.

impervious to time.
for water, impermeable.
ever a breach.
fissure proof.
thus linear.
hence absolute
death of theatre.

sensual gods.
absent organs.
clothes, horses.
nude, headless.
perfect form.
neutered yet erotic.
idealised but incomplete.
seduction lurking in dearth.
virile because lifeless.
fecund since dead.
archive of desire.
museum of lack.

all museums are graveyards.
all photographs are laments.
repository of the dead.
records of evanescence.
embalming.
anointing.
consecrating.
space swallowing space. arcade for guild.
look preying on look. food chain. calcutta. kolkata. anywhere.
man, made in the image of god. one way of seeing for another.
man, made in the image of mannequins. ubiquitous.
Kumartuli to supermarket. next season.
life as relentless window-shopping.
what is a photograph if not a gaze?
this look hovering on soft curvature.
on the swell of muscles.
projecting.
giving meaning.
evacuating.

desire in the eye.
gendered eye.
gay. normative.
performance.
juxtaposition.
taboo.
window-shopping.
And, of course, a certain Robert Mapplethorpe...

what if you did not know the image maker? would the rustle of the look tell you who was looking?
Two literary works from medieval Kerala—the Jnāna-pañña and the Nārāyanīyam—illuminate the way Malayalam and Sanskrit intertwine in the linguistic history of Kerala. These epic works by the poets Pūntānam and Mēlpattūr respectively, also express a deep personal bhakti without being representative of the Bhakti movement. “What makes a language sacred?” asks Vijay Nambisan and goes on to explore this question from a number of fascinating perspectives, taking into account his own position as a writer in English and a translator of Malayalam literature.
Two Measures of Learning

Vijay Nambisan
Any audience whatever is sufficient for one who has been too long silent. On the day that the rhetorician Gymnastoras came out of prison, full of suppressed dilemmas and syllogisms, he stopped before the first tree he met with, harangued it, and put forth very great efforts to convince it.

I have never studied Malayalam formally. My parents made me literate in the language when I was very young, but those rudiments were soon overlaid by the English and Hindi which were my first and second languages at school. I was a maranaadan Malayali—an out-of-towner, as they say in Kerala—and had never lived for more than two months at a time in my home state until 1998. Since then I have attempted to understand the language, and its structure, better.

Yet Malayalam is a highly diglossal language, much more so than any of its northern sisters. The farther south you go in India, I think, the further apart grow the written and spoken languages. In Tamil and Malayalam, to be literate is not the same thing as to be educated. I can barely comprehend the newspapers, and most literary texts are closed books to me. I have to be content with what I have, lacking the plastic brain of a Max Müller. In any case, it will take me all of this present lifetime to attain some mastery over English.

I don’t really know Sanskrit either. It was my third language in school, but there a sāstrikal taught it by rote and repetition rather than by reason. I still feel much regret that I did not have a better teacher. It wasn’t until well past the age of indiscretion that I learned to follow Sanskrit to its spring, and also follow all the Indo-European languages to that same source.

Bhakti but not Bhakta

There was no television when my parents were children. Their entertainment of an evening was rooted in their own culture. Their evenings were spent in the unnmaram—the veranda—reciting verses, or listening to stories told by their elders. My father thus memorised the entire Bhagavad Gitā in his boyhood. Though they have not lived in Kerala for half-a-century now, the Kerala culture was so deeply absorbed that English, and Delhi and Bombay, and Tamil Nadu and Bangalore, and television, are only a veneer—thick, but yet a veneer. And though the

culture of their childhood was wholly Malayali, its languages were equally Malayalam and Sanskrit, so intertwined that they could not then have told one from the other.

That has been my great disadvantage: Born and brought up outside Kerala, and educated in an English-medium school, I could not discover my love for my mother’s tongue or for philology at all until it was too late for formal learning. My first language is English and will remain so.

Two works, the *Jnāna-paana* and the *Nārāyaṇīyam*, are familiar to practically every Malayali. I would have said ‘every’ if I were writing this in 1990. The last fifteen years have changed the cultural climate. Yet no one brought up in Kerala can escape the late P. Leela’s piercingly sweet rendition of the *daśaka* (decade) from *Nārāyaṇīyam* that I have attempted to translate, or *Jnāna-paana* in the same voice. No tourist can, either, because they ring out from every temple at dawn and dusk.

I learned the *daśaka* from my father when I was a child. He would recite it sometimes at my bedtime, or when I was ill, and explicate it too, but I don’t remember understanding it then. I first *listened to Jnāna-paana* in 1992, at my sister’s wedding. I asked what it was, and was wonder-struck to hear it had been written four hundred years earlier. It was still so fresh, so contemporary. It talked of things happening in our world, not someone else’s. It *communicated*. It spoke to me. I wanted to put some of that wonder into English, so my peers could read it. It has nothing new to say philosophically, maybe, but old Pūntānām’s voice still rings as if he had said these things yesterday.

Mélpatūr’s *Nārāyaṇīyam* is of a different order. He was a classical scholar and probably dreamed in Sanskrit verse. There is no chance at all of my conveying the majesty, the *gāmbhiryam*, the style and purity, of his language.

These are poems of Bhakti but I am not a *bhakta*. I think the Bhakti philosophy, *as applied*, is the bane of Indian society today—second only to the caste system. Bhakti once meant doing without priests and rituals. Dilip Chitre writes in his Notes to *Says Tuka*, his selected translations from Tukārām:

...Bhakti for the Varkaris is a direct relationship with Pandurang without any mediation... It is obvious that the devotees experience their God in a human form and conceive their relationship with him and their own relationship with one another as a 'family' or 'community' bond in this-worldly terms. For them an act of worship is a reward in itself: It is an experience of God here and now, making the 'other world' irrelevant or redundant.1

This expresses very well an experience and a bond I have never quite been capable of. In the modern context, it seems to me, Bhakti means an unreasoning and uncritical faith, however profound. Tukārām and the other Bhakti poets were rarely uncritical and never unreasoning. The Bhakti Movement—or Movements, for they occurred at different times and took different shapes in various parts of India and that is where our perversions of Bhakti have brought us.

To some extent, perhaps, faith over reason was needed in the 8th century CE for the revival of the Vedic religion. But it was not the Vedic religion that was revived. It was very different, a softer acceptance of things as they are. Iravati Karve says in one of her essays in Yugânta, which I never tire of quoting:

Between the 9th and 12th centuries, a curious new literary language developed in Kerala. Called Mañipravâlam, it was, very roughly, half Tamil and half Sanskrit. The earliest Kerala literature which was not Tamil was composed in Mañipravâlam, and it continued to evolve.

—transformed our cultures: our literatures, our musical forms, our very languages. They succeeded because they asked pertinent and necessary questions. Are those questions being asked today? Can they be?

In the first of his Father Brown stories, "The Blue Cross", GK Chesterton has his Roman Catholic priest-detective unmask the criminal—who has been masquerading as a priest—with the words, "[He] attacked reason. It's bad theology." The necessary end of unreasoning faith is fanaticism, after the Mahabharata period why did all literature become so soggy with sentiment? The ancients daily prayed to the Sun, "Keep our intellect always on the go like a horse whipped by the master." How could the descendants of these very people be content to hand over their thinking powers into the keeping of a guru?

The philosophy which had as its basic premise an interrogation of the status quo was itself, over the centuries, co-opted by the status quo. The corruption at the heart of the Indian

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![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

polity has its roots in Bhakti. Our politicians may loot and murder with a clear conscience, because they perform a puja morning and evening. If they do their duty to God, they owe none to their fellow citizens.

That is also the story of Ajāmila in the Bhāgavatam. Ajamila was a miserable, cowardly rake who never did a good deed in his life. On his deathbed, though, he happened to utter the name 'Nārāyaṇa', which was his favourite son's. Because it is also the Lord's name, he went to Heaven. This story is told approvingly, as a proof of the power of Bhakti. With Ajamila as a role model, how can our countrymen do otherwise?

All this on my mind, how can I yet be interested in translating Bhakti poems?

**Tamizh and Sanskṛtam**

Until well after the Cankam or Sangam era (up to about 400 CE), what is now Kerala was a part of Tamizhakam—the Tamil country—culturally even when not politically. Many literary works which are part of classical Tamil literature were composed by writers from this western region. The Tamil masterpiece Silappatikāram is said to have been written by a Kerala prince, Iḷanka-Aṭikal, but its date as a Sangam work is disputed. The Tamil spoken in Kerala slowly evolved into a distinct form. After all, much of the boundary between the two territories is marked by high hills with few passes, and once an independent political power established itself in Kerala the cultural differences became more pronounced.

Between the 9th and 12th centuries, a curious new literary language developed in Kerala. Called Maṇipravāḷam, it was, very roughly, half-Tamil and half-Sanskrit. The earliest Kerala literature which was not Tamil was composed in Maṇipravāḷam, and it continued to evolve. Perhaps this was for political reasons. Through most of the 11th century, the Cōla empire, which was the dominant force in the Tamil country, was at war with the Gērēs or Kulaśēkharas in the west. The war ravaged Kerala; the whole economy and society were geared for armed conflict. At the end of the century, by processes that are not quite clear, the Nampūṭiriris held the balance of cultural power in Kerala.

The Nampūṭiriris (pronounced and usually spelled, as a surname, Namboodiri) are generally supposed to be the Aryan brahmins who settled in Kerala, probably well before the Christian era began. According to legend, St Thomas' earliest converts were the members of one hundred (some say four hundred) Nampūṭiriri families. That was in the 1st century,
and the descendants of that congregation are what came to be called the Syrian Christians.

At the beginning of the 12th century, the Chera empire was fragmented; but the kingdoms of Kerala were also free forever of Tamil suzerainty. However, the society and economy were drastically altered. The jānnī system of land-owning was in force, and the Nampūtiris were the biggest landowners in the country. (They remained so in Travancore until a strong king, Mārtâṇḍa Varma, centralised power in the second half of the 18th century; and in the rest of Kerala until the redistribution of land in the late 1950s by a Communist government headed, poignantly, by a Nampūtiri, E.M.S. Namboodiripad.) They were the arbiters of all moral and religious—and often political—issues. Marumakkattāyam, or the system of inheritance by the sister's son, was the dominant social dynamic. The Nampūtiris remained patrilineal, but by the custom of sambandham, or non-matrimonial conjugal alliances, they were connected to and had influence over the ruling clans. The varṇa or caste system, of which Tamizhakam had as a whole been relatively free, was in force. The co-existence of patrilineal and matrilineal systems, and the alliances which continued to be formed across the varṇa divide, led to a bewildering proliferation of castes and sub-castes in late medieval Kerala. It was with good reason that Vivekananda referred to the province as a veritable madhouse of castes.

The brahmins of Tamizhakam—the Iyengars and Iyers—have had a profound influence on Tamil culture, but relatively little upon the language. Perhaps this is because Tamil was a fully formed literary and popular language even before the brahmins came so far south. In Kerala, however, the rise of brahmin power coincided with the development of an indigenous language. Hence, perhaps, the high proportion of Sanskrit words in Malayalam.

Its Tamil antecedents are very clear from its structure, its inflections and from many thousands of roots. Some appear to have disappeared, in popular usage, from the mother language. (Some, bewilderingly, which are in current use in Tamil are archaisms in Malayalam.) The script too—the old vaṭṭezhuttu or round-letter script was early discarded in favour of the Grantha used in south India for writing Sanskrit—has distinct similarities with the Tamil. But the vocabulary is highly Sanskritised, so much so that even today, practically any Sanskrit word may be used in the literary language.

Until well into the 18th century, Sanskrit was the court language of both Kerala kingdoms, Travancore
(Tiruvitānkuḻh) and Cochin (Kocci). But there is a small but appreciable fraction of Malayalam words that cannot be traced to either Tamil or Sanskrit. It is of course probable that some are indigenous; but modern research indicates that many derive from the Jain Prākṛts. Sravanabelagola in Hassan district of Karnataka is not very far from the Kerala border, and in the 4th century BCE the emperor Chandragupta Maurya followed his preceptor there, the Jain saint Bhadrabāhu, to starve himself to death. The Jains travelled all over south India searching for retreats, and, incidentally, making converts. It is well established that many currently Hindu temples in Kerala were once Jain or Buddhist shrines, and the same has been shown of the Tamil country.

Malayalam is one of the youngest Indian literatures. Yet it is about twice as ancient as the earliest readily comprehensible form of English. Pūntānam was born seventeen years before Shakespeare. His texts are more accessible to the lay Malayali than Shakespeare is to the lay Englishman.

To say this is not to beat the patriotic drum. I have had more vitriol flung in my face than any of my peers who writes in English, for my insistence that English is an Indian language. I am placing 16th century Kerala literature in context, in so far as my limited scholarship allows. Pūntānam’s scholarship was limited too. In his very simplicity, it can be argued, lies his enduring appeal. (Shakespeare was no scholar either: He had “little Latin, and less Greek”. There is a subaltern triumph here which I am too poor a scholar to crow over successfully.)
Pūntānam and Mēlpattūr

Vasco da Gama landed in north Kerala in 1498, and the next century-and-a-half in Kerala history is called the Portuguese period. It was a traumatic time. Kerala had not been politically unified since the fall of the Kulashekharas four centuries earlier, and now it was never to be. The Zamorin (originally Sāmudrī Rājā, or Lord of the Sea) of Calicut (Kōzhikkōde) had been consolidating power in his hands, but the advent of the Portuguese with their cannons and rite, seeking to impose the spiritual control of the Pope of Rome. To the Muslims of course they gave no quarter. They disrupted the centuries-old trade with Arabia and Africa: Henceforth the spices of Kerala would go to Europe. The Portuguese also fomented internecine strife in the country. They reduced the Zamorin to a vassal, broke his sea power, and propped up petty kings.

In hindsight, though, the Portuguese made one valuable contribution. They broke the back of the caste system. The lower castes were moti-

Mēlpattūr did not care for the vulgar tongue. His joy was the full bloom of Sanskrit verse. His masterpiece is Nārāyaṇīyam—one hundred daśakas or decades which tell Krishna’s life and, in brief, the story of each of Vishnu’s avatars. It is the last great hurrah of classical Sanskrit.
both were Nampaṭīris—Aryan brahmins, as generally though perhaps mistakenly considered—their careers were as different as may be imagined. Sanskrit learning was a necessity to the Nampaṭīris until well into the last century. However, Pampaṭāna was a dud. He never could attain to scholarship. That is why he wrote in Malayalam.

But what Pampaṭāna lacked in Sanskrit, his junior Melpattur gloriously made up for. He was exceptional even in an age—in a sequence of many ages—when privilege threw up prodigies by the score. The Aṭṭiṭṭāmaḷa, a compilation of Kerala legends, histories and folklore from a century ago (excellently retold in English by Abraham Eraly as Once Told Tales, Penguin, 2007), gives many proofs of Melpattur’s mastery of all forms of Sanskrit scholarship and, what is rarer, composition.

Melpattur did not care for the vulgar tongue. His joy was the full bloom of Sanskrit verse, of that purity and all too often many-meaninged intricacy which it would still baffle modern scholars to parse, and will never admit of an equal. His masterwork is Nārāyaṇiḷiyam—one hundred daśakas or decades which tell Krishna’s life and, in brief, the story of each of Vishnu’s avatars. It has been called the concise Bhāgavatam (Melpattur is said to have known the Bhāgavatam by heart), but as a work of poetry it soars above anything written since Jayadeva. It is the last great hurrah of classical Sanskrit.

Very often, in post-classical Sanskrit, writers contented themselves with delightful sounds, letting the sense take care of itself. In a way that was Kalidasa’s fault. He used the language so marvellously that his successors were driven to imitate him, and that was not an easy thing to do. They mistook the form for the marvel itself, and tied themselves up in tropes and alliteration.

It needs a really remarkable mind to rise above that kind of thing. Sankara had one, but he wasn’t into literary composition. The post-classical
...in the class where each quarter [of a quatrain] contains six syllables, each of the six syllables may be either short or long, and thus the number of possible combinations is... 26 = 64, though not even half a dozen are in general use; so in the case of the twenty six syllabled class, the possible variations are 226 or 87,108,864. ³

That's a misprint, it's a mere 67 million and odd. Mēlpattūr must have commonly used some fifty or sixty vṛttams, all of them with consummate ease.

Mēlpattūr paid, though, for his mastery. Rather, he paid for his arrogance, for contemporary accounts leave no doubt that his genius made him proud. Whatever the reason, he was stricken in his twenties by a disease that seems to have been a rare form of arthritis. His peers were sure he had been punished for his pride. He was never to be free from the disease.

For one hundred days and one hundred nights, it is said, in his twenty-seventh year, Mēlpattūr prayed and did penance at the great temple of Guruvāyūr. During that time he composed ninety-nine daśakas of his great work, and on the one-hundredth night he was rewarded by the visvarūpa, or vision of the cosmic form of Krishna. This he described, in unparalleled Sanskrit, in his one-hundredth daśaka. Accor-

ding to tradition, this towering act of Bhakti—and perhaps of catharsis—freed him of his ailment. But not forever.

Püntānam had not been idle in these years. Denied the heights of the Aryan tongue, and therefore the acclaim of his peers, he poured out his bhakti in his country’s language. He composed a few long poems in Malayalam: notably Śrīkṛṣṇa Karnāṃṭam and Santāṅgōpālam. Perhaps they would not be so well known today were it not for his Jñāna-paana. Jñāna-paana is not only his masterpiece but, for another reason as well, a foundation stone of Malayalam literature.

The story is a good one, and beloved in Malayalam folklore. Püntānam and Mēlpattūr were both Krishna-bhaktas, and habitués of the Krishna temple at Guruvayur. (Guruvayur’s pre-eminence among Kerala’s holy places dates from their time and owes much to their works.) Püntānam and Mēlpattūr, naturally, knew each other. Mēlpattūr though younger was universally considered the greater poet. One day, it must have been in about 1590, Püntānam humbly approached the Sanskrit poet and requested him to listen to the Malayalam work which he had just completed. Mēlpattūr scorned all who wrote in the lesser language, and vented that scorn on Püntānam.

That night, goes the story, Mēlpattūr was afflicted by a severe relapse of his disease. As he writhed in pain, Krishna appeared to him and told him that Püntānam’s bhakti was dearer to the Lord than Mēlpattūr’s vibhakti (erudition). As far as I know there is no record that Mēlpattūr did listen to Jñāna-paana, or that he was thereafter less unbending with Malayalam writers. The acceptance of Malayalam as Kerala’s language owes something to this story.

It must be pointed out that the poems of neither Püntānam nor Mēlpattūr that I have been translating approach Mr Chitre’s definition of bhakti as a “direct relationship with” God. Neither poet talks to his chosen deity as Tukārām does to Vithoba. Püntānam’s poem is a straightforward relation of the advantages of the way of Bhakti, of its undemanding nature. Mēlpattūr’s is an equally straightforward description of his vision of the Lord. Neither poet holds any communion with God.

But the Bhakti cult, the wave of religious freedom that had swept over northern India in the previous two or three centuries, was not needed as such in the south. All that personal relationship with God’ doctrine which was the backbone of the movements—as preached by Kabīr, Mīrā, Ėknāth, Sūrdās, Nānak, Jñanēśwar, Nāmdeo, Tukārām—was old hat in
Tamizhakam. When Kalidasa and the others were composing classical drama (by conventional chronology), the Sangam poets, and later the Āzhvārs and Nāyanārs—the Vaishnava and Śaiva saints—were writing personal poems of great depth and beauty to their gods.

Therefore, Pūntānam and Mélpattūr's poems must not be read as expressions of a bhakti movement, but as personal expressions of their own Bhakti. That they became lived to a ripe old age, eighty-five at least. He continued to compose in Sanskrit, and was always remarkable for his mastery of the language, the speed of his composition and the facility of his invention. Because of Narāyaṇīyam, he is counted among the Bhakti poets; but he is unique in combining devotion with scholarship. His Prakriyasarvasva (said to have been written in sixty days) is a commentary on Paṇini's scheme of grammar; the Kriyakrama studies

Pūntānam and Mélpattūr's poems must not be read as expressions of a Bhakti movement, but as personal expressions of their own Bhakti. That they became so popular, to the exclusion almost of any of their peers, only testifies to their genius. For both poets were brahmins, and did not need anyone, according to the varna code, to intercede for them.

so popular, to the exclusion almost of any of their peers except Ezhuthachan, only testifies to their genius, and to the remarkable coincidence by which each seized the same historical moment in literature. One more point: Both poets were brahmins, and did not need anyone, according to the varna code, to intercede for them.

Despite his disease—perhaps he did read Pūntānam's work, and the Lord tempered his wrath—Mélpattūr Nampūtiris domestic ritual. His devotional works include Sripadasaptati in praise of the Goddess. Mélpattūr was patronised by kings, and wrote works they had commissioned. He also composed a number of librettos for the folk Chakkiyār-Kūṭtu performances. Typically, defying the trends of his day, these were in Sanskrit.

Pūntānam was, as I said, not idle either in the ninety-three years that
he lived. In his late thirties he had suffered a tragedy. His first and long awaited son was born. There was a chöräŋu arranged, an anna-praśnam (the first-rice ceremony), which is held when the baby is about six months old. Puntānām hailed from a rich and mighty illam, or Nampūtiri house. Family and friends came by the dozen. The baby had been left to lie in an obscure corner of the room in the ladies’ quarters where female guests were welcomed. They threw off their upper cloths there, and as it happened the cloths fell one by one on the child, smothering him to death.

Puntānām composed Jnāna-paana soon after. There is one couplet therein which sums up his grief and his acceptance:

Unṇikrishṇan manassil kaḷikkumbol
Unṇikal vērē vēṇamō makkalai

which is Englished

When the boy Krishna is playing in the mind
What need then for other children of our own? (lines 295-6)

It is probable that the death of his first son inspired Puntānām to write Jnāna-paana. Only an abiding faith could uphold him. But he lived a long life and had many other sons, and wrote many more famous poems.

Votaries of bhakti would point to that as proof of the power of devotion. Puntānām’s illam is still a place of pilgrimage.

The tale of Mēlpattūr’s scorning of Puntānām is certainly historical, as much as anything of late medieval India which is not about kings and battles, or engraved on beaten copper, may be considered historical. It is a story that is ever fresh in the Malayali mind. The Sanskrit vocabulary is still an integral part of Malayalam, and Sanskrit learning is esteemed, still, even more than knowledge of computer programming; but it is unquestionable that something in that story forever freed the Malayali of cultural shackles.

May I now say something about shackles, cultural and self-imposed?

“Gaccha, Gaccha”

What makes a language sacred? What gives it that quality of holiness when to use it is to profane it?

Age, usually; and otiosity. The earliest Vedic hymns are living, breathing poems because they were composed in a living, breathing tongue. The Vedic people had, as far as we know, no other language. The speech of their magic and ritual was also that of daily use. There was really no distinction between the religious and secular when all the world was new.
But the language fossilised as old customs must, even when they are good. Younger, more muscular Prâkârs sprang up for the expression of living, breathing people, and Sanskrit became inaccessible, even unnecessary. (It was also a storehouse of knowledge, but of knowledge that could not be changed or adapted.) It is more than two and a half millennia since Sanskrit ceased to be a popular language, and nothing was done for more than a thousand years to resurrect it.

That the Buddha spoke in simple language and in the common tongue helped spread his teachings. Surely, too, the simplicity of those teachings energised the common tongue. What was Sanskrit doing in the millennium when the Prâkârs flowered? We have Panini's grammar—elegant, unsurpassed in logic and science until the 19th century in Europe, but not for the multitude; we have the Yôga Sûtras of Patañjali or others—important, but recondite; we have, possibly, Vâtsyâyana's Kâmâsûtra—essential knowledge, but esoteric, surely a world-beater had it been written in a Prâkârs; and we have classical drama.

When our dance, drama and literary forms modernised rapidly in the last century or so—due to a variety of factors—we found a framework ready to support them, through their changes, in the Nâtya-Sàstra. But the scriptural status Bharata Muni's work had been given was, previously, a hindrance to all change for two millennia. After Nâtya-Sàstra, no shades of grey were possible in Sanskrit literary composition. Nobody could operate outside it; nobody did, at least. Heroes were all good, villains all bad, heroines always pure and hard done by. If the hero did something wrong it was because of a divine curse or loss of memory. Good always won in the end, evil always came away with hanging head or worse. That dramatists of the calibre of Kalidasa took this seriously shows perhaps the power of the formula that Sanskrit had become.

Modern audiences prefer Sudraka's play Mrchakaṭika to the so-called classical dramas. Sudraka was a king, but his characters speak Sanskrit only in the formal court scenes. (Sanskrit had become a lingua indica, a language of diplomacy and communication across borders—no more.) Good does win in the end, but incidentally. The people are real, and speak as real people do. A language not rooted in the common speech cannot survive except as a curiosity.

It was Sankara and some of his peers and successors who restored vitality to Sanskrit, and they did that by giving it back the intellectual vigour which defines the Rg Vedic hymns and the Upaniṣads. It is no coincidence that they at the same
time restored the religion whose vehicle Sanskrit was. But that was after 800 CE, and the Prākṛts had by then become distinct, vibrant languages all over the north, with literatures of their own or at least the beginnings of them. In the south the Dravidian languages and literatures were long established; even Malayalam, the youngest, was being born.

Malayalam is a Prākṛt, but born of two languages which are both classical. (This is probably true of Kannada and Telugu as well, but they are older and prouder languages which disdain the Prākṛt tag.) What could the attitude of such a twice-born tongue be to its parents? (For Malayalam was twice-born, the first time as Manipuravājam.) What is today Kerala was part of Tamizhakam until at least the 9th century CE. Bitter wars were fought over the land. The political yoke of Tamil Nadu was shaken off at last, but it took three hundred years. In the civil turmoil which accompanied the wars, the Nampūtiris somehow managed to get on top of the social heap and stay there. This power struggle went undocumented. So did the ascendancy of Sanskrit. Theirs was a yoke much more difficult to throw off.

The influence of the Aryan varna system on the south is hard enough to comprehend. Sangam literature makes it clear that there were classes, even hereditary classes, which made up the society of the day. Yet the concept of pollution did not exist. All this came—the conclusion is ineluctable—with the Nampūtiris. My father remembers when ‘untouchables’ could not come within a certain distance of a savarṇa, and they had to call out warnings when walking along the road.

Sankara was a Nampūtiri and was brought up as a good brahmin boy. His Maniṣā Pancakam (Resolution-Quintet) begins with his telling a caṇḍāla (lowest of the low, born of a sudra father and savarṇa mother, commonly called a dog-eater) to get out of his way. My father still remembers that call: “Gaccha, gaccha”, which is Sanskrit for “Go away, go away.”

The caṇḍāla asked Sankara, “By
saying 'gaccha, gaccha' are you trying to distinguish between matter and matter, or spirit and spirit?" Sankara had no answer. He was the prime advocate of Advaita, the doctrine that there cannot be any distinction between the individual soul and the Universal Soul. He was big enough to admit in the Panchakam, "Whoever shows the Way, be he a brahmin or be he a caṇḍāla, he is my guru."

(The canny Nampūtiris later propagated the story, which is widely accepted, that the caṇḍāla was Siva in disguise. This effectively negated the influence of Sankara's example. A Nampūtiri did not have to own as guru any caṇḍāla beneath the rank of Almighty.)

What Mēlpattūr said to Pūntānam was, in essence, this: "Gaccha, gaccha." As a writer in Malayalam, Pūntānam was of low caste as a poet. He was beneath Mēlpattūr's consideration; the Sanskrit poet would not defile his ears with the sound of the bhasha. His was an elitist attitude, and he richly deserved his punishment at the Lord's hands. If Sanskrit has lost its pre-eminence, it is because its votaries said "Gaccha, gaccha" too often and to too many people.

To answer the question which began this section—"What makes a language sacred?"—a language becomes sacred, and therefore loses its sanctity, when the fact of its use is more important than the manner of its use. So it happened with Sanskrit. All sorts of people, not just writers, were judged and classified according to whether they knew Sanskrit, not how they used it. Sanskrit is not quite a dead language today, but it's being kept alive by artificial respiration. Old Latin and ancient Hebrew and hieratic Greek became too holy to be profaned by common use, so they died. We cannot let that happen to any language we prize; and the first step in that direction is to prize all languages, to sanctify them all by common and pious use.
Pleasure of Prints

a flock of dogs, a pack of crows, who can say what exactly we are? no matter. here we are, combined and separate. we keep the
neighbourhood awake with our cawing barks, our whining creaks.
we nest inside old cartons, our eggs are born blind and helpless.
we eat leftovers and roadkill, on windy nights, we chase the moon.

"FLYING DOGS"

Manjula Padmanabhan
Making an etching involves producing an image that is initially incised into a metal plate by immersing it in a mild acid bath. It is easy enough to make this statement, yet I can remember struggling to believe that an impression could possibly be made from a groove! The notion of printed impressions made from a raised surface such as a rubber stamp or a fingerprint was much too firmly entrenched.

In etchings, a plane surface is incised, the groove filled with ink, and pre-moistened paper is squeezed down into the groove by being passed through the rollers of a press. The plane surface of the plate can be wiped clear of ink or it can be covered with different inks to create multi-coloured impressions.

In terms of technique, my prints are really very basic. Most of my plates were printed in single colours. Half-tones were created by dusting the plate with fine resin dust before immersing it in the acid bath, leaving a minutely pitted surface. In a couple of prints, colours were added by a technique called chine collé: thin handmade paper, cut to size and air-brushed with glue, placed upon the inked plate. The green of Carpet Man's turban for instance, and the yellow of his gown, are the result of paper, not ink.

Hybridity is a theme that pervades my work. It's not just the animal/human, animal/animal and human/carpet combinations: it's that I am attracted to the odd-one-out, to those who do not conform, to those who cross boundaries.

The creatures and characters who represent crossed destinies in my drawings are a reflection of my interest in crossed destinies in general. I am representative of the hybrid nature of international culture, having grown up away from India. I don't feel strongly rooted in 'my' culture but that doesn't mean I feel rooted anywhere else either. I believe this is true for a small but growing number of people around the world, others who, like myself, grew up knowing that they were different to their companions in school and in the playground, without a clear sense of what defined that difference: was it colour or accent? was it language or clothes? was it knowledge or ignorance? I was never sure.

I don't believe I minded being different. Most times, it was an asset. If I did occasionally feel rejected or dismissed merely because I didn't belong to whatever was defined as the 'in' group for the situation, I had also discovered fairly early in life that I could slip away into one of my alternative realities, as an artist and as a traveller through fantasy lands encountered in books and dreams.
Hybrids sometimes occur spontaneously, without the intervention of zoologists and botanists while others are highly artificial, created only by specialised breeders. Some hybrids are sterile and constitutionally delicate while others—pariah dogs, for instance—are exceptionally robust. Individuals of mixed ancestry are regarded with suspicion and distaste because their continued existence represents a challenge to tribal purity. Yet they can also, by the mere fact of being different, be strong where the rest of the group is weak: a hybrid might resist an infection that devastates an entire herd, for instance or possess a gift for contrariness that blunts the edge of an enemy’s strategies.

Keeping these several features in mind, I would say that ‘Magnolia’ represents the typical mood of both my prints and myself—she’s amused and comfortable, but her claws are always out.

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One of the questions that interviewers routinely ask me is: Are you a writer first or an artist?

I am always at pains to explain that there’s no contradiction. Just as a computer routinely contains software for word-processing as well as for graphics, I believe that most of us can both write and draw, because these are basic skills. Indeed, I think drawing is more instinctive than writing: whereas pre-literate children will doodle prolifically with or without instruction, writing must be learnt from peers and never develops spontaneously. In school and college, greater emphasis is placed upon developing verbal skills than visual until eventually it begins to seem odd when someone chooses to express both skills.

However, in the case of these prints and the way that they’ve been presented here, I’ve done something I haven’t ever done before, which is to find a voice for the characters in the drawings. It wasn’t my idea! Anjum Hasan, while commissioning this feature, suggested that I might consider developing a ‘back-story’ for each of the subjects of the prints, because (she said) they each seemed to be such clearly defined personalities.

For a while, I had a comic strip in which my central character, Suki, and her friends appeared in the newspapers (The Sunday Observer 1982-86 and The Pioneer 1991-97), commenting freely on all manner of subjects. Drawing her in combination with her comments was an inextricable part of the cartoon’s conception. But in the case of these prints, the drawings were never intended to be talkative. They were created in silence and I had assumed all along that they were mute.
So writing these brief monologues has been like holding a microphone to a painting on the wall and being astonished to hear a voice, a point of view, emanate from that two-dimensional entity.

Very odd! And quite funny. I like to imagine that I give my characters free rein to express themselves, which is why I refer to them in the third person: however much I am quizzed about Suki's connection to me, I always maintain that she is 'she', not 'me'. I think of myself as a consortium of different personalities, some of which get a chance to express themselves as characters in what I write or draw. ☛

Note: All these prints were editioned at Atelier 2221, most of them by the talented young print-maker Manikanta, assisted by Pankaj and under the constant guidance of Pratibha Dakoji. Print-making is a collaborative art and I owe a very great deal to the Atelier for making it possible for me to work there.
endless time
nothing to do
turn off the wind
shut down the sun
it's all too restless
let me sleep
the year is still young
there's time yet
to plough my thoughts, sow my dreams, gather up my hopes
but the day is hot
tomorrow!
tomorrow, I'll begin
i'm ready now

feet ...

hands ...

mouth ...

all are ready

but i hear no sounds

what is this darkness?

there's one more season

isn't there?
SO HERE I AM. THE ARCHETYPAL CARPET LADY. WIFE TO CARPET MAN. BUT I HAVE MY SECRETS TOO...

... YES, LOOK CAREFULLY. LOOK CAREFULLY WHERE YOU PLACE YOUR FEET. YOU MIGHT STEP ON SOME HIDDEN WELLSPRING OF MY DESIRE.

AND I MIGHT RISE UP AND ENFOLD YOU IN MY DEEP PILE. YES. WE CARPET PETS ARE TREACHEROUS. KNOTTED. DENSE. WE'RE USED FOR PUTTING OUT FIRES. BUT SOMETIMES WE START THEM. FIRES OF DESIRE. A SPARK OF BURNING ASH CAN SET US ALIGHT. WE BURN IN SILENCE THROUGH THE NIGHT, BRINGING DOWN HOUSES DESTROYING LIVES. TREAT US WELL. TREASURE US. YOUR SOFTNESS IS YOUR REWARD.
SOMETHING.


yes. yes. yessss. and also ... yes. we like to say yess. it suits us. it suits our cushions. we like cushions too. and carpets. we like long lazy afternoons. we like icecream. and zebra and antelope. on the hoof or lightly grilled in coca cola sauce. yessss. cooking is NOT our strong suit.
Man or beast? Beast or feast?
No answers. 'Scuse me while I chew my cud.

The Elephant
strums the grassy
plains of our imagina-
tion with his stubby
fingers, grazing our wits
with his tusks. He feeds
on weeds and poppy seeds,
and sunlit dreams and
rusks. He sports a
chunky signet ring
and sleeps on
oatmeal husks.
The walls are cool. I have no complaints. During the day I sleep. At night I catch mosquitoes and spiders. Sometimes I lay eggs. Sometimes they hatch. It's a good life. Good Good Good Good Good Good
my flute is heavy with DESIRE

my radiant feathers spread WIDE

my throat bulges with SONG

i am GLORIOUS

i am joy INCARNATE

love me
Originating in the mid-nineteenth century as a form patronised by royalty, Marathi theatre eventually went on to encompass genres as diverse as the Akhyan (mythological), the Farce, the Bookish (translations) the Sangit Natak (musicals) and the Prose Natak. Sociologist Urmila Bhirdikar has especially focussed in her research on the practice of female impersonation—a characteristic of all Marathi theatre of the period. In this essay she explores how the 'boys' who enacted female roles were perceived and how such impersonation came to denote "a new understanding of the self". Drawing on a range of archival sources, Bhirdikar describes the boy actors' treatment at the hands of drama company owners, the way such actors were judged in relation to the 'boys' who comprised the audience, and, importantly, how they looked at themselves and each other.
Boys in Theatre

Urmila Bhirdikar
Wanted Boys

...If boys are in demand everywhere it is no wonder that they are in demand in the drama companies as well. Especially in the drama companies this demand is quite pressing. One reason is that boys are not available openly for this business and (secondly) even when they are available they become useless for this business very soon. That is why drama companies need to maintain a good number of boys specially and all the time. However, very few proprietors/owners of drama companies are conscious of this need and take the necessary care to see that there is no scarcity of boys for their business to continue without impediments.

...These days very few drama companies show any responsibility for boys' education, health and good conduct. Only two or three companies have employed a good singer to teach music to the boys and only in Kirloskar Company do we see a teacher employed to take care of the boys' formal education. The hardship boys go through in the rest of the poor companies is unbelievable. In some haughty and cheap companies it is the important people in the company who unhesitatingly give boys lessons in lax and immoral behaviour. All this must change. Only then will the drama companies get good boys for their business and the boys too will give the companies the benefit of their good conduct and (dramatic) skills.

Anant Waman Barave: Natyakala: 1906
This was one of the first articles that changed the direction and nature of questions with which I had begun thinking about the practice of female impersonation in Marathi theatre from the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth century. The two initial questions I carried to my research were about the celebration of the practice of female impersonation ("There is more art in men acting female roles" and "Even women imitated Balgandharva") and, with reference to Farce, which was the specific topic of my project, the deployment of female impersonation for projecting the image of woman—specially educated/new woman—in such visual and linguistic hyperboles that awakened censorship and criticism.

Marathi theatre emerged under princely patronage in 1843 with plays based on mythological narratives. It carried in it aspects of the local traditions of the Kannada Bhagavata plays and of the Marathi Dashavatara. However, as soon as it broke away from princely patronage and become a commercial venture it took on an urban outlook by incorporating elements of 'English' theatre and acquired support from reformist leaders in urban centres like Pune and Bombay. The Farce, first performed in 1856, was the further outcome of this theatre's link with 'English' theatre and it showcased a non-musical and naturalist form based on 'social' themes. Soon, however, the term Farce was used to designate prose plays based on historical themes as well. In addition, around the 1870s, the 'social' farces acquired the form of satires, obviously using the comic satirical aspect of farces, but this time to criticise social reforms like non-torsuring of widows and women's education. Given the fact that this theatre had from the beginning developed mainly as a theatre of female impersonation, representation of femininity was naturally its main concern. All the genres—the Akhyan (mythological), the Farce, the Bookish (translations) the Sangit Natak (musicals) and Prose Natak—revelled, in their own specific generic terms, in the projection of femininity. As a result, this theatre held in tacit tension the liberation from gender identity and the projection of the ideality of gender, thus producing the specifics of gender difference.

I had hoped to understand the link between performance of gender transgression and production of gender difference and ideal gender roles on the one hand, and the specific nature of the homo-social and possibly homo-erotic relation, on the other. 'Boys' figured in this as boy-actors enacting adult female roles, accompanied by the well established understanding that within this practice adult femininity appears as a phase leading to the culmination of gender
into adult masculinity (which, as Stephen Greenblatt puts it in the context of Shakespearean theatre, is the ‘telos’ of gender). But the ‘construction’ of femininity on stage showed how it partly depended on ‘imitation’ of existing practices and notions of femininity.

Anant Waman Barave’s article quoted above complicated the formulations of my questions and I had to add at least two dimensions: the meaning of the word ‘boy’ and its relation to other men such as patrons and drama company owners, and the meaning (content) of the boys’ good conduct and its use in theatre. As I had hoped, I found an interesting set of writings on boys that enriched the formulation of my initial questions as they opened a larger field of view.

Barave’s interest in the good treatment and good conduct of boys must be linked with his other interests. He published Natyakala, a monthly magazine, from 1904 to 1907 in which he put forward some of the questions that troubled him. He also initiated an annual dramatists’ meet (Bharat Natyasammelan) from 1906 till his death in 1923, and in this forum he introduced the question of allowing women to enact female roles in theatre. In contrast to the latter-day supporters of this move, Barave did not exclude ‘veshya’ (prostitute, a word used to refer to all women from professional artist families) from the connotation of ‘woman.’ The question was taken up by Rangabhumī, a magazine of the Kirloskar Natak Mandali, and a questionnaire was published. The responses to this (and earlier ‘debates’ in the theatre meet) produced two standard answers: the condition of the drama companies was not suitable for women and there was more art in men acting women’s roles.

Seen in this context, Barave’s anxiety about boys is as much about the treatment of boys at the hands of adults in the drama company as about the dramatic personae enacted by boys. Two other items published in Natyakala suggest this: in one (November 1906) Barave reports on a boy actor’s performance of Sangit Saubhadra (retitled Bala Saubhadra) in the Mahalakshmi Prasadik Sangit Natak Mandali. Saubhadra was a celebrated play on the theme of love and marriage between Arjun and Subhadra. Barve comments: “This new trend is fine, but we suggest that the plays performed by children should be shorter (not more than three hours) and should not contain shringer (eros), veer (heroism) and raudra (rage) rasa. Plays which have basya (the comic), karuna (pathos), shok (grief) and adbhuta (wonder/amazement) will appear sweet when performed by children.” In the other news item (April 1907) he merely reports that England has passed a
law prohibiting the employment of children under 10 in theatre and that it has received public approval.

Another newspaper editor’s engagement with a similar issue reveals the ruse implicit in the public concern about these issues, which I hope to show in what follows. But let me describe the context first.

In the late 1880s, Pune and Bombay were rife with public debates on social reform and morality... The pro-reformist Farces treated the [woman’s] issue in the form of moralistic plots depicting the pathos of widows and child marriage, while the anti-reformist Farces acquired a truly farcical quality by depicting the ‘educated woman’ in satirical terms. During 1884/5-1889 the fashioning of the educated woman and her libertarianism was being furiously debated in public forums in the context of the Dadaji-Rakhmabai case of restitution of conjugal rights.1 Pune’s theatres were reported to be overflowing with audiences for Farces

Bombay were rife with public debates on social reform and morality. Theatre reflected these debates in the form of Farces written from both the pro- and anti-reformist viewpoints to do with the ‘woman question.’ Interestingly, while the pro-reformist Farces treated the issue in the form of moralistic plots depicting the pathos of widows and child marriage, the anti-reformist like Abhinavtarunividyaaprabhasan and Tarunishikshan Natika which featured the educated woman in her hyperbolic aspect—licentious, wearing the new costume of ‘boots and stockings’ and using bold language. Editors were at pains to criticise the writer’s use of ‘vulgar’ and ‘cheap’ language, advising them to put their talent to more useful tasks. Understandably, the female

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1 The Dadaji vs Rakhmabai case concerned a suit filed by Dadaji Bhikaji against his wife Rakhmabai, for restitution of conjugal rights and other extended charges. Rakhmabai, stepdaughter of Sakharam Arjun, a medical scholar and social reformist, was married to Dadaji as a child. She lived with her parents until she achieved puberty and was educated at home. Later, she refused to cohabit with Dadaji, an uneducated man. The suit filed by Dadaji drew much public attention, and Rakhmabai especially attracted support from reformist leaders, notably Behramji
impersonator’s skills reached new heights in the representation of femininity and acquired a lot of popularity. Around the same time, while the Farces were still popular, another play created a rage among Pune’s public. The title of the play is not known, but it was a chakkad (a tamasha-like song-and-dance drama) which depicted the heroine’s sexuality in an equally bold and ‘hyperbolic’ manner.

All through 1888 most newspaper reports on theatre reveal the public support for Farces and for this chakkad. A write-up in Kesari (October 16, 1888) is exemplary for the treatment of the question of the practice of impersonation and performance of the ‘vulgar’. This long editorial begins with criticising the elite and respectable reformist leaders for not paying attention to the popularity of chakkad and not raising their voices against the proliferation of such ‘dirty’ and ‘deplorable’ entertainment. Granting that the leaders themselves may not be the spectators, the author draws attention to the fact that “common people… among whom there is very little formal or moral education, are completely under the spell of this entertainment”. One of the results, according to the author, is the growing practice among youth to sing lewd songs and “throw arms around each other” on public streets, where respectable women are present. Such behaviour is not only objectionable but dangerous as to the effect it might have on young and fickle-minded women. It would thus be the responsibility of public leaders as well as government officers to restrict the proliferation of such entertainment.

After this preamble the writer proceeds to report on a court case with the intention of revealing the contents and implications of such plays. This is where the boy enters. A drama company owner called Bhaushet filed a case against a young boy, Kashinath, and his guardians for breach of contract: the boy had signed a contract to play the main female role in a chakkad for one year, for which he had been paid Rs 225. However, he had now broken his contract and the drama company owner had filed a case for the reimbursement of Rs 93 and 4 annas. Kesari reports:

Munsaf Sahab dissolved the case.
Without going into the minor issues I will only report the main ground on which the Munsaf Sahab dissol ved this case and what he said about chakkad while clarifying his point.
The Judge has written, ‘This brings up two points: one, whether

Malbari, thus triggering a controversy about women’s education and the implications of moral behaviour in the context of the institution of marriage. The case itself saw contrasting results, the first judgment being in favour of Rakhmabai and a subsequent penalisation of Rakhmabai in the form of a one-day imprisonment and fine. Rakhmabai never cohabited with her husband. She proceeded to England for further education and returned as a medical doctor to work mainly in Surat. For an incisive account of Rakhmabai see Chandra, Sudhir, Enslaved Daughters: Colonialism, Law and Women’s Rights (Delhi: OUP, 1998).
Scene from Kolhapurkar Natak Mandali's performance of Prilhad from Masik Manorjan Diwali Special Issue, 1913.
this contract was intended for an immoral action, and whether the accused knew this intention...
Bhaushet and Gangaram tried to prove that their play does not contain lewd and vulgar songs. But their attempt failed completely. They must understand that they are wallowing in the signing of the contract that the accused number 1 would sing dirty songs, perform lewd gestures and despicable roles in front of respectable men and women, in accordance with the orders of Hiryashet, the owner of Anandodhav theatre, and this was the intention of the contract.'

The most remarkable feature of this piece [in the newspaper Kesari] is the variation on the word 'boy'—porya and mulay (the dancing boy and the boys in the audience). The upper-caste reformist concern for social good is blatantly present in the article in its 'accusation' of the dancing boy and in its anxiety about his influence on the "young and impressionable boys among the spectators".

in the lowest of the immoral state, and their morality has reached such a low state and their intellect too has diminished so much that they do not see anything wrong in their actions. They have admitted that the play has songs on women's menstruation and men's impotence and that the accused number 1 has to [sing these songs and] perform gestures suitable to the meaning of the songs... The account of the accused number 1 proves that he had to sing many similar songs... Therefore there is no need to elaborate on that. The plaintiff is in this business for many years. The accused too has performed the role of a song-and-dance-boy in another drama company. Therefore both the parties knew before

The author in Kesari, in his conclusion, once again reprimands the 'defenders of our morality' for turning a blind eye to the tremendous public support for such entertainment and expresses his deep anxiety at the effect it might have on young and impressionable boys who are part of the spectators.

The most remarkable feature of this piece is the variation on the word 'boy'—porya and mulay (the dancing boy and the boys in the audience)—which informs the inclinations of the judge and the author of this article. In the context of this article, as elsewhere
too, this nomenclature bears the caste mark and is visible not only in the formations of the notions of art and aesthetics but also in the upper-caste reformist concern for social good. The latter is blatantly present in the above article in the ‘accusation’ of the dancing boy and in the anxiety about his influence on the “young and impressionable boys among the spectators”.

Even more remarkable, however, is the shifting status of the female-impersonator-actor between private (within the drama company) and public realms as well as between young boy actors and grown up actors. Ganesh Govind Bodas\(^2\) in his autobiography Mazi Bhumika provides interesting insights:

“The company would have one owner or many partners... If the owner was smart or a singer he would be the hero too. Those days [early 1890s] it was not common to grow hair. Most [actors] shaved their head and kept long shikha [top knot]. Most female impersonators were very good looking. Since makeup was not commonly known, female impersonators could not afford to be dark skinned... Male-actors would mostly be unmarried, so visiting prostitutes was inevitable...

“Long shikha, a kunkum-bindi between the eyebrows, two vertical lines of gandha [sandalwood paste], a necklace of rudraksha, brash and vulgar language and careless demeanor were the characteristics of the male actors. The creature called stree-partee [female impersonator, one who takes the female ‘parts’] was termed a cute boy [porya], or a guljar boy. This class of actors had long hair. Their dress consisted of a very transparent dhoti, gandha or kunkum bindi between the eyebrows, and well-oiled hair. Young (about 18 years old) stree-partee actors were caught in the habit of visiting prostitutes. The prostitutes too would be happy with them because they got to see the plays gratis and have fun/make love to cute looking men. Because of visiting prostitutes this class of actors suffered from venereal diseases. So they looked sallow and weak.”

Bodas also describes liaisons between the drama company owners and the main stree-partee actor, and talks about how the owner would stand guard on the ‘heroine’ lest he be abducted by the owners of other drama companies. More interestingly, he vividly describes the distinction between the status of the younger boys whose

\(^2\) Ganesh Govind Bodas (1880-1965), known as Ganpatrao Bodas, started his career as a boy actor enacting female roles in the Goa Sangit Natak Mandal. Later he joined the famous Kirloskar Natak Mandal and progressed from female roles to non-singing male roles. A studious and effective actor, Ganpatrao excelled in comic as well as serious roles. In 1913 he left the Kirloskar Company along with Balgandharva to set up the Gandharva Natak Mandal and became the most important male actor for the next ten years. He also played some important singing roles. In later years he trained actors and was renowned as an effective teacher.
voice was not yet 'broken' and those who had gone through that phase.

I was taken to the house (birhad) of the company (Goa Sangit Mandal). My singing was tested. My voice was mellifluous and my looks were good. I passed the test instantly. The owner Ramchandra Balwant Sarthe was pleased and started to give me good advice. He started praising me. He gave me sweet promises. I was asked to play the role of queen Sumati... He bought me a shirt, coat, jacket and a zari cap. This was the first time I had got a shirt. So I began looking down on the other boys. Balwantrao Juvekar was my childhood friend. His voice had just 'broken'. He began laughing at me. He had had a good experience. Good-voiced boys were treated with high esteem in the company. But as soon as you lost your voice, you were like a useless coin... That was the condition of young boys in the companies.

Even more sharply, Bodas writes that in the Kirloskar Company, the singer boy would be called a 'brahmin' and the 'prose' boy, a 'shenvi' (a Brahmin sub-caste, considered 'low').

This nomenclature is interesting especially because till the 1870s, entering theatre itself was a loss of caste. From its inception in 1843 this theatre opened up professional opportunities for upper-caste (mostly un- or marginally educated) men. The homo-sociality of theatre was thus always marked by caste and so were its ideals of respectability. However, within orthodox Brahminism entering theatre was itself a loss of caste. Predictably, gender transgression (or 'taking the woman's garb') was the worst sin. Krishnaji Abaji Guruji, a theatre lover in Satara, narrates in his essay 'Natakachi Sthityantare' several cases of 'ostracism' against actors, and the subsequent rites of purification and/or pardon.

He considers the newly formed alliances between young men from respectable families and 'prostitutes' (here again the word means women from the professional artist families) one of the main reasons for the social disapproval of theatre. These alliances were the mainstay of the songs and dances in theatre. Dance seems to have been especially attractive as one reads of innumerable instances of dance-sequences inserted in the plays and performed by boys in the company. About his first experience of dressing up for the dance, actor Sakharam Pandurang Barave writes: "My dress was of the Marwadi style and I had to take the pallu over my head. Vishnu had stitched it up to the wig so that it would not fall. Everyone started to say that I looked beautiful (maru). Rasik fools [friends/patron of the actors] started to drool..."

Elsewhere in this autobiography Barave mentions how young boys in the company were initiated into sexual relations with the older actors or patrons. Not all autobiographies men-
tion these details, but those that do inevitably refer to homo-erotic/sexual relations with disgust, and always attribute them to actors other than themselves. In her essay on female impersonator actors, Kathryn Hansen rightly points out that biography as a genre does not allow a glimpse into the 'private' realm and also that in the public realm too, in South Asia, it is difficult to find the naming of alternative erotic-sexual relations. Autobiography does touch on this theme but, as I've just mentioned, with disapproval, and always as an illustration of the exploitative aspects of the profession. On the other hand, the fact of impersonating itself always appears in exhilarating terms, denoting a new understanding of the self.  

Scene from Shri Saraswati Mandali's performance of Sangit Bhavbandhan, 1924
The Mirs, a pastoral community based in Pugal, Rajasthan, are hereditary singers of the *Sufiyana qalam*—a musical tradition spread over the northwest of the subcontinent and based on the compositions of Sufi mystics such as Khwaja Gulam Farid and Bulle Shah. In the following essay, Rahul Ghai, who has been working with different communities in the Thar desert since 1992, describes how the Indira Gandhi Canal Project in the late 1970s inaugurated the breakdown of the Mirs’ communitarian way of life and discusses attempts to reinvigorate their musical tradition.
Qissa Mir-e-Alam: Working with Subaltern Musicians to Reinvigorate Sufiyana Qalam

Rahul Ghai
This is an account of engaging with the musical tradition of performing the poetry of Sufi mystics—Sufiyana qalam—practised by the Mirs. The Mirs are a community of hereditary musicians and their listeners from the Pugal region, about eighty kilometres north-west of Bikaner city in Rajasthan. Our experiences of the last four years open up questions relating to the processes of revival and representation of ‘vanishing’ folk traditions, allude to the need for fostering community participation and ownership of such processes, while pointing out critical gaps in our conceptualisation of ‘empowerment’ and ‘development’ of marginal folk performers like the Mirs.

Although Rajasthan is known internationally for its ‘folk’ music, the Sufiyana qalam tradition of the Mirs has largely escaped attention. In much recent ethnomusicology and contemporary representations of Rajasthani ‘folk music’ there has been a dominant focus on the districts of Jodhpur, Jaisalmer and Barmer. One reason for the neglect of the Mirs could be the fact that their regional musical tradition is sandwiched between the two great, well-known Sufi traditions of the Indian subcontinent—Sindh and Punjab—located respectively to the south-west and north-west of the Pugal region.

Mainly agricultural labourers, casual wage earners and small farmers, apart from being musicians, the Mirs are a marginal community scattered in the interiors of the fragile desert ecology of the Bikaner district of north-west Thar. This region has been undergoing a radical transformation since the coming of the Indira Gandhi Canal Project (also known as the Indira Gandhi Nahar Project or IGNP) in the late 1970s. The lived context of the canal command area of the IGNP inscribes the destinies of the Mirs and their listeners in more than one way, perpetuating conditions for their displacement and marginalisation. The Mirs’ musical tradition has been on the decline owing to a complex of interrelated factors. In response to this cultural dissipation, the Mirs are attempting to engage with their tradition by reinventing representations about themselves and their music.

The Mirs have been marginal to most processes of modern development put in place by the state, though a considerable number among them received slices of the canal command area land for agriculture. But given the costs and the effort involved in irrigated, resource-intensive farming in the region, very few among them have been able to develop and survive as small farmers. Instead, they have been integrated in the society and economy of Bikaner city—more as
distress migrant labourers and less as respectable musicians. Decades of drought relief works by the state as well as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) providing cash/food for work have led to them digging earth and uprooting bushes instead of investing in their cultural skills to combat recurrent droughts and scarcities.

Through our work with them, we have tried to bolster the dignity and autonomy of the Mirs and explored opportunities to address the crisis of livelihood faced by these subaltern musicians. Interactions with the Mirs combined with sessions of soul-stirring music have been reinvigorating for them as well as for those from the cities who have been involved with their music. This two-way aspect of reinvigoration is very important to keep in mind. Reinvigoration in this sense has been dialogic, uplifting for both singers as well as listeners.

Mirs and Their Tradition of Sufiyyana Qalam

The Mirs have been known for their passionate and intimate renderings of the compositions of Sufi mystics such as Baba Sheikh Farid, Sain Bulleh Shah, Hazrat Shah Hussain, Hazrat Sultan Bahu, Ali Haider and Khwaja Ghulam Farid. The compositions of Khwaja Ghulam Farid, in particular, form the kernel of this tradition. These are mostly sung in Siriaki, a dialect of West Punjab which has a strong affinity with Sindhi and Punjabi. In addition to their singing, the Mirs are expert players of the been (a kind of bagpipe) and algoza (a double-barrel wind instrument). The Mirs have been musicians of the common people par excellence, serving as mediums of devotion and harbingers of peace, hope and love through their ecstatic performances of the bhajans and vanis of Meera, Kabir, Gorakhnath, Baba Ramdev and Achalram, which form part of the wide repertoire of many among the Mirs.

The Sufi traditions of the Mirs have been primarily traditions of dissent and have flowered on the margins
of mainstream life. Most of these compositions stress on love as the basis of the relationship with God, nature and other living beings; are deeply iconoclastic in their denunciation of mindless rituals; disregard religious boundaries and lay emphasis on an ascetic withdrawal from extravagant and indulgent worldly pursuits in favour of communion with the higher reality through mystical experiences. Apart from being deeply mystical, intensely humanist and robustly pluralist, many of these traditions reflect a heightened ecological sensibility as well. In the context of a world plagued with xenophobic conflict, unbridled consumerism, ecological devastation of the habitats of the poor, heightened and often cut-throat individualism and social stress, the deep message inherent in the teachings of these Sufi mystics, though coming from the margins, is coterminal with wisdom, love, peace and dignity of all life.

The Mirs of the Pugal region are Muslims from the Mirasi and Draban caste. Along with the Dholis, Dhadis, Dammami, Langas and Manganiyars, the Mirs constitute a group of professional musicians, performers and genealogists and have occupied a marginal social and economic position in the society of western Rajasthan. This musical tradition developed in a predominantly pastoral context of survival in the deserts of north-west Rajasthan, Bahawalpur and Multan in late medieval and early modern times. The entire region on the north-western border of Bikaner district adjacent to the Bahawulpur region of Pakistan has been the social landscape of this tradition. Pugal as a settlement is older than Bikaner and was established as a seat of power by the Bhati in early medieval times. Even during the rule of the Rathors of Bikaner in medieval times, which continued right till the dissolution of the zamindari or feudal system in the Princely States in the 1950s, the Bhati of Pugal retained their sovereignty over what was called a jagiri patta which could cover as many as sixty villages. The strategic location of Pugal was conducive for its emergence as an important en route settlement on the trade route connecting Bahawalpur and Multan to Bikaner from the mid-seventeenth century onwards. This pre-eminence of Pugal as a set-

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1 Most of the Mirasis are singers and players of the been while the Drabans are ace percussionists. Together they are respectfully referred to as Mir-e-Alam in the Pugal region. Mirasis derive their name from the Persian word miras meaning inheritance. There are different anecdotes and legends that trace the etymology of mirasi from miras. Basaye Khan, the grand old headman of the Mirs, recounts the origin story that is popular in the Pugal region: "Miras ri chhadarallah ne bi baje nabi ko miti bai chhadar ke niche joge ayo who to sudar gaye bai raich gaye ay tak iski aas mein bain isletye Mirasi kabe jate bain." Roughly translated, this means: "God sent the holy chaddar (sheet) of Miras for the Nabi. All the Muslims came under it and were blessed with good life. We were left out and are still waiting for this holy chhadar of miras, which is why we are called mirasi (waiting for miras)."
tlemont on the route to Bahawalpur continued right till the creation of the political border between India and Pakistan in 1947. The coming of the IGNP has again turned Pugal, today a village of five hundred households, into a strategic point (the beginning of Stage II of the canal)—it serves as the entry point from Bikaner to go to the interiors of Thar in a north-west direction.

This region, referred to as the chitrag tract of north-west Bikaner, was predominantly a pastoral society folded. Ecstatic mehfi during marriages, at dargah or urs and in the solitary rendezvous of nomadic encampments in the grasslands during seasonal transhumance of pastoralists have been the occasions that sustained this musical tradition.

The chitrag region was once dominated by semi-nomadic Muslim pastoralists such as the Johiyas, Jalukas, Parihars, Uteras, Goperas, Buhads, Ludars, Sidrs and Balochs. Most villages in the region had more than a hundred houses, some as many

Decades of economic hardships have meant that the Mirs have had neither the surplus resources nor the leisure to hone the skills of their children. Many have dissuaded their children from learning music in the hope of diversifying into other professions. Despite this, music comes naturally to the children.

and economy, surviving by customary sanctions, practices and communal institutions linked to the sprawling, extensive, pastoral grasslands, catchments, deep wells and ponds of the wide open desert. Vast stretches of sandy plains and extensive chitrang grasslands interspersed with dunes merging into limitless horizons dotted with long lines of caravans form the geographical backdrop against which this musical tradition un-

as four to five hundred houses each. Then there were permanent hamlets (dbanis) like Phalwali, Mamuwala and Ghulamwala that were much smaller than villages (having five, ten or twelve houses) and mostly clustered around a water source, usually a permanent well of sweet water. Besides these, there were several seasonal encampments of semi-nomadic pastoralists that grew around water points (johads and tobas) in the rainy season. Apart from this
spread of settlements, the north-western region of the Bikaner district is dotted with many popular dargahs, the most popular being those of Panch Peer, Mohammad Shah Rangeela, Shakariwala Peer, Lakh Daata Peer, Peer Pathan, Maskeen Shah, Peer Veekay Sheikh. These provided the favoured sites and occasions for the collective listening their chotibanhdh Mirs. In fact, each generation of listeners tended to take fancy to a particular set of musicians who would be called to perform on all festive occasions. There are examples of Mirs having come from Pakistan to attend marriages in the households of their listeners. And there are examples of patrons having conferred a titular obligation on other Mirs when

Khwaja Ghulam Farid chooses rustic metaphors from the desert to explore the metaphysics of life and death...the rich desert grasses, the different shapes and colors clouds assume, the mushrooming of temporary encampments on chains of sand dunes after rains, the brightness of a rainbow, the rhythmic lilting sound of the bells of cattle marching.

to and singing of the Sufiyana qalam.

The semi-nomadic pastoralist patrons of the Mirs classified them into two types—pagdibanhs (those having a titular obligation) and chotibanhs (those linked to a patron by birth). Mir families had exclusive rights to sing for particular villages or patron families. In return for these performances the Mirs received cattle, camels, goats, cash, and a share in the patrons' income from agriculture or livestock rearing. Among the listeners of the region, many have had strong relations with Mirs even other than their chotibanhdh Mirs went away to Pakistan.

Over generations the Mir musicians have enriched the repertoire by presenting and perfecting their own creative intermixing of stanzas and couplets from the qalam of different Sufis. The Mirs have shown remarkable adaptability in their choice of musical instruments—the sarangi, nagara, dholak have been replaced by the harmonium and tabla, and the use of the been and algoza have been perfected. Further, the innate skills and talent among the children
of the Mirs testifies to this hereditary musical sensibility. Decades of economic hardships have meant that the Mirs have had neither the surplus resources nor the leisure to hone the skills of their children. Many have dissuaded their children from learning music in the hope of diversifying into other professions. Despite this, music comes naturally to the children. Their intimacy with the musical instruments, the ease with which they can participate in the cultural transactions of their elders, the innocent passion with which they instantly begin humming or even singing in more reposed moods, imitating the elders, are all pointers to this rich cultural resource they possess.

Qalam of Khwaja Ghulam Farid: The Kernel of the Tradition

The pastoral splendour of this tradition reaches a climax in the compositions of Khwaja Ghulam Farid (1845–1901), the great desert fakir. Khwaja Ghulam Farid, one of the most popular Sufi poets in the Sirai language, was born to a family of Arab settlers. Also known as Farid Chachran, from the place where he was born in Bahawulpur state, he is one of the important Sufis of the Chishti silsila of Fariduddin Shakar Ganj. He is said to have spent many years in the blazing deserts between Bahawalpur and Pugal.² The meditations of the intimate relations between men, their livestock and the landscape, were evocatively described by Ghulam Farid, whose compositions are rich in the imagery borrowed from the daily lives of the pastoralists of the region.

For communities whose lives revolved around mobility on trade routes, trails of caravans and free ranging pastoralism with its seasonal routes of transhumance, the compositions of Ghulam Farid had an immense appeal. These compositions, while reaffirming the intimate ties communities had with nature, articulated the deep veneration they had for it. Many of the compositions by Farid are passionate descriptions of the bounties of the desert, an otherwise barren tract that comes to life with a little rain. One of his most famous qalams, Kaldi Jungle Vich, is a pastoral romance par excellence that passionately describes how in spring the grasslands in the desert come to life, the ponds fill to brim with water, flocks of sheep and cattle are out in the grasslands, and migratory birds come to enjoy the bounties the desert offers.

Khwaja Ghulam Farid chooses rustic metaphors from the desert to explore the metaphysics of life and

² Khwaja Ghulam Farid was enchanted with the Robi (desert) in whose praise he wrote: “But what tongue shall tell the glory of it, the perpetual strength of it, and sublimity of its lonely desolation! And who shall paint the splendour of its light.”
death—the pilu (a wild berry) or the rich desert grasses, the different shapes and colours clouds assume, the mushrooming of temporary encampments on chains of sand dunes after rains, the brightness of a rainbow, the rhythmic lilting sound of the bells of cattle marching in the sprawling grasslands, the teeming variety of birds, snakes, insects, descriptions of dexterous pastoral women milking cows and their tough routines. Farid is at his best when he draws on the imagery of the everyday struggles of common people in the harsh desert, like the composition 'Toba khata de pakdiya tadu sindhari da manu udaas hai', which builds on the travails of people suffering from a severe water crisis and pleading to be blessed with a pond. Not only does the qalam resonate with the feelings of people, it also has a graphic description of the place that would be chosen for the pond—a natural catchment of clayey soil with no bushes and grasses, where water would freely flow from all the four directions. Many of the incidents in Farid's life are well remembered and recounted by the pastoralists of the region. Among the significant ones are those surrounding his marriage. Ghulam Farid is said to have married a lady by the name of Hotan Laad, who was the daughter of one Lalu Laad. Pathane Khan of Adoori further elaborates on the significance and meaning of the bridal symbolism in the qalam of Ghulam Farid.

...Hotan was the daughter of Lal Laad and Ghulan Farid was in love with her...it was true love...he wanted to marry her. Worldly love (duniaavi ishq) was so crucial and that was the way to true love for the God (ishq hakiki).

There is one central idea in every qalam of Khwaja Farid’s and that is love. He regards beauty as a mirror from which rays are reflected which lead to God. Khwaja Farid was also a connoisseur of music and his home was a haven for leading musicians. A believer in the philosophy of Wahdat-al-Wajood (Unity of Being), he believed that music was a significant means of achieving divine unity.

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3 Discussing the feminine aspect of Sufism, the scholar Annemarie Schimmel points out that this was one of the Hindu influences on Sufi poetry when it came to India, "...the image of love of two men—so frequent in Persian poetry—was changed into love of the divine as symbolised in woman." She further attributes to the proliferation of this symbolism in the mystically interpreted folk tales of Sind and Punjab. See Schimmel, Annemarie, Mystical Dimensions of Islam (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975), pp. 344-383 and 426-437.

4 It must be remembered that central to the creations of major Sufis of the region was the ease with which they composed in the local language. It is believed that Baba Farid Shakarganj was the first major Sufi poet who laid the foundations of a melodic facility based on the spoken idiom. This was further honed by Shah Husain. But what distinguishes Khwaja Sahib’s lyricism is his supreme sense of rhythm.
The Waning of the Tradition

The process of decline seems to have begun with the cessation of free movement along the trade and pastoral routes to Bahawulpur after the Indo-Pakistan partition of 1947. The migration of a large number of Mir musicians to Pakistan severely reduced the number available to Muslim patrons in the region. But over time this was handled using the flexibility provided by custom itself. Patron families adopted new Mirs from among the ones who remained by conferring titles (pagdibandh) on them. The closure between Mirs from both sides of the international border was further strengthened by increased vigilance on the border, especially after the Indo-Pakistan war of 1971. It is around this time that the dwindling of patronage by the Thakurs of Pugal also set in. They remained powerful but ceased to enjoy, after the dissolution of the zamindaris in the 1950s, their earlier political pre-eminence. The process of waning of this tradition enters a decisive phase with the coming of the IGNP Canal in the 1970s. Unlike the other crises, like the exodus of Mirs to Pakistan in 1947, the changes proposed by this radical transformation were too basic, momentous and new for custom to respond to. In fact they were to fundamentally strike at the very basis of custom itself.

The canal has brought with it the dominance of a new clock time, work discipline and a cash economy firmly regulated by the market. Successive waves of new settlers over the last quarter century have led to the creation of a densely populated and heterogeneous society. The coming in of new communities from other parts of Rajasthan, and from outside the state, has contributed to the growth of a new pattern of settlement; vast areas of the pastoral landscape have now become the command area of a sprawling network of canals dividing the land into slices of agricultural fields and scattered settlements. The making of this denser heterogeneous society has profoundly altered the meaning of social relations and kinship ties, and led to the dissolution of a range of socio-cultural practices that were intimately linked to the pre-canal human geography and ecology. The Sufiyana qalam tradition of Pugal is one such cultural practice.

The opening and settling of the IGNP canal command area also brought a new wave of Islamisation—a more conservative brand of Islam from Deoband that regarded music as heretical to Islam. This anti-singing and in many cases anti-Sufi stance was vociferously propagated by maulvis, mostly from Bihar, UP or other parts of Rajasthan. In the last decade-
and-a-half these maulvis have spread out in the entire region and man most of the mosques in the villages in the region. Many villages have followed their orders and banned the musical performances of the Mirs.

Changing notions of leisure following the advent of the mass culture of the modern entertainment industry symbolised by the TV, the cassette tape and the radio, the lack of opportunities for new performances, inability to reach the traditional listeners who have got scattered all over the canal command area, are often cited as some of the main reasons for the waning of this tradition of the Mirs. To these could be added a heightened sense of individual alienation, despair, pathos and the travails of insularity that grips many in the Mir community.

In the last few years the Mirs of Pugal have been involved in an attempt to invoke the resilience and adaptability of their tradition in order to carve out a liberative discourse in the modern context. They are trying to negotiate between different modes of team building as a step towards creating an institution for themselves in the region. It is a struggle between individual subjectivities and moments of thinking beyond the self, in the interest of the community.

Search for Alternatives in Local Cultural Traditions

Over the last eight years, some of us have been working on issues relating to access to health, education and other basic services, as well facilitating livelihood opportunities for the marginal and poor communities in the Pugal region. The last developed as a response to the context created by the coming of the IGP canal. The canal command area, by radically altering the natural resource use practices, created a crisis of traditional livelihoods which had mostly centered on pastoralism. Extensive grazing lands were converted into individual slices of agricultural lands, leaving little space for the pastoralists to graze their animals. The new livelihoods, mostly based on practices of intensive irrigated farming, were either new for the communities or demanded high market-based inputs like seeds, fertilisers and pesticides, and were hence outside the reach of the poor. While doing this work we were often concerned about enhancing the scope of livelihood opportunities by taking into account skills other than those based on land and water. We felt that it was important the Mirs retain and disseminate their own native cultural traditions instead of allowing their
skills to degenerate through an excessive involvement with the development communication programmes of NGOs.

Mukhtiyar Ali was the first one to opt out of such NGO programmes. He, along with Abdul Jabbar, embarked on a journey of rediscovering the tradition of Sufiyan qalam. This entailed extended dialogues with the old Mir ustads Basaye Khan, Subhan Khan, Piran Khan and Ghulam Khan, and interactions with Nathu Khan and Ghulam Saddiq—ardent listeners helpful in rediscov- ering the tradition’s rich repertoire. These interactions with the old ustads helped them compile a wide repertoire of qalams.

The opportunity to perform at a concert during the International Seminar on Sufism at Gajner, Bikaner in October 2003, organised by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, was a breakthrough. The wide appreciation that Mukhtiyar got from experts on Sufism, who had come from different parts of India and abroad, reaffirmed our faith. The successful production, in May 2004, of the audio tape Jogi Jadugar (largely through voluntary contributions from music enthusiasts from all over India) sustained our momentum. The Rohi Rang pro-

gramme organised in Pugal to release this tape was a unique event, where local singers, including the Mirs, participated. A second edition of Rohi Rang held at Delhi’s Triveni auditorium on March 29, 2005 provided a unique opportunity for many Mirs to perform as a community in an urban space. Barring Mukhtiyar and Abdul, all the other seven were in Delhi for the first time and this was the first time they were performing before an urban audience. After some initial hitches the programme went very well—the group performed to a spellbound audience in a packed auditorium.

With these performances, the initiative deepened and other Mirs apart from Mukhtiyar and Abdul started getting involved such as Piran Khan, Manjur Khan, Waris Ali, Nazare Khan, Razak Ali, Bassu Khan, along with elders like Basaye Khan and Ghulam Khan. In these meetings some of the key points of discussion were: What is the present status of the musical traditions of the Mirs? What needs to be done in this regard within the Pugal region? Many felt that there was a need to constitute a team, a union of artists who could perform and ask for proper remu-
nerations whether it be at a private

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5 Mukhtiyar Ali joined Shanti Maitri Mission, a rural NGO, when it was set up in Pugal in 1996. He has been a social worker, a field investigator and a member of the development communication team, Gaavaniyar, set up by the URMUL Trust in 2000. Abdul Jabbar has been a visiting member of the Gaavaniyar team. Since 2002 both of them have been actively pursuing the reinvigoration of Sufiyan qalam. Apart from earning their livelihood through singing both of them are farmers as well, although the returns from Abdul’s land are meagre. He also is a jeep driver.
has been practising them. 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. Facilitating local listeners to create new contexts of performance is one of the elements in the process of reinvigoration. In that sense the ‘old’ should give way to the ‘new’.

The other ‘new’ contexts come about as a result of exposure to the outside world, a great deal of which 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 helps the Mirs to acquire 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.

Very often in our emphasis on institution-building, we ignore the attendant tribulations. The compulsion to show results in this task of institution-building often invites use of manipulative strategies of manufacturing consent. I have come to understand that this 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 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 it is this enthusiasm that needs to be nurtured on an individual basis while not abandoning the idea of the larger collective processes in which the Mirs should participate in order to evolve a regional forum to secure their future as musicians.
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