

# ArtConnect

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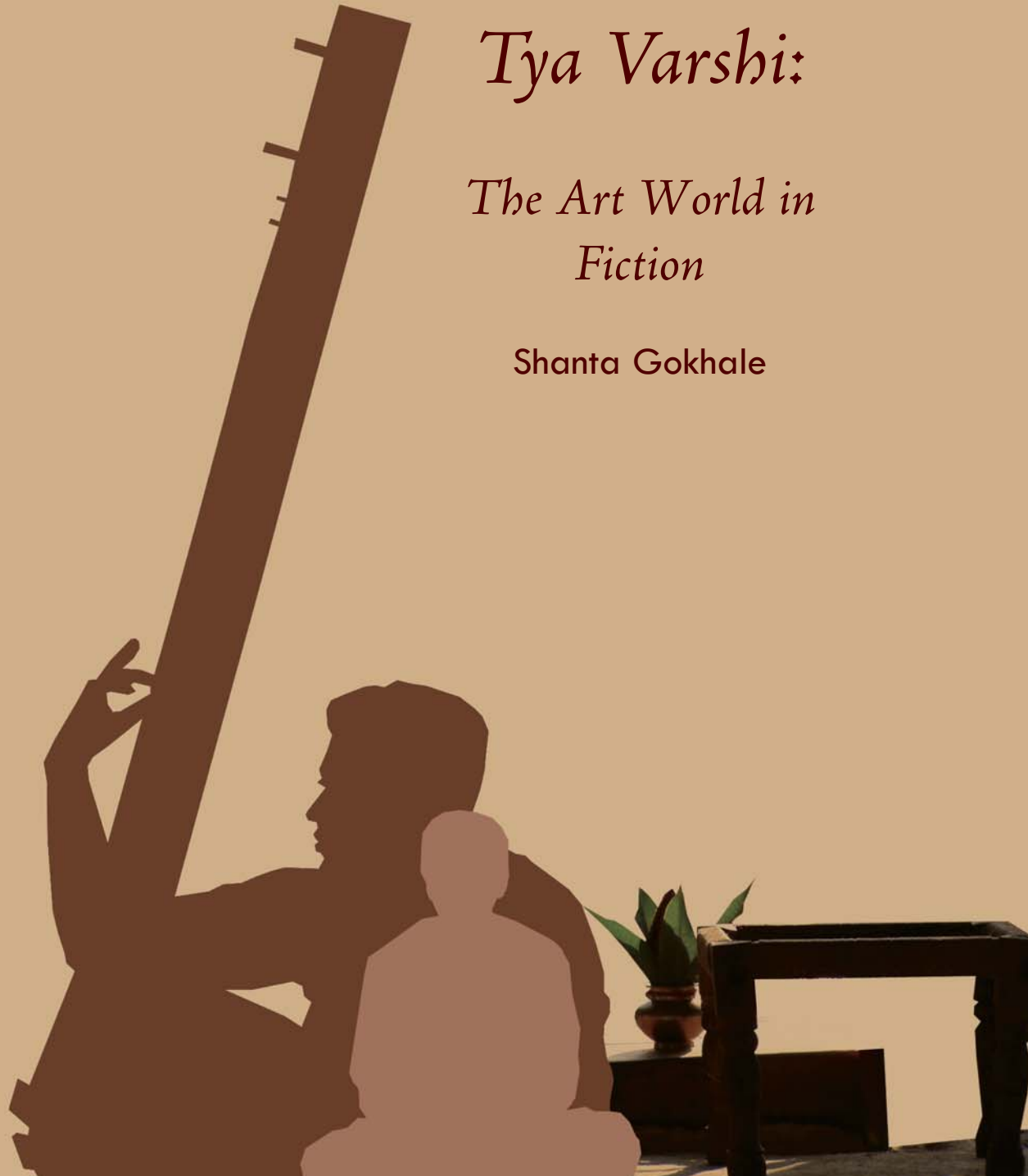
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Shanta Gokhale is a novelist, critic, and commentator on the Indian art scene. In her novel *Tya Varshi* (In That Year), she brings her sensitive reflections on contemporary Indian art—from painting to classical music—to bear on the inner journeys of her characters. *Tya Varshi* is set in 2004 and was triggered by the changes in the Indian visual arts world (which became more market-driven in the new century) as well as by larger questions regarding what makes contemporary art ‘contemporary’.

In the following piece, Gokhale discusses the process of writing *Tya Varshi* and shares an excerpt from the novel, which she is currently translating from Marathi into English

A silhouette illustration of a man playing a veena, a traditional Indian stringed instrument. He is shown in profile, seated and holding the instrument vertically. In front of him, a smaller silhouette of a child is seated, watching him play. To the right, there is a small table with a potted plant on it. The background is a light, warm color, and the entire scene is rendered in dark brown silhouettes.

*Tya Varshi:*  
*The Art World in  
Fiction*

Shanta Gokhale

For many years, as I watched the art scene closely during the early 1990s, I felt increasingly fascinated by the pressures and trends that were pushing it in new directions and the new relationships that were being forged between it and the market, it and the media. Painting was losing ground to installation art. The media had become the maker of news rather than its provider, and the market had become a leading player in the making of art.

*The Times of India*, for whom I was working in the early 1990s, became an agent of these changing equations. It held an auction of commissioned paintings in 1989. Sotheby's were invited to conduct the auction which was held aboard the naval cadet training ship *Jawahar*. It became a spectacular social event where the excitement of bidding turned moneyed laypersons into collectors of art overnight. During this time, Pritish Nandy, editor of the *Illustrated Weekly of India*, upped the prices of selected artists' work by publishing lists of "the ten best artists" of this or that time, this or that place.

During the decade that followed, two events struck me as representative of what was going on. One was the suicide of a young and very promising artist. The other was

another young artist's confession to me that he felt at a complete loss in the new world of art and did not know which way to go.

These two events became the germ from which the first vague idea for my novel sprang. Soon another art—Hindustani music—pushed its way into the scene with its own set of questions. This happened when I came across a collection of new bandishes composed by an established vocalist. The book said they were new; and yet they were all of them variations on the old themes of love and separation and were also written in the old language. I wondered how a young woman living in modern times did not feel the need to express, in her compositions, any of the feelings and ideas that marked this age. The question then was, did the old *khayal* form not have enough give to accommodate new feelings? Could urban tongues not produce lyrics for this music? Why did all new *bandishes* have to be in the old dialects of the Hindi belt? Could anything be achieved for *khayal* music by breaking some of these moulds while remaining faithful to the form?

Gradually characters began arguing about these questions. Artists arrived. Music gurus took up their positions. The media looked on. All

these characters took shape and grew out of argument. At some point one of them would bring in something from her/his past life which illuminated where s/he was coming from. Gradually, they put on their own particular flesh, came to have their own particular hair, expressions, habits and language.

Once the scene was peopled, I knew it was time to begin writing. But I had no idea where to begin. Like the first mark that a painter makes on the canvas, I put down the first few words about one of the characters. She was

working was unfamiliar to me. My first novel [*Rita Welinkar*, Mouj Prakashan, 1990] had been a linear story. In that book I had been deeply concerned about the emotional well-being of my protagonist. She had stumbled into a fulfilling but ultimately emotionally draining relationship. She had been living with it, finding joy in it but also suffering because of it. She was looking for a solution. Would she find it? How? I was certain she would. So I had this outline firmly in mind. The details followed.

During the decade of the 90s, two events struck me as representative of what was going on. One was the suicide of a young and very promising artist. The other was another young artist's confession to me that he felt at a complete loss in the new world of art.

gazing out of her window as evening fell. She was alone. Her thoughts were of the past. Out of that past rose the figure of a husband. He was blood-smearred. He had been killed by a rioting mob. That is how the novel began. That is how it still begins.

I started in July 2005 and wrote every day, chapter after chapter, not once stopping to look back. I was afraid to look back. This way of

In the present case, I was writing the details, imagining whole scenes, but was unsure of how they would hang together to produce a coherent narrative. I trusted some inner sense of structure and rhythm to guide me and allowed my overall preoccupation with the violence of our times to seep in. I did not exclude from the narrative any of the bits and pieces of my characters' lives that came floating in,



even when they were not of immediate relevance to the 'story'. In fact, I realised as I went along, that I had abandoned the idea of writing 'a story' in the conventional sense. I sensed that I was writing a time, I was writing situations arising out of this particular time and how this time was affecting the lives and creative processes of my artist characters. I had located my story in Mumbai and confined it to a specific year—2004. By doing so, I was hoping to control the spread and sharpen the focus of my characters' preoccupations. Hence the rather unimaginative title *Tya Varshi* [In That Year, Mouj Prakashan, 2008]. This year was 12 years after the demolition of the Babri Masjid, three years after 9/11, the war on Afghanistan and the hacking down of the Bamiyan Buddhas, two years after the Gujarat pogrom and the American invasion of Iraq. The year ended with a natural disaster of unprecedented proportions—the tsunami. My characters could not remain untouched by these events.

The novel was published in March 2008. Since then I have received a lot of feedback. There's been admiration for the detail I've worked in, for the number of interesting characters that people the novel, for writing about art at all. One reader

told me that the novel has been written in epic form. Another said he was unable to find its centre. A reviewer who responded to being drawn into the creative lives of artists, and appreciated the strong presence of the socio-political context, still missed being able to identify with any of the characters. One reviewer, who liked the novel immensely, ended by saying, "But it's the kind of novel that the general reader may not be able to appreciate". Another reviewer has responded strongly to the questions about art and art practices that I have raised, but objects to the disfavour he thinks I have shown to one character.

One question that I have been asked again and again, and which has bewildered me, is: why have I chosen to write my novel in this form. I have been unable to answer the question except tautologically—I wrote the novel in the form that it brought with itself. To me the question signifies a reader who is still not willing to give her/himself the freedom that writers are increasingly giving themselves. The reader is still looking for the comfort of the known while the writer is taking risks with the unknown. How do we close this gap?

## From *Tya Varshi* (Translated by Shanta Gokhale)

An immense new hoarding, roughly ten feet by five, has gone up at the corner of the junction, admonishing the whole square, as it were, to march to Shivaji Park. Sharada lets her eyes wander casually over it as she waits for the red man to turn green. At the centre stands a pink-lipped leader in a crisply starched white *kurta-pajama*. The pink lips are the hoarding painter's flight of fancy. Ranged around him like buzzing flies waiting for a ride on a buffalo's back are several gentlemen named Pednekar-Bhagwat-Bhure-Gangan-Boite-Sheikh and suchlike. All of them wear triumphant expressions. The leader's right hand is raised. Four fingers of the hand are folded in, while the forefinger jabs the sky at the top. Along the bottom appear the following words in bold green and saffron: March to Shivaji Park.

On the pavement below, a ragged child is beating a younger and even more ragged child with a supple twig. As soon as the signal turns green, Sharada hurries across the road and grabs the hand that holds the twig. The child looks at her with moist, hollow eyes. A fly alights on the corner of his open mouth. He jerks his head to whisk it off. Sharada's grip

around his sticklike hand is as tight as his on the younger child's hand. The younger child stares at her with dumb hope.

"Why are you beating the poor thing," Sharada asks the older child sternly. He says in an expressionless voice, "Aunty, he won't sing." His mouth remains open after he has spoken because that is the way it is made.

Sharada is still holding his hand. What is she supposed to do with it? She strikes herself as an idiot, standing there looking at the two children, who in turn look at her in silence. It is her turn to say something. Or do something. What? Fed up with waiting, the older child intones yet again, "Aunty, he won't sing." Then adds, "He won't sing to get money. He won't sing to get food." That said, the two children stare at her again.

Sharada is embarrassed. The older child probably expects her to tell the younger one, "You must listen to your older brother. You must sing." The younger child probably expects her to free him from the older child's grasp. She can do neither. She should never have meddled with them. Passersby are now staring at her. They probably expect her to do

something else altogether. To set up a cry. "This child has picked my purse." They will then move in to beat up the child and extract the truth and the purse from him. She breaks into a sweat. Her grip on the boy's wrist loosens. He worms his hand free. She still does not know what to do. So she puts her hand on the older child's head and says, "Don't beat him. He's so small."

The child says, "If he doesn't sing, they'll beat him."

She doesn't ask him who "they" are. She wants to escape from this thing as fast as she can. She thrusts a hand into her handbag and pulls out a couple of coins. Pushing them into the younger child's hand, she says, "Tell them he sang."

The older child says, "They are watching from there."

Sharada turns away firmly and starts walking. A little way down, she hears the younger child howl again. She keeps walking. Her mind is in a turmoil. Why did she give him money? She should have bought him *paos*. The beating might have hurt less on a full stomach. Then from far away she hears two voices singing—one voice is strong, the other tearful: "Tumhare hain tumse daya mangate hain; tere ladlon ki duva mangate hain." ("We are your own, we beg you for

pity; we beg your darlings for their blessings.")

Sharada goes back some 25 or 30 years. Her aunt's house in Pune. Summer vacation. They are playing last-letter-song on the terrace, under a bright starlit sky. The last letter is 't'. Shalinitai begins to sing, "Tumhare hain tumse..." The refrain is sung, the first stanza is sung. But Tai continues to sing. Sharada's eyes stream with tears. The song rises to a final crescendo. Tai sings the last two lines, "Bacha ho jo roti ka tukada dila do, jo utara ho tan se woh kapada dila do" ("Give whatever scraps are left over. Give whatever clothes you have worn and discarded.") Sharada has burst into uncontrollable sobs. Her aunt slaps her lightly and says, "Really, Leela's daughter is too sensitive." Sharada does not understand what the English word 'sensitive' means. But she gathers it is something shameful and quickly rubs her eyes clean.

Sharada climbs up the ramshackle stairs to Pandit Keshavrao Kinikar's rooms. There is a ton-heavy iron ball in her stomach. Pandit Kinikar lives in a two-room unit of the Unmrao Chawl in a lane behind Kohinoor Mills No 2. The door to his rooms is open. Guruji is standing at the window. He remains standing with

his back to her even after she has entered. The expanse of the mill land spreads before him. Mill workers once laboured here in three shifts, spinning and weaving without end. Now the place is without buildings and without people. Guruji has seen those days from this window. Now he can see these. His 70-year-old back, always straight as a palm, is now rigid in its straightness, as though someone is about to attack it from behind.

continues to stand absolutely still, only his fingers intertwined behind his back moving slightly. Sharada has seen Guruji's anger take many forms, but never this. What must she do in these circumstances—stand like a statue, or fall at his feet and ask for forgiveness? She cannot in all honesty ask for forgiveness. She did what she did knowingly. To ask him to forgive her would be hypocritical. She continues to stand like a statue.

**Guruji is standing at the window. He remains standing with his back to her even after she has entered. The expanse of the mill land spreads before him. Mill workers once laboured here in three shifts, spinning and weaving without end. Now the place is without buildings and without people. Guruji has seen those days from this window. Now he can see these.**

Sharada pulls the durrie from under the cupboard and spreads it noiselessly. She gently lifts the tanpura from the corner and sets it horizontally down. This done she waits, holding her tense body in. Guruji is still unwilling to turn. He is lost in the view outside. A puff of breeze enters through the window and with it a dried leaf that flutters in and settles on his shoulder. Guruji

Sharada shifts her weight from one foot to the other. If a way is not soon found out of this impasse, she is afraid she will burst out laughing. Fortunately Madhavrao Sabnis enters just then on furtive feet and freezes when he sees her. He has come in wearing one of his long-sleeved shirts of pale, indeterminate colour and his customary expression of devotion. But now the expression becomes muddled.

He half-smiles at Sharada in greeting and hurries forward to touch Guruji's feet. This is not easy to do because Guruji's feet point towards the wall. But he touches them from the side and moves back.

Madhavrao was once Guruji's disciple. He used to pour his soul into singing. He was tenacious. But around the time he realised that mere tenacity was not enough to produce a true *shadja* note, he was diagnosed with cancer of the throat. On hearing the news, Haridas had said in his off-hand

nods and smiles. If he does not, he hangs his head. He worships Guruji with boundless devotion. His belief that such a singer was never born, and never will be, is total. For the last 30 years he has accompanied Guruji on the tanpura at every concert. On these occasions, his face lights up with such guru-love, that people's attention is often diverted to him and stays entangled there.

When Madhavrao touches Guruji's feet he does not simply bend, touch and straighten as others do. He

perplexed at Sharada's presence. So when Guruji finally turns round and signals to him to sit, he gesticulates and arranges the lines on his face into the question: how can I sit when it appears to be Sharada's time with Guruji. Guruji makes another sign to him to sit. "There's no lesson today," he says. Sharada starts. For the first time now, he looks at her and says, "You may also sit."

"There's no lesson" is the first part of her punishment. She guesses that Madhavrao's presence means more will follow. She realises she is still standing. Guruji says, "Sit down, please. You're really perfectly self-sufficient now. You should not need my permission to sit."

Guruji's speech always becomes nasal when he is saying cutting things. Sharada's palms have been sweating since she entered the room. Now her heart begins to pound. She is not afraid of what Guruji will say next. What she is afraid of is suddenly losing her respect for him. Where will that leave her? So far she has always managed to justify to herself even his most irrational outbursts, his arrogance in dealing with people, his paroxysms of rage against Pandit Raghuvir Sharma of their own gharana. She has told herself that nobody understands Guruji's

greatness. He has never gotten over the grief of losing his wife at a young age. His ideas about music are too high for today's world. Etcetera, etcetera. But lately, doubts have begun to enter her mind.

"Did you go for her concert Madhavrao," he asks. His voice is like silk. Madhavrao looks severely uncomfortable. He knows she has done wrong. He has been disturbed about it ever since. He has known that he will be asked this question. He nods affirmatively. He is a simple man. He cannot see what she can. Guruji is laying a trap for him. She does not wish to see this simple man being used in a game. Guruji should speak out about what is on his mind directly to her and be done with it. But he will not do that. Sharada hangs her head.

"Yes, I heard you were there," Guruji says softly.

Madhavrao nods again.

"What did you think of it then?"

Madhavrao is stumped. There is the devil if he says he liked the concert, and the deep blue sea if he says he did not. He flails around.

Guruji says, pronouncing every word very clearly, "Pandit Raghuvir Sharma was overheard telling someone that Sharadatai is the only star among my disciples. The rest is darkness." Poison has gathered on

14 **Guruji's speech always becomes nasal when he is saying cutting things. Sharada's palms have been sweating since she entered the room. Now her heart begins to pound. She is not afraid of what Guruji will say next. What she is afraid of is suddenly losing her respect for him. Where will that leave her?**

way, "That's how God sometimes intervenes to decrease the tunelessness of the world."

Madhavrao just about manages to produce a speaking voice now. It comes from somewhere deep within his throat and sounds like sandpaper. Madhavrao is a chaste man full of goodness. He expects people to find his voice annoying, so he does not say much. If he agrees with people, he

prostrates himself on the ground. When he rises, his eyes are always moist. He feels no embarrassment on that account. He pulls a handkerchief out of his pocket, gives his eyes a thorough wipe, and even snorts into it on occasion. He then stands aside with a joy-filled smile awaiting the order to sit. On this day, he has been denied prostration, and the order to sit has not come. Moreover, he is

Guruji's lips. The glint in his eyes suggests that the poison has a sweet taste and a tender touch. Pandit Sharma's name has this effect on him. Guruji's concerts attract a few true connoisseurs. Pandit Sharma's concerts attract the world. In Guruji's opinion the reason is this: "He is handsome. I am ugly." On occasion he has added a gloss to this statement. "In our country fair skin is worshipped. We submitted to the British. We made Pandit Nehru our Prime Minister. If we had chosen Vallabhbhai Patel, the future of our country would have been very different. But Vallabhbhai was dark. His nose was large."

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Madhavrao's eyes are fixed on Guruji. What is he thinking? Is Sharadai the only star or is she not? Which way should I shake my head? Up-down or sideways? Guruji returns his look with curiosity and a sweet smile. Sharada feels suffocated. She is not going to be able to resist the urge to simply leave if Guruji does not let his bile out quickly. If she leaves there will be no way back. She will have lost a great guru and taken upon her head the sin of forsaking a guru. She finds the idea unendurable.

Guruji now says thoughtfully, "I am told that Sharadai did not sing with a full-throated voice as we do, but played around with it. What is

your opinion about this present trend of voice modulation?"

"Mine?" Guruji's question is so unexpected that Madhavrao stutters his first word of the morning. Even assuming he has opinions, Guruji has never shown any interest in them before. And yet now... is he really expected to give his opinion or will Guruji answer his own question? Guruji speaks.

"There's a fundamental difference between popular songs and classical music. One of them is that we are not expected to tickle the listener's feelings. The listener is your fellow-traveller, or at least should be. When you sing your arduous practice, your honed skills, your faith, your tradition, you give him something that he doesn't get from his daily routine. Your attempt is to arouse in his mind something that lies beyond the materiality of the here and now. It's a difficult thing to do. That is why you put in years of practice. Those who want to escape hard work are tempted to do sensational things—like singing their own songs, composing their own ragas or singing raags out of their timeframe."

Now, finally, Guruji turns to her. "You don't need those great composers Sadarang-Adarang anymore. You have become independent. Your ideal is no

longer your Guru and your Guru's Guru. It is Pandit Raghuvir Sharma. He has been flitting wantonly through all the gharanas, composing his own raags, his own songs. Now it's you. If you wish to follow his ways, you're free to become his formal disciple. It is a disease that afflicts our nation, to forget our own and run after the alien. Pick and use is what people respect most these days. How can even you escape it? Let's celebrate."

Guruji is choked. Sharada looks at him with wet eyes. This man has suffered unknown hardships to acquire the knowledge he has; and although he has not given with a generous hand, he has given me enough to last me a lifetime. What did he expect when he was passing this treasure on to me? That I would sing his music in his name. So I do. But how do I convince him that I do precisely that? How do I tell him that my confidence in doing something different comes from the fullness of his music in me? How unfair it is that he should think—people enjoy her music because she uses gimmicks to please them. How do I tell him that the audience did not care for my experiment that evening? That it made them uneasy; that such experiments are not going to add to my popularity; that if anything, the exact opposite is

likely to happen.

Guruji's face has grown suddenly softer. He sighs and meets Sharada's eyes directly. "People say we must change with the times. My profound belief is that this should not apply to a timeless art like music. It is possible that my mind has caught the mildew. I am entering my seventies, you are barely thirty-five. So you tell me then. What was your idea in singing the afternoon raag *Shuddha Sarang* in the evening?"

Sharada knows this path is strewn with mines. Since Guruji has put such a direct question to her, it would be impertinent not to answer it. But to answer it would be an arrogant admission that I think differently from him. Sharada takes a deep breath. "I didn't do it just to be different. When the song came to me it came composed in *Shuddha Sarang*. It so happened that I had this concert coming up. So I felt tempted to try the song out before an audience, that's all."

"Merely because you felt tempted, you thought you would..."

"Not just that. I also thought that Carnatic musicians don't adhere to rules of time and season. The Carnatic system and the Hindustani system have emerged from the same source. We have borrowed several raags from one another. When I

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attend Carnatic music concerts, I do not suffer loss of enjoyment because a raag has been sung out of its time or season. We too have made compromises with time rules.”

“We have? Compromises?”

“Times have changed. We don’t have night-long concerts any more, so we sing raags that used to be sung in the early hours of the morning much earlier... So I thought we’ve stopped associating raags rigidly with sunrise and sunset in any case, so it shouldn’t matter greatly if one sings a raag that is right for the mood and meaning of a song even though the time is wrong.”

“Did you place this thought before the audience?”

“No.”

“So how did they respond to this innovation of yours?”

“It did not go with their listening habits.”

“Their habits? Or their tradition? Their faith?”

Sharada says nothing to this, but tells herself that people who once listened exclusively to *dhrupad* began to enjoy the *khayal* once they got used to it. If they had only recorded the stages by which that transition was made, we would not be arguing about such things now.

She does not know how Guruji has interpreted her silence. But he says

now in a quiet tone, “You are free to do what you want. This is the age of individual freedom. But if you want to continue with such experiments, please do me the favour of not naming me as your guru.”

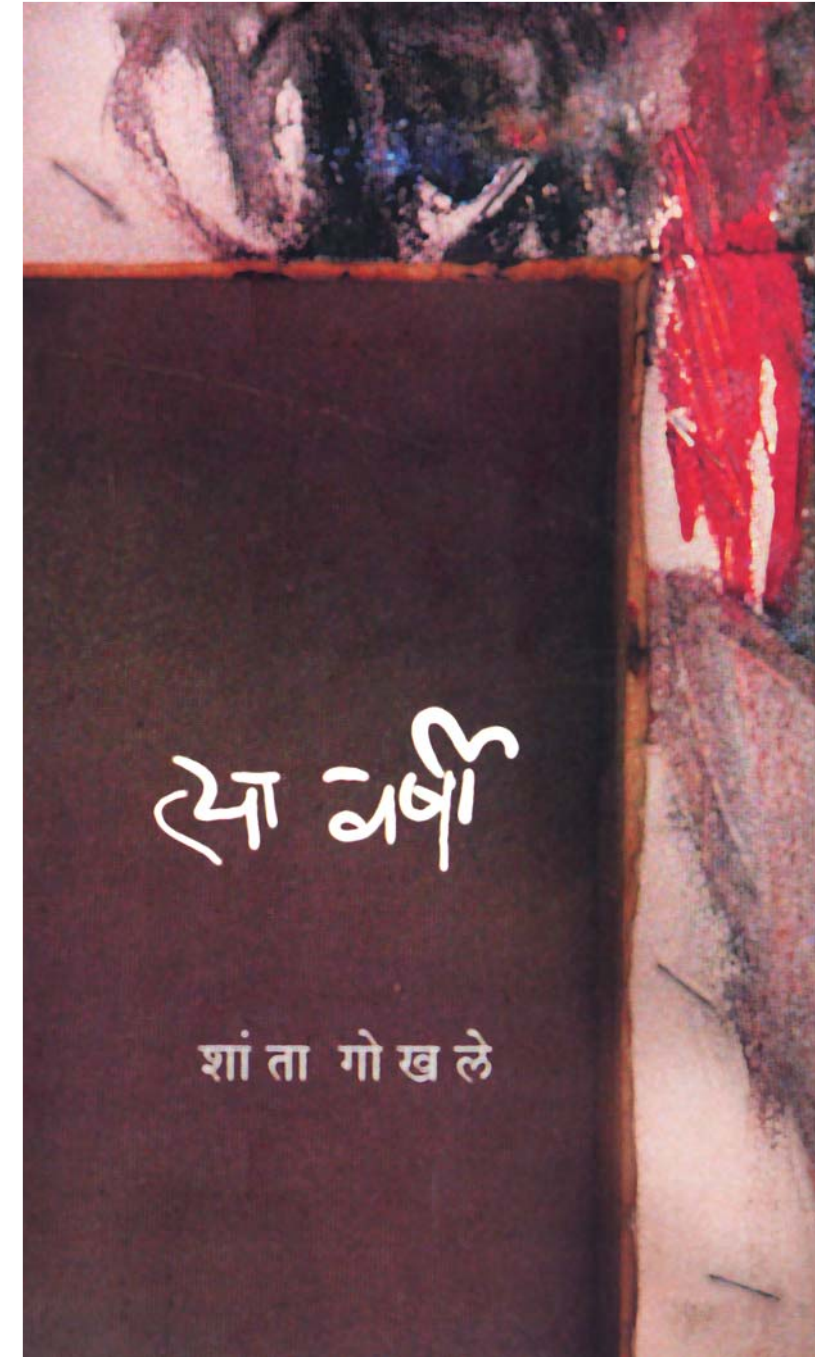
This said, he rises. Madhavrao and Sharada also rise instantly. “I have to go out for a while now,” he says. Madhavrao and Sharada glance at each other. Guruji never goes out, although several uncles, aunts, cousins and others from his huge extended family live thereabouts. He stopped visiting his relatives after his wife died. So when he says he has to go out, he means to tell them that they may leave. Guruji’s parting line is, “Please give a thought to what I have said and make up your mind. You need not come here till such time as you do.”

Madhavrao and Sharada descend the worn out stairs of Guruji’s tenement building. The ripples from Madhavrao’s perplexed state of mind lap against Sharada’s body as she walks beside him. He clears his throat many times but not a word emerges. She herself is in a daze. Sing the way I tell you to or I am not your guru. This is the essence of what Guruji has said. Think about it and only then come to me. Think? That I have no creative freedom; that I am duty bound to

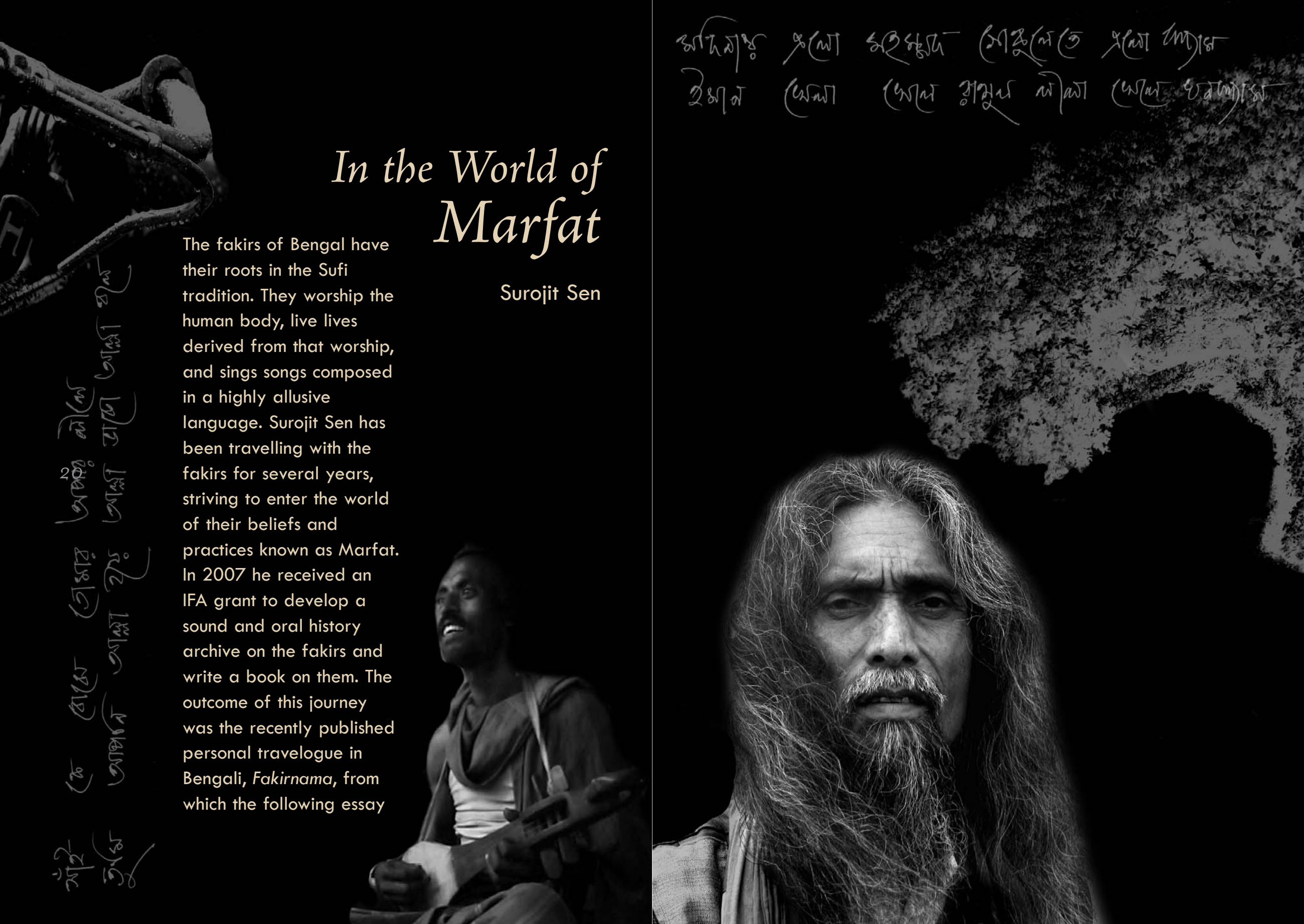
remain within the circle of rigidly defined tradition; that if I want to step outside that circle, I must do it without a guru. What space does that offer me to think?

Madhavrao and Sharada are on the street now. Madhavrao must face the last test. How is he to say goodbye to a disciple who has been rejected by his Guru? With a smile, as though nothing unusual has happened? Or with a stern face that will make it clear she did wrong? Madhavrao does neither. There is no smile in his heart. How can it emerge on his face? There is no sternness in his nature; how will it enter his voice? He looks utterly miserable. Then he says “So sorry, so sorry” a few times in his sandpaper voice and hurries away with lowered head.

Sharada stands below Guruji’s rooms in the slanting sun. Her feet will not move from the spot. She raises her head to look at his window. He is not there. She feels suddenly orphaned.







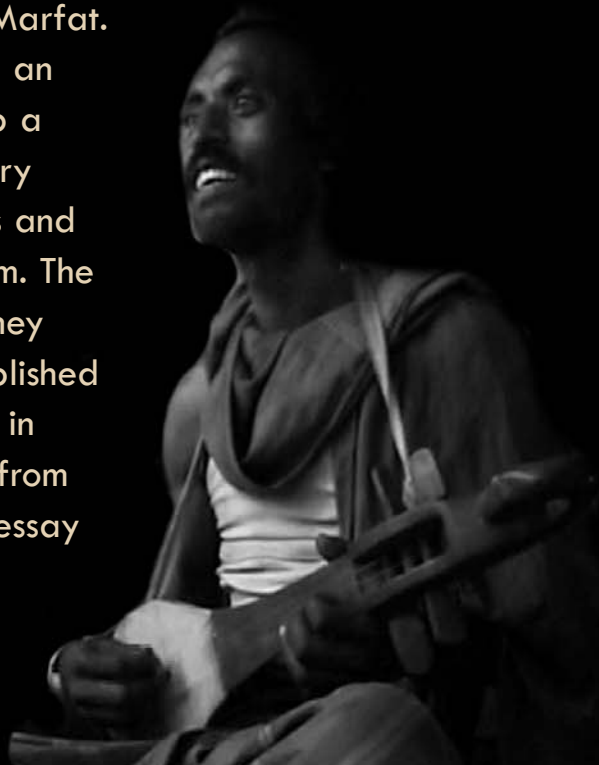
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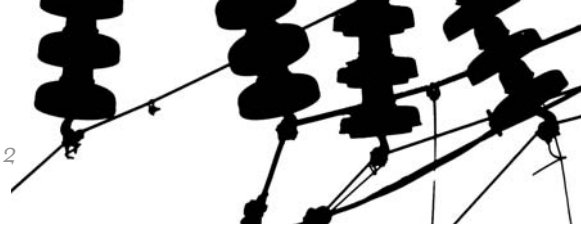
# In the World of Marfat

Surojit Sen

The fakirs of Bengal have their roots in the Sufi tradition. They worship the human body, live lives derived from that worship, and sings songs composed in a highly allusive language. Surojit Sen has been travelling with the fakirs for several years, striving to enter the world of their beliefs and practices known as Marfat. In 2007 he received an IFA grant to develop a sound and oral history archive on the fakirs and write a book on them. The outcome of this journey was the recently published personal travelogue in Bengali, *Fakirnama*, from which the following essay

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Six years ago, a new way of life began to be revealed to me. As I frequented the houses of the fakirs in the villages of Nadia, Murshidabad and Birbhum in West Bengal; visited *akharas* and festivals; met and talked to the fakirs; listened to their songs; ate with them; lived out the days in the proximity of their families and community, their music, philosophy and stories, the shape of a new world unfolded before me. The world of *Marfat*.

The fakirs inhabit the fringes of our society immersed in their *Marfati* world. Before going in search of them, I had briefly looked up the history of the faith. Browsing through a few books convinced me that it was like the sea. Instead of wading deep in the waters, I picked up a few pebbles from the shore. What I have gleaned from my reading goes thus:

The fakirs of Bengal are believed to have their roots in the Sufi tradition. A story has often been told as an illustration of the originary moment of Sufism. One day, Mohammed was elucidating for his disciples the seven echelons created by God. Suddenly, a new connotation emerged, one that had not occurred to him before. Ibn Abbas, a disciple of Mohammed and a man known for his adherence to the faith, was present at

the discussion. Later, the other disciples pleaded with Abbas to explain to them what Mohammed had said. Abbas told them that if he did so, they would stone both of them to death. In essence, Abbas meant that it was an offence to reveal secret knowledge to the uninitiated. Such a revelation amounted to stifling that knowledge. One found the knowledge only through worship. Therefore, the *Marfat*is believe that it is impossible to acquire knowledge without conscientious practice.

Sufism evolved through the interface of Islamic traditions and syncretic thought. A group of Mohammed's followers were also referred to as Sufi. 'Sufi' literally means both wool and purity. The Sufis used wool for their garments. And, just as they covered their bodies with clothes woven from wool, they lived in close proximity to and surrounded Mohammed all the time.

Religious authority was yoked to the power of the state from the originary moment of Islam. After Mohammed's death, there were repeated feuds among the various Islamic sects. As a mark of protest against the conservative, Statist practice of Islam, the Sufis refused to participate in the *namaz* and instead sat outside the mosque, expressing

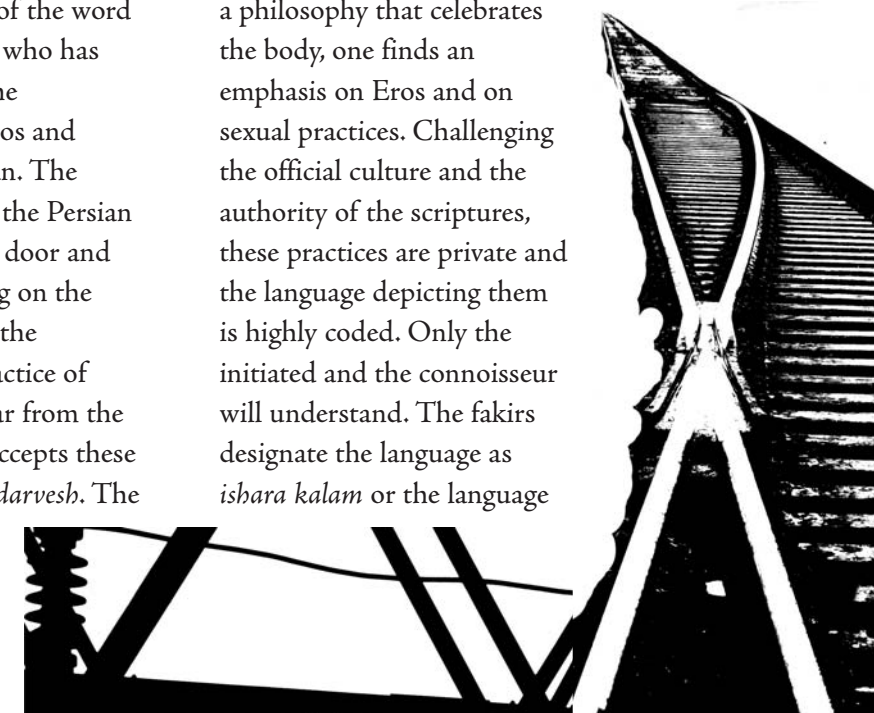
their dissent in silence. Soon the State began pursuing and torturing the Sufis in order to curb what was perceived as a challenge to its religious and political authority. Many like Mansoor Hallaj, an artist and staunch follower of Sufism, died in an attack by the religious fundamentalists. A number of scholarly works on Sufism mention such incidents. In their worship, lifestyle, elucidation of the Koran and the music and dance that accompanied their practice, the Sufis violated the doctrines of mainstream Islam.

In Bengal, the word fakir or *darvesh* is more common than Sufi. Fakir has its etymology in Arabic and is used to describe a man who does not have any possessions, or refers to a particular community of Islamic worshippers. In Bengali, the non-communitarian meanings of the word fakir are: i) beggar; ii) one who has renounced the world iii) the practitioners of a secret Eros and sexuality according to Lalan. The word *darvesh* derives from the Persian *dar-avez*, where *dar* means door and *avez* implies an object hung on the door. The word alludes to the householders' common practice of hanging alms for the beggar from the door latch. The one who accepts these gifts or alms is also called *darvesh*. The

word is used as well to refer to the people of a particular sect who arrive at the householder's door asking for alms. Their attire is made up of patches of coloured cloth—red, yellow and white. Interestingly, the red and yellow sweet popular among Bengalis has also come to be known as *darvesh*.

The fakirs worship the human body, and their lifestyle revolves around various practices derived from that worship. Like the Bauls of Bengal, the fakirs also sing songs celebrating the body. These songs reveal a different face of folk life, not wholly unfamiliar, though the highly allusive language points to a practice that is quite alien to everyday rural life. These songs speak of a different philosophy and a way of being in the world that is singular.

Since these songs emanate from a philosophy that celebrates the body, one finds an emphasis on Eros and on sexual practices. Challenging the official culture and the authority of the scriptures, these practices are private and the language depicting them is highly coded. Only the initiated and the connoisseur will understand. The fakirs designate the language as *ishara kalam* or the language





of allusion. What is hinted at through this language of innuendo is the secret practice. Since the fakirs inhabit a larger world where language operates differently, and where a set of familiar realities, cultural forms and practices have hardened through validation, they have honed a language of double entendre to speak of their own divergent practices and faith and be comprehended on various levels. "Among common people, say what they understand; among kindred spirits, talk the shared language," the fakirs say.

These songs comprise a seminal genre within Bengali folk music. They are popular both in the village and the city. Other than the celebration of the body, these songs go against the grain of mainstream communitarian and religious practices and strongly critique casteism. They have been handed down by the gurus to their disciples and are primarily disseminated through oral transmission.

Lalan is the most significant poet of this tradition and has written hundreds of songs. His disciple Duddu Shah and his friend Panju Shah have also written many songs. Other than these well-known poets,

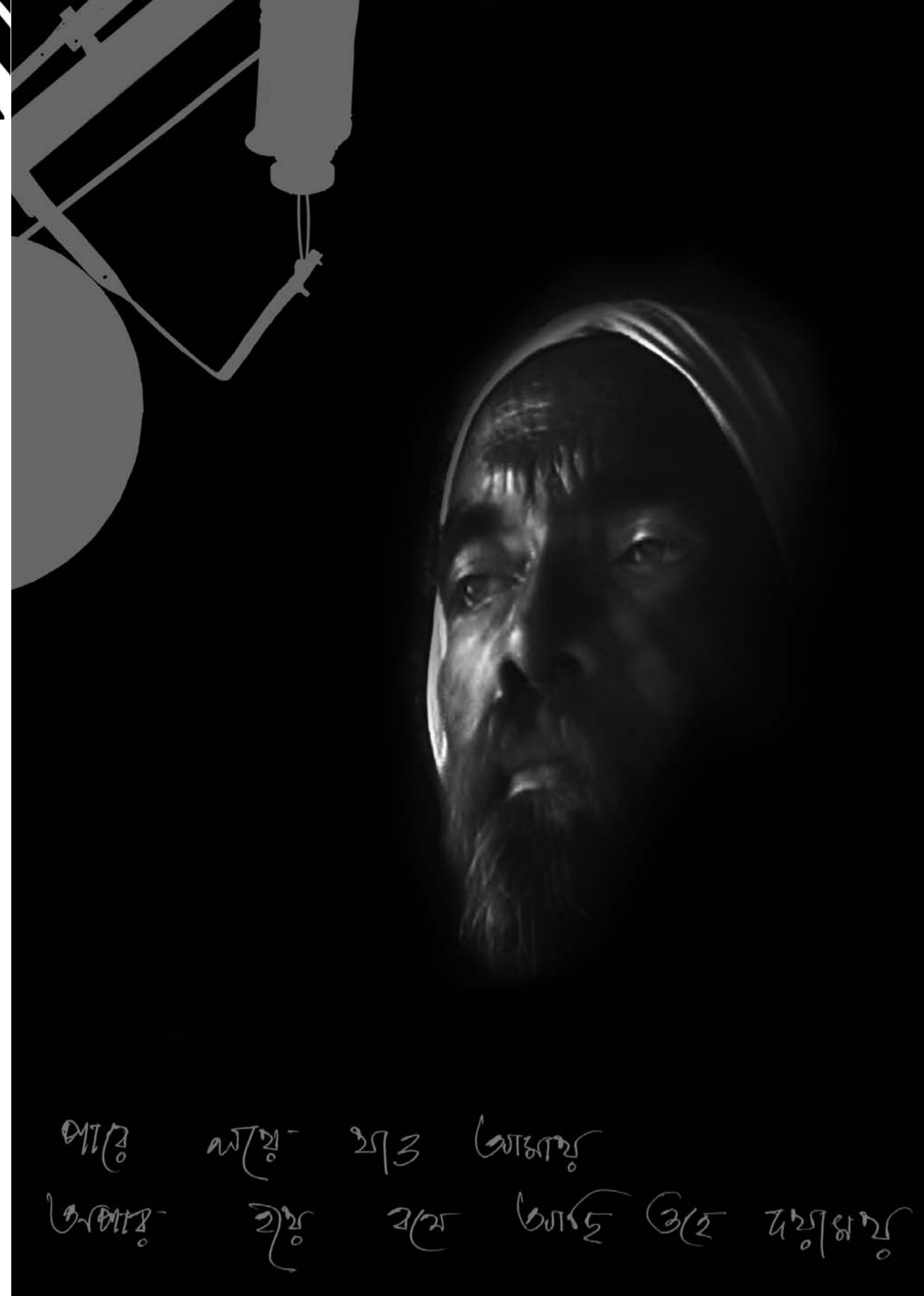
there have been other poets in rural Bengal who are known as great practitioners of *Marfat*.

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I met Khaibar Fakir in Karimpur, Nadia. Early in the conversation, the pleasing man sang a song for me. I say *sang*. But they *tell* songs. In their language: "I'll *tell* you a verse", like you narrate a story. In my experience there is no *telling* of songs. There is only listening. For them, the *telling* of songs, always.

Speaking of himself, Khaibar said, "I also believed in the *shariyat* once. Prayed regularly in the mosque. One day, after *namaz*, I saw the enraged Imam beating up a man with his slippers. The incident disgusted me. Henceforth, hatred was the only feeling I had for the mosque."

"The mosque is God's habitus," he continued. "How could I pray in that sanctum with someone who commits such a heinous act? Mankind has descended from Adam. The devil violated Allah's command and refused to acknowledge Adam. So he was evicted from Paradise. And those who disrespect man are but the devil's accomplice. I never went back to the mosque. Having seen a number of saints and fakirs, I finally submitted heart and soul to a man called



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Bashiruddin Shah. My guru. He lived in Swarup Pur village in the Hariharpara area of Murshidabad. He taught me the lesson of humanism and the path to a spiritual being, *I sold my head to my guru. The guru and God are one/ There is no doubt / He is Allah / Lalan doesn't say this, the Koran does.*

"I designated a man as my teacher," Khaibar observed. *"He whose guru is Man/ Speeds down the path of the right,* Lalan wrote. I do recognise that unquestioned submission hinders knowledge. But once you have submitted to your guru, you cannot harbour doubts. My guru taught me the worship of the body. I have cared for him. His whole being represents purity for me. He is my Allah, my God. I have found his essence. I proceed with this self-knowledge. But the spiritual had a reality for me much before I submitted myself to my guru. I have always followed the path of ahimsa or non-violence. Still do. It is necessary to consciously practice it. You won't find even a stick in my house to ward off the dogs. I don't need it. Have never used my hands on anyone. At fifty-two, I am still driven by the motivation to remain an honest man."

"How do you survive?" I asked

him. "I have two and a half *bighas* of land," he replied. "I cultivate as much of it as I can. I'm a farmer's son and there is nothing in the domain of agriculture that I'm unfamiliar with. The rest of the land is contracted out to other cultivators. Paddy, wheat and mustard grow. I have a cow. It is enough for the three of us to survive. There is no other way. I don't know of another purer means of survival."

As our conversation progressed, the subject of *Marfat* came up. "The *shariyati* practice is based on a belief in what cannot be seen," Khaibar remarked. "I have not seen Allah, but I continue to utter his name. Such is the power of trappings. *Tarikat* is the process by which you can, through simple knowledge, allow a comprehension of Allah to emerge within you. *Hakkel Yakeen*, on the other hand, is an experience of Allah through true knowledge. In *Marfat*, we speak of *Ainal Yakeen*, the belief that is premised on eyewitness. We see Allah and believe in him, like I see you before me. The Koran says that Allah can be seen like the full moon. In *Jugal Sadhana*, Lalan says, *The animal being falters/ The godly remain unshakeable.* In the union of man and woman, if the man falters, he is still in the animal state. The one who is firm never

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wavers. He is closer to God. When the experience of union, steadfast and resolute, can be elevated to a higher level, one can reach a true understanding of Allah. The worship of Woman is one of the stages. And one has to go beyond it. I am in Gorbhanga now. I will proceed to Kolkata. If I sit in Krishnanagar, it won't do. Woman is *shakti*. The worship of *shakti* is therefore the worship of woman."

I asked Khaibar what his experience of being a fakir means. He smiled, paused for a moment and said, "I have traversed a long road, but my journey isn't over; the eyes have beheld much, but there is something yet to be seen. A lot of people look at my white beard and suggest I colour it black. And I wonder why I should impede that which is a natural process. My being is momentary. Why should I needlessly run around? Where can I reach with a love of objects? I don't think about the future because I have nothing to gain from greater economic well-being. The shadow of death accompanies me. I take it with me wherever I go. God is absence. There is no gravity around Him. When I die, the state of being I am in, will continue to resonate beyond this life. I keep myself prepared. Lalan said, *You*

*are Allah, and You name Allah as Allah/ Who can comprehend Allah's sublime work? My practice is to find Allah within me. I am still looking for him."*

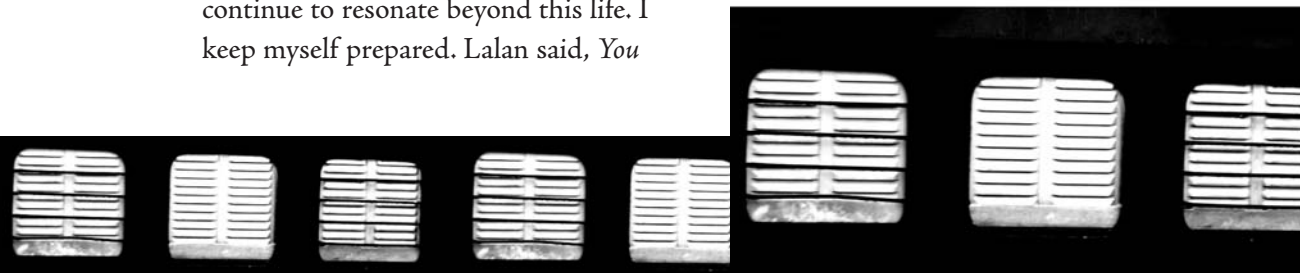
Penetrating the true meaning of a song takes a lifetime. "We have talked a lot," Khaibar remarked and with a smile he took up his *dotara*, closed his eyes and launched into a song:

The mind wasn't mindful so long  
Where was I? How did I come here?  
Where to? Toward whom do I proceed?  
Calling it *my house, my home*, is beguiling  
In a wink all will be razed some day

The mind wasn't mindful so long  
Concrete corridor, solid house, happily-ever-after  
Didn't consider the journey to the cremation ground

The mind wasn't mindful so long  
I think this and do that, a boat laden with sins  
The huge waves roll before me, Lalan says  
The mind wasn't mindful so long

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Three years ago, I started out from Bahrapur one morning, bound for Nazrul Fakir's house in Lalnagar, twenty-five kilometers away. Our car soon left the highway and took the tar-road leading to the village. A plaque erected by the government informed us that the road had been laid under the aegis of the Prime Minister's village roadworks programme. A little later, we left the shiny tar and turned into a dirt track. A whirl of dust followed our car. Soon we turned into a narrower lane and slowed down further as a band of geese obstructed our way. A passing cyclist told us we had reached our destination—Nazrul Fakir's house.

Past fifty, Nazrul Fakir sat in the porch of his house with a heap of molasses drying on a mat beside him. More palm jaggery was cooking in the oven in the courtyard. He was in the business of palm molasses, Nazrul informed us. His molasses had a reputation in the market. Soon, puffed rice and molasses arrived for our consumption. Nazrul spoke fondly of his blind brother, who was a well-known musician and knew about two hundred songs. He had learnt his music from his brother. Nazrul's wife, Djamila, was a musician too.

"The crux of *fakiriana* is a certain humanism," Nazrul Fakir

observed. "We have faith in Man and we worship him. There is one God, but he exists among men. In what form he exists, in what manner he manifests himself, are questions that preoccupy us, the fakirs. Like the sweetness of jaggery, like the cream in milk, God is immanent in man. You cannot separate them.

"If you wish to find Him," Nazrul continued, "you need an intermediary. Man is that intermediary. Lalan said: *The messiah accompanies you/ Let your mind find and follow his trail/ Someone deigns to reach the shore.*

"There are two kinds of scriptures in the world," Nazrul explained, "one is made of paper, and the other is Man. What is written on paper doesn't help you understand anything. You might read all the books from the Koran to the Gita, but you will not comprehend anything until you search out the philosophy of Man. Everything that has been said is written on paper. Those things are to be talked about and made known to the world. The secret knowledge, however, flows in the veins. It isn't written down. It is handed down from the guru to his disciples. The scriptures are written around Mohammed. But Mohammed claimed that he was an ordinary man like us.

One who has witnessed me, has experienced Allah, Mohammed said. The Koran simply documents what he said.

"Yet the Koran is also the beginning of all conflict," he continued. "Lalan said that the *maulavi* and the *maulana* both read the same Koran. But the *maulana* has more authority than the *maulavi*. The man who prays in secret, and reads the *namaz* taught by his guru, need not pay heed to the dictates of the *shariyati* authorities. The *kazi* hands out justice having read the same Koran and Hadis. There is so much dispute within the Muslim community—Sunni, Hanafi, Hambeli, Maleki, Safi and so on. For instance, the Hanafi and the Farazi do not agree. Now you have the Tablig, Giyampanthi and Pirpanthi too. Though there is only one scripture, one Allah and one messiah, there are myriad sects who fight amongst each other. When you worship Man, these disagreements fade. *One moon illumines the earth/ The same seed spawned us/ I hear useless bickering in the world,* Lalan says.

"A great man like Lalan has expressed it through innuendoes. We fakirs tell people what these great men have said. The same moon gives us light, even if we belong to different

faiths. There aren't different moons for people following different religions. The seed from which we are born is unique. It cannot produce a horse, just as the seed of the horse cannot produce sheep. The human seed cannot be marked as Hindu, Muslim or Christian. These divisions have been made by man. So, what Allah has said is for all men. The long and short of it," Nazrul Fakir concluded, "is that man has to know himself before he can make sense of the world."

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In Deganga, North 24 Parganas, there is a Chistiya Sufi worshiper called Saiyad Reza Chisti. Each year, the *urs* is celebrated there on the first day of the penultimate month in the Bengali calendar. I got the news and arrived there on the designated date. That night, in a long, intimate conversation, he told me: "I don't go to the mosque. I have my quarrels with the *shariyat*. Those who believe in the *shariyat* say that music is evil. But according to Sufi belief, music is central to our practice. The *shariyatis* think that I am a *kafer* and have deviated from the faith. I read the *namaz* and keep the *roza* in my own way. In the *urs* that I organise, the music observes no barriers, encompassing even the

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ମୁକ୍ତି ପାଇଁ ମନୁଷ୍ୟ ଯେଉଁ ଧର୍ମ ଗ୍ରହଣ କରେ ତାହା ତାହାର ଧର୍ମ ହୁଏ ।

Vaishnavite tradition. The Bauls sing, the fakirs sing, and there is also *qawali*. The *shariyatis* consider it a violation of Islam. I ask them to cite the Koran and the Hadis and explain my transgressions. Islam tells us to shun envy and anger as evils. Yet these people nurture these evils in their minds. And they sit in the mosque with their minds brimming with envy and anger and call Allah. So they never find Him. They treat the *namaz* as central to the faith. But the *namaz* is a convention. The process of organising and institutionalising Islam gave birth to this convention. The *namaz* does not have the power to purge the soul. That can be achieved through the practice your guru teaches you. You can gradually perfect it through a painstaking process of worship. If I concentrate on what my guru has taught me for five minutes, it has more power than reading the *namaz* five times a day."

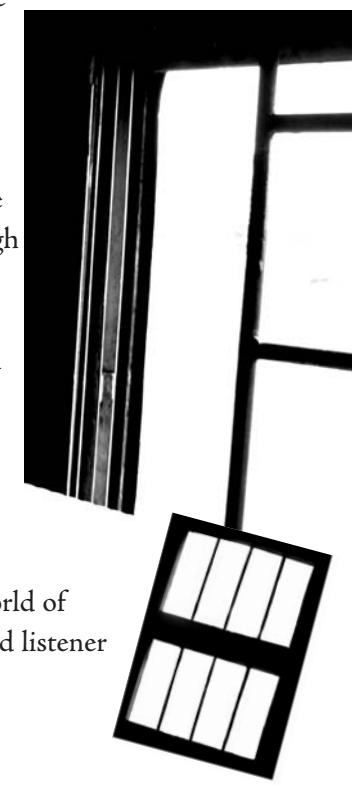
Speaking of the antagonism that he has had to cope with, Saiyad informed me: "The local mosque has issued a *fatwa* in my name to prevent people from coming to the *urs* that I organise. What transpires in the celebration is evil, they say. I am under a lot of pressure. They have even lodged a complaint at the local police station attempting to stall the festival. All this is there; all this will remain. I

have to continue with my work in spite of these tribulations. I do not nurse envy or anger towards anyone.

"I do not know of any other path except the Sufi practice that enables me to constantly purge myself and aspire to a purer being," Saiyad continued. "I have travelled, met many people, and heard about other paths to self-knowledge. All these experiences have convinced me that my faith enables me to practice the most peaceful existence. This faith has allowed me to recognise a spiritual power within my own body. When I pray, I do not know where I am. Sometimes, I can feel Allah arriving within me, and I feel an unearthly sense of pleasure. This pleasure increases as you follow the path of simplicity and renunciation. You cannot see the bacteria with your naked eyes. You need a microscope. If you acquire the spiritual power through worship and practice, you will be able to see much that evades the eyes. Until you have purified your soul, such vision is not possible."

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Travelling through the world of *Marfat*, I have been an avid listener



to myriad stories. The people I have met and spoken to have searched for a simple existence without greed and anger whereby they could love their brethren and practice a faith that allows them to cleanse their soul and reach true self-knowledge. These experiences have had a cleansing effect on me as well. I have often asked myself who I am, and what I've been up to.

Twenty years ago, my girlfriend and I took the local train as always on our way home from Kolkata. We were so immersed in each other that we did not notice the people around us. When my girlfriend got off at her station, the man next to me remarked, "Son, it seems that you are very much in love with the girl". Taken aback, I had a good look at the speaker and found an old man in a black cloak, hair reaching his shoulders and a flowing beard touching his chest, quietly smiling at me. A little annoyed, I answered in the affirmative. "It is evident from your eyes," he continued. "She has got off the train but lingered in your eyes." "So what," I retorted sharply. "Son," he observed, "We wish to love Allah in the same way, but cannot." I asked him what the collective pronoun, "we" was supposed to mean. "The *Marfati* fakirs," he

answered. I could not quite comprehend what he implied, so he said, "You didn't understand a thing, did you? When the time comes, you will. Immerse yourself in the love that you covet now. But that love is transitory." I got off the train at that point. The words, *Marfati* fakir, though, remained etched in my mind.

Many years after this incident, I asked Arman fakir why he covered his head with a cloth. "I am married to him," he replied. "I remain immersed in his love." I understood the implication of his words and suddenly in its wake remembered the conversation with the fakir on the train many years ago. Had the man guessed that some day I would gravitate towards the *Marfati* fakirs? How did he conjecture that the worldly love of that moment would not last long? I don't know the answers, but I do believe that the conversation from long ago played a role in nudging me into the world of the *Marfati* fakirs.

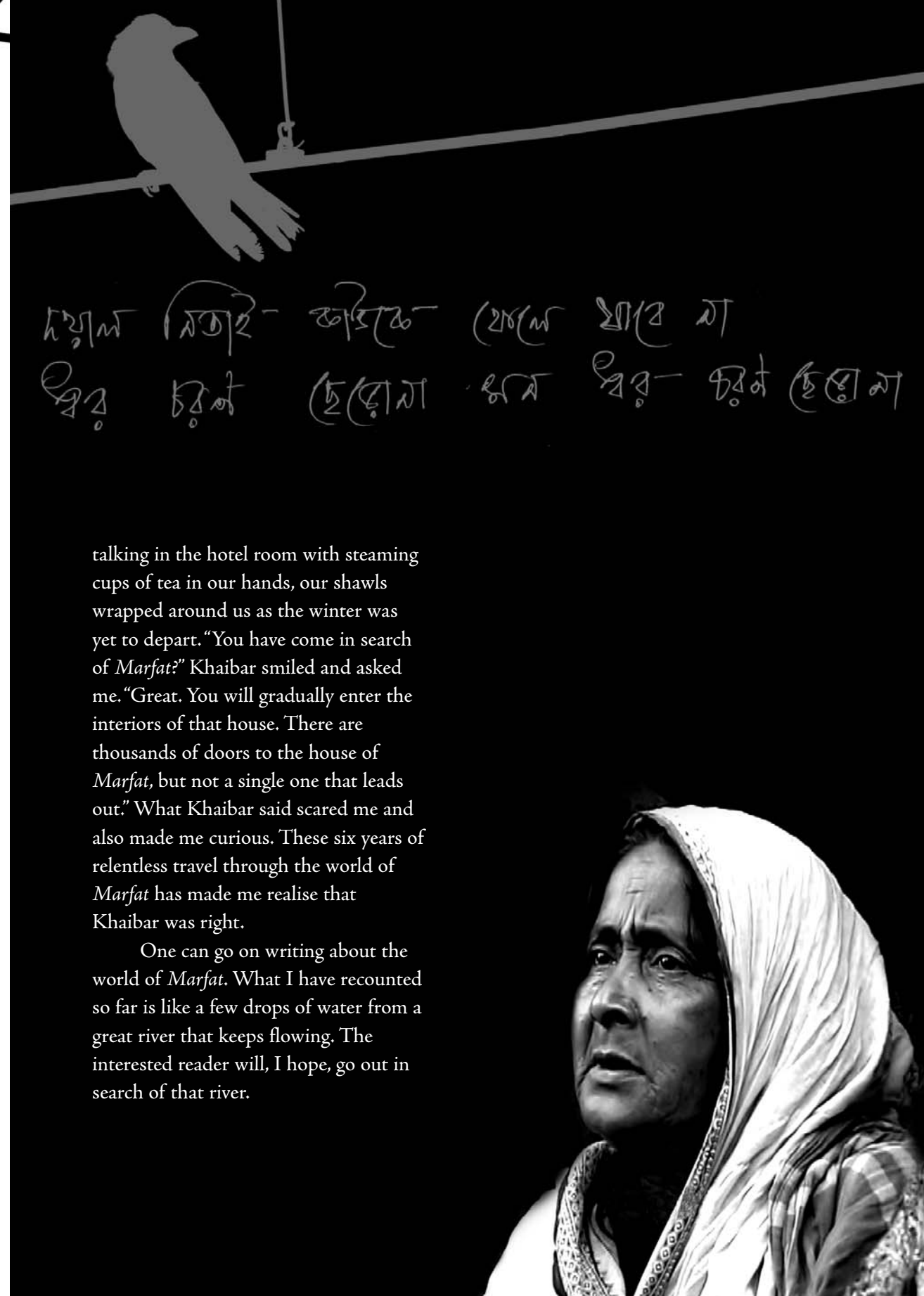
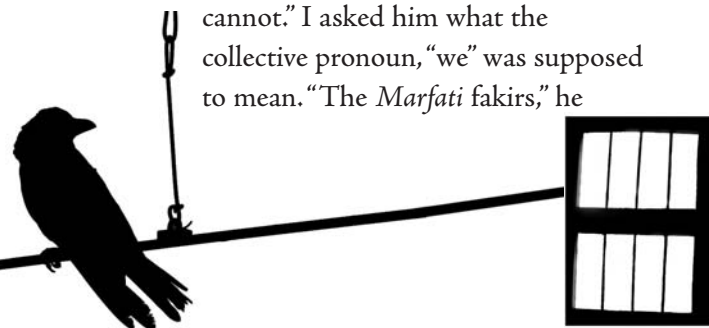
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Six years ago, I put up in a hotel in Karimpur, Nadia with my new friend Khaibar Fakir. At five in the morning, the day after I had met him, we sat

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talking in the hotel room with steaming cups of tea in our hands, our shawls wrapped around us as the winter was yet to depart. "You have come in search of *Marfat*?" Khaibar smiled and asked me. "Great. You will gradually enter the interiors of that house. There are thousands of doors to the house of *Marfat*, but not a single one that leads out." What Khaibar said scared me and also made me curious. These six years of relentless travel through the world of *Marfat* has made me realise that Khaibar was right.

One can go on writing about the world of *Marfat*. What I have recounted so far is like a few drops of water from a great river that keeps flowing. The interested reader will, I hope, go out in search of that river.





Astad Deboo is a name synonymous with modern Indian dance. As part of his radical approach, Deboo has undertaken many experiments with space, stretching the possibilities of conventional spaces as well as creating performance spaces out of classrooms, homes, staircases, gardens, window ledges, train stations, and grand historical sites such as the Great Wall of China.

In the following interview he talks to theatre director Sunil Shanbag about his lifelong fascination with the hidden possibilities of space.

This interview is excerpted from a book on experimenting with performance spaces that will be shortly published by IFA.

# Astad's Space

Astad Deboo in conversation with Sunil Shanbag





What emanated from the loudspeakers were sounds, not music, and what the dancer was doing on stage was not dance as I knew it. And, most frighteningly, the intimacy of the performance space had been ripped open like a tin can and harsh lighting exposed bare walls, a scarred ceiling, narrow catwalk, and giant wings. I thought I knew this theatre space, but now I did not know it at all, at least not in this avatar. Everything was different. Even time: sometimes it raced; sometimes it slowed to an intensely stretched crawl. The dancer turned arrogant, and then so full of compassion, he evoked tears and longing. When he moved across the stage he seemed to occupy spaces conjured out of thin air, filling them, extending them, drawing them in... If what I was familiar with was dance, then this surely was *anti-dance*.

This was sometime in 1978 and was my first exposure to Astad Deboo, a patrician-nosed Parsi returned to Mumbai from the West, who introduced to us a strange animal called 'modern' dance. That night as I walked home, I was trying to understand why, despite being so disturbed by the performance, I felt a deep sense of liberation.

The amazing stories of Astad's

early years as a dancer have been told and retold. A fidgety child is sent off by his parents to learn Kathak. He takes to it, but he must complete his graduation like all middle-class Indians. In Mumbai he wanders into a Murray Lewis modern dance performance and what he sees electrifies him. Returning home he stands in front of a full-length mirror and looks at his body with fresh eyes. It's a body trained in the Indian dance vocabulary, but he wants to break out and experience the freedom and adventure of modern dance. It's a long shot. Undeterred, he sets off on the overland route to Europe, determined to get to the US to take classes in modern dance. On the way he finds he can dance to buy his way forward, but it means dancing anywhere—in someone's home, in a TV studio, in a café, hardly ever on a formal stage. This is his first lesson: my art can happen anywhere. Because he does not make it to the US, he must now become the itinerant student, taking classes when he can afford them, but finding that he learns more from travelling to different countries and watching a spectacular range of dance being performed in temples, courtyards, ceremonial spaces and theatres.

In his own words, he is imbibing

it all, taking what suits his body and creating a vocabulary and style that is uniquely his own. The 1970s are a heady time in the West. Rules are being broken in art, and contemporary dance is vibrant with new energy. Astad fits in easily, and his eclectic form is attractive. He collaborates with painters, musicians and other performers in this grand celebration of subversive art. On one occasion he is strung up on a crane, lowered into vats of paint and then onto a vast canvas where he dances a painting. Site-specific work was coming into its own. Performers wanted to disturb conventional notions of dance/space/spectator/performer relationships, and boundaries were being extended every day.

So when Astad returns to India it's hardly surprising that he sets off ripples in the rather sedate and conventional dance and theatre scene. I was only one of many that evening who left his performance feeling we had seen a few rules of performance and performance space being rewritten.

Since then Astad has developed a formidable reputation as a performer who revels in exploring unusual spaces to stage his art. Of course his spectacular experiments have been more discussed—his work in the ruins

of Champaner fort, on the steel banister at the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA) in Mumbai, or on the Great Wall of China, or even Wyna Picchu. But not enough has been said about how he works with spaces within conventional theatres. This is unfortunate because it is here that he faces the greatest challenges. Indifferent and unimaginative theatre design in most Indian performance spaces have frustrated many a performer, but Astad, with support from his design team, has been successful in creating fresh perspectives for the audience every time he performs.

Watching him dance provokes many questions about space. What is this space? Is it static and always there, or is it being 'produced' even as Astad dances and moves? Is it three-dimensional as we commonly understand it, or does he force time into the equation, as Einstein did for the first time?

Any discussion on performance space



benefits from the performer's approach to, and understanding of, the relationship between space and his/her art. It was in this spirit that we spoke to Astad at length. A word of caution: his words on a page, detached from his body and his being, convey only half the story. As he spoke, his hands and his body also talked, eloquently complementing his words in an amazing dance of gestures and movements. Some deft editorial effort was required to translate gesture into words, but other than that what we have is Astad Deboo in the original.

Photograph by Neelesh Kale.



**Sunil Shanbag:** What is the relationship between the kind of dance you do and your openness, willingness, interest in and urge to experiment with spaces? India is full of dancers. What is it that allows one dancer to be much more open than another? Is it the contemporary work you do? Is that really at the root of your interest in experimenting with spaces or is it something else?

**Astad Deboo:** Spaces have always fascinated me. I have a comfortable relationship with spaces. I think it's partly to do with the influences on me



from the period of intense travelling and viewing

performances all over the world during my early days as a dancer. I always wanted to tell the audience, "Look! Performance can be done in spaces other than the conventional!"

For example, yesterday I was doing a lecture for the *Times of India* and as I walked in I saw there was a table on the stage. There was also a very nice elevated platform quite close to it. So I immediately thought to myself, "Ok fine. I can show the transition between two spaces using the table and the platform."

**SS:** Much of what you're saying is a concern for all kinds of dancers. And yet, for example with Indian classical dancers, the piece is performed regardless of the space. Whether this is right or wrong is a different matter but the space doesn't seem to play an important part in the performance idea unlike the way you use it.

**AD:** Yes. For instance, last night I saw the brilliant Bharatanatyam dancer [Alarmel] Valli perform on the NCPA [National Centre for the Performing Arts, Mumbai] stage. If I were to have choreographed the piece I would have said, "No Valli, you must dance only in

this specific area, and see the kind of effect and the impact your piece will have in comparison to randomly using the stage." The dance would take more effort but it would have a punch! It just needs reconstruction. But Indian classical dancers are not used to that. They just move from point to point on the stage. It would be interesting to collaborate with a classical dancer on the use of space. To say, "Do your movement but only in this space!"

This is mainly because of my trained eye. I can see how something could have been done better. I mean I have no complaints about her performance as a performer—her technique, her presence, her depiction is fantastic—but I felt that it could have been so much more than what it was.

But then again for them [the classical dancers]... I mean I shouldn't generalise, but I feel that they don't think that space is all that important. Because they'll put it down to being part of the tradition.

**SS:** It's the frontal nature of the modern proscenium that has deadened everything. Earlier all these things were performed in temple courtyards or other open places, so they would have had to deal with different spaces.

**AD:** The kind of work I do—the themes I work with—gives me the artistic freedom to select my spaces. The choreography remains more or less the same, but I know what I need to do with the space to get the maximum impact. I look at a space and see that a different kind of impact is possible and I start from there. I know what I need to do in that space.

**SS:** It's really the nature of your work, isn't it? It's the kind of approach you bring to your dance—call it a contemporary approach or something else—that probably allows you the freedom to do this kind of work. Do you remember what kind of influences actually made you regard space as a dimension in your work?

**AD:** I think the influences are from the dance I saw in the West by various companies and in Asia—like the theatrical presentations of the Kabuki theatre in Japan. Even our own traditions like Kathakali... I guess I felt the impact of all I saw, and slowly it crept into my own work. I saw a lot of interesting things being done. Like I remember a performance where there were two sets of windows adjacent

to each other, and two performers were using the windows like frames. You had to watch the performance from outside...

**SS:** From the street?

**AD:** Yes. Then there were lights going on and off and the performers would interchange their positions... all of a sudden you just see a streak. For me it was magic! You are suddenly seeing one thing and there is a blackout and when the lights come on there is a whole different frame!

**SS:** Can you remember any other examples of things that struck you as very interesting use of space?

**AD:** Watching the Pilobolus Dance Company and the intertwining of the bodies... and then at one point they all open out and you think you're seeing a piece of sculpture, and basically you don't realise that there are six bodies intertwined. At one moment they just collapse and at another they leap out, and you see how with this physical action, and the use of light, the space suddenly expands.

I find that light also contributes to creating the space. When you work without light and when you add that

little light it makes such a lot of difference. And the space too has a different quality to it.

**SS:** Sure, with light you are able to create multiple spaces within one space. That is also a possibility.

**AD:** I recall the Japanese group Sankai Juku, the Butoh performers, and how they use air. Like when they came down on ropes in an open square: there were seven bodies which were coming down very gradually, each one with their feet up on a rope.

**SS:** Hanging upside down?

**AD:** Yes. For me that coming down gradually—that was the space with which they were working. Unfortunately, I have never been able to explore vertical space like that for whatever reasons and limitations.

So after my early travelling I started doing site-specific work—the Great Wall of China, or Alhambra in Granada, or Champaner, or when I used the lamppost at Ballard Estate, or even our NGMA. The NCPA outdoor spaces are so beautiful—for example, the sunken garden outside the Experimental Theatre. I could bring that space alive. And then people would say, "Wow! That too can be

used as a performance area!"

I've never used space as a gimmick, though. Once I've decided that this is the space that I am going to work with, I try to imbibe it, and weave the work around it, and not just make it look like a prop. There has to be that participation with the space, and for me, the space is also participating with my work.

**SS:** You said that yesterday you were at the *Times of India* and you walked in there and you sensed something. What is it about a space that you sense? Is it possible for you to put it in words? When you enter a space, what actually happens in your mind?

**AD:** Well, when I see a space I think, "Oh good: how can I use this space to show my work?" At the *Times of India*, that confined space was where I was going to perform and I was not intimidated by the narrowness of it. During the piece I had to make a transition and there was a bit of a gap between the table and the platform and I wasn't sure that I would be able to extend myself. And I saw a little hook there. So I put my hand on that hook and held it and made it look as though I had already choreographed the transition.

Sometimes when I come into a







small space like a classroom I try to see how I can make the performance interesting for my viewers. How can I bring magic for the audience? Like when I was at the University of Fine Arts in

Kabul, I performed on the ledge of these two large French windows. It was perfect to show to the students of Fine Art how I could just deconstruct my body and say to them, "You are artists. Now look at this work. You are watching a dance but at the same time you are seeing a part of my body, and a movement, and then another part of my body, and how sometimes you can see more and sometimes less."

**SS:** What did you do exactly? How did you achieve this? What were the mechanics of this?

**AD:** Well there were these two large French windows with shutters that open out of the building. So I stood on the ledge outside, behind a closed shutter, and slowly brought out my leg into the frame of the open shutter. Then my palm... and as my palm came out my leg went back in. Slowly I showed them half my body, and then, as I began to turn, I made sure I didn't show them my face. Then I began to open the shutter that was shut, and

close the other one. This went on... it had a completely different impact.

**SS:** So had you thought about doing this piece earlier or it came up as you walked in?

**AD:** I just walked in! I didn't know what space I was going to perform in. The day before I had gone to the University of Education and there it was just a regular stage. I tried to make it a little interesting so I asked for 12 boys to be volunteers. I did my piece *Endless* where I have these chairs. So I placed these 12 Afghan boys in rows and made them my chairs. All this was very spontaneous. I told the volunteers that I would dance close to them and give them certain instructions which they must follow. I told them to interact with me and follow my instructions, which they did. It was amazing! There was no hesitation at all. They were all men, Afghans, but they were very willing and happy to do it.

**SS:** So if you were to put it in concrete terms, when you enter a space, what would you look at?

**AD:** Challenge.

**SS:** Yes, but that's an abstraction. Can

you put it in concrete terms? Like you said, a window—that immediately gives you a frame to work with. What else excites you about a space?

**AD:** The height.

**SS:** Elaborate on that.

**AD:** Recently this year I was performing in New York at the Consulate of India. It was a very boring space. But there was a fireplace, and there was a platform and a mirror.

**SS:** There was a fireplace with a ledge on top?

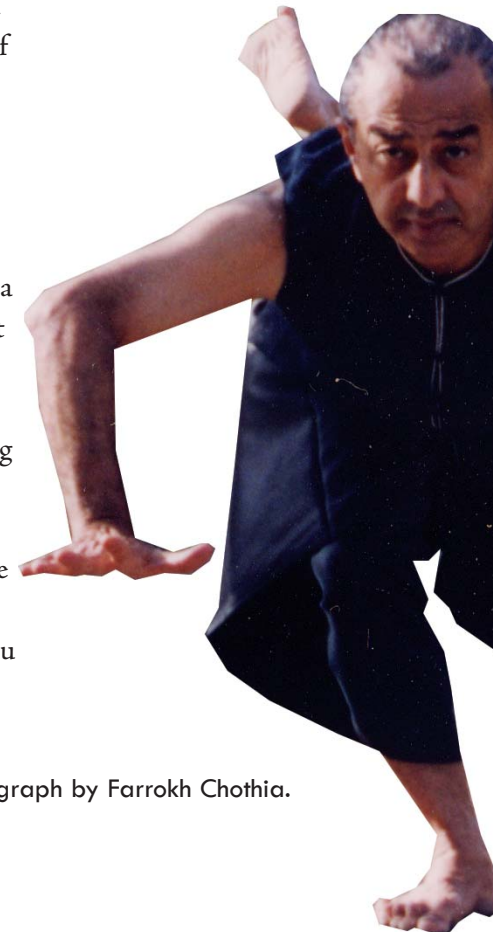
**AD:** Yes, with a ledge and a mirror above the fireplace. So I said ok fine, this is not really a performance space, it's a lecture space, but the mirror can create a reflection for my viewers to see me, and from the ledge I can come down to the fireplace itself. So height is always an interesting attribute of the performance space.

**SS:** What about other possibilities on the horizontal plain?

**AD:** On the horizontal plain I remember a work I did in Mexico. They had a highly mechanised stage which had platforms that could move

and also go up and down below and above stage floor level. The stage was divided horizontally into three distinct spaces by these platforms at three different levels, and each one could be controlled mechanically. So I started off by crawling on one level and people could see that there was nothing in front of me and I was still moving forward and they said, "Oh my God! He's going to fall!" And then the next level comes up and I move on to that. And the one behind me goes down, and then the same thing with the third level. But then again, that was possible because they had the sophistication of that kind of a stage, which I could use and manipulate.

**SS:** Let's talk a little bit about the NGMA work. There you were using a spiral staircase that runs down the middle of the gallery and you performed along the



Photograph by Farrokh Chothia.



banisters literally—these shiny chrome banisters. And there was a drop of how many feet...?

**AD:** 20—25... 30 feet.

**SS:** There is also some risk element that you build into your use of space. You're balancing off the edge—it seems quite dangerous. What is that about? When you use spaces like this? Let's talk about it in relation to the NGMA work.

**AD:** When I first went exploring the NGMA and I wanted to see how we could work there, I tried out a few things. See I'm not scared of heights because if I were, then I wouldn't be able to do the kind of work I do. So that helps. Yes it looks a bit risky and looks like I'm pushing the edge. But I don't really want to make it look like a circus act.

I checked out the place to see what breaks I could use should I lose my balance. I looked to see where I could interlock myself. In the NGMA banister there was another rod which went across, and I understood that I could curl my leg around it in case I began to fall off, and then begin again from that position. I could then extend myself in mid-air. So I do think of these things.

**SS:** Do you think the risk adds to the excitement of the space and of the performance?

**AD:** Oh sure it does! It also kept the audience on the edge. At NGMA they said that they enjoyed it but were always very afraid that I might fall. But at no given point could you see that I was afraid. Nobody ever expected to see this kind of a performance or that a banister could be used in a performance. So I do challenge my viewers to see that dance and movement can happen in this kind of a scenario.

**SS:** So what extra dimension did it add to that work—doing it on a banister as against doing it on a flat surface?

**AD:** I couldn't have done it in the same way. That impact would not have been there! I mean I could play the music and I could do the choreography but the impact would be nothing compared to what you saw at NGMA. How the dance moved along the space, how one movement dissolved into another. They said, "We were so mesmerised that we didn't even know when the movements happened. You were standing in one place and we only knew you had

Photograph by Farrokh Chothia.





moved and were right in front when you held out your hand to us.” Of course there were gaps in the movement, but I worked very differently on the transitions... So definitely it would have been very *phika* (bland) if I had done this performance on a horizontal surface, or even a plain elevation.

**SS:** Tell us a little bit about the Champaner work because that also seems like an interesting experiment.

**AD:** Well at Champaner my work was

part of a larger event. I was taken to see the space. It was a large space and we had to figure out what we would use. So I chose three areas—again very distinct spaces.

The highlight of the performance, I would say, was when I danced on this 40 feet high wall, which was 25 feet long. And it was not a regular wall, it was undulated because it was an old ruin you see, and there were stones and bricks jutting out. So I began to formulate the piece after I saw it for the first time. I was going to have the Gundecha Brothers

sing for me live but I felt that for the wall piece I needed another soundtrack. I also found out that the local villagers worshipped a goddess they called Devi. I thought, let me do a piece dedicated to her. So I chose this huge prelude to the opera *Carmina Burana* for the soundtrack and it brought such a regal feel to the performance. The feel suggested Devi in her domain.

On one side of the wall I had my invited audience watching and on the other side were the drivers who had brought their respective sahibs and memsahibs. While performing I made sure that both sides were able to see me. I began by being Devi myself. I had a mask and was dressed in red and black. As I danced one of the drivers said, “*Arey! Devi ma! Devi ma!*” (Look! It’s goddess Devi!) It was a full moon night, you know, and that’s the kind of impact it had. The audience on the other side of the wall could not hear what he said with all the music, but I did. And I thought, “Wow! Am I really like that?” I mean it must have been what I was projecting when I was dancing and, sure, the costume added to the visual impact.

**SS:** And the fact that you were at a height.

**AD:** Yes. When I started off I was perched on a ledge and then I slowly came down from there and on to the wall. I had seen the space and worked out my piece and then I improvised: I walked, pranced, stopped and looked at the audience... it was dark so I was basically just playing with the comfort of my feet. There again I was tempting my audience because there was that risk factor. I nearly came to the edge and they said, “My God! One slip and he is going to go down!”

There was another interesting space there—a platform with columns around it. So from the height [of the wall] you come to this space, which is flat, and it became a very sophisticated, elegant presentation. There again the theme was just using the space and bringing the space alive. And of course one of the pieces was dedicated to Devi.

**SS:** How far away was the audience from the column space and the wall respectively?

**AD:** The audience was at the level of the platform with columns, so they had to look up at the wall to see my

Photograph by Farrokh Chothia.





dance there. Imagine looking up at the NCPA roof from below. Not all the way up perhaps but three quarters of the way.

**SS:** Right. Very dramatic.

**AD:** The full moon added a lot to the visual impact. The wall is lit up as a matter of course, so that helped me. But this is a huge wall, and we could manage only two lights at the far corners because there was no other space to place them. So it was quite dramatic with light coming from two angles and the full moon on top.

50 **SS:** When you see a space does the distance of the audience from where you're performing... not just the distance... the arrangement of the viewers. Does that also affect your sense of the space?

**AD:** Sure. Sometimes when the audience is very close to me it can get a little intimidating—like when I performed at the NGMA. At times I don't want them so close and I want a little space. In a way you are completely stripped, which is fine. It doesn't really bother me. But yes, if the audience is too far then the impact will not be there. I want the audience to feel the body singing and the music

dancing. So if there is a certain proximity then it's definitely different.

**SS:** You want them to be close enough for you to sense the audience. Not be in the distance in the dark like in conventional spaces.

**AD:** Yes. But even in conventional spaces as the dance progresses I can feel the audience. I can't really explain how but I can feel it and I know that now the audience is with me.

**SS:** Let's talk now a little bit about regular performance spaces. You obviously have your favourite spaces and your not-so-favourite spaces. Just so that we will have common references, in Mumbai, which performance spaces have you enjoyed performing at?

**AD:** Prithvi. Though I have done very little work there, it's an exciting space. I do like raked seating, the kind of seating which allows the audience to see your work easily, so as a choreographer or dancer you are not worrying that some move will get hidden from the audience. I prefer tiered, raked seating. I really have enjoyed Prithvi. That's where I did my very first performance when I came back to India. It has a very nice feel...

sometimes the space also gives you a comfort level.

The Experimental Theatre at the NCPA also is an interesting space. A couple of years ago I did a piece called *Revivals* where I used not just the stage of the Experimental Theatre but the first floor as well. It was similar in some ways to what I had done at the NGMA.

Or just recently I really enjoyed Ranga Shankara in Bangalore. There the space is a little broader and deeper than what we have at Prithvi. So those kinds of spaces really excite me. Also because I know the work can be seen from all angles and I don't have to worry about the performance being seen like in most conventional spaces.

Photograph by Shantanu Sheorey.

**SS:** So basically if you look at it from a design point of view, you would prefer a performance space that has a certain built-in flexibility. You would also look at the relationship between the audience and yourself in terms of distance, in terms of visibility—that would be a second thing. Anything else?

What do dancers need from a performance space which is different from what actors need? Everybody talks about theatre design in terms of actors and plays. What do dancers need which is different?

**AD:** The floor. The floor needs to be really smooth, and also an expanse of space—regardless of whether it's a

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solo work or a company work. Even in a large space a solo performer is very effective and can bring that intensity of the choreography. In my work I often travel across the stage, and that needs space. Like in *Search*, where Ratan [Batliboi] creates a set with stretched fabric, and I have had the Gundecha Brothers singing live. There you saw how I tried to flow through

the space with the music. Each time we performed *Search* it was different because we never knew what kind of spaces we were going to get.

**SS:** Earlier in the conversation you mention using light. Can you describe how you use light or how you think of light design as creating space within space?

**AD:** I share my ideas and then I leave it to the lighting designer. I have worked with many designers—you've lit me, and so has Ratan and several international designers, but their concept of lighting is very different. I think we do a remarkable job within our

huge limitations. I do have a concept of how I want to be lit. For me when I'm dancing it's the body which is communicating so the body has to be lit up more. Ok, I do use my face given my Indian classical tradition training but not as much as I use my body. I want the stance, the curve, and my body to be lit up. Or I want a little rectangle of light to be on me and to follow me.

**SS:** What I have understood from listening to you and designing for you is that you have a given space which is the stage and you're very keen on breaking that one large space into multiple spaces. That's one thing. Then what you've just talked about—the travelling from one space to another so a kind of corridor is created. That is what I meant: this multiple use of the same space and each of them have a different texture so it has a different experience. Is this something that you see in your head when you're actually discussing lighting?

**AD:** Yes. It also comes from watching so many of my colleagues from overseas perform. Here I've seen some effective lighting with some contemporary dance performances but nothing interesting with traditional

dance. They may have a spotlight or something from the side, a slant light, but other than that there is no play of light, which for me is an important part of the creation of the piece, of the impact.

**SS:** So to continue the earlier question... what kind of facility and freedom would you look for in a space?

**AD:** The luxury of using a space overseas is very different. My friend Lloyd Newson's DV8 can rip apart the existing stage and build a stage according to the performance. Of course they also have that kind of budget. And after the performance they return the stage to its original state. When we want to perform here, the theatre people don't allow us to.

They are always telling me that I can't use this and I can't use that, and you can't have this on stage. For example, when we did *Mangalore Street*, originally I wanted to come on a scooter or a motorbike but the theatre people [the management] said that I couldn't.

**SS:** Well they allowed

Alyque Padamsee to have a motorbike come on stage in his *Romeo and Juliet*.

**AD:** Well yes, but here we're talking about 1984, so I suppose things were different then. Even this piece that I have wanted to do for a very long time, where the setting is like a swamp—they just won't allow us. I have wanted to do a piece set in a swamp for very long now, but no one will allow it.

**SS:** What would you like to do on stage for that piece?

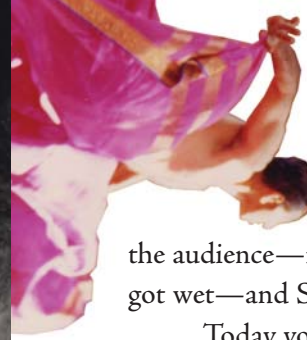
**AD:** Well, first the swamp has to be created. So naturally it's all mud and water and they feel that it's going to mess the place up. Well, sure it is, but it will be cleaned up. The stage is not going to corrode nor will its sheen go, because precautions are taken to make sure it doesn't happen. But they won't let us do it.

I recall a performance I was doing in Patkar Hall in Mumbai way back in 1972 where I wanted to have a bath on stage. I told my friend and the then manager of the theatre, Sam Kerawalla, that I would use just two mugs of water. But then I had a full bucket and four or five kids all pouring water on me. So then the water started flowing down and into



Photograph by Farrokh Chothia.





the audience—not that the audience got wet—and Sam had a fit!

Today you see performances where the whole stage is flooded! Pina Bausch has done it and also at the Cirque du Soleil—water, water, water! Swimming pool on stage!

**SS:** Apart from the lack of technology, it's also a mindset isn't it? A mindset about how you manage space. Our space managers tend to be very proprietorial, very reluctant to let go and very strict about the use of the space. Is that a problem you face?

**AD:** Yes I do. Also it's a managerial thing of not allowing you to get familiar with the space and explore the space. If you had enough time, you could do one or two dry runs when you're developing the piece. Over the years one has learnt to rely on one's experience to create a design and choreography even with limited access to the space where you will eventually perform.

**SS:** If someone were to design a space for dance what would be the key things that you would say have to be there.

**AD:** Flexibility of the space. If it's a large space I need to be able to cut it down to a small space. And some

technical luxuries, which I don't see as luxuries at all today. This is what I find most frustrating in our country when new spaces are being built: I don't know if they ask an actor or director about what a stage should be like, or what lights need to be brought in—we don't have that happening here. In the West, even in the smallest of towns there are enough lights, and enough space to work with. You can send the performers ahead, and you can get props made on site. Of course, certain spaces have been very niggardly but that has been more of an issue with the technical people not wanting to work. Sometimes when you go into a theatre that is already set for shows, and you are doing a one-off show, they don't really want to change anything for you.

So sure, if a theatre is to be built I would look for flexibility. At the end of the day I am a performer and I want to perform and I'll make the best use of what I have been offered to perform in. So my work does not suffer but the presentation and the lighting would give a different look to it when there's an exciting space to work in. I mean, I don't want a huge football field to work with because there's nothing there. I don't want that kind of an open space. I want a space which has character. Like when we



performed at the Elephanta Festival or at Rishi Valley with that one huge banyan tree... there was a different dimension to it.

But it is possible to create something even in the most conventional spaces. I recall when I was doing my work where I wanted each part of my body to move and be seen independently.

**SS:** Yes, when you described your Kabul experience I immediately remembered that piece.

**AD:** That's right. It was when Ratan came up with that box.

**SS:** Yes, let's talk about that. What did you want to do?

**AD:** I was trying to show a viewer individual parts of my body. Like in biology class where you say this is just your wrist or this is just your arm. So I was dissecting my body and showing it to the audience. There the proscenium black box was extremely effective.

**SS:** Right. You needed a frontal view.

**AD:** Yes. Otherwise the piece cannot be done. So Ratan created a black box which had windows of eight different

sizes for me to work with. Within the box he had built many different levels and rods for me to hold on to. A window would open and I could sneak my toes out, and all of a sudden another window opens and you just saw the waist. The next thing you saw was the whole leg as a pendulum, and then just two arms like little caterpillars and then just the eyes. He had a long window and you could just see the eyes come up slowly and then the neck. I was standing on a table inside where I could do a complete turn so you saw the whole head do a 360 degree turn and it looked like it would get chopped off and suddenly the window closed and you didn't see it. Then you could see the entire body without the head—like a headless chicken fretting and fuming. At the end you could see just the leg coming out. *Chrysalis* it was called. That whole dance was given life because of the space otherwise it wouldn't have worked.

**SS:** I think to a large extent it has to do with the kind of work you do—that it has certain built-in flexibility, it has an improvisatory quality, and exploration is a very fundamental quality of the dance you do, so that immediately opens you out to exploring other things. It's not complete in itself. A lot of the classical

dances are like that—complete in themselves, so the performance circumstances like the space seem unimportant. Your work is not like that.

**AD:** Did you see the work we did at the VT Central Station where I used the coaches and the platform? What is unfortunate in our country, and this is really a shame, is that we have such interesting monuments which can be used. In festivals in Europe, all these churches open up and become the venue, which adds hugely to the performance.

Originally at the Khajurao Festival, the stage where the dances took place was really close to the temples. Now it's a far away thing and they have built this awful concrete stage to dance on... it doesn't have the same impact. Even the Asiatic Library steps in Mumbai are a beautiful space to perform in.

**SS:** Yes, spaces abound, you just have to discover them.

**AD:** Yes. And be allowed to use them.

Photograph by Farrokh Chothia.





# Disappearing Professions in Urban India: Kolkata's Precarious Charms

Photographs: Clare Arni

Text: Oriole Henry

The recent economic growth in India, much documented across the world, is transforming the country and particularly its cities. Malls and chain stores are replacing smaller stores. Technology, mechanisation and large firms producing cheaper goods are marginalising the specialist and the craftsman. Photographer Clare Arni has been documenting these disappearing professions in Bangalore, Delhi, Kolkata and Chennai, during this story of rapid development. The following photo-essay presents Clare's vision of mercantile Kolkata. Accompanying it is a short essay by writer Oriole Henry, who travelled with Clare to Kolkata and found that the genteel traders and old-world shop interiors with which the city's character is inextricably bound still remain, if precariously.

Shanghai Co Drycleaners established in 1936 and now run by the 87-year-old CM Wong who undertook a long sea voyage to India in 1942.



Wandering the streets of Kolkata in the crisp winter light, we searched for what remained of the professions historically associated with the port city. We particularly wanted to look at the artisans who were brought in or had been attracted by the wealthy traders and moneylenders in what was the headquarters of the East India Company, and then the capital of the British Indian Empire. We discovered that Kolkata, unlike many other large Indian cities, was still bursting with its own particular character. India's growing economy had, so far, not wiped away the old city and replaced it with ubiquitous concrete and glass.

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Walking from morning till night, with bad maps, we found Unani *hakims*, Chinese cobblers, coffee houses and bookstores—all still housed in their original buildings. On Rabindra Sarani, just down from the toothy, smiling Urgent Stamp Maker was the musical instrument shop Mondal and Sons. They had been there for five generations, they told us, and their claim to fame was the violin they had mended for Yehudi Menuhin in 1952 when he came to Kolkata for a recital. A photograph of Menuhin hung on the wall with a faded copy of the receipt. Everywhere were musical instruments: sitars dangling from the loft, cellos, double basses, violas, and violins in different shades, all waiting in the gloom for someone to come and

make them speak. "Nothing is electrical," one of the sons firmly pointed out to me.

Talking to them I decided that the city's history—the old buildings and trades that survived—was what gave Kolkata the personality I liked so much. It was not long, though, before we realised there had been many changes to this multi-ethnic centre for trade. Most of the shoe shops were now only Chinese in name and the wigmakers only sold white yak hair flywhisks for the gods—though the shop signs promised a Calcutta Wig House, a Bengal Wig House and even a National Wig House. Still, I thought, at least they had not been taken over by Nike or Barista. Kolkata had not yet been completely tarred by the globalisation brush that leaves a city devoid of any individual personality.

What I hadn't yet recognised was the lack of a desperate need to sell: the fake, smiling commercialism drummed into staff by training weekends full of 'games' that teach sales tricks to persuade customers. I should have realised it when we stumbled across an old store, the Oriental Art Gallery, that did still sell wigs. Inside the small room with green walls and pitted mirrors, the owner, a delicate old man, pulled out tissue-wrapped bundles of long black hair from dusty boxes and carefully fixed them to a wooden head to show us.

He smoothed down the stray hairs with his fingers as though it was the hair of someone he loved, not just a wig.

It was, however, when we found an attar shop, the Latin Flavourosynthesis Company in the bowels of the large Bangur Building, that I realised more would be lost than just a skill or knowledge base. Mr Mehrotra's shop had little charm; in fact it looked like an accountant's office—a desk, two chairs and a mattress with bolsters on the floor. Mr Mehrotra looked like any other businessman but sitting down at his desk we were bombarded by scents leaking out from beautiful old glass bottles in wooden cabinets, from large tin drums stored in the loft above him and from plastic jerry cans full of the pure natural oils of rose, jasmine, khus, and champak.

I explained to him that we were looking for what remained of the old city and its trades. Mr Mehrotra settled into his chair, ordered tea for us and began to talk. "This shop has been here for five generations," he said "but the price of natural oils is very high, so it is difficult to carry on in this business. Also, farmers are more interested in cash crops as they can get three to four crops out of one plot." Large pictures of ancestors, "who started this concern", looked down at us as he told me his oils were only really sold these days to put into

chewing tobacco, cosmetics and soap.

This confirmed to us that in Kolkata the trades had changed and were still changing but it was as we moved on to talk about extracting the oils and the different scents that something in Mehrotra shifted. A poet emerged, telling me, "The rose is the king of flowers—so mild and beautiful and soothing." His assistants brought out one paper taper after another dipped in the attars and Mr Mehrotra would pause to watch our reaction as bouquets of roses filled our senses and then the seductive scent of jasmine slipped through us.

Listening to him I realised that the character of the city was partly in what had survived of the past but it was also formed by the owners of these small businesses. Because it was their business, there was a pride that these men took in their work and a sense of passion—passion for their chosen profession which had nothing to do with how much money they were making. It had been there all along: in the music shop, when they knew we weren't going to buy anything and yet sat talking to us about their work; in the gentle smoothing of stray hairs at the wig maker's. I just hadn't seen it. And I knew that this, along with the architecture that showed the evolution of the city, was what gave Kolkata the uniqueness of its character, but I also wondered how long it would last.

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Violins at Mondal and Sons who have been in the business for five generations.





Woon Son Shoes run by Christopher Francis Lin, expert footwear designer and shoemaker.





The Oriental Art Gallery,  
the only store still selling wigs.





Das Gupta & Company Private Ltd, booksellers since 1886. There is no browsing. Customers can only come as far as the counter.



The Russell Exchange Auction House.





Abdul Hafiz Dawakhana, a Unani pharmacy which is apparently more than a hundred years old.



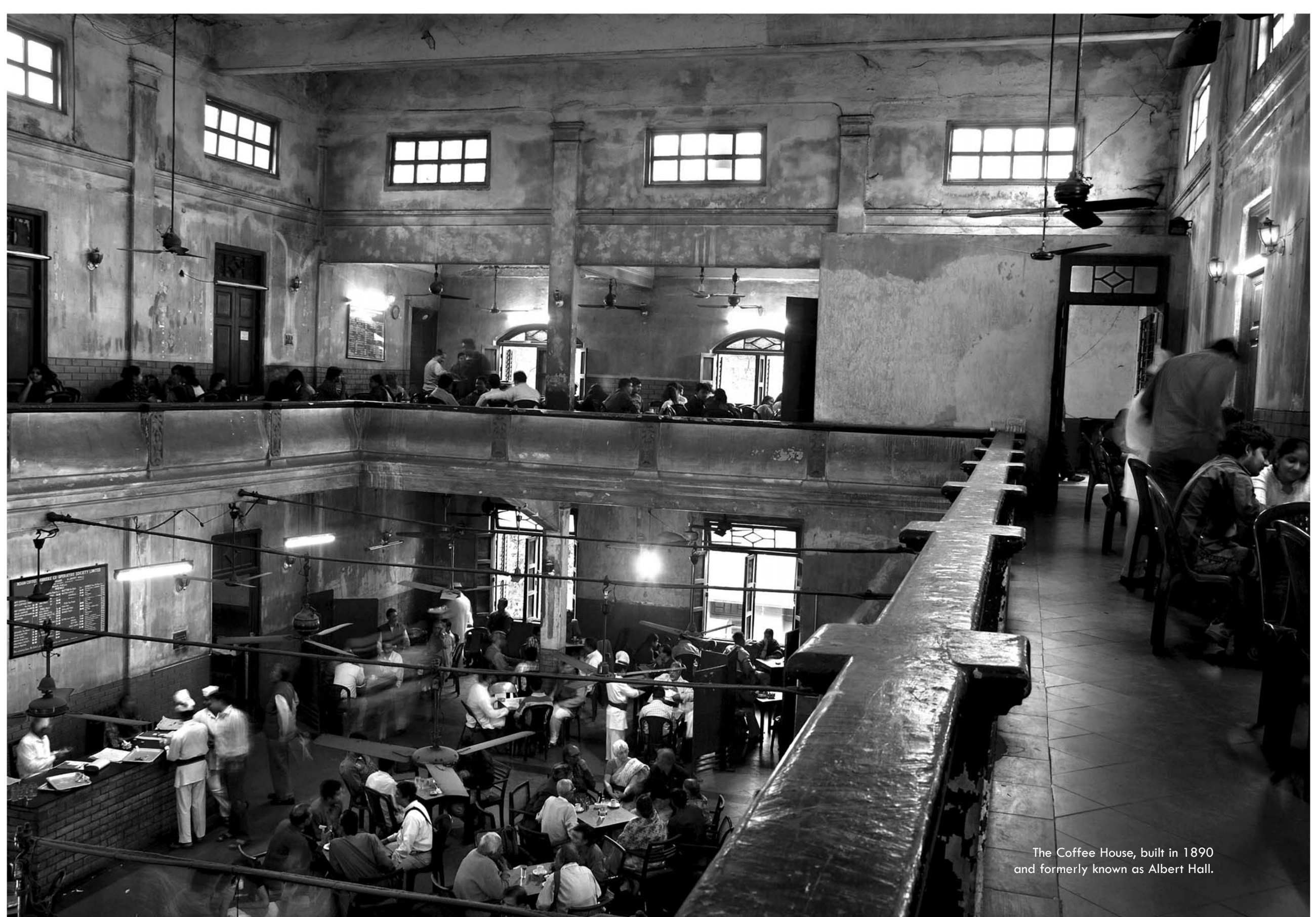
Makhulal Ayodhya Prasad & Grandsons, whose visiting card says they are “the nation’s oldest perfumery house”.



Latin Flavourosynthesis Company, where the scents leak out of beautiful bottles.







The Coffee House, built in 1890  
and formerly known as Albert Hall.



*The Story of a Story-teller:  
Jogesh Chandra Bose,  
the First Radio Storyteller of India*

Indira Biswas

Jogesh Chandra Bose was one of India's early media personalities—a middle-aged lawyer who created for himself the persona of an absent-minded, storytelling, child-loving grandfather through his children's radio programme—*Chhotoder Baithak*—broadcast from the Calcutta Radio Station in the late 1920s and early '30s. In this essay, historian Indira Biswas presents a portrait of Jogesh Chandra Bose or Galapadada against the context of early broadcasting in India. Biswas is on an IFA grant to research the linked histories of the radio, the gramophone and Bengali music in the early 20th century.

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বেতার-জগৎ—“গল্পদাদা সংখ্যা”



গল্পদাদা  
(GOLPADADA)

We worked for the Calcutta Radio Station not because of a professional commitment but out of fondest love and passion for the new medium.

This was the mindset of a handful of culturally-inclined people like Jogesh Chandra Bose, Birendrakrishna Bhadra, Pankajkumar Mallick, Nripendrakrishna Chattopadhyay and Banikumar, who associated themselves with the Calcutta Radio Station (CRS) under the leadership of Nripendranath Majumdar, a famous clarinet player and the director of the Bengali programme during the Station's early years. This, the second radio station of the Indian Broadcasting Company (IBC), was inaugurated in Calcutta's No. 1 Garstin Place on August 26, 1927, the first having been set up in Bombay a month earlier. Nripendranath found among his colleagues the zeal required to run the daily programmes of an incipient institution. In the informal *addas* of Garstin Place, programmers sat down to chalk out plans. Though suffering from financial crisis, inexperience and amateurism, these enthusiastic talents tried their best to initiate novel programmes. Their circumstances were favourable. The English Station Director of the CRS CC Wallick (whom JR Stapleton

replaced in late 1928) did not understand the local language and remained satisfied with whatever feedback he received from Nripendranath Majumdar regarding the programmes in the local language. Under a broad spectrum of rules and regulations (there was specific instruction against broadcasting of political matters), this division of the CRS enjoyed a lot of autonomy in matters of day-to-day broadcasting. I do not use the word 'autonomy' here to imply any political nuances. I only use it to indicate the absence of bureaucratic control of programmes like *Chhotoder Baithak* whose anchor could broadcast it extempore.

In those early years of broadcasting, there were no hard and fast rules regarding the prior approval of scripts. The broadcasters on whom the Bengali programme director relied were able to run their programmes without such approval. (Much successful broadcasting of the time was done without written scripts and, in the absence of recording systems, could not be aired more than once.) Nripendranath Majumdar and his associates were careful not to broadcast any programmes touching on overtly sensitive public issues. However, the responsibility of creating content for the daily programmes of a

the CRS encouraged the few young programmers to innovate and experiment. In this essay I portray one such early programmer—Jogesh Chandra Bose or JCB (27.01.1885-17.11.1933) who was popularly known as *Galpadada* (grandpa who tells stories) and who initiated the first children's program—*Chhotoder Baithak*—in India.

JCB was a lawyer by profession at the Calcutta High Court. Nevertheless, he spent hours at the Imperial Library making notes for programmes, neglecting his professional duties. He joined the CRS in 1927 and took part in various 'talk' programmes, including storytelling for elders, in the role of Pandit Chintamani. Around that time he also began a children's programme, taking on the persona of *Galpadada*. It was aired twice a week from 5.30 pm to 6 pm and extended to 6.30 pm from February 4, 1930 on popular demand. He was identified with his adopted name to such an extent that even a formal genealogy of the family referred to him as *Galpadada*.

Radio being an auditory medium, words are expressed in voices. A voice creates a 'self', a self which tries to endear itself to its listeners. A number of elements cohere in this self. The ambience of a

caring attitude towards child, family and nation, the focus on creating a target audience, the preponderance of improvisations rather than of written texts, a distinctive style of presentation, the eagerness to make the voice of the audience heard in the programme—all these, in different ways, went towards the making of the media personality called *Galpadada* who for the first time imagined a space for children in the media.

### Vision

A few things need to be stressed to show how these disparate elements—institutional, social and personal—worked together. First, a long distance mode of communication became what Andrew Crisell has described as 'an inward, intimate medium', because listeners formed a relationship with the invisible person as imagined from the words and sounds of radio. In this imaginative space, the voice was the only tangible thing that bound the speaker to listeners. *Galpadada* had to fill up and manipulate the space through his voice. The very absence of recording in that era underlines the transient and fleeting nature of performance and its plasticity.

Secondly, the idea of an old man addressing the younger generation



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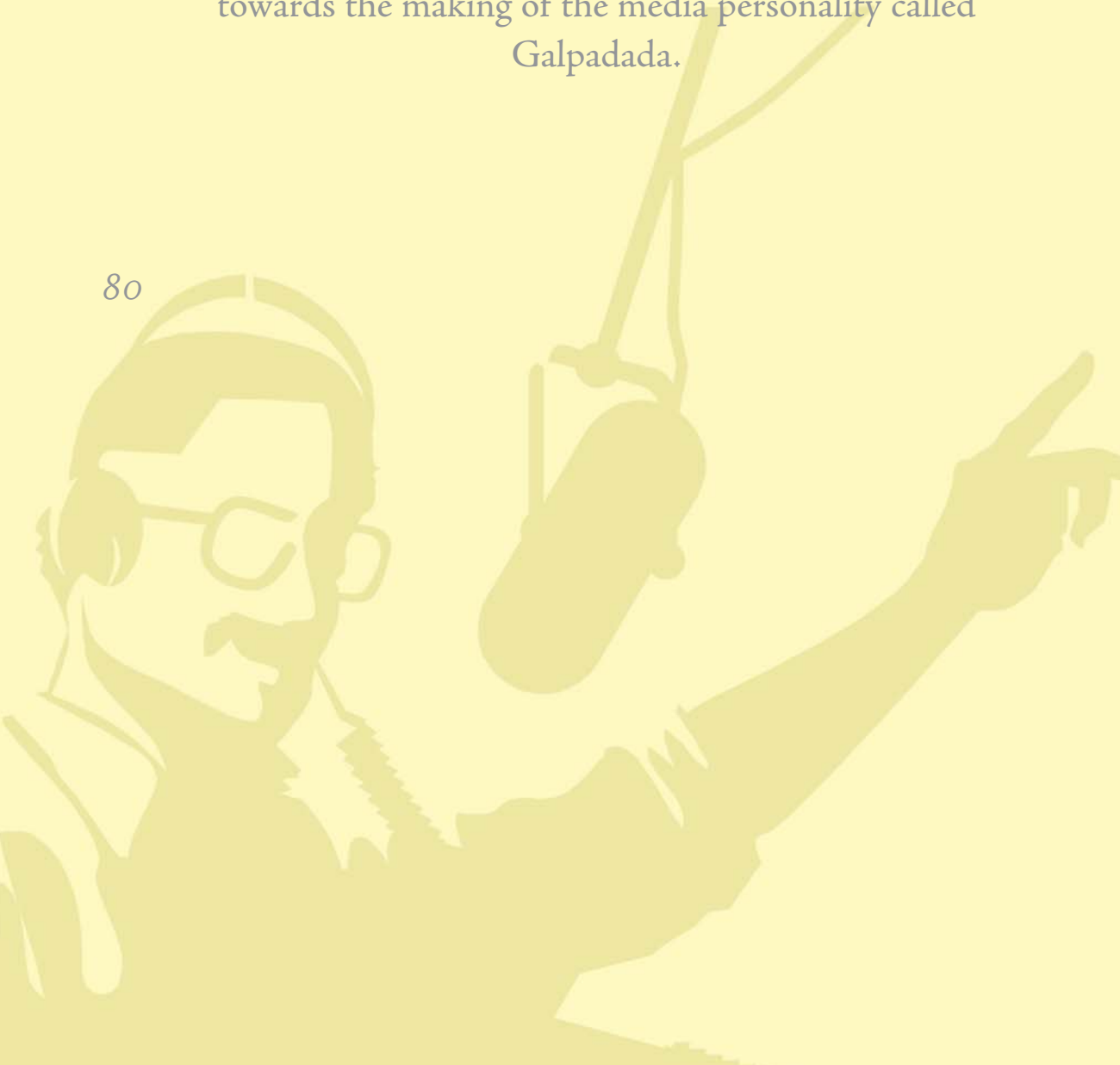
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played on the generation gap, and the warmth generated from this encounter enthused the young. Following the storytelling lineage of grandparents, JCB portrayed Galpadada as an affectionate old man who had time to be with children, enjoyed their company, was forgetful, but worked with a pedagogic mission. It was as if a particular name and age along with the establishment of a particular relationship became the key to this particular programme. While analysing his inner motive behind conducting this programme, JCB mentioned an interesting anecdote. Once a king was extremely worried about his sons' repugnance to any kind of education. Teachers came and went but failed to teach anything to the adamant, disobedient princes. The disheartened king announced that if anybody could teach the princes to count up to ten (termed *Satke*), the person would be rewarded with a handsome emolument. This too failed. Then, a teacher came. He showed no real intention of teaching and encouraged students to do whatever they liked. Days passed away like this. One day, while resting in a spacious hall after a round of tiring play, the teacher playfully asked the students to count the number of beams on the ceiling. They started doing so. By the

time the princes realised that the teacher was up to teaching them something, he already finished teaching them *Satke*. JCB argued that *Chhotoder Baithak* was also teaching students useful things playfully as in the above story.

JCB was associated with the Swadeshi Movement and Congress politics in the first part of the twentieth century. His ideas about the important role that children played in the nation-building process were much similar to the prevailing middle-class ideas of the time. Behind the performance of entertainment, his real mission seems to have been to perpetuate the virtues necessary to make an ideal man in nationalist terms. Influenced by Montessori's playful education, JCB had a strong aversion to harsh punishment and used the analogy of British society to prescribe the ideal father-child relationship for his Bengali counterparts. He felt that elders should behave towards children as friends do during play, and come out of the shackles of discipline and dominance to reach their hearts. In Europe, fathers leave behind their high social status when they enter the nursery. They enjoy the company of children by being one of them. This happiness spreads from nursery to

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other avenues of family life. Children remain obedient and disciplined in all matters including studies and grow up successfully glorifying their own name and country. He wrote in *Betar-Jagat* (in-house magazine of the CRS):

In our country, children's food and clothes are provided by parents, education by teachers and recreation-by God knows whom! When, in between studies, children want to free themselves of restrictions by engaging in merrymaking, when bubbles of joy strive to explode to form a joyful atmosphere, then parents answer them with a dry cane and harsh scolding.

He continued:

The uncontrollable excitement of childhood can never be suppressed by canes in any country. As the current of a flooded river knows no bounds but needs to be checked, similarly, children should be offered good companions and the resources of untarnished pleasure. Only then will they not stray into the wrong direction or fall in with wrong companions. How many brilliant students I have met during my student and working life wasting their future by falling into evil company! Nobody is born a judge, lawyer, hermit, thief, robber or murderer. But as they grow up in bad or good company, someone is hanged while someone gives the order for hanging.

JCB redefined certain existing cultural notions by stressing that childhood is precious and children

ought to be trained properly to become successful future citizens of the nation. He advocated maintaining a balance between enjoyment and discipline, and warned Bengali fathers of the evil consequences of excessive caning.

### *The Programme*

Arun Uday Bhattacharya—a listener of Galpadada's programme—talks about how it would begin:

Galpadada would begin in English saying "Good evening children, Galpadada speaking, Galpadada speaking" and then would continue in Bengali Galpadada *katha bolchhi, sunte pachho? Palio na, palio na, palio na'* (Galpadada speaking, do you hear me? Don't run away, run away, run away).

Bhattacharya continues:

Why should we run away when we rushed off from the playground only to listen to him!

Taking his cue from the BBC, JCB conducted the programme using catchphrases, starting with the words "Good evening children" and framing the programme with items such as stories, quiz competitions, puzzles to be solved and so on. Children were invited to the studio to perform. Their letters to Galpadada were acknowledged and answered. The subject matter of his stories ranged

"In our country, children's food and clothes are provided by parents, education by teachers, and recreation by God knows whom! When, in between studies, children want to free themselves of restrictions by engaging in merrymaking then parents answer them with a dry cane and harsh scolding."





from historical, religious and devotional, to fables and humorous stories; they all shared the trait of ending with a moral maxim. He reframed old classical stories to match the fashionable taste of a 20th century household; sacredness was in tune with the culture of modern domesticity where past and present were ever-active and dialogical.

A survey of how the print media created a special niche for Bengali children shows that the publishing industry for children had come into existence at least a century before systematic broadcasting through radio. Beginning with the publication of *Neetikatha* by School Book Society in 1818, the last quarter of the 19th and the early 20th century saw the burgeoning of various textbooks, storybooks and magazines exclusively for children. In fact, the first quarter of the 20th century is considered 'the golden age of children's literature in Bengali'. Jogindra Nath Sarkar, Dakshina Ranjan Mitra Majumdar, Upendra Kishore Roy Chaudhury, Sukumar Roy, Kulada Ranjan Roy, and Sukhalata Rao pioneered the writing of children's storybooks in Bengali. Magazines like *Mukul* (Sibnath Sashtri, 1895), *Sandesh* (Upendra Kishore Roy Chaudhury, 1913), *Mouchak* (Sudhir Chandra

Sarkar, 1921) won the hearts of children. In a word, the press was ruling the world of children's education and recreation when Galpadada began his programme. In his zeal to acquaint children with eminent scholars and multiple subjects, he would bring Dr Rameshchandra Roy to speak on health and hygiene; and litterateurs Premankur Atarathi, Jaladhar Sen, *Dadathakur* Sarat Pandit and Sourindramohan Mukhopadhyay to tell stories or talk about personal experiences. Galpadada remarked:

Should you be flying only on the Pankhiraj (fabled flying-horse) of stories? You must also ride on gari ghora (horse-drawn buggy). And for that you need a firm base in education!

Sometimes essay competitions were held on topics like 'The Value of Truth', 'The Goal of Education' or 'How do you Utilise your Leisure Time'. He established a direct link with the BBC listeners through CRS Station Director Mr. Stapleton by forming the 'Radio Circle Club' with members of his programme. A club of the same name already existed among the BBC young listeners. Some members of both these clubs established epistolary correspondence with each other.

### Writings

JCB wrote to his listeners in a conversational idiom, made fun, cracked jokes and established a personal link transcending distance and age barriers. In the absence of any recorded voice or spoken words, these written excerpts of Galpadada in a colloquial style are our basis for forming a tentative idea about his oral style. To quote few lines from *Betar-Jagat*:

Yes... What was I saying... my—no, that I have reduced taking, on your requests... then what? Oh what did you say? Oh! My real name? Well, I'm saying... you know, what is his name? You understand that... oh, why don't you guess?

Yours.....

As if talking to children with a modulated voice, his writings, full of pauses and interjections, suggest what his radio style might have been like. Elsewhere, he offers an excuse for not writing to children for some time:

I have woken up like Rip Van Winkle and have come running to respond to your frantic calls! I'll give you the explanation for not writing provided you promise not to let it be known to others. Do you agree? Then promise, promise, promise. Well, listen to me. You all know how lazy your Galpadada is! I am like those borrowers who keep promising to return money, but never do so in practice. I

think of writing, but do not write. But I cannot escape you—you are worse than the *kabulis* and above all, there is constant pressure from the editor. So, here I am with my pen on my ear! Don't I know how deeply you love your Galpadada? Those who have received your love are extremely fortunate!

This was no routine writing. In a fanciful way, he was creating an image of himself as a carefree, lazy fellow, and his listeners as loving and intimate, compelling him to take up writing.

The IBC was liquidated in February 1930 due to financial bankruptcy. The Government ultimately decided to take over the two stations because of popular pressure, one of them being the CRS. The listeners of the two most admired programmes—*Chhotoder Baithak* and *Mahila-majlish*—sent thousands of letters to the CRS worrying about the fate of their favourite programmes. This one in reply from Galpadada shows his relief about the March 1930 decision to continue:

Broadcasting will stay and so will your Galpadada... while the future of broadcasting hung on a slim thread, what a commotion you made! I received thousands of letters... No one but I alone knew how much you loved and cared for your Galpadada.

Galpadada and his child listeners tended to keep interchanging

the roles of author and reader in their 'outpourings of the heart.' *Betar-Jagat* published letters from children projecting Galpadada as somebody dear to their heart:

Tuntun, a frequent correspondent, wrote in one of her letters:

I haven't met you but have been receiving your endless love and affection through the microphone. I feel sorry for those who have been deprived of your affection till now. Were I a rich person, I would have bought a crystal set for every child of Bengal... I wish everybody received my *Dadu's* (grandfather's) love!

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Galpadada also reciprocated in the same intimate and loving manner to children. The untimely death of two of his regular listeners prompted him to write a touching letter. Mourning became public with Galpadada reacting so intimately through microphone and the magazine:

I had been ready with bag and baggage to go to another world and had only one solitary desire—to have a last look at your joyful faces before the final departure. But this was not destined to be fulfilled. The other day my grandson Prafulla passed away. Before I could recover from the shock, my dear Pushpa Rani faded away... Would God take away the ribs from this old man's chest in this cruel a manner!

Thus, in a way, both the programme and the publication propagated and recycled certain ideas. While JCB through programme and column constantly intervened in the world of children as Galpadada, they reciprocated by portraying him as a storytelling old grandpa befitting their imagination; two listeners even sketched a portrait imagining him as an old man with a long beard. The drawing was published in the *Betar-Jagat* along with an enchanting reply:

I told you in my stories about a painter of olden days belonging to the court of king Bikramaditya. That painter painted the picture of the queen Bhanumati by looking at her shadow. At present, our Jogomaya and Mahamaya have exceeded even that painter. They have successfully drawn a beard of thirteen inches. All of us are indebted to them. At long last, a true picture of Galpadada has appeared!

A true picture of the middle-aged, moustached forty-five years old Jogesh Chandra Bose indeed!

As an author, Galpadada presented a book of the stories he had shared through the programme—*Galpadadar Katha* (1933)—to listeners who had been complaining of not having heard all his stories through radio. Blurring the differences between the two media, he imagined listeners as readers and gave them tips

about when and how to read his stories—a combination of facts and fiction! Not worrying about the number of readers, the storyteller/author remarked buoyantly: "What fun it is to love each other unseen!"

### Feedback

Galpadada used no script or book during his programme; sitting before a square box, he would begin speaking extempore to listeners. His son Bimal Bose has provided this description of his father's programme:

The person I had known all my life suddenly spoke in an unknown voice when he began: "Good evening children, Galpadada speaking." This man was completely unfamiliar to me. He became oblivious of people around him and proceeded with his story—sometimes laughing loudly and sometimes nodding his head in joy. This was a wonderful experience. How is it possible for somebody to tell a story in such a manner without any written script! One hour passed by in no time.

The son failed to recognise the familiar father in unfamiliar situation. The specificity of the father-son relationship dissolved in this larger communication process. Galpadada confessed that while telling stories, the whole world around him passed into oblivion. This Galpadada was

transformed from a particular man into a generalised figure. Two of Galpadada's colleagues have written about their maiden experiences of hearing JCB on the radio. Birendrakrishna Bhadra was amazed at listening to a story called *Lakshmhira* and became Galpadada's staunch admirer. Rameshchandra Roy expressed his listening experience thus:

I surreptitiously listened to your programme for children. Even though I've become old, I wish to go back to crawling stage to stay permanently in your programme in my own right.

However, it was not an uncontested terrain. Criticisms of the programmer came from grown-ups. *Nabasakti*, a weekly Bengali periodical, published a letter objecting to the inclusion of higher age group listeners in the programme. It was alleged that children between age group of 5 years to 10 years were being deprived of attention due to the inclusion of older members. Older listeners argued that members of *Chhotoder Baithak* were true friends to each other irrespective of age. Galpadada was highly criticised in the English daily *Amrita Bazar Patrika* by the radio columnist Ess-kee-gee (nick-name) in his weekly review (27.12.1931):

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Son Bimal Bose has provided this description of his father's programme: "The person I had known all my life suddenly spoke in an unknown voice when he began: "Good evening children, Galpadada speaking". This man was completely unfamiliar to me. He became oblivious of people around him and proceeded with his story—sometimes laughing loudly and sometimes nodding his head in joy."

Galpadada is a misnomer. He only reads out letters and riddles with solutions furnished by little boys and girls and arranges singing competition among them and distributes medals and badges supplied by some indulgent guardians. One hears but few instructive stories from his lips during the year. He extols the childish production of these children as being at par with the writings of some of our famous authors and calls for funds to start a special organ for the Children's Corner.

JCB's plan of a Radio Circle Club magazine was treated with suspicion by this writer, who responded to the idea by saying: "Children's Corner has become a money raising institution to fill someone's pocket."

Nevertheless, criticisms did not diminish popularity of Galpadada and when he died on November 17, 1933,

the *Betar-Jagat* published reports and letters in several consecutive numbers, reflecting the melancholy of his listeners. His death anniversary was celebrated every year with memorial programmes, special numbers of *Betar-Jagat*, and past listeners recollecting fond memories of their very own Galpadada.

### Conclusion

Galpadada died in November 1933. By the end of that year, the total numbers of radio license holders were only 10,872 for the broadcasting stations of both Calcutta and Bombay. Even if we assume that there were several thousand more listeners on account of collective and pirated listening, the radio was not a common household item of the time. It was much less known and used than the gramophone. Advertisements (in vernacular magazines) of gramophone companies and shops were more in number than those of radio selling agents. Personal interviews reveal that people were generally conservative, hesitant and most of the time critical about the utility and impact of radio broadcasting. Also, the cost of a medium wave family radio set (other than the crystal set with head phones which allowed only one person to

listen at a time) ranged from Rs 70 to Rs 100 with a recurring license fee of Rs 10 every year. In addition to that there used to be regular hazards of atmospheric disturbances. Therefore, the programme *Chhotoder Baithak* that we have been discussing could not have influenced a large number of people. But within a limited purview, as an initiator of a public programme for children through radio, Galpadada was successful in creating new tastes and understanding among his listeners. The warmth, assurance and affection of the voice could leave its imprint on listeners despite hazards like atmospheric disturbances, unsophisticated studio and radio sets, and other auxiliary disadvantages of early broadcasters.

The permanent ovation by the broadcasting authority of Calcutta came to JCB in 1943—a decade after his death—when Victor Paranjyoti, the then Station Director, decided to rename *Chhotoder Baithak* as *Galpadadur Asar* in his memory, with instructions that in future no one should personally identify himself as Galpadada. Indeed, the word Galpadada has become a permanent feature of the regional broadcasting history of Calcutta with *Galpadadur Asar* still aired as a regular programme of the CRS.





The Thiyyas, a matrilineal community from North Kerala whose members are spread all over the country and the world, tend to document family history through photographs, letters, family trees, genealogies and myths of creation. Sociologist Janaki Abraham has been researching the visual cultures of the Thiyyas for the last five years. In the following essay she presents photographs found in homes in Thalassery, Kerala, and challenges the assumption that the privileged alone had collections of old photographs.



## *Who Has Photographs?*

*A Journey into Homes  
in Thalassery, Kerala*

Janaki Abraham





In an age when a photograph can be taken with the ubiquitous cellphone and sent as an SMS, and when cameras are sold even at small developing studios in India's cities and towns, it may seem odd to ask the question 'Who has photographs?' However, the history of the camera and photography in India<sup>1</sup> is one associated with power and privilege. The camera was used for purposes of governance (see for example Pinney 1992, Singha 1998) and was simultaneously accessed by a privileged upper-class (Macdougall 2006, Karlekar 2005). For long, the possession of a camera and of large photograph collections was associated with a narrow, privileged socio-economic group. However, the question I wish to raise is: was class *the* dividing line between those who had photographs and those who did not? I address this question by looking at the presence of photographs in homes in the southern Indian town of Thalassery, Kerala.

This essay is part of a larger project on the visual cultures of the Thiyyas—a large heterogeneous caste concentrated in North Kerala, with a history of matrilineal kinship. The Thiyyas have suffered considerable disabilities due to practices of

'untouchability', which denied them education, certain forms of employment, and entrance into upper-caste temples until the passing of legislation on temple entry in the 1930s. Although known as having a 'caste occupation' of toddy-tapping, members of the caste have been agricultural labourers and Ayurvedic doctors as well as held modern bureaucratic jobs from roughly the middle of the 19th century. In fact the Thiyyas are well-known for having accessed all employment or entrepreneurial opportunities that were opened to them—they started the first bakeries in Kerala and the first few circus companies in India. Educational and occupational opportunities made available through the Basel German Mission and the British in the Madras Presidency led to the formation of a sizeable elite among the caste during colonial rule. Thiyyas are now scattered all over the country and the world.

I began to get interested in photographs while conducting fieldwork for my PhD in Thalassery, Bangalore, Chennai and Delhi, during which elite Thiyyas from large *tharavads*<sup>2</sup> in Thalassery would show me their collection of old photographs when introducing their *tharavads* to

me. It was often through photographs that people spoke of the glory of the *tharavad*, and of the achievements of individuals. These collections of old photographs were usually part of a larger collection that included documents such as old letters, genealogical charts and accounts of the family. The preservation of this personal archive was part of a tremendous interest in family history and the history of the community, the latter most often crystallised around the question of the origin of the Thiyyas<sup>3</sup>. This quest, and the importance of photographs in these personal archives, seemed to indicate the ways in which some people were engaged in studying themselves. This triggered the question of whether we can talk about community or region-specific visual cultures. I asked if communities have distinct ways in which they represent themselves or are represented by the professionals hired on specific occasions to photograph/film events. How are these visual cultures fractured by class, location or individual biography? The project has sought to explore these questions by looking at the photograph and film collections of Thiyyas in Thalassery and of some Thiyya families outside Thalassery.

I focus here on personal photographs in people's homes—stored in bags and boxes, arranged in albums, or framed and displayed. Looking at photographs and other images hanging on walls in houses pointed to the complex and contingent ways in which they come to hang there, and in turn the equally complex ways in which the images forge a link between the house and particular kin and non-kin, gods and heroes. It also indicated the varied forms of mass reproduction and printing that have made images and art accessible in small towns. This range is seen in the lithograph reproductions of Ravi Varma's paintings, the chrome-lithographs of Sri Narayana Guru, the black-and-white picture of Marx or Lenin, the brightly coloured posters of gods or the shiny 'Made in China' ready-to-hang framed pictures. At the same time, the range of visual representations of a relative reflects the change from the oil painting to the black and white photograph to colour photographs and coloured digitally manipulated photographs and images.

However, in this short essay I focus on the question: *Who has photographs?* Through case studies of homes which hold very different kinds of photographs, I argue that class is

<sup>1</sup> Photography came to India soon after its invention around the mid-19th century. Christopher Pinney writes of the advertisements in the Calcutta newspapers that indicate the arrival of the camera (1997).

<sup>2</sup> Traditionally, a word used for a matrilineal joint family or joint family house.

<sup>3</sup> The contestation of theories put forward by Brahmanical and upper-caste-informed colonial texts is not only a site of caste contestation but is also a way by which elite Thiyyas seek to understand the mismatch between a history of 'untouchability' (and now the status of Other Backward Classes) and at the same time, a history of privilege from the beginning of the 20th century.

only one of the complex of factors that influences the presence of photographs in a house. Further, as I will argue, these case studies express the very local space that photographs and photographic practice occupy<sup>4</sup>.

Large elite *tharavad* houses in Thalassery often have several albums of old black and white photographs—unless they have been destroyed by white ants or moisture. These albums are expressive of a large joint family in which a wide range of photographs of family members are preserved. While there are photographs taken in studios, and posed photographs taken at home possibly by a professional, a majority of the photographs indicate that some members of the *tharavad* owned a camera. This presence of a camera in the house is seen through photographs taken in informal settings inside and outside the house in Thalassery and also through travel photographs. The photographs also indicate that some of the family members who lived in far flung places, in India and outside, also owned a camera.

Photograph albums in lower middle-class households present a sharp contrast to these albums. For example, in the house of a schoolteacher married to a

government-employed bus conductor, many of the photographs were new colour pictures taken with the camera of a friend or relative, or photographs taken from a recently acquired mobile phone camera. The old photographs belonging to this family are taken by professionals—the posed studio picture, the school group picture, pictures at a formal meeting at which a speech is being given, or passport-sized pictures. Their marriage album from 1980 has small (and now fading) black and white photographs that were also clearly taken by a professional. Thus their photograph collection indicates not only the recent arrival of a camera in the house (a mobile phone camera), but also the recent acquisition of a camera by friends or family.

However, the existence of a range of old photographs in a house cannot just be explained by a difference in class. While looking at photographs and albums in homes in a panchayat area near Thalassery town, I was struck by the rarity of old black and white pictures in these homes<sup>5</sup>. However, I noticed that houses of circus artists tended to have more old photographs—large albums or plastic bags full of photographs—many of them rapidly fading with the

moisture in the air. Thalassery is closely related to the history of the circus in India. VN Narayanan, whose case study I present below, explains that “Thalassery circus ka Kashi kahiye, ya Mecca kahiye.” (“You could call Thalassery the Kashi or the Mecca of the circus.”) Many of the artists in the circus were, until about ten years ago, from Thalassery.

### Performance and Photography

TK Uma (born 1942) and VN Narayanan (born 1937) have both been circus artists. They have a collection of photographs, especially black and white ones from the 1960s and '70s. Most pictures are of them performing, meeting dignitaries who came to see the circus, or of them in places they travelled to with the circus. Many of the pictures they showed me had once been in an album, but had been cut out and were still stuck to the album's black paper. Uma said they had been cut out of the album to be produced in the circus office in Thalassery as proof that they had once been circus artists, which entitled them to the monthly pension of Rs 500. Many other photographs had over the years been lent to fellow players in the circus for the same purpose. Many of these had not come



back. The photograph album was thus dismembered and the photographs put to use in bearing witness to their having performed in the circus. What remained was a fraction of the photographs that they now stored in a pink plastic folder.

Both Uma and Narayanan went into the circus when they were quite young. Uma's parents were circus artists and part of a troupe that performed in the Gemini Circus. Uma joined the same troupe; she and Narayanan met in Gemini Circus and were married in 1965. She stopped

<sup>4</sup> Critiquing the view that technology was uniformly adopted in different cultures in the Indian context, Christopher Pinney was one of the first who explored in a monograph what he calls the 'vitality and potency' (1997:15) of this local space.

<sup>5</sup> Most of these were framed portrait photographs of relatives or marriage photographs.



performing soon after they got married, but in the early 1970s Narayanan got very sick and out of financial necessity Uma returned to Gemini Circus with her two daughters. She specialised in the statue acrobatics feat and the balancing item in which two women stood on her shoulders while she walked up and down a ladder. She left the circus in 1990 and returned to Thalassery. It is primarily with her earnings during those years that they managed to build the house in which they now live, named 'Uma Sreyas' after her.

One of the first photographs one notices in Narayanan and Uma's house is of Jawaharlal Nehru and Narayanan walking with their hands clasped together. Just behind them, standing to the one side, is MV Shankaran, the founder of Gemini Circus. Narayanan tells me how in November 1958 he had the good fortune of meeting and being embraced by Prime Minister Nehru. The other photograph he shows me from the same year, is of him shaking hands with Dr Radhakrishnan, the then Vice-President of India. When they met after the show, Dr Radhakrishnan said to Narayanan, "When you are high up, you are like Yuri Gagarin" (referring to the first



Russian cosmonaut who went into space in 1961). "His praise," says Narayanan, "I will remember till my last breath." Dr Radhakrishnan was referring to the Spring Net feat in which the artist jumps high and then walks in the air before coming down. Narayanan excelled at this feat and is in fact still known as 'Spring Net Narayanan'!

Narayanan has photographs of himself with a medley of people including MG Ramachandran and Jayalalitha, who came to various



performances in Chennai. He has colour photographs taken years later of himself with Kamal Hassan and also with the then Prime Minister AB Vajpai (1992). When MGR came to the circus, Narayanan was performing the horse riding feats in which acrobatics are combined with riding a horse. He had been trained by an Italian trainer and has a photograph of the trainer, himself and two women all standing in a line on the backs of three horses. MGR is believed to have been impressed by his horse riding skills

and recommended him for the role of his double in a film. The photograph of him playing MGR's double on the sets of the Tamil film *Arasilankumari* (1960) is part of his collection of photographs.

Narayanan has performed in a number of circuses including the Great Eastern Circus, Kamala Circus, Great Royal and Gemini. He showed me a few photographs of himself with a group in front of the Sphinx in Egypt in 1964 and told me that he toured Africa with the Great Royal Circus for roughly four years. In the late 1960s, he and three other partners started a circus called Kalamandir. They had a number of very skilled artists but

could not afford wild animals, and two years later the circus had to close down after suffering huge losses. In the 1990s he switched from being a performer to being a trainer or *ustad*. He returned to Thalassery in 2001. Narayanan's lament about the photographs he and Uma have left with them is that there are none of him performing the Spring Net. He says it was difficult to photograph that, but recalls that they did have a photograph which may have been given to the circus union office. In contrast to Narayanan, Uma still has quite a few photographs of her



performing in the '70s when she returned to the circus.

A majority of the pictures that Narayanan and Uma have were taken by professional photographers. Some circus artists told me that the management refused to give them their pictures because they were afraid that employees would use these to apply other circuses. When I asked Narayanan about this, he said Gemini was different. But he then admitted that only if you were a senior artist in the circus could you ask. He

specifically added that women would not ask for photographs directly from the photographer, but would ask the manager or their trainer or *ustad*. And if women wanted a photographer to photograph them inside their living quarters, then the photographer would have to get special permission. In addition to professional photographers, there seemed to be many individuals in the circus who had cameras. While Uma and Narayanan's collection does not contain many photographs taken with

a circus friend's camera, this is not true of the other collections which have a lot of pictures in informal settings, or posed pictures in fashionable clothes<sup>6</sup>. Thus, in occupations that are performance-related, there is a special relationship with the camera that emerges in Thalassery when looking at photographs in homes.

It is worth mentioning here, however, that I did not always encounter a sense of pride in and eagerness to show photographs housed in domestic spaces. Often when women showed me photographs of themselves performing there was a hint of embarrassment. A few women showed me their photographs quietly and shyly, embarrassed by photographs of them wearing shorts or short skirts. One former circus artist, who had a large album of very well-preserved photographs, did not want me to scan some of the photographs. She and her husband, still working in the circus, feared that I would give the photographs to the newspapers and that images of her wearing short skirts or shorts would be published. In a context in which the strong public morality in Kerala is sharply expressed in a rigid dress code for women, the need to control the

audience of these photographs is heightened

### *Individual Passion and Photography*

A circus artist I met who had a large and well-preserved photo-album explained that this was partly because her husband had had a camera and enjoyed taking photographs. The presence of photographs in the home is thus also dependent on the interest of an individual in photography. Below I present the case of someone who worked as a *beedi* worker as a child and through an interest in the creative arts—in poetry and then photography—became a schoolteacher and a professional photographer.

Sukumar Andaloor is a well-known poet, photographer and teacher in his early 60s. His house is full of photographs—they have been put up on walls and are in frames on shelves. The more recent ones are on his computer, downloaded from his digital camera.

Sukumar tells me the story of how he became a teacher and a photographer. Due to financial difficulties at home after the death of his father, he had to stop going to school after the third standard and start working in the local *beedi*

<sup>6</sup> Circus artists were known in Thalassery for returning home from their travels sporting various new fashions—churidars or bellbottoms for instance, when these had not previously been seen in Thalassery. Hairstyles were the other focus of style.







While he would earlier send out the photographs to be set in an album, his daughter now prepares the album. She works on the computer preparing the digital pages for albums that are then printed and bound.

**Conclusion**

My attempt in this essay has been to look at the presence of photographs in homes in order to complicate the assumption of the link between class



privilege and an archive of old photographs. The contrast between two kinds of houses—a big joint family house (*tharavad*) and a lower middle-class house presents a contrast in terms of both the number of photographs in the house and also the nature of the photographs. The difference can at one level be seen as a contrast between a house in which there was at least one camera in the house and another in which all the photographs in the house were taken by professionals. While photographs and photography have been expensive and therefore accessed differentially across class, as explored above through the contrast between the two houses, this difference clearly does not account for all differences between upper and lower middle-class houses. The two case studies presented above show that individual biography and occupation, for example, are critical in understanding who had access to a camera and what kinds of photographs an individual or family has.

Simultaneously, a look at photographs in the home also highlights the social history of a place like Thalassery in which many men and women joined the circus in the



1950s and '60s. It points to the high literacy levels and presence of reading rooms that enabled Sukumar to read and write poetry as a *beedi* worker as well as to the affluence that allowed friends in the Gulf to gift him a camera. Further, I have sought to show the ways in which photographs are not only reflective of a social history but are in fact constitutive of the diversity and heterogeneity among the Thiyyas.

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