

ArtConnect

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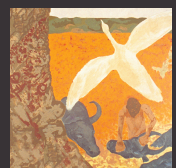
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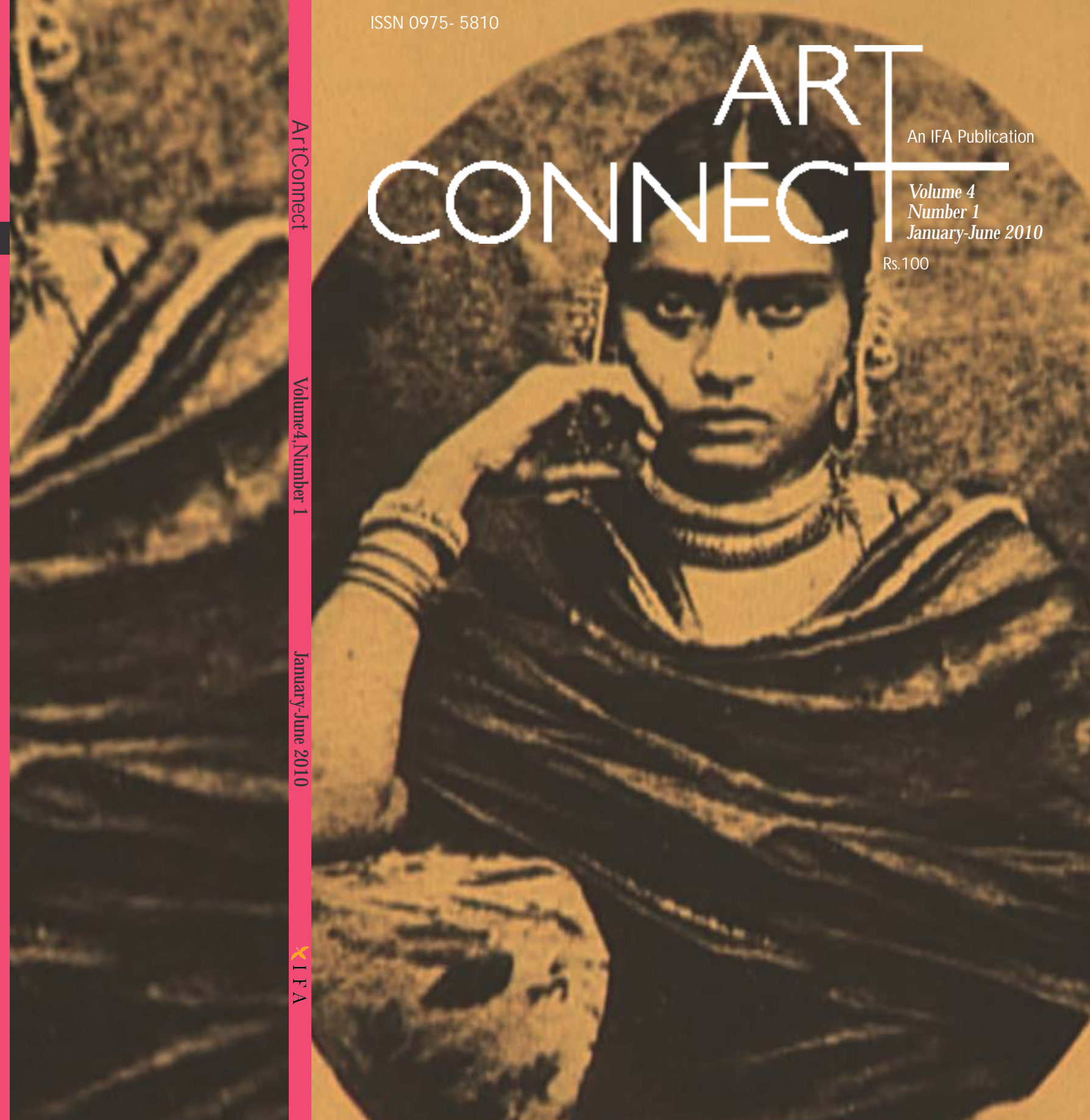
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Mishta Roy

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Cover Image

Unknown *tawaif*. Image from the collection of Krishna Kumar Rastogi.

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Editorial

How does an artist internalise the spirit of older artistic forms while also keeping her art alive to the contemporary context? And, as Frantz Fanon asked 50 years ago, how, in post-colonial societies such as ours, might the artist engage with traditional culture in a dynamic instead of reflexive way?

Shanta Gokhale considers this question the starting point of her novel *Tya Varshi*, from which we carry an excerpt in this issue. In her introduction to the excerpt she writes that one of the events that set her thinking about how art is and is not transfigured by its times, was the publication of a collection of *bandishes* composed by an established vocalist. The artist claimed that they were new, "yet they were all of them variations on the old themes of love and separation and were also written in the old language." Gokhale takes the opposite approach—the title of her novel is Marathi for 'In That Time' and Gokhale sees it as an attempt to capture a specific cultural moment. "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."

In his introduction to an interview with dancer-choreographer Astad Deboo, Sunil Shanbag describes the first time he saw Deboo perform, and the strange excitement of the new. "What emanated from the loudspeakers were sounds, not music, and what the dancer was doing on stage was not dance as I knew it... If what I was familiar with was dance, then this surely was *anti-dance*." The interview goes on to establish how in Deboo's case 'contemporary' dance implies an open-ended, flexible approach to one's resources and contexts, a deliberate suspension of prior assumptions about what the body can create in a space, and a constant search for challenge.

In Clare Arni's photographs of the old-time trades of Kolkata, and in Oriole Henry's accompanying essay, the old and the new are considered in the context of the economic changes sweeping through our cities. The piece shows how Kolkata's old business establishments present both an ethical and aesthetic contrast to the impersonal façades of the corporate world.

Historian Indira Biswas describes the career of a pioneering radio artiste—Jogesh Chandra Bose—who, in the 1920s, started the first children's radio programme in India and who used the medium of radio to create a persona for himself as an affectionate, absent-minded, grandfather-like teller of stories. *Galpadada*, as Bose came to be known, married the new freedoms of early broadcasting and progressive ideas about children's education and recreation, with the traditional image of a storyteller. This carefully constructed image made him one of the country's earliest media personalities as well as someone who "for the first time imagined a space for children in the media".

We also carry essays by Surojit Sen and Janaki Abraham on, respectively, the fakirs of Bengal and the social role of photography among the Thiyyas of Kerala. I hope you enjoy the issue!

Anjum Hasan
editor@indiaifa.org

Contributors

Teji Grover is a Hindi poet, fiction writer, translator and painter. She has published five collections of poetry. Her first novel, *Neela*, appeared in 1999 and a collection of her short stories, *Sapne Mein Prem Ki Saat Kahaniyan*, in 2008. Her poems have been translated into a number of Indian and foreign languages. She has translated and edited an anthology of 22 Swedish poets, *Barf Ki Khushboo* (2001), as well as the works of Norwegian novelist Knut Hamsun and playwright Henrik Ibsen.

Grover's first solo exhibition of paintings was held in the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore in 2005. She has been a teacher of English literature in a college in Chandigarh for two decades and is now a fulltime writer and painter based in Hoshangabad, Madhya Pradesh.

Saba Dewan is a Delhi-based filmmaker whose work has focused on gender, sexuality, culture and communalism. Her notable films include *Sita's Family* (2001), *Barf* (Snow, 1997) *Khel* (The Play, 1994), *Nasoor* (Festering Wound, 1991) and *Dharmayuddha* (Holy War, 1989).

For the past few years she has been working on a trilogy of films on stigmatised women performers. *Delhi –Mumbai –Delhi* (2006), on the lives of bar dancers, was the first film of the trilogy; the second, *Naach* (The Dance, 2008), explored the lives of women who dance in rural fairs. The third and final film of the trilogy is *The Other Song* (2009) which is about the art and lifestyles of the *tawaifs* or courtesans. All three films have been screened widely to critical acclaim.

Dewan received two IFA grants (2002 and 2005) to research and make *The Other Song*

Vibodh Parthasarathi maintains a multidisciplinary interest in communication theory, media policy and comparative media practice. He is one of the editors of the Sage series on 'Communication Processes' which so far includes the volumes *Media and Mediation* (2006) and *The Social and the Symbolic* (2007). He has taught courses in communication theory at various universities in India. Parthasarathi's latest film, *Crosscurrents—a Fijian Travelogue* (2002), explores the many faces of 'reconciliation' after a decade of coups in the Pacific nation.

Parthasarathi is the recipient of a 2002 IFA grant to study the early recording industry and music culture in India.

Annapurna Garimella is a designer and art historian based in Bangalore. She heads Jackfruit, a research and design organisation which works in the arts, and is the founder of Art, Resources and Teaching Trust, a not-for-profit organisation that gathers resources and promotes research and teaching in art and architectural history, archaeology, crafts, design, and other related disciplines in academic and non-academic fora. Her publications include work on the medieval city of Vijayanagara, modernism in India, contemporary religiosities and art, and the politics of tourism and heritage.

In 2000, Garimella received an IFA grant to research and document the religious art and architecture of Bangalore.

Gargi Gangopadhyay is a full-time lecturer of English at Ramakrishna Sarada Mission Vivekananda Vidyabhavan, Kolkata. Currently working on a doctoral thesis on children's print culture in the context of British imperialism, she also teaches a course on 'Children's Literature' at Presidency College, Kolkata. Besides an academic interest in childhood studies, she nurtures a passion for publishing for children, viewing picture and storybooks as powerful mediums for achieving a parallel and alternative education.

Gangopadhyay is on an IFA grant to research the social and historical 'formation' of indigenous children's literature in nineteenth-century Bengal. A web archive of this research will soon be available online.

Sashikanth Ananthachari is a graduate of the Film and Television Institute of India, Pune. He has worked as a cinematographer on over a 100 films including Aparna Sen's *Yugant* and Soudhamini's *Invisible Flame*. He has also directed fiction films for television.

Ananthachari is currently on an IFA grant to make a film on a village festival in Tamil Nadu that is a unique celebration of the Mahabharata. .

*The Incessant Search for Languages:
Some Thoughts on Hindi Poetry Today*

Teji Grover

What are the different streams that have fed the language we today call 'Hindi' and how have poets extended the range of Hindi poetry by drawing on these older tongues? Leading poet Teji Grover shares her own journey into Hindi poetry, via Punjabi, Urdu and English, talks about the history of Hindi poetry and presents some of the challenges and opportunities facing the scene today.



As a practising poet in Hindi, I am sometimes asked the question? “How come you never wrote in your mother tongue, Punjabi” This is a question that annoys me considerably; it sounds like an indictment more than anything else. I haven’t given this issue much conscious thought as I have a rather weird relationship with Punjabi; I avoid speaking it except with my parents. If forced to speak the language with others I begin to feel compromised, exposed. I don’t really know why.

Perhaps I need to take a closer look at the child who became estranged from her immediate surroundings by processes she never understood. This was in Amritsar where she spent her early years steeped in poverty of a kind that was illumined by glowing riches from the inside. The instinct, as always, is to talk about her in the third person. Let me drop this for once and see what happens: We were poor but we had style. We had books, we had music, and I had an artistic upbringing, so to speak. My ancestors had moved twice: once from Burma and then from Pakistan; they had been reduced to indigence from extreme prosperity twice in their lifetime. In the end everyone, especially my father, just

gave up. And we settled down with a split in our wildly beating hearts.

This ‘split’ poverty didn’t seem unreal in those days; it does now. My father had a sizeable library in the house, a telephone, five newspapers every morning and journals of various kinds. But our next meal was always uncertain. If some money came to Mother from her stitching work, we got our food, not otherwise. I studied in an English-medium school and put up with humiliation every day for wearing torn shoes and not paying the fees on time. The fear that a peon would materialise from the office to inform my class-teacher that there were two or three culprits in the class who hadn’t paid their dues is still the subject of my nightmares. The poverty seemed unreal for this reason too: right below our crumbling *barsati* my grandfather kept a considerable house. But for some reason, my parents, my brother and I were not entitled to any share in his prosperity. Breadwinning did not occupy any place in my father’s mental make-up and his health was mostly bad. Given to the vices of reading and writing, he sought the company of poets. For months on end he would be away on monk-like treks. For my brother and me, his life was wrapped in mystery. It still is for me.

My father had deep friendships

with many Urdu writers; many poets and raconteurs visited our home. He also edited a literary magazine called *Nigarish*. I was often requested by my father to recite the poems written by his visiting friends, especially Faiz Ahmed Faiz, who wasn’t yet the legend he has now become. The pleasure of the thing not understood was the first thing about poetry that I understood. I don’t know why but I never felt the urge to go to the meanings of incomprehensible words. The demand for meaning was something I never made from poetry. Hindi, in particular, had earned the immunity to exist beyond the realm of meaning for me, and Hindi writers, who had no place in our Urdu-English-Punjabi household, acquired the magnetic pull of intimate strangers. Perhaps it is still the same. Writing in Hindi, I still don’t belong to the ‘scene’.

My mother and my father belonged, it seemed, to two different planets. We had a home built of screams, the crashing of porcelain and glass, the telephone smashed again and again, and inconsolable sobbing—a home that was perhaps fit only for poetry. Trembling with fear, my brother and I would go to school and return home, trembling with fear. Who knew what the scene would be

on our return. Would people again be thronging the lane, enjoying the spectacle?

My friend, the Hindi writer Udayan Vajpeyi, has been reading the Granth Saheb for many years now. When he engages me in talk about this text, I can’t forget this image—Grandfather being shouted at to swear with his hand on the Granth Saheb that he hasn’t given us any money. He would swear false oaths, after having given us a one anna coin now and then. Later he even gave us four anna coins and more false oaths followed. False oaths should definitely be taken. They have the pleasure of writing. Or writing has the pleasure of false oaths.

I’m not surprised that my mother tongue revolted me—the language in which all domestic battles were fought and shameless bargaining took place with people who seemed even poorer than we were. No word of Punjabi had range; the language lacked the call of the unknown. I had a sense of belonging to it, yes—it offered a lot of warmth and no dearth of meanness either. But it was altogether lacking in enigma. It was a language in which I could be face-to-face with neither death nor a lover. Nor could I kill myself for the love of a word, a single word. Even a thousand miracles, if performed by

your mother, do not make you miracle-struck but more into something of a miracle habituate— this was what my relationship with my mother tongue was like.

Urdu was a language of the oral tradition for me, a tongue made of voices very near and interesting to me. I never thought of writing or reading it. I could only hear it. The magic of my father's voice filled it and the drugged voices of his poet friends. And I remember with bitter joy the big fire I made out of my diaries filled with verses written in English! The point was to get as far as possible from the stifling world created by the mother tongue, but English wasn't the way out for me. It had to be a sibling language, which could somehow accommodate itself within the linguistic world into which I was born.

Of the languages I had learnt the only one left now was Hindi, with which I had no literary contact. The void was one day suddenly filled by Nirala's poems, which I read in school; then Mahadevi Verma's story 'Gheesa'; and, as if descended from the sky, my first Hindi novel *Ve Din*, by Nirmal Verma. Hindi's initial strangeness filled me with longing for it. For me, poetry meant running madly behind words. In a Nirala poem, words like 'pulin', 'trin', 'nirjhar' haunted me

without letup, but I was not the least bit interested in knowing their meanings. For me the delirium of sound was meaning enough. In this delirium I began to write.

Later, I would plant myself in the so-called Hindi-speaking areas, in small towns and villages, and discover time and again that 'Hindi' was a myth I barely understood. Far too many fantastic mother languages had fed into Khari Boli, the dialect with which modern Hindi is equated. And so I allowed Bundeli in particular, and Malwi to some extent, to intertwine their distinct worldviews into the voice I was constantly weaving for myself.

One way of attempting to map the complex terrain of contemporary Hindi poetry is to go back to the origins of modern-day Hindi. Khari Boli is the dialect equated with the Hindi language that I write in. It is the dialect of a particular region (the New Delhi and Meerut area), and was widely adopted to express the spirit of the age, to bring a linguistically cohesive force to the prolonged struggle for freedom from the British Empire. It is today the official language of India, though not the national language. Most contemporary

'Hindi' poetry is written in Khari Boli.

It's an ironic reversal that all those wonderful indigenous mothers of Khari Boli should now be regarded as dialects of so-called 'modern' Hindi. These are actually fully developed language systems with cultural features signifying distinct ways of life, and are languages spoken across what is regarded as the 'Hindi' belt comprising several Indian states. So this 'Hindi belt' is something of a myth, since the 200 million-odd humans who are supposed to be Hindi speakers are in fact speaking their own languages, languages not necessarily comprehensible to the speakers of what I am here referring to as Hindi. These source languages are mostly regarded as oral languages though there is a substantial body of published works in them including Tulsidas's epic *Ramcharitmanas*, which was written in Avadhi. It is noteworthy, however, that there is hardly any prose published in these so-called 'oral languages' even though any number of poetic texts appear. Khari Boli is a relatively flat language compared with the rich and highly musical languages (including, of course, Urdu, Persian and Sanskrit) from which it derived its present form. But all the same Khari Boli is an extremely useful and highly dynamic

instrument that can acquire music and heat, light, colour and texture from a variety of sources.

The prosody of Khari Boli is in itself nothing much to speak of in a country boiling over with more than a couple of thousand languages, according to a rather conservative estimate. We live in a richly-endowed language landscape where you hear the various haunting percussions of Dravidian languages, the ice melting into hilly rapids echoed by Himalayan languages, or languages like Mizo in which meanings vary according to the tones of spoken words or sentences. That is precisely why a Hindi poet who has an ear and a craving for the music of languages will have to play with and on Hindi in such a way that the melodiousness that it seems to lack will at last be heard. It's like bringing back the breath of the tree to the flute fashioned from its wood. In Khari Boli, despite this severe limitation I perceive as a poet, you can still hear the most enchanting music that poets have created through the use of different poetic strategies. A cursory reading of the poets Agyeya, Shamsheer, Amrita Bharati or Shrikant Verma will make this audible to a musically-inclined ear.

One way to look at the development of modern Hindi poetry



is, therefore, to consider the relationships different poets have had with Khari Boli and how they left their imprint on the body of this fast-evolving language. Many Hindi poets came or come from regions in which Khari Boli isn't spoken at all. In many cases, poets have had altogether different mother tongues, and the new Hindi was an acquired language. Thus, for instance, a poet like Trilochan brings imprints of his mother and father tongues (Avadhi and Bhojpuri) and a host of other languages into his Khari Boli poetry, languages he acquired as a penniless vagabond traversing the length and breadth of India. His poem 'Champa' comes from such an experience. The poem incorporates the dialect spoken by the little girl Champa, and it symbolises for me the poet's incessant search for languages and tones in his poetry. In the context of Hindi, one can legitimately speak of 'languages' in this manner.

A deep adventure with Khari Boli is of necessity a vagabondage, both literally and metaphorically, an enterprise in which several Hindi poets are engaged, one way or the other. Let me give you some interesting examples of how drastically even worldviews shift from one language to the other even within the supposedly 'Hindi' zone. In the

language Malwi, for instance, the expression for death is 'to go into peace'. In Bundeli, it is 'coming to an end' or 'finished'. Similarly, the flower of the *mahua* tree, from which both liquor and food are obtained, will carry great significance in poetry from the Gond *adivasi* regions, where a newborn infant is placed on the earth and a *mahua* flower placed on her body. The ritual signifies that the earth and the *mahua* are the first mothers of the baby. When a poet from the mountainous Garhwal region says he must go home to his children, they're alone, he could very well mean that his wife is alone at home. I once bought books as gifts for these non-existent 'children' when I heard a poet friend saying this. I had no idea shyness could go to such extremes among the people of my own country. In many respects, most of us are proved complete, though intimate, strangers in this land comprising innumerable lands and cultural/linguistic practices.

The beginning of the twentieth century marked a distinct break in Hindi poetry from the melodiousness of the poetry preceding it, a curve away from a wealth of cultural

associations that tradition had refined over several centuries. The two streams that fed poetry in the preceding centuries were those of bardic and devotional poetry (*bhakti*), and the poetry of courtly love, with elaborate descriptions of the erotic beauty of various kinds of heroines (*nayikas*). Historically, the times under the British regime gave an edge to poetic practices because poets felt obliged to make room for nationalism and social reform. The adoption of Khari Boli was important because it gave a single linguistic platform to this enterprise, but at the same time led to a lack of true melodiousness, and a break from the cultural associations of poetry written in languages like Braj, Maithili and Avadhi. This produced a real vacuum that had to be addressed.

My hunch is that this lack led to a feeling of poetic insecurity, making several poets take recourse to one or the other ideology. At the same time, it led to a proliferation of individual and eccentric voices. Though this brew might have been different elsewhere in the country, the result was more or less the same—an intense polarisation between poetry regarded as socially committed, and poetry defined pejoratively as 'elitist', 'aesthetic' and 'socially irresponsible'. Some of these pronouncements have had a marked

impact on the nurturing of poetic talents, but they have also led to a completely unexpected development—a tendency on the part of extremely gifted poets to withdraw from the polemically-charged atmosphere of contemporary Hindi literature. There are a substantial number of poets writing in Hindi today who pursue their difficult art in a void or a vacuum, which in some cases might qualify as solitude. A few years from now, a historian of Hindi poetry may find it hard to believe that poets who had the most unusual and singular voices, and who withstood the influence of all received notions, have been lying in utter obscurity for so long. The 'unearthing' of such voices has been undertaken consistently in the past by poets like Agyeya and Ashok Vajpeyi.

Interestingly, this most conspicuous preoccupation with ideological categories in contemporary Hindi poetry also brought into existence profoundly moving poetry by poets who felt they were under attack. An example is Agyeya's poem 'On the Grass for a Moment' in which even a tender moment with his beloved brings this sadness and sense of loss into the poet's mind. Similarly, Shailendra Dubey, one of the least published and highly prolific poets of

the present scene, wonders in one of his poems whether he should sit facing society in his poems. And what if society happens to be facing in his direction, how then will he be able to write? He asks this simple question charged with the anguish of an anonymous poet writing in a frightening void, away from any gaze, publicity, debate or dialogue. One can only hope that some poets writing today and going unnoticed will be recognised later, like Nirala and Muktibodh, who did not achieve any recognition during their lifetimes. Like Nirala, Muktibodh, too, has now been accepted across the ideological camps as a monumental literary figure whose poetry brought existential dimensions into play and an almost surreal imagery in its wake. Shamsher and Trilochan too have been placed above the polemics of the scene, though Marxist critics were never happy with the intense worship of experiment and beauty in Shamsher. For instance, his longing to be 'laid on mountains of thirst', and his love for the abstract would hardly find any leftist admirers, and yet he is the one of those hailed as 'the poet's poet' despite (or because of?) his peasant background and extreme childlike naiveté and openness. Shamsher is the most boldly experimental of all Hindi

poets, and one very keenly aware of the craft of writing poetry. In their sheer pursuit and mastery of various languages, Agyeya, Trilochan and Shamsher brought innumerable nuances to their Khari Boli poetry, though Trilochan continued to write in his native Avadhi too.

Regarding the unearthing of manuscripts and the rehabilitation of poets in the recent history of Hindi poetry, the most assiduous work has been done by the poet, cultural activist and administrator, Ashok Vajpeyi. Whereas Agyeya's influence has been within the fold of literature, Vajpeyi has been officially in a position to bring various art forms in proximity with one another by helping to set up institutions that became cultural hubs for the entire country, the most notable among them being Bharat Bhavan in Bhopal. This bringing together of various art forms has enriched not only Hindi poetry but poetry in other Indian languages too, by providing culturally exciting, sharable platforms. If it had not been for Vajpeyi's involvement in the Hindi literary scene, the polemically-charged atmosphere I have described would have taken a much bigger toll.

The last few years have also seen the disappearance of major literary magazines or their passage from being

platforms for diverse literary expressions to something less facilitative. It is not surprising, therefore, to come across schools of fish among Hindi poets, seeking out new waters with temperatures conducive to all of them. And while the vacuum within the poetic scene seems to be deepening in some ways, fresh currents of air rush in from unexpected quarters. Hindi poetry has found a host of scholars and translators from all over the world who engage individual writers in dialogue, culminating in serious publications from university presses abroad. A major internet journal (Pratilipi) has been launched by two young poets, one of whom writes in English and other in Hindi. Major English language publishers like Penguin and HarperCollins have started to publish in Indian languages, including Hindi. And mainstream Hindi publishers are growing bigger, even if Hindi writers are getting poorer by the minute!

Yet there are Hindi poets today whose art is refined by shyness and silence. One of the most intriguing contemporary figures is Amrita Bharati, a reclusive woman who never surfaced on the Hindi scene and is leading a quasi-spiritual life in Pondicherry. Nirmal Verma, the well-

known Hindi novelist, said of her: "Amrita Bharati is probably the most alone signature in Hindi poetry. Alone and unique." Similarly Kamlesh and Shirish Dhoble have both been singularly lacking in worldly ambition and have eschewed the limelight as well as participation in a debate that seems futile to them. They have both written poetry that brings an edge to everyday experience by drawing on Puranic and mythological texts. Then there is the prolific but unpublished Shailendra Dubey who is prone to serious inner turbulence and who turns his hallucinatory mode of perceiving reality into poetry that could well remind you of Rimbaud's engagement with literature. Miranahshah writes in English but is known only to a few Hindi poets who have read him in my translation. He has been an aspiring natural farmer inspired by the Japanese farmer Masanbou Fukuoka. I'm deeply aware of the responsibility placed on me as the sole possessor of the unpublished manuscripts and handwritten notebooks of some of these reticent fellow poets.





*In Search Of the Other Song:
Travels Among the
Tawaiifs of Banaras*

Saba Dewan

Over the course of an eight-year journey, filmmaker Saba Dewan has delved deep into the history and present conditions of the *tawaif*, the courtesan of north India. Her recently-completed film, *The Other Song*—which won the Macenet prize for the best international documentary at the Pusan International Film Festival 2009—traces the memories, physical spaces, novels, poetry and music associated with the *tawaif*, and the politics that over a century led to her gradual erasure from public memory. In the following essay, Dewan shares with us some of the discoveries she made during the course of her research and describes her encounters with the present-day inheritors of the *tawaif* legacy.



One warm summer afternoon in Banaras four years ago, Shastriji asked me a question—“Have you heard of Rasoolan Bai’s *thumri* ‘*Lagat karejwa ma chot, phul gendwa na mar*’ (My heart is wounded, don’t throw flowers at me)?” I was a bit surprised that he should ask since ‘*Lagat karejwa ma chot*’ is identified closely with Rasoolan Bai, the famous *thumri* singer from Banaras. Quite sure that Shastriji had something more up his sleeve, I hesitantly replied in the affirmative.

His next question confirmed my suspicions. “Have you heard its variation, also recorded by her—

22 “*Lagat jobanwa ma chot, phul gendwa na mar* (My ‘*jobanwa*’ is wounded, don’t throw flowers at me)?”

In his early eighties, Shiv Kumar Shastri comes from a family of *vaidyas* and is himself a renowned Ayurvedic practitioner, a musician and also grandson of the well-known Hindu nationalist leader, Madan Mohan Malviya. Fond of posing questions, Shastriji is happier still to answer them himself.

Satisfied with my ignorance about ‘*Lagat jobanwa ma chot*’, Shastriji settled into the comfortable routine of a one-sided conversation that had developed between us over the many years that I had been visiting Banaras to research and later shoot for a film that would journey through history, memory, physical spaces, cultural and archival texts to locate the arts, lifestyle and sexuality of the *tawaif* or courtesan within the cultural, social and political landscape of late-nineteenth and twentieth-century North India.

I was interested in exploring art forms traditionally associated with the *tawaif*. *Thumri*, *dadra* and *ghazal* singing through the nineteenth and well into the mid-twentieth centuries were intrinsically seen as the *tawaif*’s domain. What was the *tawaif*’s contribution to these cultural expressions? How did these forms in turn render and construct the *tawaif*? Besides being a professional musician, the talents required of the courtesan reflected her multiple roles as a companion, entertainer and lover to male patrons, who vied for the attention of well-known *tawaifs*.

As a professional performer, the *tawaif* was sought after and even celebrated, and yet she was also marked out as a social ‘outlaw’, given her non-marital sexuality and the patriarchal

stigma attached to ‘respectable’ women being out in the public gaze, accessible to all. It was this ambiguous place that the *tawaif* occupied within pre-colonial patriarchy which I was interested in exploring.

This space of the *tawaif* was, however, to be recast in a major way from the late nineteenth century onwards. A major aspect of my research was to analyse the processes by which the cultural, social and sexual space occupied by the *tawaif* was not only marginalised but also stigmatised as ‘deviant’ and ‘obscene’. In particular, I was interested in exploring the ideological discourses that fuelled nationalist responses to pre-colonial female sexualities and aesthetics. Finally, the project aimed to explore the state in which women from *tawaif* backgrounds survive in contemporary India.

That afternoon, however, the mandatory tall glass of sweet lassi at Shastriji’s home had taken its toll— heavy-eyed with sleep I was only vaguely in touch with the concerns that had brought me to Banaras in the first place. Hazily, I heard him talk about the *jobanwa* record that belonged to his father but had subsequently got lost. Shastriji couldn’t remember the year in which the record had been released but was

sure Rasoolan Bai had never sung the *jobanwa* version again since no one with the happy exception of himself seemed to be aware of its existence. Breaking my reverie, Shastriji ended by playfully posing a challenge—let’s see, he said, if you can find this forgotten song.

I am not sure whether at that time I was interested in finding out more about the song. The significance of the seemingly minor difference between the two versions of the *thumri* was not apparent to me. Shastriji, usually so voluble, had not been forthcoming and I had been too sleepy to probe. In my literal understanding of ‘*jobanwa*’ as ‘*yauvan*’ or youth, youthfulness, I could see nothing particularly noteworthy, let alone reprehensible, in the *jobanwa* version sung by Rasoolan Bai. Yet despite the lack of enthusiasm, I did accept Shastriji’s challenge for want of anything better to do.

I was already three years into the project and had come to an unforeseen halt after making initial progress with archival and field research. My canvas was vast since the research was dependent on retrieving and reading fragments. The history of the arts, especially music, in India depends to a large extent on oral memory and material traces. The histories of *tawaif*





artistes, not surprisingly, are even more fragmentary since these are histories of a community that has always stood on the margins of patriarchy and therefore, necessarily, its historiography. The process of retrieval gets more complicated since the history of the *tawaif* and her arts over the last century-and-a-half is also a history of erasure and silencing.

I got ample taste of this through my journeys in Banaras, home till roughly the mid-twentieth century to a large community of *tawaifs*, and the centre of *bol banao thumri*, *hori*, *chaiti* and *dadra* of the *purab ang*, practised and preserved by women singers almost exclusively from courtesan backgrounds. The city continues to see itself as a centre of Hindustani music, validated no doubt by the regularity of concerts organised here in both formal and informal settings, along with the presence of a large number of well-known, mostly male, musicians, wealthy patrons (both institutional and individual), countless music schools, and local music societies. Where did the *tawaif* live in the city's memory, I wondered, as I tried to trace her in musical *mehfils* hosted by wealthy merchant families in the opulent music halls of their homes. I inquired of

people that thronged the concerts organised by religious bodies on the ghats of the Ganga and everywhere received one answer—the *tawaif* is dead. She sings no more those beguiling melodies that made innocent men forget their way back home.

There were, however, some residents of Banaras who were more forthcoming. I met with Krishna Kumar Rastogi, a music collector who has an extensive collection of early gramophone recordings including those made by *tawaif* singers. He has also collected hundreds of photographs of *tawaif* musicians of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. In recent years, Rastogiji has also revived Kashi Sangeet Samaj, a once-influential music society. His music archive is now housed under the auspices of this society.

Along with him and several others, I was able to map the city of Banaras during the time that *tawaifs*, quite literally, occupied the central space—the Chowk and its adjoining mohallas, Dal Mandi, Nariyal Bazaar, Raja Darwaaza and Aas Bhairon. Many wealthy *tawaifs* owned extensive property in these areas and their *kothas*, I was told, were fabled for their

elegant furniture, rich furnishings and gilded mirrors.

Patronage for the *tawaifs* of these *kothas* came from the triumvirate of the ruling elite in Banaras—the Bhumihar king, the merchant aristocracy, and the *gosains* or priests who controlled the vast resources of the rich temples over which they presided. There was not just social acceptance of romantic alliances with *tawaifs*, it was considered a matter of some prestige. Several men were, in fact, known by the names of their famous *tawaif* mistresses such as 'Chandrakala wale' Babu Yadunath Prasad—a wealthy merchant whose mistress was Chandrakala, a famous *tawaif* of the city.

Tawaifs were invited to perform at the court on various occasions, at family celebrations in the homes of the merchant princes, in prominent temples, and on the ghats of the Ganga during important religious functions. *Tawaifs* sang of ecstatic passion, pangs of separation, sexual longing, jealousy, anger, flirtation and rejection—emotions that imbue the poetry of *thumri* and its associated forms like *hori* and *chaiti*. *Thumri* has often been called the 'feminine voice' of Hindustani music. The poetic text of *thumri* is articulated from a feminine perspective and is usually centred on

the emotions experienced by the woman in love, and the celebration of the romantic play between Radha and Krishna. The virtuosity of a *tawaif* singer's performance was judged to a great extent by her ability to tease out the differing perspectives and multiple meanings embedded within any given phrase of a *thumri*. This she would achieve through voice modulation and *abhinaya*, which included dance gestures and facial expressions. The *tawaif's mehfil* allowed for intimate eye contact between the performer and her select audience—all men—some of whom might also share a sexual liaison with the singer.

As self-made women, *tawaifs* had to cultivate, in order to be successful, a range of skills that included, besides music and dance, *ilme majlisi* or knowledge of the intricacies of social etiquette, as also grounding in literature, politics and the arts of erotic stimulation. Amritlal Nagar, in his accounts of the *tawaifs* in Banaras, mentions Vidyadhari Bai, one of the most respected *thumri* singers of the city in the early decades of the twentieth century, who, along with Rajeshwari Bai, aunt of Siddheshwari Devi, had, for instance, had spent several years studying the *Kamasutra* from Goswami Damodarlal.



I will always be most grateful to everyone in Banaras who so generously shared with me details about the culture associated with *tawaifs*. I did notice, however, that most of these narratives fed into a romantic nostalgia about the 'great' *tawaif* singers of Banaras, who had been patronised by the elite and risen to the highest echelons of wealth, fame and prestige through their music, social skills and learning. But what of the larger number of *tawaifs* in the community who did not have access to the resources or skills that would catapult them into the rarified environs of the courts and music halls of aristocratic homes?

A broad stratification of *tawaifs* based upon the class of patrons they entertained, as also their musical and other cultural talents, is to be found in some early-twentieth-century accounts. The categories were fluid in nature and narratives reflect how a poor *tawaif* could, through her beauty and talent, along with luck in getting a rich patron, climb up the ladder of success. Narratives about fall in fortunes to penury are also as plentiful.

At the highest rung were placed the Hindu Gandharva and Kinnar, and Muslim Dereydar *tawaifs*, who entertained an exclusive category of

aristocratic patrons and were amongst the wealthiest women in the city. They did not usually have, at a given time, more than one patron with whom they shared a sexual relationship, but they were free to perform in *mehfils* either within their *kotha* or at the homes of a select few. The financial security provided by wealthy patrons enabled these *tawaifs* to invest in the best available teachers in music and dance, as also in expensive clothes and jewellery, so essential to ensure their success and popularity as performers. It was also reflected in the luxurious ambience and services that the *kotha* could provide. This in turn attracted to it well-known male musicians, poets and other members of the literati, marking it as a musical and cultural institution of the city.

Placed lower were *tawaifs* from castes like the Baisi, Ramjani and Sahban who, though skilled musicians, did not have the resources to be as discriminating about their choice of patrons. Though they did sing *thumri* as well as *tappa*, in the main their repertoire consisted of popular *ghazals*, *dadras*, folk music, songs performed in Parsi theatre, and later even film songs. It is the repertoire of these *tawaifs* that often finds disparaging mention in early-twentieth-century accounts for being



‘vulgar’ but hugely popular with the ‘common’ people in the bazaar. Still lower in the hierarchy one finds mention of Gonaharins and Magiyas, *tawaifs* who danced at weddings, religious processions and other public spaces, considered taboo by the higher-placed courtesans.

As practitioners of a popular culture associated with the bazaar and a threatening polygamous sexuality, women performers placed in the lower rungs of the *tawaif* community were dismissed by a majority of my informants as ‘mere prostitutes’—outside the league of the elite Gandharva, Kinnar and Dereydar musicians whose art practice defined the ‘high’ culture of Banaras associated closely with the ruling elite.

Those *tawaif* practitioners who were able to make a name for themselves in the postcolonial cultural economy are feted, and their invaluable ‘service’ to music celebrated, but they are, simultaneously, also removed in subtle ways from their *tawaif* backgrounds. I noticed, for instance, that several people avoided using the term *tawaif* in connection with them. Instead, the preferred term was ‘*gayika*’, woman singer, which while being valid enough in a limited kind of way, is reassuringly free, for the middle-class practitioners and

lovers of music, of the anxiety-provoking sexuality that the term ‘*tawaif*’ seems to be charged with.

Clearly, in the cultural dispensation of modern India, the *tawaifs* arts have been rendered acceptable only after being separated from the sexuality and lifestyles of their earlier practitioners, who in archival accounts are increasingly transformed into women on the run, hounded by the State and society for being prostitutes. Piecing together the fragments in the jigsaw puzzle of the *tawaifs* history, I came across, for instance, a series of reports that appeared through the summer of 1958 in *Aaj*, a Hindi newspaper published from Banaras. These are accounts of the introduction in that year of the anti-prostitution law, the Suppression of Immoral Trafficking Act, in the city. They report the frequent police raids on the houses of *tawaifs*, followed by arrests—part of the State’s drive to rescue women from prostitution. *Tawaifs* seem to have responded through legal petitions and letters to newspapers asserting their identity as performing artistes and not ‘prostitutes’. There are also reports of attempts by *tawaifs* to form groups and associations of ‘singing and dancing girls’ in order to protect themselves from police harassment.

My subsequent research revealed that between the late 1950s and mid-1960s, large numbers of *tawaif* families vacated Dal Mandi and its adjoining mohallas, where they had traditionally lived.

Moving back in history, in 1946, Sardar Patel, veteran Congress leader and Minister for Home and Information and Broadcasting in the interim government, banned women artistes whose “private lives were a public scandal” from singing on All India Radio (AIR): only ‘respectable’ women were to be allowed to perform. This rule in effect ensured that AIR was left with almost no female Hindustani music singers since most came from courtesan backgrounds.

Though Patel’s ruling was subsequently revoked, I got to hear of *tawaifs* in Banaras who immersed their musical instruments in the Ganga and stopped singing altogether. Many others, dependent on the radio for a regular income, entered into marriages, mostly with their accompanist *sarangi* and *tabla* players, so as to become suitably respectable for the State-controlled airwaves. The transformation of the *Bai* (term of address for *tawaif*) into *Begum* and *Devi* (forms of address for ‘respectable’ married Muslim and

Hindu women respectively) was underway.

Why and how had the *tawaif* become a national embarrassment? In a small one-column article tucked away in an old edition of *Aaj*, dated 31 June, 1921, I read an account of a meeting of *tawaifs* in the city that had been organised by Husna Bai, the *choudharayin* of the community in Banaras. Presided over by a framed photograph of Gandhi, the meeting had sworn allegiance to the nationalist cause and had decided on the formation of the *Gayika Sangh*, an association of ‘singing and dancing girls’. It had concluded with a resolution proposed by Vidyadhari Bai to weed out obscenity in music and to promote nationalism by singing patriotic songs at all venues where the courtesans were invited to perform.

When I mentioned the news-report to Shastriji he sighed, folded his hands rather



dramatically at the painting of Gandhi hanging on the wall opposite, and said, “What a great man he was but I have to admit that he destroyed our musical culture which was so closely linked to the great *tawaif* musicians of this city.”

Rai Anand Krishna, belonging to an old aristocratic merchant family and a scholar of art and Hindustani music, also voiced similar sentiments. He shared stories about the music mehfil that were regularly organised in his home during the time of his father, the late Rai Krishna Das. By the 1920s, however, his father had stopped the practice of inviting *tawaif* singers to these *mehfils*. Rai Anand Krishna located this transition in the puritanical morality advocated by Gandhi and embraced fervently by an English-educated middleclass that had little previous connection with, or appreciation of, the *tawaif*'s arts. This important new class of political players castigated the practice of patronising *tawaif* musicians as ‘degenerate’—their influence was such that large sections of the old aristocracy that formed the cultural elite in Banaras felt compelled to disassociate themselves from courtesan performers.

Gandhi being the poster boy of the morality brigade, the accusation directed at him by Shastriji and Rai

Sahib did not sound misplaced, but both were perhaps running too far ahead of the sequence of events that had shaped the cultural history of Banaras. A series of crudely-drawn cartoons lampooning the *tawaif*, published in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Hindi pamphlets and newspapers, tell the story of a city which had in that period reverberated to the rallying cry of—“*Chahu jusko nij kalian, to sab mili Bharat santan, Japau nirantar ek zabaan, Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan*” (“Those who desire personal salvation should together as children of India chant in one voice—Hindu, Hindi, Hindu nation”).

The rise of Hindu nationalism, based on the mobilisation of a collective Hindu identity, articulated the anxieties of a subjugated patriarchy. A major concern within the discourse was the need to regulate existing female sexualities and control spaces of ‘dangerous excess’. For the newly-emerging Hindu nationalists, colonial morality became, ironically, the parameter by which they were to define and differentiate the ‘moral’ from the ‘immoral’. After the war of 1857, colonial authorities had spared no effort to construct Indian princes as effete and profligate, steeped in decadent pleasures symbolised by the

‘prostitute’ *tawaif*. Internalising this Victorian moral code, nationalist discourse, too, seems to have cast the *tawaif*'s *kotha* as a site of hazardous and illicit pleasure that sapped masculine vigour.

One of the early issues taken up by Hindu nationalist leaders such as Madan Mohan Malviya, which polarised the city on the basis of religious identity in the early twentieth century, was the demand that Hindi be declared the official language as opposed to Urdu. The *tawaif* as the personification of the ‘other’ within Hindu nationalist discourse is revealingly articulated in the above-mentioned series of popular cartoons as ‘Begum Urdu’; the *tawaif* becomes the embodiment of the alien, exotic, untrustworthy, decadent, morally corrupt Muslim ‘other’ in contrast to ‘Mother Devanagari’, the upper-caste, respectable, honest and homespun mother of every true Hindu son.

The Anti-Nautch Movement of the early twentieth century had a strong presence in Banaras. It attacked the tradition of organising ‘nautches’ (dances) and the open presence of *tawaifs* on public occasions. This was matched with demands for changes in municipality bylaws that regulated the *tawaifs*' place of residence to certain specified areas of the city.

Not surprisingly, given this history, few contemporary musicians that I met in Banaras, including *sarangi* and *tabla* players who had begun their careers performing with *tawaif* singers, admit in public to any past link with courtesans. I also met with several middle-class women musicians, some whom have gained recognition as exponents of *thumri*, *hori* and *chaiti*. I found many displaying a great anxiety to distance themselves from the earlier practitioners of art forms that they now call their own.

A sentiment that was often expressed to me was that the value or integrity of the *tawaif*'s music was compromised because of the centrality placed on sexuality in her performance. Part of the logic of this argument lies in the ascendancy of an ascetic Gandhian morality; a greater part lies embedded in that great invention of the early twentieth century: a national tradition of music cast in a spiritual, Hindu mode. With an increasing sense of nationalism came the need for a music that was classical, morally uplifting and reflected India's great cultural heritage. The problem, however, was that Hindustani music practice at the turn of the twentieth century did not quite





conform to these notions. The antiquity of most of its major genres like *khayal* and *thumri* could not be traced beyond a few centuries, and its close links with court-based patronage imbued Hindustani music practice, in the eyes of middle-class nationalists, with bawdy associations and an unacceptable morality based on pleasure seeking.

Reasons had to be found and blame apportioned to explain the disjunction between an idealised past and a far from perfect present. Locating Hindustani music in ancient *shastra*-based principles and modes of learning, early cultural nationalists like Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande and Vishnu Digamber Puluskar focused their attack on the corrupting influence of its present practitioners—*tawaif* singers and Muslim *ustads*—both of whom were seen as interlopers in a sacred tradition.

Alongside, music learning, practice and performance now moved out into newly-established music schools and colleges, music societies and public concerts largely patronised by the middle classes. Kashi Sangeet Samaj in Banaras, for instance, was established in 1906 with the active encouragement of Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande and Vishnu Digamber

Puluskar, and drew inspiration from the nation-building discourse of these Hindu cultural nationalists. The mainstay of Kashi Sangeet Samaj's activities was the organising of regular Hindustani music concerts within elite homes and on public platforms. Rastogiji, the present secretary of the music society, read out for me the meticulous records of the Samaj that list the names of all the musicians invited to perform in the 60 years that it has been active. It is a revealing exercise: all the names are of Hindu male musicians with not a single mention of a Muslim performer or of any singer from a *tawaif* background.

Despite these developments, women from middle-class family backgrounds have had to wage intense personal struggles through the twentieth century to publicly perform Hindustani music, given the association of professional music performance with the now stigmatised *tawaiifs*. There has, therefore, been an anxiety to delineate a public persona distinctly rooted in the ideals of a 'respectable woman'. Nowhere is this more evident than in the delinking of the performance from the sexuality of the performer. This is especially true for women singers who perform *thumri*. Eye contact with the audience



and the use of *abhinaya* or drama through facial expressions and dance movements are a strict no-no in the decorous presentations of *thumri*, a task made easier by the impersonal and distant space of the auditorium within which most contemporary music concerts take place.

Attempts have also been made to cast *thumri* within a devotional, spiritual mode. The explicit or implied presence of Krishna in a large number of *thumri* texts is put forward as proof of the 'inherently' devotional nature of *thumri*. In several instances, seemingly minor changes have been made within *thumri* texts, replacing especially modes of address to the patron/lover with a suitable epithet for Krishna, and in the process road-rolling the wonderful ambiguity that exists within *thumri* texts—the erotic and

the spiritual coexisting, overlapping and providing meaning to each other.

Even when, through the efforts of some people, I was able to contact women from *tawaif* families, my first challenge was introducing the subject of my research, given that the term '*tawaif*' has become a rude expression not to be used in polite company. In deference to the morality of the cultural elite, the *tawaif* community refers, in its public discourse, to courtesans as '*gaane waali*', singing woman. So did I but it did little to diffuse the palpable anxiety that arose once I explained to the women the scope of my project. Our meetings would usually end soon after. The present generations of Gandharva, Kinnar and Dereydar *tawaifs*, as also the more affluent sections from the Baisi and Ramjani castes, have over the past decades generally moved into the lifestyle associated with middle-class 'respectability'. The girls of these families are not exposed to any training in music or dance and have mostly been married off. The sons, because the families had the resources to afford it, have been educated and encouraged to seek jobs or even begin their own businesses. Understandably,

the last thing they want is an unknown filmmaker turning up at their doorstep, raking up a past now best forgotten.

However, the descendents of less well-off *tawaifs* have had to make different life choices. There has been an economic compulsion for such women to continue earning for the family, though they have lacked the resources or patronage to receive the intensive training in music of the earlier generations. Over the past century, the severing of links between *tawaif* sexuality and her arts, though never complete, pushed a large number of these women into rendering mostly sexual services, besides performing in their *kothas* a transformed repertoire of Hindi film songs and dances, sometimes even popular ghazals and Bhojpuri folk songs for a male audience that wanted the trappings of a feudal culture but not its aesthetics. In the last 25 years though, *kothas* in Banaras have shut down altogether and girls from these families have moved on to perform in the better-paying dance bars of Mumbai and Bangalore, in orchestras that perform at family and other celebrations, especially in smaller towns, and in dance troupes. Their families prefer to stay miles away from anyone connected with the media. My

chances of finding acceptance here proved next to impossible in the initial period of my project.

It was while I was politely being shown the door by most *tawaif* families that I met Saira Begum, a practicing *thumri*, *ghazal*, *hori*, *chaiti* and *dadra* singer based in Banaras. Much to my happy surprise, Saira, a soft-spoken woman in her early fifties, was more welcoming than the others in the community. I sensed that her initial openness was motivated to a great extent by a curiosity about me and the research I was doing.

Saira had begun her career as a *tawaif* performer at weddings and other family celebrations of the upper-caste landlords in Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh. However, due to the prevailing stigmatisation and pressure from her extended family of male cousins, nephews and sons-in-law, all engaged in 'respectable' professions, Saira has consciously distanced herself from her *tawaif* past.

Saira was initially vague about her family background, hinting at a bad marriage which forced her into the *kotha*. It was a story I was to become familiar with over the course of my research; I repeatedly came across attempts by *tawaif* performers to trace for themselves 'respectable' non-*tawaif* origins. With minor



variations, the script would revolve around the predictable narrative of the daughter from a poor but respectable family finding her way through a series of catastrophes into the *kotha*. The best-known and perhaps earliest literary source of this narrative is Mirza Mohammed Hadi Ruswa's celebrated late-nineteenth-century novel *Umrao Jan Ada*, based on biographical accounts of a *tawaif* in Lucknow who went by that name.

Over the subsequent period of interaction, Saira dispensed with this cliché. She had been born into a well-known family of Baisi *tawaif* singers from Bhabhua, Bihar, who were known by their family name, Koeli (nightingale). There were several women in her family, including her mother, aunts and elder sister, who began their careers as *tawaifs* in Bhabhua and who had subsequently made their way to Banaras and set up *kothas*. Saira is extremely proud of her ancestry and yet her initial attempts to locate herself within the fiction of a patriarchal family point towards the greater stigma associated with *tawaifs* born into the tradition.

The '*tawaif's* daughter' is a figure charged with a dangerous sexuality in early-twentieth-century accounts. Willful, self-obsessed, confident and practical, with little respect for the

feminine virtues of modesty and self-denial, she is the obverse of all that girls of 'good' families were trained to be. This reversal of socially-sanctioned gender rules has been studied by some feminist scholars in their exploration of the *tawaif* lifestyle within the *kotha*.

Within the *tawaif* community, the birth of a daughter was celebrated with far greater enthusiasm than that of a son, who was viewed as an economic liability. Property passed from older to younger women, and the head of the family vested with decision-making powers was always the senior-most matriarch or '*nayika*' of the house. There seems to have been intense competition among daughters to be chosen for the expensive training and grooming necessary to become a successful *tawaif*. Only girls who showed signs of having the requisite musical talent or beauty would be selected. The rest would be married off to boys within the community.

Saira rose to become an extremely sought-after *tawaif* performer and yet her career choices were tempered with the need to survive stigma. Once her children were born, she stopped performing within Banaras, preferring instead to sing outside the city where few people knew her personally. Later, for several

years, Saira stopped performing altogether. It was not a happy decision given her love for music, and neither was it a practical one, since she had no other source of income. Saira resumed singing but her efforts have been to move away from venues like wedding celebrations, traditionally associated with *tawaifs*, to 'respectable' platforms like the radio, television and concerts. This move has many times entailed heartache and even humiliation, once her *tawaif* background has become public. She has not taught music to any of her three daughters, preferring to marry them off into 'respectable' families. Saira's choices are in many ways reflective of the ways in which *tawaif* musicians have had to reinvent themselves through euphemisms, lifestyle changes, manufactured mythologies and silences: a process crucial to ensuring that some of them at least survive and others perhaps go on to achieve success as performers in the changed cultural economy of post-Independence India.

Even though Saira agreed to be part of my research, wherein her identity would be protected, she had always been apprehensive about being in the film, which would bring her *tawaif* background to the fore. On the other hand, the long period of my

research with her had forged a relationship of trust and affection between us. Caught in a predicament, Saira asked me for time to think through her decision. I had, therefore, no choice but to wait and hope that eventually she would decide to be part of the film.

It was at this point that Shastriji told me about Rasoolan Bai's rendition of '*Lagat jobanwa ma chot*'. Having time on my hands, I decided to find out whether indeed the song was lost, as he claimed. My enquiries within Banaras itself and even elsewhere, to archivists and music collectors, drew a complete blank. The version finds no mention in any discography of Rasoolan Bai's recorded music.

I was surprised, too, with the discomfort and even evasiveness that I perceived in many people with the term '*jobanwa*', which I





had assumed meant youth, sexual prime. Soon enough I realised that in poetic usage and in colloquial use 'joban' or 'jobanwa' also refers to breasts, especially

young women's breasts. "Lagat jobanwa ma chot, phul gendwa naa maar" would therefore mean "My breasts are wounded, do not throw flowers at me". There is a direct drawing of attention to the performer's physicality, her sexual appeal as a young woman, which is offset in the better-known version. "Lagat karejwa ma chot, phul gendwa naa maar" means "My heart is wounded, do not through flowers at me", a version in which the tone is romantic and the wound is received at a more subliminal level.

As I searched for the lost *thumri*, I also began to get intrigued by Rasoolan Bai, who remains an enigmatic and mysterious figure in the *tawaif* history of Banaras. At a basic level, responses to my questions relating to the contribution of *tawaif* singers included an almost ritual incantation of Rasoolan's name. Hardly surprising, since she, along with Siddheshwari Devi and Kashi Bai, formed the triumvirate that defined Banarasi *thumri* in the twentieth century. She is also the only Muslim *tawaif* singer of renown from

Banaras; the other celebrated *tawaif* musicians from the city came mostly from Gandharva families. Few people, including musicians contemporary to her, seemed familiar with the details of her life, however.

Rasoolan's rise as a popular *tawaif* coincided with the attempts by nationalist discourse to censor and control practices linked to gender, sexuality and culture, wherein *tawaif* arts and lifestyle increasingly came under hostile scrutiny on grounds of sexual deviancy and obscenity. A reading of Rasoolan's life and art practice lent itself, I felt, to an exploration of not only the story of *tawaifs* and their music, but of the major shifts in the history of the tradition to which she belonged. And thus began yet another journey to make a film around the search for Rasoolan and her lost other song.

[For the record, we were able to locate the *jobanwa* version. Amlan Dasgupta, who teaches at Jadavpur University and is also an archivist, tracked down for us the broadcast label recording of 1935. Saira Begum too, after much thought, decided to be part of my film. This film—*The Other Song*—was completed in 2009 and has since been screened at different venues in the country.]



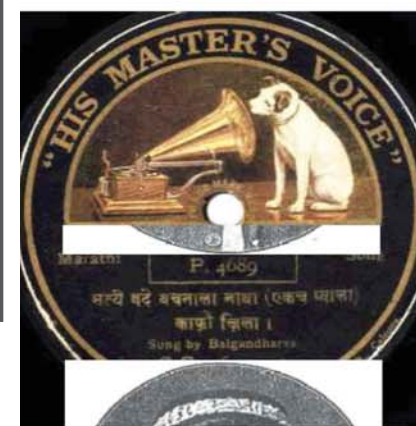
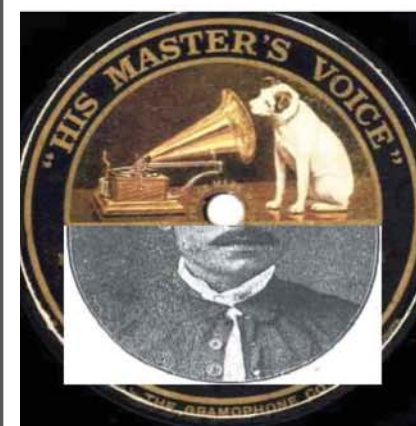
Along with travelogues, autobiographies and copious documentation, Occidental travellers during the Raj left behind the lore of 'Mad Dogs and Englishmen'. Most travelled in the service of the British Empire; but starting from 1902 some were sent by European and American recording companies on the mission of capturing the voice of 'Indian' singers. The travelogues of such recording engineers are tucked away in autobiographies, trade journals and in the house magazines of recording companies. They provide a personalised account of the scramble for sound that marked the early business of recorded music in South Asia.

These recording engineers started off as auxiliary technicians in the oldest record companies in Britain, the United States and France during the 1890s. Many of them had a passion for music, some were even amateur pianists. With the expansion of the business in recorded music by the turn of the century, these engineers developed commercial acumen. As the demand for new records grew across North America and Europe, the worth of recording engineers rose exponentially. By the first decade of the twentieth century, when they were racing across Asia, Africa and Latin America to record local music, they had become the prime catalysts of global business in and around the Gramophone.

My research on this first 'new media' of the last century has sought to capture the interplay between the dynamics of creativity, culture and commerce. The travelogues of recording engineers provide an apt entry point to understanding the formative configurations of recorded music in British India. However, making sense of these configurations also entails accounting for the travelogues themselves. This necessitates a careful reading of these specific narratives in the light of the wider regimes responsible for their creation

The Scramble for Sound

Vibodh Parthasarathi



In October 1902, the year Bade Ghulam Ali Khan was born, CJ Hopkins, who was in charge of Columbia Records' export business, embarked on a year-long journey to market their catalogue and make new recordings. Sailing first to South Africa, he went up the east coast of the continent, and on to Sri Lanka and India. Although the British colony was not high on the American firm's agenda, Hopkins found, much to his surprise, that Talking Machines of various formats were "as well-known as in Europe and the States" amongst Indian buyers. In India, Columbia was selling more cylinder-machines—that could record and playback music—than their recently launched disc-machines, capable of only playing pre-recorded music.

*The natives make their own records and there is consequently a big demand for blanks. The records so made are nearly all of them of a religious character and nearly all vocal. Needless to say they are in the native dialect. There are several dealers in Bombay making these records, and each native dealer has his own repertoire. They charge five rupees each for them, about six-eighths of your money.*¹

A few months earlier, Frederick William Gaisberg was sent by The Gramophone and Typewriter Limited (GTL) from London to record music

in Asia and the Far East. Although the Orient was a different, if not difficult, territory for this American-born engineer, he was full of a missionary-like zeal. As he and his team set sail, Gaisberg wrote: "I felt like Marco Polo starting out on his journeys."

Gaisberg, 30, arrived in Calcutta with 600 blank discs and a helper in "young George Dillnutt" who was in the last year of his teens. The recording team carried a falling-weight driven motor, specially designed for the trip, to dispense with the need for heavy storage batteries and clock springs. What attracts greater attention than this technological innovation is the manner in which the Gaisberg 'sourced' potential singers and musicians in the colonial capital.

I met the Superintendent of the Calcutta police, who placed at my disposal an officer to accompany me to the various important entertainments and theatres in the Harrison Road. Our first visit was to the native "Classic Theatre" where a performance of Romeo & Juliet in a most unconventional form was being given. Quite arbitrarily, there was introduced a chorus of young Nautch girls heavily bleached with rice powder and dressed in transparent gauze. They sang "And Her Golden Hair Was Hanging Down Her

*Back" accompanied by fourteen brass instruments all playing in unison. I had yet to learn that the oriental ear was unappreciative of chords and harmonic treatment and only demanded the rhythmic beat of the accompaniment of the drums. At this point we left.*²

Gaisberg was musically inclined and could play the piano; he had a reputation for sensing musical talent, a reputation earned during the early 1890s while working for the records producer Charles Tainter in the US. Soon after familiarising himself with the musical landscape of Calcutta, the American realised that the British staff of GTL's local office were clueless about Indian melodies—both about their musical quality and their commercial value.

*One had to erase all memories of the music of European opera houses and concert halls; the very foundations of my musical training were undermined. I soon discovered that the English, whom we contacted and who were acting as our agents and factors, might be living on another planet for all the interest they took in Indian music. They dwelt in an Anglo-Saxon compound of their own creation, isolated from India.*³

Taking matters into his own hands, Gaisberg attempted to identify the most admired singers performing

in the capital city. In doing so, he sought to gauge the tastes of connoisseurs and patrons of music; single-minded as he was, Gaisberg felt that from among this affluent section of Indians would emerge the consumers of his company's recordings. Attending performances at theatres, private parties and fêtes in different pockets of Calcutta, he began short-listing singers to be recorded.

*That evening we heard another celebrated singer, Goura Jan, an Armenian Jewess who could sing in twenty languages and dialects. Her great hit that evening was an adaptation of "Silver Threads Among the Gold". Her fee was 300 rupees per evening...When she came to record, her suite of musicians and attendants appeared even more imposing than those who accompany Melba and Calvé. As the proud heiress of music traditions she bore herself with becoming dignity. She knew her own market value, as we found to our cost when we negotiated with her.*⁴

Among the numerous singers recorded by the American, in an improvised studio in a city hotel, the most prominent were Gauhar Jan and Lal Chand Boral. In all, Gaisberg made 500 recordings on wax masters, which he then shipped to GTL's records pressing unit in Hanover, Germany. Gaisberg was aware that these singers, prominent in Indian

¹ An Ambassador of Commerce: Charles Hopkins of Columbia, *Talking Machine News*, Vol.11 (March 1904), pp. 243-44

² FW Gaisburg, *Music Goes Round* (London: Arno Press, 1942), pp. 54-55.

³ *Ibid*, pp. 55-56.

⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 55-56.

THEY HAVE COME
The New Bengali Sonai Records.
 And the latest popular songs
 by **Mr. LALL CHAND BURAL.**
ONLY A LIMITED SUPPLY, SO
ORDER EARLY.
R. N. BURGESS,
AGENT,
Gramophone & Typewriter, Ltd.,
295, BOW-PAZAR STREET.
 6 cm x 5 cm, September, 1905

cities, were unknown entities for the technicians in Hanover. To provide them accurate, 'recorded' documentation for the paper labels on the finished discs, he asked the singers to announce their names at the end of their songs. Most records canned during his visit had 'Made in Germany' printed on their label and the signatory announcement by the singer at the end of their renditions, often rapidly uttered lest the disc ran out of time: "Mera Naam Zohra, Mukaam Agra", or the oft quoted "Mera Naam Gauhar Jan". Little did the engineer know that his practical solution to the problem of documentation would turn into a stylistic signature, even a fad, in the times to come.

The finished and labelled records were shipped from Hanover, via London, to India in the spring of 1903, three months after Gaisberg left

for Japan. These seven and ten-inch discs, larger in size than those retailed in India during the previous decade, sold exceedingly well in Calcutta and Bombay. But these discs continued to be inscribed with recordings only on one side.

Why did Frederick Gaisberg tour India precisely in 1902?

To answer this question we have to step back from recounting Gaisberg's adventures and impressions of foreign lands and sift through the early history of recorded music in at least three regions: in Britain, from where Gaisberg was sent to India; in America, where Gaisberg started his career, and in British India.

GTL's origins go back to 1892 when Emile Berliner, a Jewish immigrant from Hanover to the US, incorporated the United States Gramophone Company in Washington DC. With an eye on the growing market, overwhelmingly dominated by cylinder records, Berliner realised it would be easier and more efficient to replicate numerous copies of a flat disc from a master-disc—akin to a negative in photography. In 1893 he began selling his disc-based 'Gramophone' player

GRAMOPHONE.

THE WORLD'S ENTERTAINER.

New Models.

New Prices.



Style No. 3A Gramophone.
 SIDE WIND—Can be wound whilst playing.
 CABINET—Handsome Pyramid Cabinet.
 TURNTABLE—Will play 10-inch as well as 7-inch Records.
 SOUND BOX—O. & T. "Concert."
 HORN—14-inch Bull Mouth Nickel.
 NEEDLES—300 Genuine Gramophone Needles in Dog Picture Box.
Price Rs. 37-8.



No. 8 or Monarch Junior Gramophone with Tapered Arm,
 10-inch Turntable Side wind; can be wound whilst playing.
 Handsome Oak Cabinet, Exhibition Sound Box.
 10-inch Brass Horn.
 300 Genuine Gramophone Needles in Dog Picture Box.
Price Rs. 82-8.



Style No. 3 Gramophone Nickel Horn Concert Sound Box - Rs. 22-8
 No. 3A Do. (side wind) do. do. do. - 37-8

GRAMOPHONE RECORDS

By the World's Greatest Artists.
 Thousands to select from.

PLEASE WRITE FOR THE LATEST LISTS.

NEW RECORDS

IN Bengali, Hindustani, Guzrati, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, Pushto, Sikh, Burmese, &c

ARRIVING SHORTLY.

LISTS IN THE PRESS.

Please Register your Name for Copies.

New Records by Mr. L. C. Bural, Gauharjan, Benodini, Bejoy Gopal Lahiri, Hingun Bai, etc., etc.

NEEDLES

Are Reduced in Price to

Rs. 3-12 per 1,000
 OR
As. 12 per box of 200.



Style No. 3 Gramophone.
 SQUARE OAK CABINET, 7-inch turntable will play 7-inch and 10-inch Records. O. & T. Concert Sound Box, 14-inch Nickel Horn.
 300 Genuine Gramophone Needles in Dog Picture Box.
Price Rs. 22-8.



Style "No. 11" or "Monarch" Gramophone with patent Tapered Arm.
 Highly finished polished Quartered Oak Cabinet, special strong double Spring Motor can be wound whilst playing. Tapered Arm Attachment, 10-inch Turntable, will play all sizes of Records. "Exhibition" Sound Box, 20-inch Brass Horn. Needles—300 Genuine Gramophone Needles in Dog Picture Box.
Price Rs. 112-8.

NEW PRICES

GRAMOPHONE

Style No. 11 Monarch Gramophone with Tapered Arm, 10-in. Turntable Rs. 112-8
 No. 13 Triple Spring do. do. 10-in. do. 150-0

Style No. 14 De Luxe Gramophone with Tapered Arm, 10-in. Turntable Rs. 187-8
 No. 15 De Luxe "H" do. do. 12 do. 225-0

Note.—The allowance we make for old Gramophone Records brings price of same down to cost of the imitation and inferior Records now on the market.

Write for full particulars and name of nearest Agent to

THE GRAMOPHONE & TYPEWRITER, LD.,
7, ESPLANADE, EAST, CALCUTTA.



44 cm x 59 cm, April, 1905 * 5

and seven-inch discs made of hard rubber. Replacing this with shellac was Gaisberg's innovation in 1895, after he left Tainter's company to join Berliner. Despite these superior discs, Berliner and Gaisberg had a handicap: their Gramophone machines were hand-powered, and were thus limiting sales. The search for a spring-motor led them to Eldridge Johnson in neighbouring New Jersey; Berliner entered into an agreement with Johnson to supply the United States Gramophone Company completely assembled, spring-powered Gramophones.⁵ With innovations in discs and disc-machines, Berliner was ready to make inroads into America's domestic market, still dominated by the rival cylinder-machines.

In 1897 Berliner sold the overseas rights of his patents to the British Gramophone Company founded by William Barry Owen and financial investor Trevor Williams in London. The following spring, Gaisberg was shipped across from the US to establish the British Gramophone Company's studio at Maiden Lane, London. And to create a European manufacturing hub, Berliner installed a small records pressing unit at the telephone factory of his brother, Joseph, in his native

Hanover. It was here that in 1898 the first 'Indian' records—of 'Hindu' and 'Islamic' chants recorded in London—were pressed. In 1900, wanting to expand into another mechanical media, Owen gained the manufacturing rights for the Lambert Typewriter Company, renaming the firm 'The Gramophone & Typewriter Ltd.'⁶

But GTL had a miniscule presence in British India. In the fading years of the nineteenth century, advertisements for Talking Machines in the newspapers of Bombay and Calcutta were as unusual as the availability of the machines themselves. The earliest retailers, predominantly large dealers of Western musical instruments, did not emphasise the differences between the cylinder and disc formats. The fledgling machine market in India was dominated by the cylinder format manufactured either by American firms like Columbia and Edison, or their biggest competitor Pathe, the leading producer of cylinder-machines in Europe. Cylinder-machines were attractive since they enabled buyers to, besides playing pre-recorded music, make home-recordings on blank cylinders; such blanks were often sold at discounted rates along with new

⁵ Benjamin L Aldridge in Frederic Bayh (ed.) *The Victor Talking Machine Company* (Camden and NJ: RCA Sales Corporation, 1964) p. 11.

⁶ 'Talking Machine Talks: No.4—The Gramophone and Typewriter Ltd.', *Talking Machine News*, No. 4 (August 1903), p. 59.

The export business overwhelmingly derived value from selling 'hardware' (machines & blank cylinders) rather than 'software' (recorded music).

Two factors altered these primordial conditions. Retailers in India, sensing a gradually growing demand for 'Indian' music by the beginning of the twentieth century, began pressing their overseas suppliers for a greater variety of local music. On their part, exporting firms gradually recognised that selling discs or cylinders containing local music could be a fruitful way to push the sales of their machines. These twin scenarios were not unique to India, as the preference for local music was also sensed in southern Europe, frontline Russia and elsewhere in Asia. For instance, Pathe's recordings with Parisian accents did not sell well even in French-speaking pockets of Belgium.

To record and vend highly localised music—and thereby propel the sale of their machines—GTL resorted to a new *modus operandi*: it organised 'Recording Expeditions' to countries where it felt a market could be tapped. Its first Recording Expedition, in 1899, was from Berlin to Russia. By the end of 1901, GTL's Russian branch gathered that if well-known local musicians were recorded,

Just Received.
GRAPHOPHONE & PHONOGRAPHS.



Columbia Graphophone from Rs. 50 to 125.
Columbia Graphophone 10" Record, at Rs. 2-4 each.
Columbia Graphophone 7" Record, at Rs. 1-4 each.
Edison's Concert Phonograph, Rs. 175.
Edison's Home Phonographs, Rs. 80.
Edison's Standard Phonographs, Rs. 65.

Esoofally Hiptoola & CO., Jewellers
5-2, Chowringhee & 10, Radha Bazaar, Calcutta.

12 cm x 9 cm, April, 1904

machines. Like elsewhere in the world, this proved a major competitive barrier in India for GTL and other exporters of the disc-machines—machines that could only play recorded music. Consequently, we find that the technological rivalry between the two formats of Talking Machines exponentially amplified the commercial rivalry between the many exporting firms.

For the European and American firms trading with India around 1900, the singular objective was to sell machines; selling discs or cylinders of Indian music was not on their agenda. Firms remained content with replicating a uniform set of recordings for sale all over the world—given the advantage of scale this brought. As a result, most discs and cylinders vended in India were 'English airs'—snatches of comic shows, acts of mimicry, songs and dance melodies.

these discs could be sold to the Tsarist aristocracy at higher prices than competing cylinders, manufactured by Pathe, playing French songs.

Based on this approach, GTL replayed its strategy in another market. In the spring of 1902, it sent Fred Gaisberg to Italy to convince some established singers hitherto hesitant to record. Gaisberg was particularly keen to travel to Milan to hear a young singer who was creating a sensation; but Enrico Caruso, aged 28, demanded the unheard consideration of £100 for ten records. Despite GTL's London office refusing to authorise this, the engineer took the gamble. Released in March of 1902, Caruso's records sold at double the reigning price, and GTL made an immediate profit of £15000, vindicating Gaisberg.⁷

Following its Italian sojourn, GTL was bursting with confidence and wanted to unleash this commercial innovation outside Europe. And so, later that year, Gaisberg was packed off on a 'Far Eastern Recording Expedition', the first and most vital stop being British India.

NICOLE RECORDS

Are pleasing to the ear, they are clear and distinct and free from the objectionable scratching noise of other disc records. They can be used on any Disc Talking Machine.
Last longer than any other record.

7 inch size Rs. 1. 10 inch size Rs. 2-8

Rs. 63



NICOLEPHONES from Rs. 18.
SOUND ARM NICOLEPHONES, Rs. 63 to Rs. 174.

Records in English, Hindustani, Bengali,
French, German, Welsh,
Catalogues free on application:
NICOLE FRERES INDIA, LD,
2-1, 2-2, 2-7, CORPORATION ST., CALCUTTA.
LONDON CAPTOWN

By the time Gaisberg's recordings were being vended in India, GTL had learnt two traits of 'foreign' markets. First, British India was an important, and possibly gigantic, potential market on the horizons not just of GTL but also its rivals. Second, the recording expeditions to Russia, Italy and far-flung India bore immediate, and exceedingly profitable, results. The success of the first expedition led GTL to invest in its

⁷ These records were not only the biggest contributor to GTL's success during these years but equally potent for the singer's career—the record 'E Lucevan Le Stelle' fetched him his first contract with the Metropolitan Opera Company in New York. (See P Martland, *Since Records Began: EMI the first 100 years* (London: Batsford, 1997). I thank the author for two long conversations.)

second Recording Expedition to India in 1904-05, led by William Sinkler Darby who had led the company's maiden expedition to Russia.

Precisely because of GTL's innovation, competing firms were forced to alter their strategy in India. Nicole Freres from London sent a recording expedition to Calcutta in 1904 led by John Watson Hawd—who had been the Calcutta Branch Manager of GTL—and Stephen Carl Porter. From across the Atlantic, in 1905, The American Talking Machine Co. sent a recordist to India, who arrived here after touring China. The race was on amongst firms to can greater amounts and varieties of 'native' music in what was rapidly being acknowledged as the potentially largest market in Asia.

*A correspondent of the 'Zeitschrift für Instrumentenbau' points out that records in the form of five different Indian languages command a ready and permanent sale; he also advises record companys to record the songs of the Indian dancing girls. In support of his advice he explains that the sales to the European population are very much more limited than to the indigenous peoples, and even if the Western nations refuse to class the screams and cries which pass for Indian songs as music, it must be remembered that they gratify the taste of the majority of record buyers in India.*⁸

⁸ 'India a Fertile Country', *Talking Machine World*, Vol. 3/4 (April 1907), p. 1.

THE TALKING MACHINE NEWS.

FOREIGN AND COLONIAL NEWS.

The Dacapo and Lyrophon Co.'s
A FURTHER change is to take place in regard to these firms, whose interests are, it is known, submerged in the Lindstrom Company. New premises are being taken in the Grosse Frankfurter Strasse, 137, second floor. As managers, Messrs. Bruno Berthard and Sigmund Salomon, of the Lindstrom Co., have been appointed. The services of the late manager, Herr Eisenberg, of the above two firms, will still be retained.

Jumbo Record Fabrik G.m.b.H. Oranienstrasse, 117/18, Berlin, S.W., 68.
THIS business has now been closed. The liquidator is the late manager, Herr Richard Seligson.

Imports into Persia
ACCORDING to the Talking Machine News, the value of gramophone records imported into Persia during the first nine months of the year 1913, was 2,968,421 krans (1 krans = 1/100 of a rouble) and exports 4,625,357 krans (standing fifth after Russia as regards imports and Turkey as regards exports).

Imports into India.
ACCORDING to the recently issued annual statement of the sea-borne trade and navigation of British India, the following figures show the imports in talking machines and accessories for the year April 1st, 1912, to March 31st, 1913:—

Great Britain	£26,768
Germany	9,843
Italy	5,012
Switzerland	

In phonographs, gramophones and accessories, the value of imports during the year 1912-13 was as follows during

Germany
Austria-Hungary
Great Britain
British India
U.S.A.
France
Russia
Sweden
Switzerland

This dispatch, in the foremost trade magazine published from New York, also illustrates the importance given to German trade opinion. For, by the middle of the first decade, the German records industry was rapidly expanding overseas. British newspapers, including some in their colonies, constantly talked about the 'German Peril' in the records and other industries. The leading German firm was the International Talking Machine Gmbh of Berlin; it was better known by its 'Odeon' record label, readily identified by the logo of a classical dome—a logo still visible in eponymous cinema halls of our cities. By 1907, Odeon sent an expedition and released its 'South Indian' catalogue—thereby establishing itself as the principal rival to GTL in India. The Odeon-GTL rivalry was particularly intense in India since these

two were the biggest firms exporting both machines and discs. Nevertheless, profits from 'foreign catalogues' of all firms contributed immensely to their coffers, as illustrated best in GTL's balance sheet. In 1906, when its net profits stood at £246,733—up from £53,885 in 1901—a staggering 60 per cent came from outside Britain.

And this was before Fred Gaisberg's younger brother, William, was sent on a recording expedition to India in 1906—GTL's third foray in four years.

50

From the late nineteenth century we observe a pattern in the migratory flow of musicians from regions contiguous to the mid-Gangetic plains—i.e. western Uttar Pradesh to eastern Bihar. Having gained success in cities like Lucknow and Varanasi, the crest of recognition carried singers down the Ganga, accumulating fame and legitimacy through performances at the courts of smaller principalities, before 'arriving' at the capital, Calcutta. It was like paying dues, not to the sacred river, but to the connoisseurs and feudal patrons along the tracts contiguous to the river. The early life of Gauhar Jan,

born of Armenian parents in 1870 in Azamgarh, exemplifies such a journey. She moved to Varanasi around 1880 when her parents separated and her mother, Victoria, married a Muslim connoisseur of music, taking the name Malka. In Varanasi, mother and daughter trained in music, the daughter showing more potential than the mother, who was known as Badi Malka since there were many singers who went by that name. Keen to chart out Gauhar's career, her guardians trained her under Kalu Ustad, a vocalist, and Ali Bux, the famed Kathak dancer of Lucknow. Still in her teens, Gauhar's first major public appearance in 1887 was further down the Ganga, before the Maharaja of Darbhanga. The stage was set for Gauhar to move to Calcutta in search of new and more generous patrons and further training.

William Conrad Gaisberg, 28, was extremely conscious that GTL's previous expeditions to India had recorded singers only in Calcutta and Bombay. And that, henceforth, profits for his firm depended on him adventuring out of Calcutta, against the flow of the Ganga, towards the princely states and mufasil towns of the Doab. The first page of his travelogue, reproduced in GTL's in-house magazine ten years later, has a

photo of William—clad in a colonial safari suit and a wide hat—with his crew. Modestly captioned "We leave Calcutta", this visual aptly encapsulated the spirit of what was going to be an expedition within the Expedition.

The American's years in London had shaped more aspects of his being than just his colonial attire. Punctuated with the English obsession—the weather—his account chronicles the expedition's difficult conditions of travel and lodging, and their trysts with 'native' music and musicians. But it is difficult to pinpoint whether it was the weather, the music, or the music culture that was most torturous for the bespectacled recording engineer.



*You must remember that we went out to India to furnish records for the natives, and not for Europeans, so that during our whole tour we were associated practically entirely with the natives, and during this first party of ours our bungalow was crowded with natives. European chairs were not used; we all had to sit on our haunches. Just try this for ten minutes and see how painful it is!*⁹

Outside the shadow of his revered sibling, William Gaisberg was determined to take the race for Indian ears, and pockets, into the unknown hinterland. The United Provinces and parts of Punjab, reeling under the partial failure of monsoons, were central to William's itinerary in the North.

*The language in Lucknow is Hindustani. The most appreciated singers are the young women with very high voices. The male artists are not great favourites, and their part generally consists of teaching the girl singers their songs and making up the orchestral accompaniment... One rarely hears a male singer, except when his voice resembles a woman's. I know of one case where a male artist was exceedingly popular in India, and we made many records by him—his name was Pearsa Sabebe—and one could not tell his voice from a woman's.*¹⁰

Aided by George Dillnutt—now formally designated as 'recording assistant'—William Gaisberg's efforts

⁹ William C Gaisberg, 'The Romance of Recording', *The Voice*, Vol. 2/1 (January 1918), p. 6.

¹⁰ Ibid.



Pyare Sahib.



Amir Jan.

were doubly significant. They managed to record a wider repertoire of those singers whom GTL's second expedition, under Darby, had canned. These included Amir Jan—thereafter increasingly recorded by GTL—and Pyare Saheb, identified by his falsetto. Equally crucially, William's expedition 'discovered' new singers like Janki Bai—the latter's pining '*rasili tori ankhiyanre jiya*' [GCR/HMV P235] being an exceptional rendition. Janki Bai became a regular with GTL until 1931, a distinct number of renditions being in Bhairavi.

Further north, in Ferozepore, the entourage recorded about 200 titles, in two languages, over three weeks. To identify local singers, William was aided by the English-speaking Bakshi Ram Singh—whose

short tutorial on Indian music Gaisberg acknowledged.

Indian music is divided into 80 Rags (this must not be confused with the U.S.A Ragtime music, which is simply a tempo). Each Rag has its numerous Raginis. Many of the Rags and Raginis have been forgotten or lost, owing to the fact that the study of music in India has degenerated into the hands of the lowest and most ignorant people of the land, and also that there are no publications.¹¹

After a few days in Lahore, the heat finally got to the Londoner and he detoured to Mussorie where, to his amazement, the nights were "cold enough to necessitate using two or three blankets". Not on holiday, he was forced by his itinerary to Delhi, which was "like an oven".

¹¹ Ibid, p. 7.



COLUMBIA COMPANY'S RECORD STORE WITH A CAPACITY OF 300,000 RECORDS.

Darting into the Deccan, at the borders of the kingdom of Hyderabad, William's travelogue laments the twin delays caused by customs officers inspecting his heavy storage batteries and clock springs, and plague-inspection doctors suspicious of the recording troupe arriving from the recently declared "infected port" of Bombay. The expeditionaries made another 200 records in Telugu, 'Canarese', Marathi, Arabic and Persian—a clear sign of the city's cosmopolitan character. Pushing further south to Madras, William was quick to note the

"entirely different tone of voice"; he harvested over 300 discs in Tamil, Telugu and Canarese. This created GTL's vital 'South Indian Catalogue'—a repertoire challenging that released by Odeon a few months earlier.

Not to be undone by GTL's repeated forays or Odeon's successful inroads, the other German firm, Beka dispatched its maiden expedition in 1907-08. Beka undertook a substantial gamble by entering a

British colony where its national rival, Odeon, had a head start. But Beka's 400 records met with success, not in small part due to the large number of songs from popular proscenium theatre. This vacant niche in the market had not been exploited by the earlier expeditions of GTL and others; Beka was the first to spot the untapped commercial potential—beginning with a recording session with Bal Gandharva that included his rendition of Mira's famous lyrics 'Gokul e lai chalo odhavraj'. While this expedition propelled a new genre of recorded music—Drama Songs, or Stage Songs—Beka's sales motivated it to subsequently focus on other unrecorded genres, especially in languages besides Hindustani. This imparted an edge to Beka over both its national rival Odeon and the British, American and French firms. In 1906, GTL had produced the largest chunk of records retailed in India; but the late-mover Beka amassed 1,000 'native' titles by 1908—the same as GTL's cumulative repertoire.¹²

Upping the ante yet again, GTL sent its fourth recording expedition in the early summer of 1908. Instead of the Gaisberg brothers, the firm relied on the enthusiasm of a technician making his third visit to India. At 25, George Dillutt became the youngest roving recordist to lead a GTL expedition. But cumulative demand for Indian records had reached such an extent that later in the year GTL decided to establish a manufacturing facility in India—at Sealdah, then a suburb of Calcutta. Dillnut was asked to relocate to India, and appointed the resident recording engineer of this first records factory in the colonised world. The scramble for sound had been settled.

A special thanks to Michael Chanan, Narendra Shrimali and Dwijendra Tripathi for putting up with my unannounced visits, and my grant administrator at IFA, Madhuban Mitra.

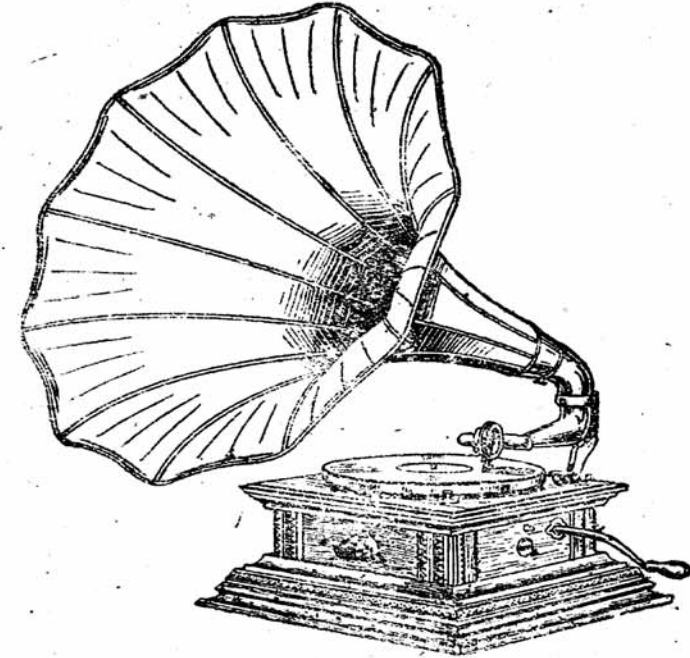
¹²Notes from India, *Talking Machine News*, Vol. 6/77 (June 1908) p. 148.

கிறம்போன் மெஷீன்கள்

The Gramophone Machines

WITH HORN

குழாயுள்ள சாதிகள்
விலை விபரம்.



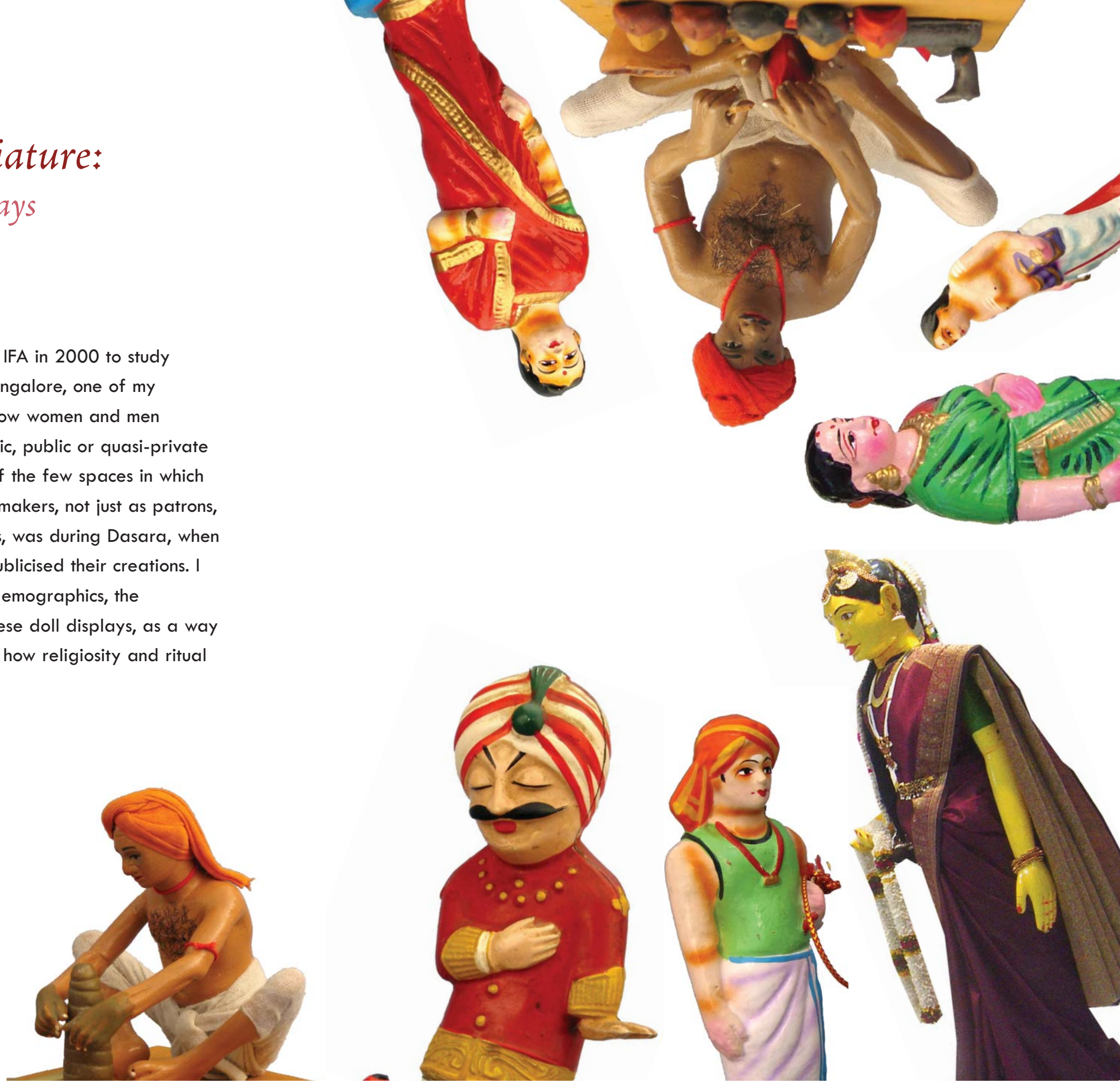
அடையாளம்	ஸ்பீழிங்	\$	cts.
H. C. O.	ஒன்று	50	00
H. C. M.	செ	55	00
H. E. O.	இரண்டு	65	00
H. E. M.	செ	70	00
H. F. O.	செ	75	00
H. F. M.	செ	85	00
H. E. M.	மூன்று	110	00

Society in Miniature: Dasara Doll Displays

Annapurna Garimella

“When I received a grant from IFA in 2000 to study contemporary religiosities in Bangalore, one of my research questions concerned how women and men entered and participated in civic, public or quasi-private religiosity. I realised that one of the few spaces in which women asserted themselves as makers, not just as patrons, supporters, devotees or viewers, was during Dasara, when they made doll displays and publicised their creations. I was curious to understand the demographics, the aesthetics and the politics of these doll displays, as a way of searching out and theorising how religiosity and ritual make our urban lives.”

56



Many urbanised, upper-caste and class Hindu households in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, and people from these communities living abroad, display dolls (Tamil: *kolu*, Kannada: *golu*, Telugu: *koluvu*) during the ten-day Dasara festival. Women and girl children make the displays using wooden, clay, glass, ceramic, papier maché and plastic dolls (which in turn are made by artists elsewhere), or using images made at home with skills learned in hobby art classes. Such displays can be small or can include as many as 400 dolls.

58

My interest in these dolls began at a young age when as a girl-child, I was given opportunities to work on the displays. It would start with the religious rituals of Navaratri as conducted in an upper-caste household but after that all sorts of possibilities for invention became possible. Cutting branches to create trees, sprouting seeds to get grass for the miniature park, bending palm leaf strips to make dolls, sewing their clothing and buying dolls became a major seasonal activity. During events such as these, it was difficult not to measure the sense of authorship women and we girls felt. It was rare to feel so in control of

creating something.

When I received a grant from IFA in 2000 to study contemporary religiosities in Bangalore, one of my research questions concerned how women and men entered and participated in civic, public or quasi-private religiosity. I realised that one of the few spaces in which women asserted themselves as makers, not just as patrons, supporters, devotees or viewers, was during Dasara, when they made doll displays and publicised their creations. I was curious to understand the demographics, the aesthetics and the politics of these doll displays, as a way of searching out and theorising how religiosity and ritual make our urban lives. However, from the time photographer Clare Arni and I collaborated on the project, what captured my imagination were the look and feel of these objects, especially the colours and themes as well as the strange combination of nostalgia and novelty intrinsic to the dolls and their displays. This essay then is an attempt to integrate and link my personal fascination to a larger historical narrative and collective experience.

In History

The practice of Dasara displays has evolved and become consolidated at different places and moments, though a full history is yet to be written. During the Vijayanagara period (ca.1335-1565 CE), Dasara festivities seem to have been an opportunity for remaking the kingdom's order with grand displays of power, wealth and art. One traveller's account of a Dasara in Hampi allows us to imagine how tiered structures, such as the Mahanavami Dibba, were the setting for tableaux vivants¹. Divinities, allies, officers, performing and servant women, forms of weaponry, modes of warfare and art forms were grouped and structured in a hierarchy that placed the Vijayanagara ruler and his gods at the top. Through the Nayaka period (1600-1800 CE), the Dasara display continued in regional courts, as historical accounts from Tanjore, Ramnad and Madurai inform us. Nayaka kings used Dasara to display connections with the glory of Hampi and Vijayanagara by establishing the ritual in their courts. Gradually, as many other social arrangements were realigned in colonial India and new elites emerged in both interior royal capitals and coastal emporia, the Dasara display must have entered the

homes of upper-caste groups as a marker of high culture.

The colonial Mysore state exemplifies continuities with the past and the creation of new political and visual regimes. Public Dasara festivities included wrestling or *kusti*, elephant fights, dancing, grand processions and doll displays, all conducted under the watchful gaze of gods, kings and colonial authorities. The murals in the Kalyana Mandapa in Amba Vilas, the Mysore city palace, painted in the mid-twentieth century, function as a kind of Dasara doll display in which Mysore is presented as the model state deserving both ancient feudal loyalty and modern civic pride. The artist shows citizens and guests from different communities and religions, European and Indian, observing the pageant of musicians, decorated animals, bureaucrats and officials, religious leaders and military bands. Throughout each neighbourhood are groups of people standing near a garlanded painting of the Mysore king, dressed in a *sherwani* and turban, and modestly ornamented. This civic *utsava* presents the king as an ideal leader whose presence is firmly desired in the streets by the people who in turn organise themselves to allow him to experience the order, wealth and integration of

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¹ See Domingo Paes' narrative in *The Vijayanagara Empire: Chronicles of Paes and Nuniz* (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1991).

the city. Mysore appears as a very wide, even transnational space, with Shell, Lipton and foreign missionaries all prominently represented. The bodily experience of the viewer mimics the experience of walking in the parade, and the spectator almost automatically begins to seek familiar images or places in Mysore. The murals are rendered to cultivate nostalgia in their viewers; their textured, realist style is mediated by photography, specifically of well-known events such as the Delhi Durbar of 1911, and by popular styles, especially calendar art. The royal durbar and procession, with its pomp, exoticism, political authority, religiosity and everyday public life is the most prominent inspiration behind the creation of domestic Dasara displays across southern India.

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Making the Displays

The displays begin with flat or tiered platforms covered with a white sheet or a light-coloured silk sari. Much like a contemporary art gallery, women favour a light background since it showcases their objects. The tiers take the form of a historical building such as the Mahanavami Dibba in Hampi, the Mysore palace or a temple chariot. Women strive to demonstrate their

creativity, applying techniques from store design or theme parks to heighten the theatricality of the display.

The objects can be a combination of older dolls, such as those given to a bride by her mother or mother-in-law, and new ones, along with acquisitions purchased on a recent trip abroad or some new silver objects obtained over summer vacation in India. Figures of divinities are placed on top, in the middle tiers are important public figures, and below are scenes of work and play. Potters and other doll-makers keep cosmological and caste/class hierarchies intact as they make these dolls, perhaps aware that buyers, while seeking innovation, do not want to challenge social codes. For instance, in one Ramayana scene image dating from circa 1950, Guhan the boatman is differentiated from Rama, Sita and Lakshmana by his dark skin while Rama's divinity is highlighted with green.

Till about 20 years ago, potters who made most of these dolls had a fixed repertoire of images including deities, mythological scenes, buildings, national leaders like Gandhi, Nehru and MG Ramachandran, and figures such as the Buddha, Mirabai and the Air India Maharajah. But like other



Indian artists, doll-makers too have expanded their repertoires. They now include entire cricket teams, all-girl marching bands, scenes from Hindu rituals, distinctive temple urbanscapes, and Ganeshas using cell phones and computers. Artisans are expanding their range, using brighter colours with a glossier finish to suit urban women who seek more industrialised (polished) finishes and globalised (novel) imagery. And in the last five years, buyers are also more consistently seeking to build their collection of dolls from other parts of India and the world to make ever more inventive arrangements. Rich households even hire fine arts

students to do scenography for the displays. In many cities, competitions and prizes for the best Dasara exhibit have become part of the festivities.

It is when the doll displays go public and become part of community relations exercises or Internet-based socialising, where people of South Indian origin connect virtually and discuss issues, that specific political concerns or ideological issues are highlighted. Temples, municipal transport organisations and even

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women empowerment groups turn the Dasara display into an opportunity to promote issues like women's rights, self-employment schemes, traffic rules or environmental concerns. Perhaps the manageable scale of the Dasara doll event provides the ideal space for activism, which can be successful in this limited sphere where the festive mood allows for old agendas to be revived or new ones to be born. Activism of this sort is related to the public interest campaign and consumer exhibition— useful in that a *kolu*-based event attracts a diverse enough middle-class public but is pitched to not challenge their aspiration, concerns and habitus.

It is during this moment of making the domestic public that the women-centric devotionism and consumersim of the Dasara

display faces questioning. One website (www.indiavarta.com) declares that raising women's consciousness is the purpose behind the display and surrounding festivities:

The whole essence of the navaraathri celebration is to remind all the women that they are the guardians of the family, culture and national integrity, to take lead in times of crisis to guide the humanity towards the path of social justice, righteousness, equality, love, and divinity.

Yet the author adds a disclaimer about the possibility of empowerment by saying:

All that is fine but to what extent that gets translated into real power is questionable because today's women do not have the weapons that was [sic] generously conferred on the Devi but they have to do only with their inner strength which can turn them into weapons themselves. It is on such occasions like Dasara that symbolically encourages women to worship the Devi and have fun and also get empowered and become the Shakti themselves.

Tableaux and their Meanings

"...dolls are arranged in five levels with the King and Queen seated at the topmost level. Dolls, perhaps signifying

the other aspects of the agrarian society or community living like potters, blacksmiths and soldiers, are seated in the descending levels." Preeti Nagaraj, 'Dolled up for Dasara', *Deccan Herald*, 16 October 2007.

"Today's parents do not have time to really teach their children traditional knowledge and wisdom." 'Keeping Traditions Alive', *Deccan Herald*, 19 October 2007.

Dasara displays are fiction and theatre, designed to present a tableau of society in miniature, particularly of moments of grandeur such as *darbar* or processions. The festival itself has this purpose; historically, it was an event in which rulers asserted their cosmology as supreme and valid in front of the gods and their contemporaries. The whole kingdom was made and remade in the idealised, smaller context of the court. It is therefore unsurprising that display makers are keen not just to make something creative and beautiful but also to render aspects of their society in miniature form.

Grihani ('ideal housewife') aesthetics, a term I use to describe the sensibility of the Dasara displays and their mode of representation, consolidate an upper-caste/class household's good taste and high culture through these small-scaled

creations, which combine handicraft, industrial kitsch and homemade hobby art. Miniaturisation is at the core of the display's aesthetic order. As Susan Stewart has written in her book *On Longing*, the miniature is a specific way of relating to labour, time, narrative and, indeed, the world *at large*.² The truncated size of an object directly refers to pre-industrialised labour, particularly handicraft, even when it is made through industrialised production. That is why in Dasara displays there is both a fascination with larger-than-life figures such as the gods and artisanal *and* peasant labour.

Deities must be at least partially unimaginable (the scale is too gigantic to describe) in order for them to be divine. But they must also be imagined at a smaller scale in order to represent *their* world as well as to make them inhabit *our* world. This is the fiction that displays visualise obsessively. If an artist shows the Ras Lila of Krishna



² Susan Stewart, *On Longing* (Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 1993).

and the *gopis* or the naming ceremony of Rama with a full cast of epic characters, women make a miniaturised Brindavan with trees made of paper or vegetables or sprouted wheat or insert real fruit and sweets in the Rama narrative. As display makers take these miniatures and elaborate the narrative with detail (e.g. adding cotton for Himalayan snow), the mythic-scape becomes domesticated. Most god narratives only focus on gentle, sweet or benign moments, suitable for a home environment.

For instance, an artist makes a Himalayan-scape, with Karthikeya at the centre and Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwara offering him their worship. The mountains are soft, lumpy silver mounds and, placed in such an elevated setting, the boy god is made worthy of the *trimurti's* devotion. The angry Devi at the heart of the Dasara story is usually worshipped as an icon and not located in a narrative. Domestication is not about making the home an otherworldly space but rendering the other world as part of the everyday. In this way, Dasara and many other festivals become secularised; for this reason, Usha writes: "often I feel the Hindu festivals have a stronger 'socializing' element

than a spiritual one".³

Display makers also buy and install images of artisanal or peasant labour in progress—potters, carpenters, cobblers, blacksmiths and farmers are favourite subjects. The enchantment and preciousness endowed on these handcrafted lives and images is in direct contrast to the daily domesticity of most homes, which either are mechanised or depend on undervalued human labour provided by the domestic worker. The value placed on this genre is also in contrast to the lives of the artists—most would not be able to afford their own products and certainly do not make displays in their homes.

For urban buyers, the lure lies in the scale of production implied by the handcrafted object, the figure of the artisan and the display itself. Dolls representing craftspeople most



perfectly capture the perfection of the miniature world, where enumeration of detail in reduced scale produces an altered temporality, even a sense of timelessness. The world of the display and the household in which it exists seem uncontaminated by the gigantic scale and the consequent stresses of industrialised work, at least during the duration of the festival. The tableau arrests time and provides a total view of the world in its stillness, even though most genre scenes involve activity. Working with miniatures and making a miniature world relieves the pressure of industrial time or elongates it, one of the main goals of any contemporary celebration or festivity. Like a potter's home, which is oriented around his occupation, the display becomes the central work of the household, particularly for the housewife who makes it. There is even a temporary identification between the housewife's creativity and the artist's labour, and in turn the household's identification with the display maker's work.⁴

It is perhaps for this reason that housewives who attend hobby art classes are the largest new producers

of craft objects, and why they most often choose to learn and appropriate historic craft styles rather than invent new ones. Indeed when reading the popular literature on Dasara displays, it becomes clear that it is the fantasy of the display that is important—in every account the artist is displaced or diminished by the presence of the display maker, except when artists are presented as producers of the 'raw' materials. In this context, they become authors in relation to the desire of their buyers. For example, one source



associated with a well-known handicrafts store in Mysore is quoted in a newspaper article stating, "Karnataka-based artists completely dismiss our suggestions. They are not willing to accommodate any changes in their work. But artists from other states seek suggestions from us and implement them in a jiffy."⁵

One other aspect of the dolls is fascinating. If doll and display makers

³ <http://usha123.livejournal.com/3143.html#cutid1>

⁴ <http://agelessbonding.blogspot.com/2007/10/in-defense-of-imperfection.html>

⁵ *Deccan Herald*, 16 October 2007.

choose objects and themes to create tableaux which arrest time, at what moment has the historical clock stopped? A majority of objects reproduce architecture and social relations found in India of the mid-twentieth century in a style associated with popular calendar art and *Amar Chitra Katha*. One artist made a *grihapravesam* or housewarming scene in house form that was current in south India about 50 to 70 years ago, when the home was imagined primarily as a space for joint family living. It is hard to find an 'apartment-warming' scene, though this is the type of home in which many middle- and upper middle-class people live today. The mixture of rural and urban decorative elements, modes of dress and social relations between men and women, among generations within the family, and between the family and service/labour providers, represent

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fascination with wealth and nostalgia. These qualities are, of course, as Stewart writes, the 'dominant motifs' of the dollhouse (*On Longing*, p. 61) and are evident in the *grihapravesam*. In this scene, a cow is ready to be given to a Brahmin, a form of presentation no longer active today in urban settings, but which here functions as a sign of remembered class-caste origins, most likely those of the display maker.

Nostalgia for life just after Independence is perhaps as important to the display as the miniature is: it was at this moment when many upper-caste families left their villages and traditional occupations and sought to remake their wealth and status in cities. It is also a period before urbanised ambitions fragmented the joint family life valorised in these displays. And on a larger political map, the years just after



Independence also represent a time before the nationalist victory became fractured and even delegitimised by caste and community struggles.

The transcendence the miniature offers and hence the image of the world the display presents, are a product of *grihani* aesthetics, which celebrates social order and tradition, not social commentary and critique. Indeed, scenes of processions and events affectionately incorporate Brahmins and the constabulary, both of whom represent the continuation of social and state power. Even when such displays are put to use for some civic activism, as in the municipal displays I discussed earlier, the social message is contained within the fold of upper-caste, middle-class values.⁶

⁶ Women are told to pursue maternal health or citizens exhorted to plant trees (to offset vehicular emissions and unmanaged growth) but the structures of patriarchy, consumerism or development itself are never questioned. The messages during such occasions are feel-good panacea presented to a public that is in transit, which rarely reflects on the medium or the messenger, but instead takes in the display and the surrounding discourse as urban spectacle.

At a time when many south Indian middle- and upper-class families are straddling the Indian and the global, the rural and traditional function to smooth over and bridge differences, reminding people here and there of common origins and utopian moments, even as they make relationships in other places. The possibility exists, in these changed circumstances, that the display itself will be wrested from the purpose of making or asserting Indian tradition and instead serve NRI domesticity. The latter cannot be conflated to the former since NRI homes often create hybrid domesticities that allow for zones of 'Indianness', say in food, a puja room or a handwoven rug, but also have zones of 'Americanness', 'Canadianness' etc., such as in the

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68 children's room and the formal dining room. Especially in the US, where NRIs form one of the wealthiest ethnic groups, the making of the domestic sphere is a complex negotiation between their class and caste origins in India and their class aspirations in their adopted homeland. Women often parlay markers of tradition, not just to nostalgically celebrate a specific practice but also to compete in a tight circle of peer NRI households. In a society where colour and ethnicity define upward social mobility, NRI women also invoke heritage, art and craft as status symbols, which allow them to enter a wider social sphere in the host country. If a Dasara display at home was a domestic ritual, in the host country it is projected as a long-standing familial commitment to Art. The shift from domestic ritual to Art or heritage is a remaking of the past to create the present; it is an active attempt by NRIs to demonstrate to socially influential people and groups that they are not mere third-world migrants or technocrats but come from a class which has long been aware of more lofty things.

For many *grihanis*, who live between here and there and have not entered the transactional economy of the host country, the shift is often not

successful. When the protocols of the Dasara display and comportment are extended beyond the familiar, women like Kamala write such comments on their blog:

Saratoga is one of those quaint little towns in Silicon Valley [...] that is filled with Tamilians. I am not sure how this came to pass, but there is a huge concentration of people from the Tamil community who celebrate all the festivals with great gusto....I discovered that there is a whole kollu circuit that the Tamilians in Bay Area travel during these nine days, and many travel 100-150 miles over the weekend....The conversation did not vary much and this kollu celebration was a tailor-made opportunity for them to catch up on which company was going IPO, what stocks are doing well, who has started what company, and who made how much money etc....While it was nice to go around and see kollu celebrated in Silicon Valley, I somehow preferred the way it was celebrated in Madras, which had a touch of sincerity and innocence.⁷

[A version of this essay first appeared on www.tasveerghar.net]

⁷ <http://kamlasindia.blogspot.com/2005/10/kollu-dasshera-dusshera-navararti.html>

Page 61:

Top row, from left to right: *Buddha*, circa 1950s, plaster of Paris; *Yashoda and Krishna* (?), circa 1950s, plaster of Paris; *Mother India*, 2004, terracotta, all purchased at Gandhi Bazaar, Basavanagudi, Bangalore; *Ganesha with cell phone*, 2004, terracotta. Purchased at Malleshwaram Market, Bangalore.

Middle row: *Bharatiyar* (Subrahmania Bharati). S Boopathy, Thanjavur, 2008, plaster of Paris.

Bottom row: *Women at water tap*, 2007, made in Tamil Nadu. Purchased at Saraswati Mahal, Thanjavur.

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Top, *Guhan, Rama, Sita and Lakshmana*, circa 1900, terracotta. Purchased at Oriental Haveli, Bangalore.

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Bottom: *Ras Lila*, 2004, terracotta. Purchased at Malleshwaram Market, Bangalore.

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Kartikeya and the Trimurti, 2005, terracotta. Purchased at Malleshwaram Market, Bangalore. Collection of Art, Resources & Teaching (A.R.T.), Bangalore.

Page 65:

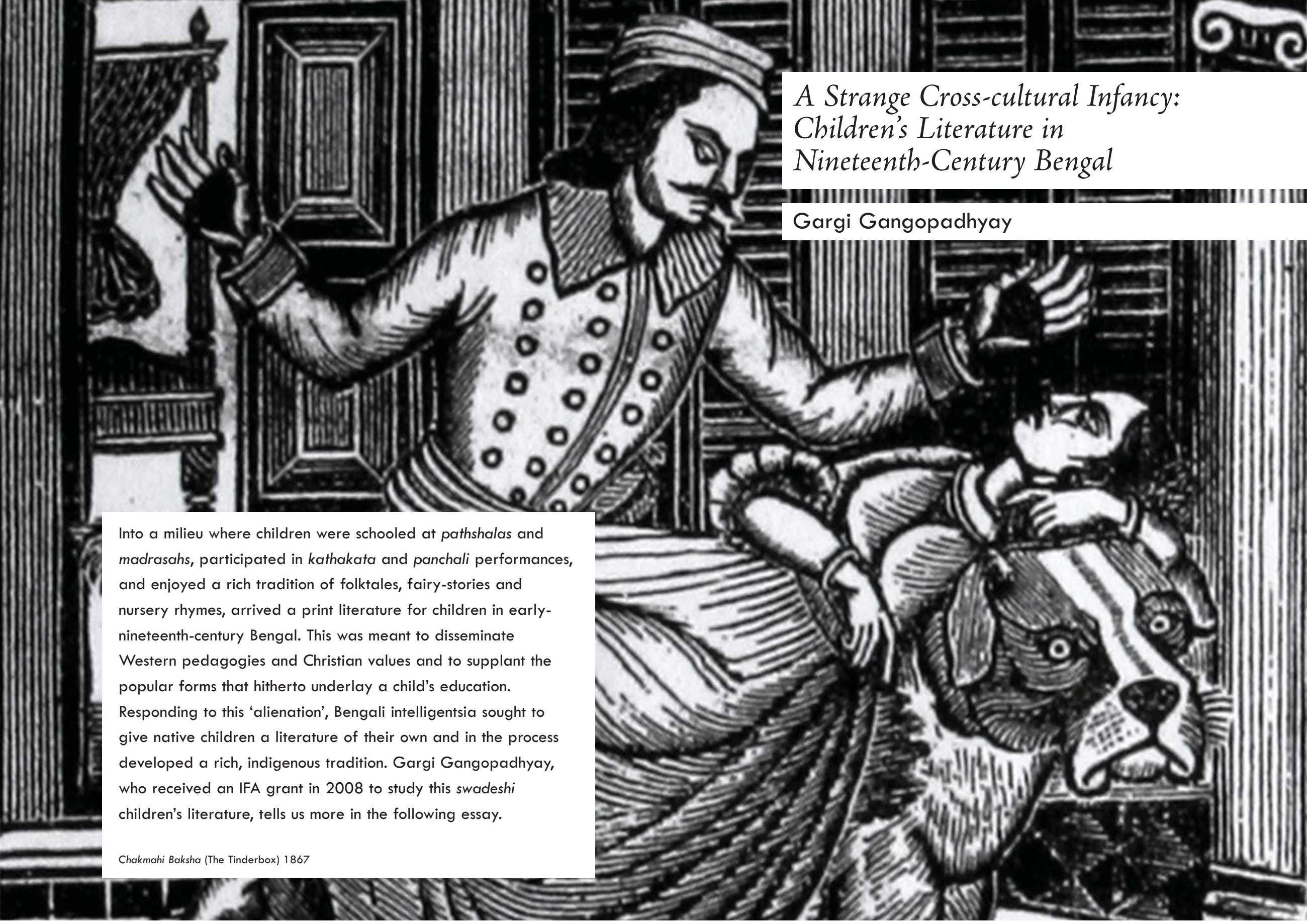
Craftspeople—Basket weaver and Bricklayer, circa 2007, mixed media, made in Benaras or Kolkata. Purchased at Ramsons, Mysore.

Page 66 and 67:

Grihapravesham—Young Family, Grandparents, Purohit and Cowherd with Cow, 2005, terracotta. Purchased at Malleshwaram Market, Bangalore.

All dolls from the collection of Art, Resources & Teaching Trust, Bangalore.





*A Strange Cross-cultural Infancy:
Children's Literature in
Nineteenth-Century Bengal*

Gargi Gangopadhyay

Into a milieu where children were schooled at *pathshalas* and *madrassahs*, participated in *kathakata* and *panchali* performances, and enjoyed a rich tradition of folktales, fairy-stories and nursery rhymes, arrived a print literature for children in early-nineteenth-century Bengal. This was meant to disseminate Western pedagogies and Christian values and to supplant the popular forms that hitherto underlay a child's education. Responding to this 'alienation', Bengali intelligentsia sought to give native children a literature of their own and in the process developed a rich, indigenous tradition. Gargi Gangopadhyay, who received an IFA grant in 2008 to study this *swadeshi* children's literature, tells us more in the following essay.

The journey of Isvar Chandra Vidyasagar, the great nineteenth-century social and educational reformer, from his native village to Calcutta in November 1829, as an eight-year-old in search of an education, is a well-known one. The story, told as an exemplary tale of his extraordinary perseverance and memory, recounts how by the end of this long journey, which he undertook by foot, Isvar Chandra had learnt all the English numerals from the wayside milestones. The anecdote is also emblematic of the socio-political changes taking place in British-dominated Bengal at the time, as the old systems were rapidly giving way to the new. Vidyasagar's eagerness to learn the English numerals as well as his father's choice of an 'English' school in the city for his son rather than the village *tol* reflected the new priorities of an empire under a foreign dominion.

Bengal was the first province to feel the full weight of the British presence in India. It became a stronghold of the Empire since the Regulating Act of 1773 that established Calcutta as the seat of the Company's central government. Emerging as what some consider India's first colonial city, Calcutta soon became the nodal centre for the new

systems of education and allied trades. A print literature for children in Bengal was thus established in the early nineteenth century when Western education under the British dominion and the newly imported printing technology was fast supplanting the existing indigenous systems. Designed to graft the science of the West on an Eastern stem, to bring in the 'light' of Western thoughts and philosophies, this new literature in print was a far cry from the prevalent popular carnivalesque culture pulsating with the myths, legends and faiths of earthy, organic communities. Schooled at the *pathshalas*, *tols* and *madrasahs*, the pre-nineteenth century child in Bengal participated in lively mass cultures and folk practices like *kathakata* and *panchali* performances. Children also enjoyed a rich tradition of vibrant folk tales, magical fairy-stories and colloquial nursery rhymes.

The new 'foreign' culture largely displaced, especially in the urban areas, the earlier cultures of childhood and changed the very fabric of the elite and middle-class society for generations to come. 'Child' and 'children's literature' were re-formed and reinterpreted in the cultural and intellectual climate of colonialism. In sharp contrast to their predecessors



Cheleder Tyagrahi (The Boy's Satyagrahi)

bred on a wide pre-print culture, the children growing up in the Bengal of the 1820s were the 'reading' generation, schooled in printed books from the new presses.

Digdarshan, a monthly periodical edited by John Marshman and published in 1818 by the Serampore Baptist Mission, claims the credit of being the first title for children in Bengali vernacular. Aimed at "the instruction of youth", the volumes carried a miscellany of articles on life science, geography, short histories and voyages. With the establishment of the Calcutta School Book Society in 1817 and the School Book Society in 1818, and with a growing number of schools, there was a spate of children's books, both in vernacular and in English. The School Book Society aimed for "Preparation, publication, and cheap and gratuitous supply of works useful in schools". Within a short time it had published six school-readers and by 1828 its





Chhobi-o-Galpa (Pictures and Stories), 1897

titles covered “almost every subject of elementary education”. Applying Locke’s famous principle of ‘Instruction and Delight’, *Manoranjanetihash* (1819) told “Pleasing tales or stories designed to improve the understanding and direct the conduct of young persons”. It

periodical for children—*Pashvabali* (A Catalogue of Animals), possibly drawn from books like John Bunyan’s *Devine Emblems* or Thomas Boreman’s *A Description of Three Hundred Animals*. Its six parts describe the habits and habitats of the lion, the

contained 19 short tales in all, some of which are introduced through little prefatory verses. ‘The Source of Pleasure’ begins with one such:

Riches cannot true bliss impart to thee
As is the mind so shall thy pleasure be
Regard not outward show, but search the mind

The spring of joy and grief in all to find.
Hitapadesha, published in 1820, was probably the first translation from Aesop meant for children. Later versions include *Esop’s Fables* by JC Marshman (1834) and *Kathamala or Select Fables from Aesop* by Vidyasagar (1856). 1822 saw the first illustrated

jackal, the bear, the elephant, the rhinoceros, the hippopotamus, the tiger and the cat, with the front pages carrying an excellent woodcut of each. In 1824, *Little Henry and his Bearer*, a story by Mrs Martha Sherwood, appeared in a Bengali version. A piece of Evangelical writing, it tells of little Henry, a devout Christian, who ‘civilises’ and ‘saves’ his caretaker through conversion, by convincing him that some religions and cultures are right while others are wrong. The book concludes by telling its readers: “Little children in India, remember Henry L—, and go and do likewise.”

The publication of *Vetalpanchabinshati* in 1847 marked a new phase, signalling new tendencies in Bengali children’s books. An adaptation by Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar from the original Hindi, it narrated a series of tales concerning the good King Vikramaditya. Though conceived as a college textbook, the hugely popular tales escaped the classroom to appease the appetite of story-craving children. The Vernacular Literature Society (VLS), formed in 1851, wished to promote “a sound and useful Vernacular Domestic Literature for Bengal”. Its purpose was “to place within the reach of all, through the agency of a cheap and popular

literature, a knowledge of the rudiments of those sciences which effect the well-being of man in his everyday pursuits... to spread abroad a better appreciation of moral and ethical truth”. By commissioning native writers to translate or adapt representative works from English into Bengali, and by making the thin, paper-bound volumes affordable, the society sought to create a popular literature suitable for women, children and peasants. Madhusudan Mukherjee, the Society’s most prolific author, produced a dozen tales for the VLS’s Bengali Family Library between 1858 and 1867. Some of them were adaptations of the English moral-school writings such as *Sandford and Merton* or *The Ignorant Boy* while others were translations of Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tales: *The Little Mermaid*, *The Tinder Box*, *The Chinese Nightingale*, *The Ugly Duckling* and so on. *Shushila’s Upakhyana*, a female bildung, was meant as a model lesson for girl readers.

But the vibrant colloquial mass cultures relating ancient traditions to the everyday lives of the common people did not just disappear with the advent of print and foreign



pedagogies. The residues of the pre-print era continued to exist simultaneously with the new culture of children’s books. The oral narratives, banished from the boundaries of official print, found a fresh lease of life and resurfaced in the form of cheap *Bat-tala* books. By the second half of the century the native *Bat-tala* (a locality in the heart of Calcutta) presses were doing brisk trade by selling cheap and popular publications. Bringing into affordable print the old mythologies, legends, romances, fairytales, popular dramas, songs and ballads, almanacs, educational literature, manuals of various kinds and other ephemeral genres, these small booklets sold like hot cakes and by far surpassed the limited and expensive output of the ‘respectable’ presses of the city. Though the consumers came from diverse social groups, wayward youths and schoolboys, who used to save up their pocket money to buy *Bat-tala* books on the sly, were often singled out for attack in newspapers for being addicted to the ‘trash’ culture.

Such widespread evidence of the popularity of *Bat-tala* books among children and youth becomes important in establishing the fact that their reading was not limited to ‘official’ pedagogical literature. They

gathered from the humble pages of the *Bat-tala* the vernacular versions of the great Indian epics, traditional songs and ballads narrating popular mythologies, religious poetry like *Geetgovinda*, the popular romances of *Biddah and Soonder*, and fairytales like *Yusuf and Zulekha* translated from the Urdu and Persian originals.

This widespread popularity of the *Bat-tala* culture also generated numerous genres of original writings in the vernacular. The first original ‘novella’ or ‘tale’ written for youth was the story of *Bijay-basanta* (1859), which notes the necessity of an ‘entertaining’ literature for young people in its preface. The weariness of studying heavy books of Grammar, Geography and Physics, the author observes, has often driven literate adolescents to the forbidden temptations of immoral and bawdy *Bat-tala* romances like *Kaminikumar* and *Rasikranjan*. Narrating the story of two young princes and their wicked stepmother, the novella marked a shift from dry learning and sought to create more pleasurable reading for children.

By the 1860s the niche publishing market was mature enough to demand, over and beyond school texts and moral instructions, light and entertaining reading matter for children. This was supplied mainly in

child readers themselves. Through the pages of *Abodh-bandhu* (The Innocents’ Friend, 1866), *Jyotirangan* (The Firefly, 1869), *Balak-bandhu* (The Child’s Friend, 1878), *Shakha* (The Friend, 1883), *Balak* (The Child, 1885), *Shathi* (The Companion, 1893) and *Mukul* (The Bud, 1895), in a short stretch of six to seven years Bengali children’s literature moved beyond the limited confines of textbooks and ‘Moralties’, and began to mould itself as a distinct literary genre. *Shakha* was the first journal to introduce a ‘Girls’ page’ as one of its regular features. This was addressed to the female readers and would bear recipes in one issue and knitting patterns in another.

As the new print genre of Bengali children’s literature passed through its strange cross-cultural infancy, it started negotiating the limits of this imposed ‘alienation’. By the latter half of the nineteenth century, authors writing for children in the vernacular began questioning the norms of Western pedagogies and their validity in the native culture. The profound urge, in the face of such an estrangement from one’s roots, was towards a recovery of the ‘self’, towards defining a national identity by reclaiming the lost heritage. The ‘popular’ that had for the previous few



Bhut-patrir Desh (Fairyland), 1915

the form of periodicals, and the latter decades of the century saw a steady flow of them. They contained an array of writings ranging from short fiction, serialised adventure stories, horror stories and lives of pioneers, to poems, essays on science and literature, political pieces, book reviews and occasionally original contributions by





Chhotto Ramayan (Little Ramayan, 1919)

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decades been labelled backward and vulgar, came to be seen as containing ingredients that were truly indigenous, authentic and uncontaminated. Rejecting the form, content and language of the ‘Western vernacular’ juvenile literature, the elites and the intelligentsia of contemporary Bengal sought to give the native children a literature of their own.

As early as 1838, the anonymous author of *Gyanchandrika* wrote an article titled ‘*Swakiya desher parti sneha*’ (‘An Affection for One’s Own Country’). He urged his boy readers to “love one’s own land even if it is lowly and despicable, to praise one’s own country even though it be but a desert land”. The first issue (1866) of *Abodh bandhu* (The Innocents’ Friend) began with a patriotic poem:

To work for the nation, for the
motherland’s good
To the best of our abilities, try we
should

A glorious history is of utmost importance in defining a nation and many authors started to trace and build the yet unwritten history of India in their writings for children. They recounted the tales of heroes—from epics, myths and legends and from the ancient and recent past. Rajanikanta Gupta, writing of the dauntless Rani Lakshmibai in his *Aryakirti* (The Deeds of the Aryas, 1883) intended to arouse a noble *aryabhav* in his juvenile readers. Instances of unflinching courage and the extraordinary martial valour of the Rajputs and the Marathas in the face of Muslim invasions were often extolled by the Bengali writers as examples of heroic strength and



Kanka Batir (1893)

patriotism. Abanindranath Tagore’s *Rajkabini* (Tales of Kings, 1909) presents a fascinating history of Mewar, of its braveheart queens and fiery kings. *Chitor-gourab* (Chitor’s Pride, 1921) a drama based on the fight between Mewar and Delhi is imbued with high nationalist fervour. *Biratwe Bangali* (Heroism in Bengalis, 1929) is a rare collation of heroic chapters from Bengali history, ancient and modern.

Apart from formulating such patriotic discourses, ardent efforts to construct a ‘*deshbodh*’ (idea of a nation) can be seen in the persistence with which late-nineteenth century children’s writers sought to recover the popular oral literature of their forgotten childhoods. Not only did

they repeatedly relive and recollect the nostalgia of those ‘ideal’ childhoods in their memoirs, autobiographies and other non-fictional writings, they also often assimilated and integrated folk motifs and plot variants in their original writings for children. In his preface to *Folk Tales of Bengal* (1883), Reverend Lal Behari Day mentions a ‘Shambhu’s mother’ from whom, as a little boy, he had heard thousands of fairytales.

Rabindranath Tagore in *Chhelebel* and *Jibansmriti* fondly recaptures the absurd yarns told to him by Abdul the fisherman and the magical tales of Tinkari dashi. Abanindranath draws upon the characters, motifs, events and elements of the whimsical world of nursery rhymes (*Chhelebhulano chhara*, anthologised by Rabindranath himself) to create a land of little boys in his literary fairytale *Khiner putul* (The Cheese Doll, 1896):

It was a novel land, a dream kingdom! [...] There lies besides the deep black waters of the *dighi* a jungle of reeds and beyond that the unending stretches of moorlands merging with the far horizon. After that, dense groves of mangoes and jackfruit trees—their branches crowded with long-tailed



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parrots; the round-eyed *boal* fish in the river and clouds of mosquitoes in the arum plants...

His imagination rides on nostalgia as he fabricates, for the very first time in Bengali children’s literature, a ‘fictional’ and ‘authentic’ Bengal filled with its native folklore and legendary landscapes. Notably, Abanindranath and Nandalal Bose made important contributions as illustrators in creating the accompanying visual texts and translating these ‘lost’ landscapes and fantastic characters into printed pictures.

Hemendraprasad Ghosh in *Ashare Galpa* (Fanciful Tales, 1901) laments that with the advent of English education, children are losing touch with the indigenous folktales that form a part of the cultural history of any nation. When Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar brought out the first ever anthology of Bengali fairy tales—the *Thakurmar jhuli* (The Grandmother’s Bag: Fairy Tales of Bengal) in 1907, Tagore succinctly summed up its



Mochak (The Beehive), Baisak, April-May, 1920

significance: “Could there indeed be anything quite as *swadeshi* as this *Thakurmar jhuli*? But alas! Nowadays even fairytales are being sent to us from the factories in Manchester....”

Rejecting the ‘Christian or Englishman’s Bengali’ which was unnatural, unidiomatic and necessarily



Keet-Patanga (Insects), 1925

foreign, the new writings for children radically broke from the formal rigidities of ‘written Bengali’ (*shadhu bhasha*), trying consciously to imitate oral speech patterns in their narratives. *Upakatha* (Folktales, 1907), *Hindusthani Upakatha* (Folktales from Hindusthan, 1912), *Shanjher Bhog*

(Evening Treats, 1919), *Udalburor Shaotali Galpa* (Santhali stories by Udalburo, 1921), *Ho-der Galpa* (Stories of the Hos, 1921), *Thakurdadar Rupkatha* (Grandpa’s Tales, 1922), *Buno Gappa* (Wild Yarns, 1922), are all lovingly nostalgic about the lost tradition of oral storytelling and they deliberately try to preserve that intimate colloquial ‘voice’ while transferring these stories to print.

Epics, legends and mythologies too began to be retold for children in abridged forms. After *Shishuramayan* in 1884 and *Shishuranjanramayan* in 1891, we have Upendrakishore’s *Chheleder Ramayan* (The Children’s Ramayana, 1907) and *Chhotto Ramayan* (Little

Ramayana, 1919). Jagindranath Basu’s *Ramayaner Chhobi o Katha* in 1909) narrates the epic in simple rhymes, while *Kurukshetra* and *Lanka-kanda* (both published in 1909) by Jagindranath Sarkar are captivating books with dramatic, fast-paced narratives and breathtaking



Khukuraniir Khela (The Little Miss's Play, 1919)

illustrations of monsters and ogres. *Sandesh*, the popular children’s magazine from the house of U Roy and Sons, published a series of stories from the four *puranas* that were later collected and published as *Puraner Galpa* (Tales from Mythologies, 1921).

To fashion an ‘authentic’ Bengal out of the lost oral tales and nursery rhymes, to build an indigenous tradition of children’s books, is a unique phenomenon in Bengal’s social history. A protracted project to

construct an independent identity and to etch out a national culture, it was, in actuality, part of a more widespread *swadeshi* movement against British rule. This is not to suggest that other forms of writings like informative texts, books on natural sciences, adaptations and translations from Western originals did not continue to be published in the new century. But with the rapid influx of these ‘new’ folktales and fairytales, both traditional and literary, the spirit and the nature of Bengali children’s

literature had clearly changed. Remarkably, as the years progressed, a substantial section of children’s books turned out to be a potpourri of the Western and the indigenous.

Khukuraniir Khela (The Little Miss’s Play, 1919), an oversized book by Baradakanta Majumdar, presents a happy mix of the *desi* and the foreign. While the pleasing illustrations alternate between Western and Indian styles, the contents are a companionable blend of both. In one episode *Khukurani* washes her china doll in a tub and dresses her in a blue-striped penny while another narrates the elaborate preparations for the wedding of *Khukurani*’s doll to a ‘groom’ belonging to a friend. The little girl’s play becomes, without any conflict, a space for cross-cultural contact and assimilation. Another poem ‘*Bhai-bon*’ (Brother-sister) rings with the same tone:

When we visit the *shahibs*
In pretty frill and cuff
With their boys and girls
We play blind-man’s buff.
Though we learn their manners
And their foreign fashions
At home, donning *dhoti* and *sari*
We follow *desi* notions.

Appearing in 1920, *Mouchak* (The Beehive), made its presence felt at once. Laden with wonderful and

varied writings by the most renowned authors of the day and carrying coloured prints of famous paintings by great Western and Indian artists, the periodical urges the children to have a taste of its ‘honey’:

The hive is filled with honeyed rhyme
Its smell enchants the air
In thoughts idle don’t waste your time
Oh Come! Do come without a care!

Its science and information segments, often in anecdotal form, invite youngsters to read on by introducing the subject through captivating tales. Enlivened with haunting rhymes by Satyendranath Dutta, and hinting of the afar in its tales from Tibet, Finland and Sweden, *Mouchak* is truly alive with the buzzing spirit of the hive. *Chheleder Satyagrahi* (The Children’s Satyagrahi, 1922), an intriguing assortment of contents, includes single page ‘stories’ like ‘*Khadderer Poshak*’ (The Khadi Garment), and ‘*Deshi Shaban*’ (The Desi Soap)—which are, in effect, advertisements for the shops or factories selling/manufacturing these goods. The book market doubles as a consumer market here, the text displaying an interesting medley of ideology and commerce.

Children’s books have, almost universally, been seen as frivolous and ephemeral. Even in Bengal, where



Biratwe Bangali (The Tradition of Bengali Herosim), 1929

children’s literature shares quite a number of authors with the mainstream and has a rich 200-year-old print history, it has been grossly neglected in research and documentation. In an attempt to fill this lacuna, this research has been a journey into the past, into musty stories and mouldering books. And like any journey, it has yielded rewards. Some of the books discussed in this essay are well known and still remembered; others have scarcely been mentioned in records or reviews; while others still are ‘lost’ from print, documentation and cultural memory. Surviving copies of originals like Jogindranath Sarkar’s *Hashi-khushi* or Abanindranath Tagore’s *Bhut-patrir desh* or Ashitkumar Haldar’s *Ho-der Galpa*, with their yellowed pages

crumbling from decay, are still books of outstanding beauty. They are made with loving thought and care, designed and printed with perfection. It will be a pity to lose them.

My research aims to build up an encyclopedic web archive of such Bengali children’s books from their infancy to the early decades of the twentieth century. Through bibliographical documentation and digitisation of a few images from each book, the archive hopes to trace the trajectory of children’s literature in Bengal, to bring to light many old and forgotten texts scattered in various libraries or personal collections, and to help preserve some evidence of those books that are under severe threat of perishing.



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[All translations from the Bengali by Gargi Gangopadhyay.]

Kelai Draupadi! (Listen Draupadi!)

Sashikanth Ananthachari

Sashikanth Ananthachari is making an IFA-supported film on the Draupadi Amman Mahabharata Koothu festival that is celebrated in over 200 villages in Tamil Nadu every year. In the following pages he explores a fascinating aspect of this festival—namely its portrayal of human identities and values as fluid and permeable. In the Draupadi Amman festival, Draupadi speaks through five Kauravas—even though they belong to the enemy camp; the festival has both Shaivite and Vaishnavite elements; and each ritual in the festival is sponsored by a different caste. Through its inclusiveness and its play with identity, the festival becomes “simultaneously, a celebration of one’s caste, community, gender and economic identity, and its transcendence”.



88 Every year, in over 200 villages in Tamil Nadu, a festival with the Mahabharata at its core is celebrated. This, the Draupadi Amman Mahabharata Koothu festival, is a post-harvest festival celebrated in the months of April, May and June, when people pray for good rains and a good harvest the following year. The duration of the festival varies depending on the affluence of the celebrating village: it can range from ten to 40 days. Draupadi Amman is the presiding deity of this festival, and the Mahabharata is narrated as a story, enacted as *therukoothu* theatre and performed as ritual for her. During the festival, the entire village becomes a stage for various performances. An icon of Draupadi is first carried to the site of the performance and then the performance begins; Draupadi is the primary audience for this festival and no performance can take place without her consent.

In the first few days of the festival, the Mahabharata is narrated as a story, from *Adi Parva* to the point in the narrative where Draupadi enters; at this stage the rituals centred on Draupadi are performed in the village and the theatre begins. The festival in its full-blown form begins only when Draupadi becomes the bride of the village and the village

itself becomes Hastinapura.

Invariably, the first *therukoothu* play performed in most festivals is *Vil Valaippu* (The Bending of the Bow) where Arjuna, in disguise as a Brahmin, wins the hand of Draupadi at her *swayamwar*.

The notion of identity and disguise is a major area of play in this festival; in all the rituals performed in the village, characters from the Mahabharata are seen in disguise: Arjuna first as a Brahmin and later as the eunuch Brihannala; Bhima disguised as a Brahmin when he kills Bakasura; Draupadi herself as a gypsy fortuneteller when she narrates the Mahabharata to the Kauravas to warn them of the impending danger.

During the day, the storytellers sing the Mahabharata in Srivilliputhur Alwar's fourteenth century Tamil rendition, and expound on the verses; all through the night, the *therukoothu* performers enact that episode of the epic which has been narrated as a story during the day; in between some key episodes are performed as ritual in the village. For about 20 hours a day for almost 20 days, audiences hear, see and live the Mahabharata!

The festival is celebrated by popular demand. If, for some reason, a festival has not been performed for two or three years in a village, an

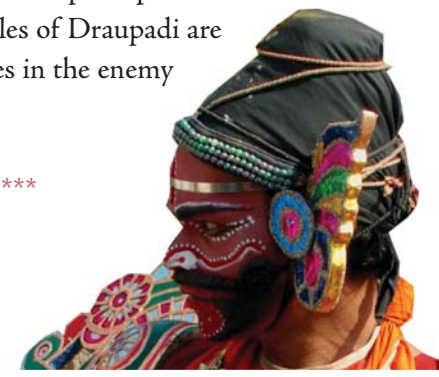
enthusiastic villager might secretly fly a flag near the temple. This the villagers call the 'false' flag (the first step in announcing a festival in a village is the hoisting of the 'true' flag in the Draupadi temple). The 'false' flag is the village enthusiast's way of trying to persuade the village elders to hold the festival that year. Soon other villagers could voice the same eagerness as the original enthusiast and the village council would be forced to convene a meeting to decide whether the village can afford to hold a festival that year. All these negotiations happen around November-December and a firm decision has to be made by the end of December as it takes about six months to organise a festival.

Once the village economics have been worked out, preparation for the festival begins. The villagers identify the pair of storytellers and the *therukoothu* theatre group they want for the festival. Once that is done, an auspicious date for the start of the festival is fixed, depending on when both the storytellers and theatre group are available together.

On the appointed starting date of the festival, the 'true' flag is hoisted and five men from the village take their vows to be the caretakers of the Draupadi temple. These five people

are drawn from three castes in the village—the Konars, the Velalar and the Vanniyars. The group of five is called the Samayam Ganachari Kumaravargam and from that day on till the end of the festival, they live in the temple and function as the instruments of the deity. They become the medium through which Draupadi speaks, and every function in the festival has to be initiated by them and terminated by them at the deity's behest. (In the village I documented, the group of five men expanded to 13 to give greater representation to various families in the village.)

89 Who these Samayam Ganachari Kumaravargam are is only revealed at the end of the festival: they are the last five Kauravas alive at the end of the war. They have been deputed by Gandhari to guard Duryodhana from Bhima till he says the *Sanjeevini Mantra* and brings his entire army back to life. Interestingly, this story is purely local and is not found in the Sanskrit Mahabharata. The five Kauravas are Bhismacharya, Kripacharya, Kritavarman, Ashwatthaman and Sanjayan. So the five people who are the principal devotees and oracles of Draupadi are also the key figures in the enemy camp!

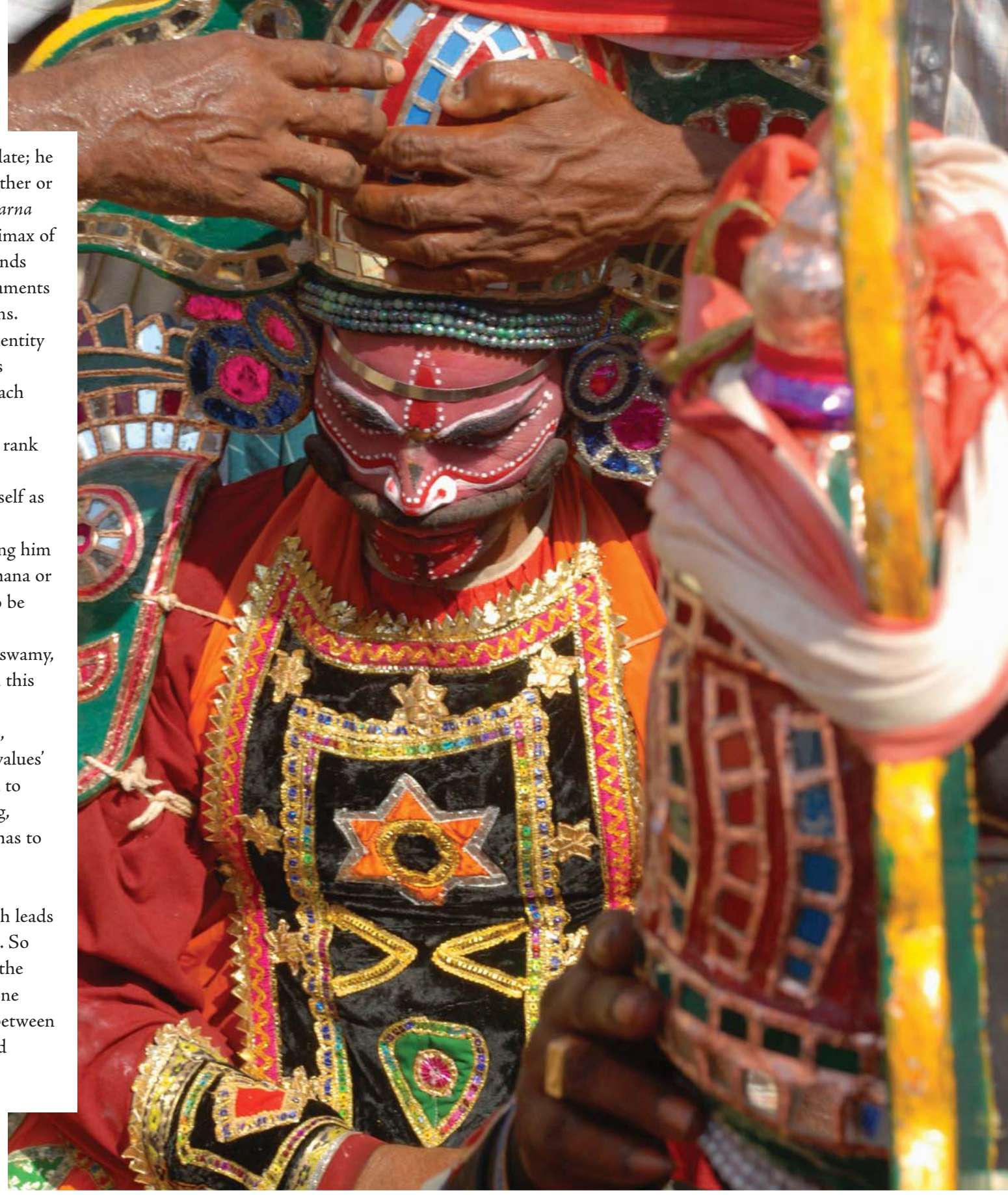


This doubling of identity and profusion of identities, including disguises, false identities, mistaken identities and lost identities, leading to a state of transcendence where one acquires one's 'true' identity, is a region of active play in this festival. The festival becomes, simultaneously, a celebration of one's caste, community, gender and economic identity, and its transcendence. Yadu becomes important in this festival as he was cursed by his father Yayati and lost his Shatriya caste status. The Konars, who are one of the major custodians of this cult, are a Yadava community who trace their ancestry to Yadu and call themselves Yadavakula Shatriyas. (The pantheon of deities of this cult are, other than Draupadi, all Yadavas, the other deities being Kunti, Balaram and Subhadra.) Arjuna is important in this festival as he is Sabhasachi or the person who is in touch with his 'left' or 'feminine' self; during the festival rituals he appears as Brihannala, a eunuch dance teacher (and he is, finally, an avatar of Shiva). Draupadi herself is an avatar of Durga. And Karna becomes an important figure as he does not know he is the eldest Pandava. His tragedy is that by the

time he realises this it is too late; he has to either kill his own brother or be killed by him. The play *Karna Moksham* is the emotional climax of the festival, and a hush descends over the audience as Karna laments his ignorance about his origins.

The interrogation of identity can also occur in a humorous fashion. It is customary for each character to announce herself/himself by name and rank on entering the stage. When Duryodhana announces himself as himself, the *kattiyakaran* or *sutradhar* mocks him by asking him whether he really is Duryodhana or someone trying to pretend to be Duryodhana.

As MD Muthukumaraswamy, a scholar who has worked on this cult, says, this festival and *therukoothu*, the theatre form, portray 'identity' and 'ethical values' as polarities. To fight for and to preserve one's identity as king, father, landlord or wife, one has to give up one's values. And the hardening of identities leads immediately to conflict, which leads to a further erosion of values. So the question the festival and the theatre pose concerns what one really desires. The choice is between a world of 'ethical values/fluid



identities' and peace, and a world of rigid identities and war.

This anti-conflict/antiwar position is ingrained in the festival, and in all the interviews I conducted with the participants, the answer to my question—as to why this festival was performed other than to propitiate the rain gods—was the same: to promote *samarasam* (unity and harmony) and to promote *vittukodutthal* (to understand, to give and take, to learn to yield).

To understand or at least to speculate on why this position gets privileged in the festival, one has to go back to its origins and there are two possible origins. In the eighth century Pallava temple at Kurram, a village near Kanchipuram, there is a bland inscription which says that the Pallava King Mahendravarman first donated money for the reading of Bharatham (Mahabharata). Mahendravarman, a Shaivite king, was a great patron of the arts and crafts who has left his

legacy in the various temples he built and the artists he patronised. His period was also characterised by violent religious conflicts and struggles for power between the Vaishnavites and the Shaivites, while his kingdom was also threatened from the north by King Pulikesin to whom he had already lost a major battle.

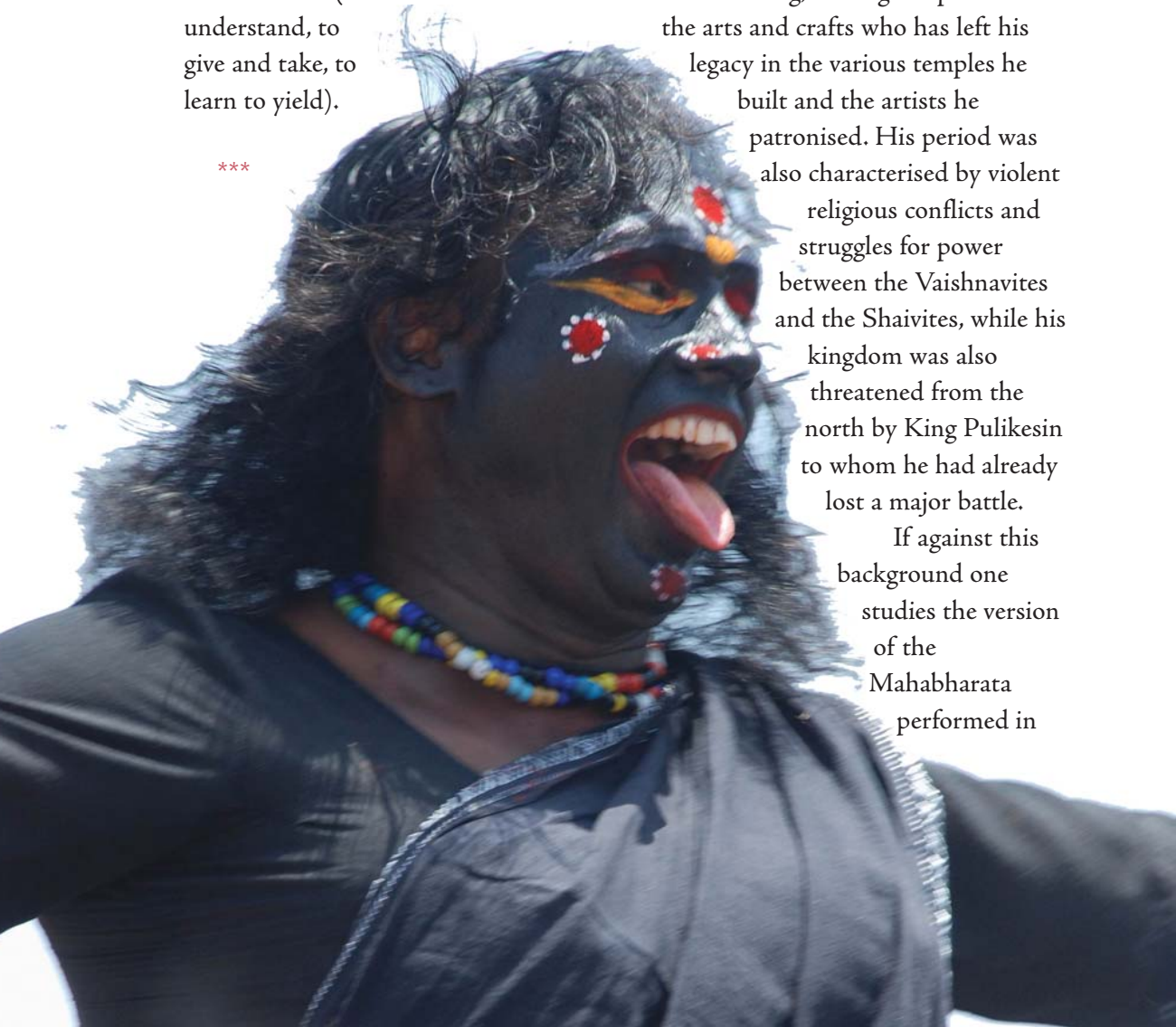
If against this background one studies the version of the Mahabharata performed in

the Draupadi Amman festival, certain divergences from the Sanskrit version become clear. In the invocation song to Draupadi, she is constantly addressed as Durga and the sister of Vishnu; and Arjuna is identified as an avatar of Shiva. So the festival has both Shaivite and Vaishnavite themes with both communities participating equally in its celebration. One of Draupadi's two chief bodyguards is called Potturaja, which is a distinctive title bestowed by the Pallava kings.

Looked at in this way, the festival seems like an attempt to create an inclusive civil society which could resolve its caste, community, property and religious differences amicably and with the involvement of the entire community. Even now, the outstanding land- and water-related disputes which plague agrarian communities are resolved during this period and new kinships created. Each ritual in the festival is sponsored by a caste, for whose identity the episode being celebrated functions as a marker: the Konars sponsor all rituals and theatre performances involving Krishna, and the Vanniyars sponsor events related to Arjuna. It appears that in earlier times the play *Karna Moksham* would be sponsored by a community which is traditionally the custodian of the cremation grounds, an 'untouchable' caste, but

this is not in practice now.

(In the village Ecchur, which I documented, the festival is relatively new, having only been performed for the last 60 years. In this village, the younger Dalits were conspicuous by their absence in the festival, while their fathers participated. The younger Dalits were also the most educated people in the village, working as white collar professionals—college teachers, bank employees etc.—while their contemporaries from other castes were relatively uneducated, working mostly as plumbers, electricians, masons or car drivers in the neighbouring towns. When I interviewed these young Dalit men, they were clear about not participating in the festival and also disliked the fact that their fathers participated; however, they did not want to go on record about this, as they said that they have been living in harmony and they did not want to disturb this.)





The festival seems like an attempt at creating a 'village republic' which can internally resolve its differences, whatever the conflicts of the larger world. This line of reasoning gains ground if one considers the other bodyguard of Draupadi: Mutthala Ravuttan, a Muslim soldier who joins the pantheon of the deities in the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries with the entry of Islamic rule in this part of the country. Both Potturaja and Mutthala Ravuttan have mythologies of their own in this cult, and both are equally honoured in this festival. There are records of Muslim landlords patronising this festival when this region was under the Nawab of Arcot. Later, when the region came under the sway of the British, there are records of the British also being included in the festival's mythology. In Alandur in Chennai there is a Sri Artilari Dharmaraja temple supposedly built by an Englishman—Colonel Artilari—who had a 'vision' of Draupadi. What is clear is that this region came under the sway of various rulers, to whom the village had to defer, while at the same time negotiating a certain kind of autonomy.

The second possibility of the cult's origin is connected with the region called Senji in Tamil and Ginge in English. With the collapse of the Chola Empire, Senji seems to have gained a measure of autonomy in the late thirteenth century under the Kon dynasty, a line of 'shepherd' (Konar) kings. Their descendents claim that their royal ancestors built the fort at Senji and also the first Draupadi Amman temple at Melaccheri, a village which at that time was called old Senji. The descendents of this dynasty are also one of the three castes which are the current custodians of this cult. Draupadi in the invocation song is addressed as 'Senji Pathiyale en amma nee', or 'Our mother who resides in Senji', and there is an elaborate mythology concerning her second birth from fire at Senji. The festival as it is celebrated right now is tightly woven around this mythology of the second coming of Draupadi.

According to legend, when King Cunitan, a great grandson of Arjuna, was ruling at Hastinapura, his kingdom was threatened by a demon called Rochakan. This demon, a grandson of the demon Baka who was killed by Bhima, wanted revenge on the descendents



of the Pandavas. Rochakan was powerful as he had two boons from Brahma: of his 100 heads, 99 could be cut off, but if someone tried to cut his central head and the head fell to the ground, the person who cut the head would die; the second was that only a person born of fire could kill him.

Cunitan was advised by his ministers that only Draupadi could kill Rochakan, and that Cunitan should immediately search out the two immortals who had performed the original fire sacrifice which resulted in Draupadi's birth and ask them to re-perform the sacrifice for her to be born again. Cunitan searched all over the land for the two sages, Yachan and Upayachan, and finally located them at Senji. The sacrifice was performed and Draupadi was born again. When Draupadi was told about Brahma's boon regarding the hundredth head of Rochakan, she asked Cunitan to locate Potturaja, an ardent Shiva devotee who ruled Kalinga; she said that only Potturaja could hold the hundredth head of Rochakan for eternity and prevent it from falling on the ground. Then there was a great battle between Draupadi and Rochakan, and when Draupadi cut off Rochakan's

hundredth head, Potturaja was there to catch it. Potturaja took a vow that he would never drop Rochakan's head, and that he would always stand guard outside her temple holding it. So Potturaja, who stands outside Draupadi's temple, is the first figure to whom respects are paid in this festival, "for without him there would be no festival".¹

The Mahabharata celebrated in the Draupadi Amman festival as an antiwar text starts from the exile of the Pandavas and ends after the war with the crowning of the 'just' king Dharmaraja. It simultaneously recounts the trials and tribulations of the Pandavas and their final success as well as the trials and tribulations the people went through during the Chalukya war, and the final triumph of the people. And Potturaja stands guard outside promising eternal peace.

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¹Alf Hildebeitel, *The Cult of Draupadi* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991).





I F A

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