

ART CONNECT

An IFA Publication

Volume 5
Number 2
July-December 2011

Rs.100



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Volume 5, Number 2

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Editor

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Design

Mishta Roy

Printed by B Narahari, published by Anmol Vellani on behalf of India Foundation for the Arts and printed at Manipal Press Ltd., Press Corner, Tile Factory Road, Manipal, Udipi, Karnataka - 576 104 and published at India Foundation for the Arts, 'Apurva', Ground Floor, No 259, 4th Cross, Raj Mahal Vilas IInd Stage, IInd Block, Bangalore - 560 094. Editor - C.K. Meena

Photo and Text Credits

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Cover Image

Ninasam Tirugata setting up to perform in a market square in Badami, Karnataka, during their twenty-fifth anniversary tour in 2009. From the film produced by Gautam Sonti and Uma Magal (www.tirugatafilm.com)

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Editorial

At first glance, this issue, which focuses on networks and collectives in the arts, appears to be an exercise in nostalgia. Sample the contents at random, and you are likely to taste the spirit of decades past. Words that you had almost forgotten—radical, reactionary, anti-Establishment, imperialism, manifesto—might catch you by surprise. But our aim is not to merely recount or—heaven forbid—extol the achievements of that era. Through conversations and critical analyses, attempts have been made to assess the influence of these collectives and their relevance in a globalised world.

It is no coincidence that many of them were born in the same period and are broadly, if not firmly, leftist in orientation. Another common thread is their pride in having done much with little money at hand. 'Spending from our own pockets' is a refrain heard right through the issue: in Usha Rao's interviews with the heroic foot-soldiers of the network that supports the Tirugata travelling repertory and contributes immensely to its success; in the conversation of five people associated with the Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust—Ram Rahman, Rajendra Prasad, Indira Chandrasekhar, Parthiv Shah and M.K. Raina—who recap key events in the history of this unique 'platform' (as they choose to call it); and in the effervescent voice of Amrit Gangar as he recalls the heyday of the film society movement in his freewheeling chat with Shai Heredia.

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'Marketing' was a dirty word in the vocabulary of most collectives and movements. The refusal to be tainted by filthy lucre found one of its most extreme, and some would say naïve, manifestations in the Little Magazine Movement. Of the various languages in which these magazines were brought out, this issue focuses on two: Marathi and Bengali.

The cheaply produced, a-periodic Marathi Little Magazines that Mangesh Narayanrao Kale writes about were distributed largely free of cost. The writers they published rejected the middle class sensibility, defied social convention and protested against the dominant canons of literature. Rebellion was their calling card, as Aryanil Mukherjee makes clear in his piece on Bengali Little Magazines. Mukherjee not only narrates the history of the Little Magazine Movement but also brings out the changes wrought by the arrival of the post-modernists in the 1990s.

The history of arts collectives is inextricably bound up with the history of the nation. By analysing the changes that they, and our society, have gone through, we can perhaps bring new meaning to our own individual pasts.

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Contributors

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Usha Rao is by profession a cultural anthropologist (University of Massachusetts Amherst) but has traversed many paths. Apart from some amateur theatre in college, she has also worked on plays with children, and taught humanities and music at the Valley School, Bangalore between 1999 and 2006. Over the past four years she has been working as a freelance researcher. As a freelance writer, she has reviewed art for *Art India*. The research projects that she has enjoyed most have been in the areas of theatre, education, law and culture, and arts education. She is currently scripting and producing audio science programmes for government school children.

Shai Heredia is a filmmaker and curator of film art. She holds an M.A. in documentary film from Goldsmiths College, London. In 2003 she founded Experimenta—the international festival for experimental cinema in India. She has rapidly developed this event into a significant international forum for artists' film and video. She has curated experimental film programmes at major film and art venues such as the Berlinale Film Festival, Germany and the Tate Modern, UK, among others. Shai is responsible for the Extending Arts Practice programme and the Curatorship programme at India Foundation for the Arts.

Amrit Gangar is a Mumbai-based film theorist, curator and historian. The Federation of International Cine Clubs in Berlin awarded him in 1989 for his work in the Indian film society movement. He has conceived and curated several Indian film programmes in various venues across the world. The concept of 'Cinema of Prayoga' that he had first presented at the Experimenta 2005 in Mumbai was followed by curated film screenings at

the Tate Modern in 2006. Amrit will also present his concept at University of the Arts, London in June 2012. His book *Cinema. Culture. Capital. Context: India* was released during the Kolkata Film Festival 2011 by the well-known filmmaker Buddhadeb Dasgupta.

Aryanil Mukherjee is a bilingual poet, translator and editor who grew up in Kolkata, India but now works as an engineering mathematician in Cincinnati, USA. He has authored nine books of poetry besides essays in two languages. Awarded the Subhas Mukhopadhyay Samman (2007), his Bengali writing has featured in several Indian magazines and his English writing in *PennSound*, *Asian Cha*, *The Literary Review*, *Jacket*, *Big Bridge*, *El Invisible Anillo* [in Spanish] etc. Anthology appearances include *The Harper Collins Book of Indian Poetry in English* (2011), *Indivisible – An Anthology of South Asian American Poetry* (2010) and *The Literary Review Indian Poetry Issue* (2009). Aryanil edits *KAURAB* and his poetry has been translated into Hindi, Spanish and Danish.

Mangesh Narayanrao Kale started his career in the publishing and printing industry as a journalist with the Marathi daily *Marathwada*. He later started his own daily *Khandesh.*, and as the editor of *Khel*, a Marathi literary magazine, he was involved with the Marathi literary movement for over a decade. Among his published books are the poetry anthologies *Naal Tutalya Pratham Purushache Drishtaant* (2007) and *Trutiya Purushache Agaman* (2010), both published by Abhidhanantar, Mumbai. Of the distinctions he has gathered, the most prestigious has been the Marathi literary award Yashwantrao Chavan Kharad Puraskar, which he won in 2006 for poetry.



Tirugata :
The Madness that Fuels
the Magic Bus

Usha Rao

All photographs courtesy film produced by Gautam Sonti
and Uma Magal www.tirugatafilm.com



Tirugata, the travelling repertory of the reputed cultural institution Sri Nilakantheswara Natyaseva Sangha (Ninasam) in Heggodu, Karnataka, has pulled off an unparalleled feat. For the past twenty-six years it has taken contemporary theatre to millions across the state, an achievement for which it wholeheartedly shares credit with a loyal network of local organisers who have hosted thousands of their shows in towns and villages. Usha Rao discovers that what Tirugata and its organisers have forged is not a commercial arrangement but a symbiotic relationship based on years of joint effort and mutual trust. After tracing the origins of Tirugata, Usha delves into the stories of the self-professed ‘theatre nuts’ who welcome the touring bus into their communities every year and, in the words of the Ninasam manager, “without whom everything we do would be meaningless”.

The Tirugata bus leaving Ambikanagar in Uttara Kannada district.

Ashtagi, fifteen kilometres from Gulbarga in northern Karnataka, is the sort of place that is colloquially known as 'out-of-the-way' by virtue of its distance from the commercial hubs of the new economy. Yet, despite its apparent remoteness and the absence of a pukka performance space, this year it is hosting Shakespeare's *Othello* under a tree in the precincts of the village temple. The deity watches as actors transform the platform into a performance space complete with wings and lighting rigs. Tirugata, the travelling repertory of Ninasam,¹ has come to town.

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Tirugata² is "theatre that is possible anywhere"³—in a school, an auditorium or a clearing under a tree. When the Tirugata bus pulls in, the most basic of spaces morphs into a proscenium stage where stories unfold and fantasies fly. Tirugata has been journeying for the last twenty-six years, criss-crossing the state of Karnataka, taking the plays of Shakespeare, Kuvempu, Brecht, Kalidasa and others, translated into Kannada (the state language), to small towns and villages. The actors lead a nomadic life for six months beginning every October, when the Tirugata bus hits the road, carrying actors, sets,

props, lights and everything else required for the performance, never halting for more than two days at one place.

At the end of its twenty-fifth year, Tirugata had covered an astounding 240,000 km of road and performed 3,245 shows for two million people. The audience was spread over 1,333 towns and villages—till date, over 1,350. For Tirugata manager B. Sripada, one of the aims of Tirugata is to take good-quality contemporary theatre to places where it not usually available: "They have neither the funds nor the sponsorship that is available in cities to do theatre...and professional non-commercial theatre hardly visits these places."

A complex mesh of relationships and mechanisms make it possible for Tirugata to perform in a village such as Ashtagi. They are natural consequences of the various streams of cultural initiatives that have flowed out of Ninasam since its inception. Tirugata in its structure and practice is rooted in the larger context in which Ninasam has evolved into a cultural hub of significance. It leads back to the vision of the late K.V. Subbanna, who threw open Ninasam to a larger world.

Subbanna saw theatre as an extension of the ethos of the national freedom movement, where the desire to “create a new kind of theatre” was intimately linked to the creation of “a new kind of society”.⁴ He envisioned theatre as a forum for dialogue within the community as well as with others outside it. As a Gandhian, he deeply believed that the ‘world’ (in terms of new thoughts and ideas) ought to be invited into the ‘home’, from where they could be owned within one’s particular context. Social change, for him, was engagement between the ‘home’ and the ‘world’, mediated through the production and

interpretation of cultural practices. Subbanna chose ‘storytelling’ and ‘story-making’, whether in the form of literature, world cinema or theatre, as the means to begin conversations.⁵

Beginning with Heggodu, his community soon extended to the rest of Karnataka. Through Chitra Samaja, which was started in 1973, film appreciation courses were held. The Jana Spandana programme, begun in 1983, took plays, films and discussion forums to places all over the state. A base was laid for appreciation of contemporary theatre and an eager audience was waiting



The performance space in Ambikanagar.

when Tirugata entered the scene in 1985. Tirugata was born of Subbanna's deep commitment to community theatre where both theatre and community were mutually determined and sustained. The repertory also offered a live laboratory and means of livelihood for professionally trained actors who had graduated from the yearlong course at the Theatre Institute that Subbanna founded in 1980.

There are several unique aspects to Tirugata. Every year it travels with a fresh set of plays. New actors are recruited every year and only a few senior actors may stay on for a

maximum of four seasons. Plays are selected keeping in mind the prevailing socio-political environment and the availability of actors as well as directors who are able to work within the constraints of a travelling production. The range of plays is diverse, and deliberately so, as the intent is to bring stories from 'unfamiliar' settings into the local discourse. Every year, Tirugata includes one work by a non-Indian playwright and one original work in Kannada or some other Indian language. All plays are performed in Kannada within a contemporary idiom. Subbanna expands on the rationale behind the practice of

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Setting up stage in Badami.

performing plays from other cultures: “We do not want every experience to reach our audiences through characters named Rama or Krishna or Beera. We want a Ferdinando or a Hamlet, too, to speak to our audiences, and to do so as Ferdinando and Hamlet.”⁶

The Tirugata tour, from October to April, calls for intense preparation. The actors have a rigorous rehearsal schedule for two to three months. The plays are first performed for and critiqued by a large and diverse audience from around the country that gathers every October for Ninasam’s Culture Course, and which includes writers, intellectuals, arts practitioners, and residents of Heggodu and nearby villages. Once they are on the road, actors take charge of all aspects of mounting the show—from the unloading of boxes to the rigging of lights, from setting up the stage and wings to doing their own make-up. No demands for infrastructure are made on organisers save for electricity and some rudimentary amenities. Some places such as Badami, Ajjampura and Manchikeri have been regular stopovers. New places are emerging on the map and the audience numbers are growing.⁷

Building the Network

Tirugata remains on a firm foundation because of its meticulously built scaffolding. When it was launched in 1985 it was, in K.V. Akshara’s words, “an idea whose time had come.”⁸ The Jana Spandana programme had created a common language and framework within which contemporary theatre could be viewed. Ninasam had toured Karnataka with *Sangya Balya* (a popular folk play) and other productions that had received an overwhelming response. The local hosts—the yokes that would link storytellers to audiences—had been found among the graduates of the Theatre Institute, who were distributed through the state.⁹ This base was later expanded into a wide network of organisers that grew as Tirugata’s reach increased.

The choice of venue is not dependent on the potential for ticket sales but on the willingness of local organisers to host the show. In keeping with its ethos, Tirugata is supported by small, independent cultural organisations linked to the everyday life of the towns or villages in which it is hosted. Sripada describes organisers as “theatre-crazy individuals, without whom everything we do would be

meaningless". They are farmers, lawyers, teachers, activists, amateur theatre practitioners, and theatre-lovers from varying social backgrounds. Some of them have been inviting Tirugata for over twenty years running, and others join the fold every new season. Some struggle to gather finances—they dip into their pockets and into spare funds, if any, of their organisations. Sometimes they defer payment, but the show goes on.

The ledgers at the Tirugata office contain over 700 addresses of cultural organisations, all of which are informed about the season's Tirugata plays, although not all of them invite Tirugata. In their early touring years, members of the Ninasam team had come in contact with those who were inclined towards engaging their communities in theatre activities. "When Tirugata was launched we wrote to them," Akshara recalls. "We got a fantastic response; about forty shows were instantly confirmed in about twenty-five places." This momentum snowballed as the organisers were asked to provide names of people within a 100 km radius of their locations who would be interested in hosting Tirugata.

Sripada, who took over as manager in

1993, describes how addresses were painstakingly compiled: "In the initial years, I used to personally collect the addresses of all those I met who expressed an interest in Tirugata." He continues to keep an eagle eye out for 'blank' districts and taluks. "For instance, in Belgaum district we didn't have shows for a long time. I located old students and asked them to forward addresses of cultural organisations that they know of. We managed to collect these addresses in a district ledger where it has been recorded. We sent off letters asking them to acknowledge their addresses."

In tandem with the growing network of organisers, support systems needed to be evolved. This essentially meant that a constant stream of communication had to flow between Heggodu and the organisers. In the past, when there were no mobiles and few landlines, bus rides into poorly connected places and the humble postcard were the only reliable means to reach people.

The initial years were a struggle, for Ninasam and for the organisers. Tirugata travelled with four plays on a budget of Rs 4,000. A person was appointed to liaise with the organisers—to visit the venues well in

advance, discuss their requirements and, if dates clashed, visit a place more than once before they could settle on a mutually convenient date for the show. Although Tirugata carried all equipment needed for the productions, some basic infrastructure such as electricity, space and living arrangements had to be discussed and solutions found. “This was the main kind of communication that was needed, as people were not used to hosting our kind of plays,” says Sripada. According to Akshara, “Things began to settle down only after three seasons.” In the process, they lost some of the initial organisers but gained new ones.

The number of contacts keeps growing since every Ninasam event draws potential organisers. For instance, Akshara has observed that at the Culture Course in October, which attracts a large audience, the post-premiere discussion of the plays excites many. “Some of them invite Tirugata because they want to share their experience, of entering a story in new ways, with others in their community.”

Today, with the advent of the mobile phone and with Tirugata’s being around long enough, communication has become easier. Besides, Akshara has started a blog for Tirugata



Tirugata actors in the green room.

(ninasamtirugata.blogspot.com). “This is convenient and cheap as people can also download forms, brochures and images.” There are plans to start a website. This will partly be in English in order to reach people who are not familiar with Kannada but who wish to keep up with Ninasam’s activities. All this will no doubt benefit those who are tech-savvy but Akshara feels that while this allows for functional efficiency it is no replacement for the personal nature of their communication.

An affectionate and open relationship has been built and maintained with the organisers over the years. Sripada says,

“They sometimes call and tell me that a play was ‘no good’. It is important to have this channel open...else Tirugata will stagnate.” The connection they share cannot be reduced to a commercial arrangement and, at times, even flows into the realms of financial advice and literary criticism. A primary reason for organisers to drop out of the Tirugata network is their lack of skills in collecting funds, distributing tasks and mobilising the community. Sripada often advises new organisers on possible avenues for raising funds and sourcing support within their community. As many of the host organisations are amateur theatre/arts clubs, the members’

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The premiere of *Akash Beri* at Ninasam in 2009, Tirugata’s silver jubilee year.

articles, poems and scripts find their way to the Tirugata office, seeking comments. “We even get to know their personal problems,” says Akshara. Ninasam regularly invites the organisers to seminars, culture workshops, theatre workshops and so on.

Many organisers use Tirugata as a pivot around which to simultaneously build other events in their community, such as literary meets, theatre festivals and art exhibitions. “When the bus arrives, there is a celebratory air that catches on,” says Sripada. Especially in smaller towns, the local community plunges wholeheartedly into the preparations for the show: one arranges for food, another organises ticket sales, someone else takes care of the actors, and so on. Organisers take on the responsibility of publicising the show, and often this means personally handing out brochures to the townspeople.

When Chandrashekar Honalli, an organiser from Shimoga, decides to send his request for the season’s Tirugata performance, he has to be prepared for hectic arrangements. Nam Team, his amateur theatre club, must mobilise a compensation of Rs 14,000 for two plays, arrange for hospitality, organise

the venue and gather an audience. It takes Chandrashekar many calls, visits, and much ‘adjustment’ of resources to host Tirugata. “Despite people’s good intentions, sometimes money doesn’t come through and we pay from our pocket,” he says with matter-of-fact acceptance, adding that lack of funds has never been a reason for skipping a Tirugata season.

In villages such as Ashtagi, organisers face Herculean challenges. “We have no donors,” says Prabhu Linga Kinagi, the organiser of this year’s Tirugata in Ashtagi. “In fact there is very little money in our village. People are not prepared to pay any ticket money.” In such situations the plays are performed practically for free. Sripada says, “We never refuse to go to a place because they are not able to pay us, as we understand financial constraints, especially in some villages in northern Karnataka.” Akshara adds that just as the organisers put up with the varying quality of the plays from year to year, Tirugata too accommodates the organisers’ dip in finances for two to three years. There is no financial gain in either doing or hosting Tirugata. The most that the repertory can expect is to break even.¹⁰ Often, funds have to be creatively circulated to put the bus on the road. Sripada

observes, "No organiser has grown financially from hosting Tirugata...but they want to give something that is good and liked by people which in turn gives them pleasure and prestige."

Mad About Theatre

When one meets the organisers of Tirugata and witnesses what they call their 'madness for theatre', one gains a fuller understanding of the ways in which they have contributed to Tirugata's success and have in turn been influenced by Tirugata. To meet them I travelled to Shimoga, Ajjampura and Manchikeri, each unique in its own way. Shimoga is gradually becoming an important commercial centre and is fast moving away from its primary identity as district headquarters. Ajjampura appears to retain its rural way of life despite its busy main street lined with shops. In Manchikeri in Uttara Kannada district, which is situated amidst old forests and areca-nut farms, a distance of five kilometres is still referred to by some as 'far away'. The organisers in all these places, however, are united in their common passion and filled with a similar dynamism, which is required to keep their communities culturally alive despite the odds.

One can easily shoot past the narrow

road off the Shimoga-Tumkur highway that takes us to Ajjampura in Chikmagalur district. Across the railway line, past the *palash* trees in full bloom, through the gates, and we're on the main street. Lime-washed, tile-roofed buildings and sparse traffic suggest a rural way of life. Passers-by point the way to the primary school where I would find Ajjampura S. Krishnamurthy, the driving force behind theatre activities in the town. Krishnamurthy's table is cluttered with books, files, trophies, skipping ropes and other school paraphernalia. He explains: "This is a higher primary school that we started as a cooperative. We try and incorporate theatre into lessons as far as possible."

Ajjampura has been a regular on the Tirugata circuit for the past sixteen years without a break. Before 1995, the year Krishnamurthy met Ajjampura C. Chandrappa and got him on board, the town was unable to invite Tirugata regularly because of a money crunch. In 1985 when Tirugata was launched, Krishnamurthy, like others who had been associated with the Theatre Institute, received a letter asking if he could organise a show. He recalls: "At the time we simply did not have the means to do so...but we went

and saw the plays in another venue.” The following year, they managed to gather some funds and hosted Tirugata. However, for four years there was a shortfall of funds. “The amount required then was Rs 8,000 for two plays but we managed to collect only Rs 4,000, primarily through ticket sales.” Embarrassed, they discontinued their invitation to Tirugata. Now the partnership between Krishnamurthy, a self-confessed ‘theatre *buccha*’ (theatre nut), and former Zilla Parishad and Gram Panchayat member Chandrappa, an accomplished fundraiser, has resulted in a happy balance of passion and practicality.

For the greater part of his adult life, Krishnamurthy, a part-time agriculturist and cloth merchant, now in his sixties, has been active in bringing theatre to Ajjampura. Today, it is a favourite venue of Tirugata actors. Krishnamurthy, through his organisation Gelayara Balaga Ranga Tanda (which translates to ‘theatre association of a group of friends’) not only hosts Tirugata every year but also conducts regular theatre workshops (for adults and children) leading to productions, most of them with the help of the Theatre Institute graduates. Iqbal Ahmed, Y.D. Badami and Pramod Shigaon are some of the well-known theatre professionals who have worked in Ajjampura.



S. Krishnamurthy of Ajjampura in his office.



C. Chandrappa outside the Kailasam Kalakshetra in Ajjampura.

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Krishnamurthy's 'madness' began in childhood when he hid in the dark and watched the rehearsals of the local amateur theatre group, Kalaseva Samaja, which had existed since the 1930s. In its performance space, now abandoned due to poor acoustics, stalwarts from the Gubbi theatre company as well as local artists (including his grandfather) had performed. Besides watching as many plays as he could, he tried his hand at direction. "I thought theatre was only about putting on make up and saying lines. After my exposure to Ninasam plays, I have understood the discipline involved," he explains. When Ninasam launched its Theatre Institute and called for applications in 1980, he responded. Things went on well until he visited his home for a break at

the end of three months. "Madam, that was *it*...they didn't let me go back." Krishnamurthy was persuaded to abandon his theatre dream in order to fulfil his marital obligations.

But Krishnamurthy continued his links with Heggodu. He arranged several workshops conducted by Ninasam faculty. Ajjampura can be thankful that his thwarted desire to be an actor has been channelled into promoting theatre within his community. He is in touch with the latest developments in Kannada theatre. Names of plays, playwrights and dates of premieres roll off his tongue and they are peppered with his views about them.

Krishnamurthy is equally passionate about collecting information about theatre. His extensive print archive of theatre in Karnataka that dates back to the 1970s won him the Karnataka Nataka Academy Award 2005.

Chandrappa says, "We are crazy about theatre, madam," in answer to my question about his commitment to Tirugata. He walks me down the street and to the impressive outdoor theatre, Kailasam Kalakshetra, at the end of the school ground. While in many places, performance spaces are

wrested out of schoolyards, in Ajjampura the auditorium generously offers itself as an extra classroom when there are no performances scheduled. It has been built with Tirugata specifically in mind. Chandrappa proudly adds, “When we see a Tirugata play on this stage, it is as lovely as [watching on] a 70 mm screen.” The auditorium, which was built with Zilla Parishad and Gram Panchayat funds during Chandrappa’s tenure as a member, is rent-free for theatre performances. Chandrappa also drew on the cultural funds of these bodies to set up performance spaces in some surrounding villages.

A Pivotal Event

Tirugata is treated as a pivotal event for a weeklong theatre festival that includes Shivasanchara, the travelling religious plays from the Lingayat Mutt of Sanehalli. The festival also features a local children’s production that comes at the end of a fifteen-day workshop. All shows in Ajjampura are free. Chandrappa who, as a child, watched plays through the chinks of partition walls because he did not have money for tickets, feels that good theatre is a treat that ought to be given to everyone.



Manchikeri Auditorium

Manchikeri in the Western Ghats, a regular on the map of Tirugata since its inception, is predominantly a farming community where the rhythm of the monsoon and the areca harvest dictate the pace of life. In the days of unpaved roads, the late dramatist and polymath Shivaram Karanth used to take many a bullock-cart ride to visit Manchikeri and interact with its residents. Ramakrishna Bhat, who founded Ranga Samuha, emphasises the connection between Manchikeri and the arts: “In Manchikeri we have poor infrastructure but great appreciation for theatre and arts.” And today it appears to be living its legacy as Ranga Samuha hosts several theatre festivals, one revolving around Tirugata and others that include folk theatre and seminars on arts and



Ramakrishna Bhat of Ranga Samuha in Manchikeri.

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contemporary issues, all of which draw people from nearby villages. “It has grown into a kind of [cultural] centre as people from nearby communities come here to see good theatre and also take back ideas on how to organise events,” says Bhat. At the centre of the village is the Manchikeri auditorium, and its teashop Ranga Darshini (run by a local actor), which has witnessed many performances. The auditorium grounds double as the banana *mandi* where bananas from the nearby farms are weighed and sorted before being loaded on to lorries headed to big cities.

Ranga Samuha’s links with Ninasam pre-date Tirugata and can be traced to

Bhat’s passion for theatre that he developed while at college in Udupi. “I saw great plays...like Girish Karnad’s *Oedipus*, and even watched B.V. Karanth direct,” he recalls. When he returned to Manchikeri after finishing college he started Ranga Samuha and produced plays, drawing his inspiration from Subbanna and directors from Ninasam such as C.R. Jambe, K.G. Krishnamurthy, Akshara and others who were all regular visitors. Jana Spandana and other Ninasam initiatives drew Manchikeri into its fold. “There is an osmosis of ideas from Ninasam. The culture of discourse is something that has flowed to us from Subbanna’s legacy,” Bhat

comments. His young colleague Vasuki Hegde adds, “But perhaps we need to find new ways of thinking and doing theatre which could possibly flow into Ninasam.”

Vasuki, who directs plays during the lean, post-harvest months, suggests that their ability to organise events might spring from their way of life as agriculturists: “As small areca farmers, we have to depend on each other and therefore know what it means to work together.” But he observes that people are slowly moving away from both agriculture and communitarian arts. Parents are increasingly encouraging children to pursue arts such as music, which he feels reflects

the individualism that has entered their communities.

Both Vasuki and Bhat think it an advantage for a group of individuals to register themselves as an organisation. It gives them the credentials to seek funds and a structure for sharing responsibilities. Local banks and, sometimes, generous individuals in the community support theatre. However, it is a constant struggle. If they are lucky they manage to tap into the budget of the state government’s Department of Kannada and Culture. Ticket collections for Tirugata shows never exceed Rs 6,000 per show (at Rs 20 a ticket) and often they supplement finances from their



Vasuki Hegde of Manchikeri broke off from rehearsal to pose for this shot.



Chandrasekhar Honalli of Nam Team looking through their props. Photo Courtesy: Nam Team

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own pockets. Bhat sums up his relationship with theatre: “We are bound to our village...but we can meet new ideas and thoughts through theatre.”

Chandrasekhar Honalli, a journalist with a leading Kannada daily, gathered friends of his —some journalists and some out-of-work actors—to start Nam Team (*‘namma’* is ‘our’ in Kannada) in 2000. They produce plays, most of which are based on new scripts or adaptations of literary works. They were determined to do “something” for theatre in Shimoga and took up the challenge of organising Tirugata when one of the earlier organisers withdrew. “For the first few years the manager would write and ask if we would be interested in organising that year’s

Tirugata...now they have taken it for granted,” says Chandrasekhar. Nam Team also hosts Maru Tirugata, which usually features an experimental play that does a short run in May. Like his counterparts elsewhere, Chandrasekhar too developed an interest in theatre as a child while watching his father, an amateur actor, rehearse. As a college student he watched every contemporary play that came to Shimoga and tried his hand at directing. He encountered Ninasam in the plays that were directed by its Theatre Institute graduates and was impressed enough to want to engage more deeply with theatre. Today Chandrasekhar is a regular at Ninasam’s Culture Course and all other events. On an average, Nam Team produces two plays a year, one of which is directed in-house. Some of these are huge hits and have travelled to places such as Bellary, Hassan and Bangalore.

Despite being located in a big town with a corporate presence, funds remain a challenge for Nam Team. Over the years they have built up an exclusive set of patrons for Tirugata but often the team members make good the shortfall. “Sometimes when we have surplus generated through some other programme we

use it for Tirugata,” says Chandrasekhar. As the result of a strike in which Chandrasekhar played a major role, Nam Team has managed to gain access to the state-owned Kuvempu Rangamandira (which is fitted with lights) on a concessional rent of Rs 500 per day. This has enabled them to organise more theatre events in Shimoga on a small budget. Recently they concluded ‘Collegu Ranga’, which featured five productions from five colleges whose students were trained by young Ninasam graduates. Chandrasekhar says, “We are a theatre-crazy bunch, and organising events that bring theatre to Shimoga is one aspect of our commitment to theatre.”

A Symbiotic Relationship

Chandrasekhar claims to have understood the finer craft of theatre and the discipline it involves only after working with Ninasam-trained directors. For him and others in Nam Team, Tirugata is a source of new ideas, theatre skills and insights into interpreting texts, which feeds into their own theatre practice.

Reflecting on how he has watched Tirugata grow over the decades, Akshara concludes that in many



Sirsi (left), the organiser of Vishwa Chetana in Badami, speaking to Tirugata actor Gopalkrishna Deshpande.

instances the cultural lives of communities have developed symbiotically with Tirugata. Organisers and audiences are not passive consumers of theatre but channels for feedback that shapes the course of Tirugata. “We get to know the pulse of our audiences through the organisers,” says Akshara. The feedback is taken into account while reviewing each season and changes are incorporated slowly—sometimes over a couple of years.

Most individuals who lead host-organisations are themselves theatre lovers or amateur actors, writers or directors. Through their association with Tirugata they find inspiration, if not skills that enhance their personal practices. Their primarily amateur

cultural organisations have a communitarian base where individuals feel responsible towards their communities, as well as towards those of neighbouring villages.

The Tirugata network is not a set of functional relationships but a mesh of lives with shared aspirations, passions and questions. Organisers attend events in Heggodu, and converse and sometimes collaborate with one another. At Ninasam they debate the quality of plays and share their opinions, whether on the podium of the annual Culture Course or on the *jagglis* or verandahs of Ninasam's office building in the thick of *paan*-chewing sessions. The context for their existence is the lure of theatre and the space its practice offers to dissolve themselves into alternative stories and realities. And it is this that sees people inviting Tirugata over the years even when there is no promise of commercial gain. This is an especially poignant fact given today's obsession with commodification where action is expected to reflect the logic of profit.

Tirugata and its relationship with its organisers offer an opportunity to explore the possibilities for revitalising theatre in small towns and villages. This is all the more relevant at a time

when theatre practitioners are lamenting the decline in the making and viewing of contemporary theatre, especially in towns that dot the hinterland.¹¹ An informal cultural organisation in an 'out-of-the-way' place holds the potential to become an active collaborator in this enterprise.

The intent to rely on local organisations is in keeping with Ninasam's larger philosophy of building networks that are communitarian rather than depending on "dry professional contacts, or the amorphous mechanisms of the media."¹² The story of Tirugata and its organisers seems to justify the logic behind this.

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Gopalkrishna Deshpande rigging lights.

ENDNOTES

1. Ninasam in Heggodu village, Shimoga district is acknowledged as a theatre and cultural hub in Karnataka. K.V. Subbanna, who won the Magsaysay Award in 1991 for his contributions in several areas including literature and theatre, built on the amateur theatre and cultural organisation started by his father in 1949; it is now spearheaded by his son K.V. Akshara. In 1980 Subbanna established the Ninasam Theatre Institute, which offers a rigorous one-year course in theatre arts. Tirugata, the travelling repertory, was launched in 1985.

2. Tirugata means 'travelling' in Kannada.

3. An expression used by Prasanna in dialogue with Subbanna and Geeti Sen. 'Theatre at the Grassroots' in N. Manu Chakravarthy (ed), *Community and Culture: Selected Writings by K.V. Subbanna along with Interviews and Tributes* (Heggodu: Akshara Prakashana, 2009), p. 338.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 333.

5. Anmol Vellani, 'The World in the Village: Lessons from K.V. Subbanna's Inspirational Life in Theatre and Community', *Local-Global: Identity, Security, Community*, Vol. 7 (2010), pp. 42-53.

6. Chakravarthy (ed), *Community and Culture*, p. 373.

7. On an average, Tirugata visits fifty places every year. In 2011 it travelled to sixty-two venues.

8. K.V. Akshara, theatre director and writer,

assisted by several others, is currently at the helm of Ninasam.

9. To date, graduates of the Theatre Institute continue to be an important thread in the organisers' network. For instance, Mandya Ramesh, who was part of the early Tirugata years, has established Natana in the city of Mysore and continues to be a regular Tirugata host.

10. All actors are remunerated equally—Rs 6,000 per month—for their rehearsal time and travel time. A basic insurance policy protects them in the event of accidents.

11. Observations from the baseline study on theatre infrastructure undertaken by IFA (2008). The study looked at a sample of Tier Two and Tier Three cities in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra.

12. S. Raghunandana, 'Interview with Subbanna', *Theatre India*, No. 11, 2005, p. 220.

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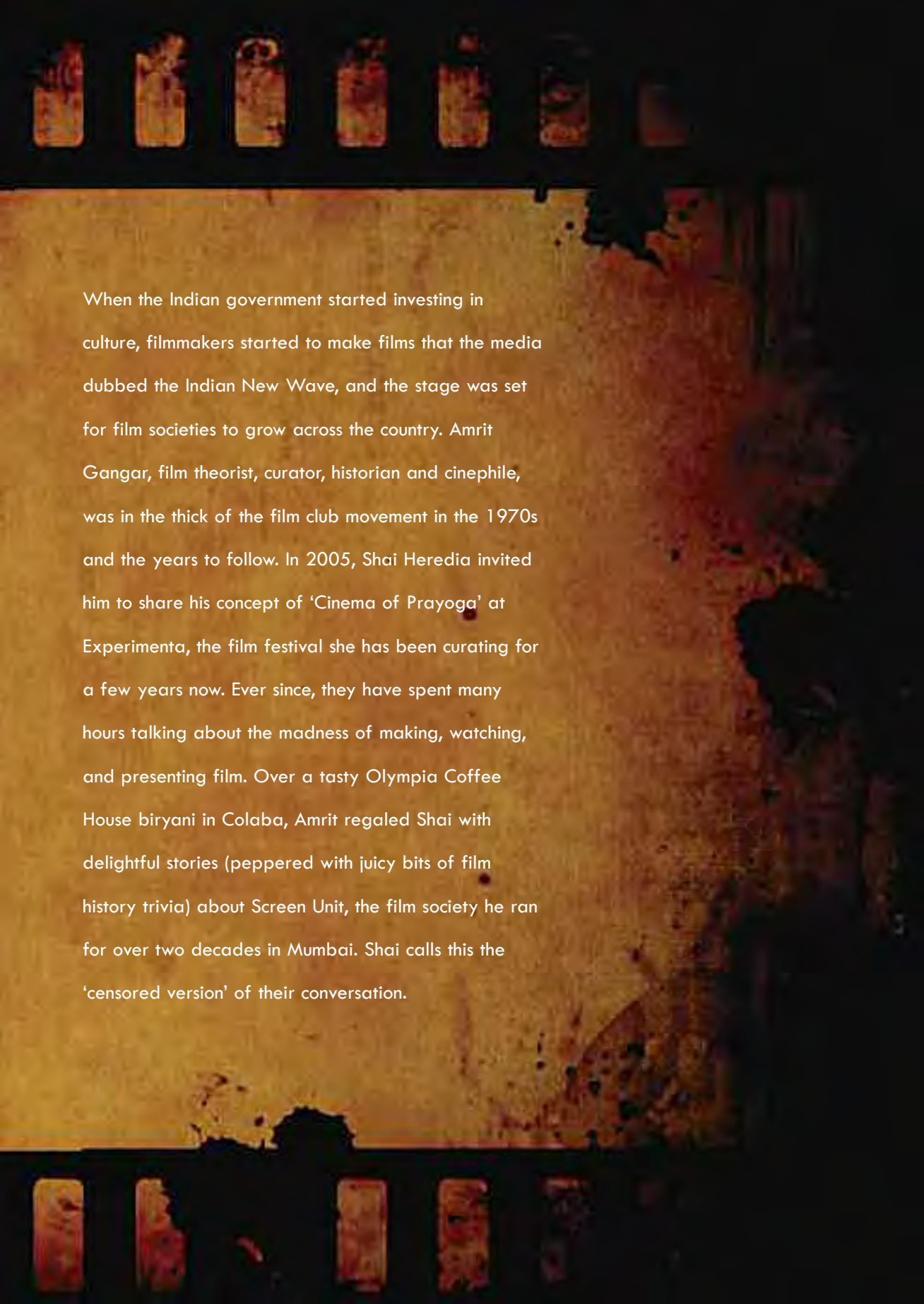
The Tirugata bus unloading at Mandya.



**Film Societies:
When Godard Rode
the 17:05
Borivli Local**

**Amrit Gangar in conversation
with Shai Heredia**

All photographs courtesy Screen Unit



When the Indian government started investing in culture, filmmakers started to make films that the media dubbed the Indian New Wave, and the stage was set for film societies to grow across the country. Amrit Gangar, film theorist, curator, historian and cinephile, was in the thick of the film club movement in the 1970s and the years to follow. In 2005, Shai Heredia invited him to share his concept of 'Cinema of Prayoga' at Experimenta, the film festival she has been curating for a few years now. Ever since, they have spent many hours talking about the madness of making, watching, and presenting film. Over a tasty Olympia Coffee House biryani in Colaba, Amrit regaled Shai with delightful stories (peppered with juicy bits of film history trivia) about Screen Unit, the film society he ran for over two decades in Mumbai. Shai calls this the 'censored version' of their conversation.

Shai Heredia: *What do you understand by 'film society'?*

Amrit Gangar: The word 'society' connotes a coming together, a society of like-minded people. A film society is like any other—a consumer guidance society, a cooperative housing society.... It needs to be registered under the Registrar of Societies Act as also the Charitable Trusts Act in order to get affiliated to the federal body: The Federation of Film Societies of India (FFSI), which in

turn is part of the Federation of International Cine Clubs (FICC). It is required to submit annual reports and accounts audited by a chartered accountant. These are the formal restrictions on a cultural body. The FFSI, headquartered in Kolkata, is divided into regions, and our film society, Screen Unit, was part of the Western Region (WR) comprising the states of Maharashtra, Gujarat, Goa, Daman and Diu.

For some time I was elected Honorary Secretary of the FFSI (WR), which



The late John Abraham (left) at the Bombay premiere of his film *Amma Ariyan*, with Amrit Gangar.

meant I had to remain in contact with all the affiliated film societies in the region. For example, in Gujarat, besides the big ones in Ahmedabad there were many small but active film societies in places such as Vadodara, Paatan, Jamnagar, Bhuj, Diu, Daman and Goa, and I had to see that they were sent films, and some literature about those films, regularly. I had to do all correspondence, organise Regional Council meetings, invite filmmakers, technicians, writers and others to organise debates and discussions with members, organise programmes, get films, hire screening places, write programme notes and post them to members. It was all *khoon paseena* [blood and sweat].

SH: *But what about the romance that so many of us harbour about film societies, the passion and energy that was inherent to film society culture in India?*

AG: Strangely, the so-called passion and the feeling of romance came from inaccessibility. We were not living in the DVD age then—I think VHS had just entered India—and we had to screen films on 35 mm or 16 mm. Formal registrations helped us access films; the FFSI would get films from the embassies and cultural wings of various countries, which would be

circulated across the country among registered film societies, which in turn had their own individual approach towards cinema, which would determine the kind of membership each had. The levels of romance also included the erotic; many were anxious to see the ‘nude and sexy scenes in foreign films.’ But gradually such proclivities were subsumed by interest in serious cinema.

Absences are beautiful and romantic at times—the absence of accessibility. Today youngsters pride themselves in having personal collections of thousands of films on DVD or as data on hard drives, but they may not have watched even five of them! For us, the freedom of access to films we never imagined we could see was what made film societies special. There were the Alliance Française, Max Mueller Bhavan, the House of Soviet Culture, and so on, but they would only show films from their respective countries and on their own premises. Film societies, on the other hand, were spread across the city and you could watch these films in your own neighbourhood—like Screen Unit, which was started in Mulund, and Sahridaya, which was started in Chembur and provided us a rare opportunity to see Malayalam films.

For bigger events the film societies were free to hire screening places anywhere in the city. What was special was the experience of seeing [Jean-Luc] Godard or [Miklos] Jancso in our local environment. Imagine the works of masters from Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Russia, France, coming to Bombay's suburbia!

The romance you are talking about was drenched in sweat and perspiration, particularly for the organisers. For every film screening you needed permission from the District Collector's office. Chitra and Broadway cinemas in Dadar, New Excelsior and Eros in south Bombay had small preview or mini theatres with around 100 seats, and film societies could hire them for their bona fide members. Those days I was working in a private firm and before finalising programmes for Screen Unit I had to stand in the queue to get the requisite form, fill it up making three copies using carbon paper and then submit the application for the formal screening permission. To do this I had to take leave from office, once or twice every month.

But yes, the romance was like a tonic. Often, as I stood in the queue for hours, there would emerge an

image of naughty Jean-Luc smoking a cheroot and enjoying *Vent d'est* [East Wind]. Above my head in the Collector's office in Bombay's Old Customs House, the big old fan would fling out warm dusty air, the real East wind, from the Orient. But we always treated our sweat as one of the world's costliest and most fragrant perfumes. That was our romance, you see!

Khoon paseena—I think less *khoon*, more *paseena*.

SH: *What years were these?*

AG: We started in around 1977-78, but it went on for twenty-five years.

SH: *So how did Screen Unit start?*

AG: My friend Manilal [Gala] was the prime mover, but we were together from day one. Manilal wanted to be a filmmaker. He had applied to the Film & Television Institute of India (FTII) but he could not get in, and so he started Screen Unit to be in touch with cinema. I remember the first film we showed was Andrzej Wajda's *Kanal* in Mulund at the Maharashtra Hall. It was a community hall that was open to all kinds of functions including weddings; a non-a.c. space, with a big pedestal fan that kept whirring loudly, providing a parallel sound track to

Wajda's film. There was this excitement of watching film together like a social ritual! I remember introducing the film in whatever way I had understood it through whatever reading material was available. Inaccessibility made us work harder, read more, visit libraries, consult more knowledgeable friends, look at the sky, like Sachin Tendulkar does after hitting a century. Finally the sky was our screen.

SH: *So that was the essence of the film society—the joy of the collective experience.*

AG: Yes it was this collective experience, but this was only possible because we could get the films. Quite early on Screen Unit had organised an animation film festival showing mainly films from the Films Division. This was perhaps the first independent animation film festival. We showed Kantilal Rathod and Ram Mohan's films, drawing on the history of Indian animation films, or cartoon films as the Films Division called them.

To catch up with my *paseena* story again, we were not permitted to carry celluloid film print on trains. Though we were no longer in the age of the



Adoor Gopalakrishnan seen at the launch of *Arguments/Stories*, a Screen Unit book on Ritwik Ghatak.

inflammable nitrate silver acetate film, and had entered the age of non-inflammable celluloid film, the Indian Railways still considered celluloid as dangerous inflammable stuff. It required any passenger carrying it to obtain a special permission—we were lucky to get a blanket one. The pockets of sweating people are generally empty (though their hearts are large, as Raj Kapoor would proudly sing) and hence we carried

those film cans all the way from the Films Division office on Peddar Road by bus to the Victoria Terminus and from there by train to Mulund. And to receive film prints, there were no courier services to deliver them at your door. We had to approach the Railways with proper documents to get the outstation prints—for example from the National Film Archive of India (NFAI), Pune—released. Railways stations could be anywhere:

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Filmmaker Kumar Shahani speaking at Screen Unit's Antonioni retrospective.

Byculla, Dadar, Bombay Central, Grant Road or Victoria Terminus. You know, it was the romance of the coolie—our great intellectual romantic notion that Mao Tse-tung would like us, and we would join his cultural revolution! The romance gave us the necessary illusion, the necessary energy, the necessary hope, the necessary anxiety, the necessary desire to know more. Towards the formation of a 'vision,' I think all this becomes necessary. And of course, the physical labour also kept us healthy and fit.

Recently, the well known painter Sudhir Patwardhan and an old-time member of Screen Unit was a bit surprised to look at the added fat on my body and he asked me the reason. I had no answer, but he did. He held DVD responsible. "Earlier," he said, "you carried the heavy film cans personally and that helped burn your calories but now you can so easily carry a tiny DVD in your pocket!"

Let me recall a story. We had planned the screening of Kumar Shahani's documentary film *Fire in the Belly* and the prints were to come from the NFAI since we could not get them from its producers, the Films Division. Suddenly on that day a railway strike was announced. Manilal rushed to

Pune early morning by any mode of transport he could get, picked up the prints from the NFAI, and started the same backbreaking way back to Mini Chitra, back in time for the screening at 6.30 p.m.

For practical reasons it was necessary to do screenings at around 6.30 p.m. so that office goers could make it. To travel to Mini Chitra in Dadar by train was hell. Commuters getting into the compartments would not let you get out, and very often we would have the heavy film *dibbas* with us. We had innovative ways of dealing with this problem. As the train entered Dadar station platform, some of us would start shouting '*machhi ka paani, machhi ka paani*' [fish water, fish water] as those fisherwomen with baskets full of fishes do; or we would shout 'Datta Samant zindabad'. [Datta Samant was a leading trade union leader and he had led the longest textile mills workers strike in the city.] Listening to this bunch of shouting commuters, people would move aside and we would royally alight from the compartments, sometimes with dear JLG [Jean-Luc Godard] on our shoulders, or Jancso squeezed in our armpits, or John Abraham held firmly in our hands.

SH: *How did you publicise the screenings? How did you get people to come?*

AG: No computer in those days, no e-mail, and the photocopying machine came later. I had bought a second hand typewriter and used it to cut stencils and get them cyclostyled for multiple copies. My programme notes would run into ten, twelve, sixteen pages with reading material sourced from several books and journals. Earlier, Manilal used to do it, before he joined Ketan Mehta's *Bhavni Bhavai* production team. After working from morning till evening in a private firm for my *rozi roti* [daily bread], I would work on preparing my cyclostyled programme notes through the night in our small house. The *takka tak takka tak* of my rickety typewriter would not allow my wife and child to sleep, but they did not mind my cruelty; after I got the copies they would help me write addresses on the envelopes, carry the bundles and post them. To save money we would send the notes, not in envelopes but stapled, Under Certificate of Posting. Initially I would address members as just Dear Members, which eventually turned into Dear Folks, which gradually—and passionately, and intimately—turned

into *Swajan*. *Swajan* means kindred, one's own people. Interestingly, in Sanskrit, *swajah* or *swajam* also means sweat, perspiration or blood! So it really jelled with our notion of *khoon paseena* romance. I really cherish the memory of this journey that led me to *Swajan*.

I must tell you that we did not have an office to work in. We would hold our executive committee meetings in open parks—fortunately there were parks in Mulund. But since our meetings would be turbulent with loud arguments and counter-arguments we would attract the attention of policemen and they would drive us away. We could bribe them only with free viewing of films organised by Screen Unit and nothing else; of course they were never interested. Consequently, we would walk the streets and conduct our meetings, walking and talking.

SH: *I always feel that there is an intimacy in the social experience of cinema. There's a social contract that everyone is making by entering that space together and watching a film together for that period of three hours. So by becoming a member of a film society you consciously make this larger social contract with various other people*

from different strata of society.

AG: Yes we were very conscious of that. Our fee was Rs 36 per year, Rs 3 per month and a member could watch as many as sixty films over a year. Again in tune with our *khoon paseena* romance, we wanted to help poor students and working class people by offering them discount or free admission—although it was illegal! There were students who got the benefits of discounts. Most of them came from rich areas such as Peddar Road, Nepean Sea Road and Malabar Hill. But later on, many students from working class areas such as Lower Parel and Curry Road also joined. We were really excited about the fact that we were finally reaching other sections of society. My firm belief was, and continues to be, that after a year of seeing films by Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Ingmar Bergman or Jean-Luc Godard and such other filmmakers, it rubs off on you. You become a better human being, a better citizen.

SG: *So a community developed through Screen Unit.*

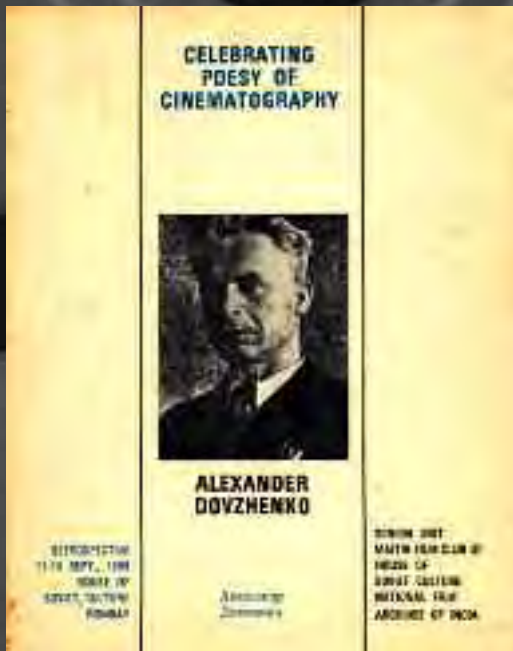
AG: Yes, absolutely. Once we had organised a retrospective of Ray's films in a municipal school classroom, showing films on a hired 16mm



Amrit Gangar at Screen Unit's Gujarati film festival.

projector. People sat on hard wooden benches on many of which students had scratched one-letter or one-sentence love stories. We had also organised an exhibition of books on cinema in a community hall—books borrowed from friends and foes, books even stolen from strangers to be returned to them later with legitimate pride. Such an exhibition had never happened and it was quite a revelation for visitors.

SH: *Would you say therefore that film societies were only concerned with showing 'art cinema'?*



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AG: No we didn't even use the word 'art'. We were just showing and discussing cinema. We just told people, come see these films and decide for yourself what cinema is, and what cinema could be.

SH: *Can you trace the growth of the film society movement in India?*

AG: By 1964 all the Nehruvian ideas had crystallised: the NFAI, the Film Finance Corporation, which later became the National Film Development Corporation (NFDC), and the Film Institute of India, which soon became the FTII. Cinema was

being contextualised. The Indian government in New Delhi took interest in cultural investment, including cinema. With that investment (adequate or inadequate) were made films such as *Bhuvan Shome* by Mrinal Sen, *Uski Roti* by Mani Kaul, and *Maya Darpan* by Kumar Shahani. The media dubbed it the Indian New Wave. Immediately after, we started Screen Unit.

I think the stage was set for film societies to grow more widely across the country. I really doubt whether it turned into a nationwide movement since the northern regions were a desert, and so were parts of the western. The only two states that were very active in film society circuits were West Bengal and Kerala, both ruled by communist governments. It took almost fifty years after film societies had existed elsewhere for them to appear in India. The world's first film society was born in Paris in 1920, and Britain's, in 1925, with some of the finest intellectuals associated with the movement: George Bernard Shaw, Julian Huxley, Clive Bell and J.B.S. Haldane. The first two in India were Amateur Cine Society (1937) and Bombay Film Society (1942), but the 'movement' could be said to have started only in 1947 when the

Calcutta Film Society was formed; the prime movers were Satyajit Ray, Chidananda Das Gupta, and others. On 13 December 1959 the parent body, FFSI, was formed when a small gathering of Delhi, Patna, Roorkee, Bombay, Madras and Calcutta Film Societies met in New Delhi. Ray was the President of FFSI.

By and large the so-called 'movement' in India remained either elitist or petit bourgeois. But Screen Unit had several Dalit writers as members, including Namdeo Dhasal, Daya Pawar and Narayan Surve.

SH: *Tell me more about this community and these individuals who mattered.*

AG: We were clear right from the beginning that Screen Unit would not have more than 150-200 members. We never hankered for 2,000 or 3,000 members like other film societies. Being small we would be more cohesive and focused and carry through our own ideas and philosophies.

Most of our members were students from all branches of knowledge, and there were also writers, poets, artists, architects, meaningfully unemployed youth, young girls and boys, women

and men, straight, semi-straight, semi-semi-straight, non-straight, et al. Their average age was about twenty-two, though there were members as old as seventy and as young as eighteen. To be a member of a formal film society you had to be eighteen. This was because film clubs were exempt from censorship laws and were allowed to show films uncut. The age restriction irritated me. A Marathi newspaper had carried an article about Screen Unit and after having read it a boy of fifteen came to my house in Kandivli, desiring to be a member. I found him serious and intelligent. I asked him to fill in a form and put his age at twenty-two in the appropriate column. Eventually he imbibed so much knowledge about cinematography, and also steadfastly helped in our day-to-day working.

And then there was an old tailor from Bandra who didn't speak English—my programme notes were in English and films were subtitled in English, but that was not an impediment for him. In my programme notes, I would talk not only about films but also about several issues affecting our urban life, pollution in Goregaon [a suburb in Bombay], for instance. Some FFSI office bearers did not like such writings of mine. For me cinema was

ANDREI TARKOVSKY

— A HOMAGE —

SCREEN UNIT



life, it could not be without life. Usually my notes would reach all members in the first week of the month. If the tailor did not receive them on time he would wait for me at Kandivli railway station, as he knew I caught a train there to reach my workplace. He would stop me and ask, “Saab, *aapka* programme note *abhi tak nahin mila*.” [Sir, your programme note has not yet reached me.] That would give me such a wonderful feeling and fill me with energy. I would briefly discuss with him, in Hindi, the forthcoming programme and films. Such was the connection with my *Swajan*.

When we screened a retrospective of Alexander Dovzhenko’s films we brought out a slim brochure with small ads from well-wishers. A generous donor (offering Rs 300) had given us an ad—a strip in the name of a well-wisher—and he gave us a cheque in the name of “Alexander Dovzhenko” a/c payee only!

There were moments of deep frustration, too, when we would find only a few people attending our screenings. We would think, what about our donkey-work? Then we would go boozing, drinking cheap desi stuff like *mosaambi*, *santra* or eclectic

mixed fruit, and think of joining the Consumer Guidance Society instead, to give something back to society.

SH: *In my opinion, Bombay’s cinephile culture was created by Screen Unit.*

Would you agree?

AG: If I say yes, I would sound arrogant. If I say no, I would sound false. So let me be arrogant, if only partly so. Some facts are on record. When we organised a retrospective of Andrei Tarkovsky’s films, it was the first time that Tarkovsky’s entire body of work had been shown in India. 35mm prints. Tarkovsky on the big screen. This was the real experience of watching cinema. The city was almost crippled by a taxi strike on the first day of the festival but to our surprise over 800 people turned up to pack the Amar Gyan Grover Auditorium at Haji Ali. The secret of how could they reach the venue, we could never know.

We brought out a small book paying homage to Tarkovsky when he died in 1987. For its blue printing paper we called it the Blue Book. It carried Jean Paul Sartre’s letter to an Italian daily defending Tarkovsky’s film *Ivan’s Childhood*, which was shown in the Venice Film Festival. The Italian communists had criticised the film but Sartre had defended it publicly. Our

friend Madan Gopal Singh had translated the letter into English and perhaps it was for the first time that it was published in English!

We chose to screen documentary and short films, which film clubs in general were not interested in. Also, most clubs would not venture to show films without subtitles, even if they were made by some of the most significant filmmakers. As for us, we wanted to familiarise ourselves with the works of important filmmakers, though not at the verbal 'story' level but at spatial-temporal levels, as cinematography. Towards this end, we showed the body of works by Dovzhenko and G. Aravindan, even though we were not able to get their films subtitled in English. We were against spoon-feeding.

I personally was not inclined towards writing synopses of films and doling them out to members. The Tarkovsky 'Blue Book', for instance, had no synopsis but only the words and expression around his cinematography, his 'filmosophy'. By insisting upon synopses, film societies across the world have made the viewers too story-conscious and linearly oriented. I often ask students and general viewers to attempt writing a synopsis

of Tarkovsky's *Mirror*; and not surprisingly, most of them find it extremely difficult to do. I like synopsis-defying films. I think my programme notes played a crucial role in creating an orientation towards cinematography. We were very clear about the way in which we wanted to create a *bhavak* or connoisseur. Young journalists such as Meenakshi Shedde and all the others who later started writing on film were members of Screen Unit.

SH: *Screen Unit published books as well. That's a particularly special achievement. How did you make that happen?*

AG: Books were a natural corollary to my extensive programme notes. The first book that we published was interestingly in Gujarati, in 1982. It was a small but very significant publication, I would say, published when Gujarati (talkie) cinema had completed fifty years of its existence. We had also organised a big seminar and a festival as companion events. Many non-Gujaratis attended the events and helped us financially too. The publication cost only Rs 5 and it doubled as an entry pass. It contained Manilal's careful compilation of Gujarati films produced between 1932



**SCREEN UNIT'S HOMAGE
TO
RITWIK GHATAK**



and 1982, and a study of Gujarati cinema based on extensive research done by the historian Virchand Dharamsey and myself. We had put forward an argument that many of the Indian silent films were actually Gujarati films: despite the absence of language you could see it in the milieu, costume and overall environment. We had also given a list of studios that had produced silent films.

On Ritwik Ghatak we published two

major books. One, titled *A Return to the Epic*, by Ashish Rajadhyaksha was published in 1982 and formally released in Calcutta. The late Ghatak's wife Suromadi was at the function and as she said, the book was first of its kind in English and it threw new light on Ritwik-da's oeuvre. This was followed by another major book on him, *Arguments/Stories*, in 1984. Edited by Ashish Rajadhyaksha and myself, the book was much appreciated for its structure and approach to Ritwik-da's work and thoughts.



The late Hassan Kutty, Screen Unit member, working on the Ritwik Ghatak retrospective.

There was the Blue Book on Tarkovsky, which I told you about. Mind you, we had no money whatsoever when we were carrying out all these activities. *Hum to bilkul kadke they* [We were absolutely penniless] but we had loving members. There was Prof. Mashruwala—a Reader from Bombay University’s Department of Economics, if I remember right—who would pull out whatever chips he had in his pockets and force me to accept them. He would say, “*Yeh tu rakh le, tumko chahiye programme notes ke liye.*” [You keep this; you need it for your programme notes.] This kind of camaraderie had evolved over the years through our work, our beliefs, and our selfless craziness.

And here I would like to put on record my gratitude to my wife, Kuntal and my daughter Akanksha, who was still studying in primary school and my son Viprav, who was very young. They all contributed by helping me in posting programme notes, writing or pasting names and addresses, and bearing with my reaching home late at night. Unfortunately, it was not possible for them to travel in local trains particularly in the evenings and they

missed the films we screened. They had also to do their homework. And I can say similar things about my colleagues who were also putting in hours of work. Nobody expected anything in return; in fact, we were spending money from our own pockets. Those days were different, there was still some idealism left. But gradually, the only cultural centre in the city of Mumbai was the Stock Exchange building. After Harshad Mehta [the stock-market scamster] everybody had started “thinking big” and making money, more money... It wasn’t strange that such an environment had an impact on the film society ‘movement’. The membership of several film societies, and hence of the federal body, had begun to dwindle while the Stock Exchange was growing taller in its height. As money-making dreams could not be realised, longer queues formed outside temples in the city; the city was experiencing a kind of deep vacuum that culture could not fill. Unfortunately, film societies were finding themselves mired in this vacuum, losing social contact somehow. I think this could be an interesting subject of research.

SH: Which in your view were some of the more interesting film societies in the country?

AG: Though scattered unevenly across the country, according to my guestimate there were over 250 film societies affiliated to the FFSI which once had 150,000 members. To my knowledge and firsthand experience, there were a few smaller film societies across the country, in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh in southern India, Maharashtra and Gujarat in western India, West Bengal in eastern India, and barely any in northern India, except perhaps Delhi, though there were some film societies in small towns there.

44 In Mumbai, there was Sahridaya, which I had mentioned earlier. They showed Malayalam films and also came out with a book that provided valuable historical information about the Malayalam cinema in English. There was Cine Society run by an indefatigable old man, Abdul Ali, whose obsession was films produced by New Theatres, and he would do anything to obtain them and show them to his members. He had discovered prints of some Hindi films from Chor Bazaar and railway godowns. He also came out with informative brochures whenever he had bigger events. Those days when many Indian films were not easily

accessible or even seen on television, Cine Society provided an opportunity to see them on celluloid. Abdul Ali was always dressed in white khadi bush shirt and trousers. He was a trade unionist who headed some hotel unions, including that of the Ambassador hotel in Mumbai. It was really fun to see old Hindi films along with his members, most of them past fifty or sixty years old, clapping at dialogues and singing along with heroes and heroines like K.L. Saigal and Kanan Devi. He liked P.C. Barua films and music composed by R.C. Boral and Pankaj Mullick. In his youth, he had personally met Subhash Chandra Bose. I would sometime attend his screenings held at Tarabai Hall near Marine Lines railway station.

Also in Bombay, there was a film club on the Bombay University campus, and another one in Ruia College run by students—Hira Stevens, a professor there, was associated with it, and if I remember right they published a cyclostyled journal, very well produced and rich in content. There was Film Forum, which had its own office and library of books in Dadar, and many filmmakers and technicians from Bombay film industry as its members; it also

published an interesting journal. In Nagpur, there was Gora Ganguly and his colleagues who quite imaginatively ran a film society called Cine Montage. There was one in Latur which young thinker Atul Deulgaonkar was associated with. Down south, in Trichur there was an interesting film society run by the academic and writer I. Shanmugha Das, cultural activist and media person Neelan, and their colleagues. They were responsible for bringing out an important journal in Malayalam called *Drishyakala*. And in Chennai there was Chennai Film Club in which then upcoming short filmmakers such as Siva Kumar were active. They all brought out programme notes and other publications in their respective languages. In Calcutta, there were several but the Cine Central was huge, with its own office. They brought out a monthly and were able to bring out some important special issues on Ritwik Ghatak. In Jodhpur there was an interesting film society run by Prof. Maheshwari. There was one in Jamshedpur. These smaller film societies with enlightened leadership, if I may use this word, were quite focussed and developed their own character and commitment.

SH: *Do you think film societies have nurtured film culture in India?*

AG: To my mind, the film society 'movement' in India had remained largely petit bourgeois. Most of the film society organisers were middle class careerists hankering after little benefits such as getting passes for film festivals, and attending meetings, seminars and parties organised by foreign consulates and embassies. By and large the 'movement' has not contributed significantly to developing deeper aesthetic roots. I also feel that this 'movement' has failed to develop a critical attitude towards cinema.

SH: *Nowadays, with DVD, people barely get out of their homes to go to the cinema. So what happens to that kind of collective viewing of film?*

AG: Social and cultural clusters keep on redefining themselves and with increasing technological interventions, they find themselves lost sometimes in real spaces but found in virtual spaces. Social dialogue is taking place almost anonymously in cyberspace, through Facebook and all that. The physical get-togethers for viewing films in darkened auditoria during film society screenings, for example, have almost disappeared, and with that the

dialogic space, the space for thought articulation, has either shrunk or changed substantially.

Everyone wants to have big film festivals with glamour and glitz. Mediocrity and brazenly low-quality stuff are masquerading as the best and people don't really have many choices in the world's largest democracy. In this atmosphere, whatever is small yet intellectually rigorous gets brutally pushed out, but nevertheless there is always hope, since the whole of humanity is not homogenous or media-driven. You just have to have faith in yourself and keep doing what you believe in.

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Talking is important. Writing is important. Articulating your thoughts is important. And it's rigour. You have to read a lot. That is not happening. Maybe someone can talk about *kachra* [rubbish] in a very significant manner. *Hum Aapke Hai Kaun* has produced so many thought-provoking essays within social theories. We are not even paying attention to our own films. In fact at Screen Unit we also thought that it was important to study popular culture so we had a seminar on *Sholay*. You can't just reject it. When ten million people are seeing a particular film, you have to talk about it: that

was the postmodernist argument.

SH: Do you think television has had a huge role to play in these changes in viewing?

AG: I don't think so. Whether to watch it or not is a conscious, personal choice. Television is just a piece of furniture. Yes, it does challenge the human sense of discretion. As a matter of fact, television with hundreds of channels does not really offer you many choices. There could be many channels catering to stock markets, many more catering to sadhus, still more catering to family feuds. The world's largest democracy is in many senses an illusion, *maya*. Television is *maya*, and humanity's natural function is to understand this *maya*.

The film society's function was to develop a critical sense, which I don't think happened.

In fact, when television serials such as the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* started, most film society members chose to see them uncritically sitting at home on Sunday mornings rather than going to New Talkies, Bandra for the FFSI joint screenings of film societies to see a Bergman, a Ghatak, an Ozu, a Mizoguchi or a Ray or any

other classic. But why blame television? You cannot stop the way technologies change but you can perhaps guard yourself against their undesirable grip on your life; if not, you will increasingly crave for censorship and at the same time extol the virtues of democracy.

SH: *It's true, there is a space to develop a critical sense whether new technologies come or go.*

AG: Exactly. Technology is not your master, you know. You are the master of technology. My personal observation is that there is hardly any difference between a human being watching a television and a cat doing it. Motor responses purely at retina level are almost the same, and television viewing is mostly at retina level. Passive. The older you grow, the more you like television's company. It's passive-to-passive time- pass. It is difficult to



Screen Unit activists put up a poster at the Ritwik Ghatak retrospective.

contemplate and imbibe while reading a book on the computer screen. As a consequence, the world is growing in superficiality of thought. It is a serious matter that we need to counteract. It is not technology per se that is responsible; it is the human decision.

SH: *Do you think that there still is a space for a film-society-type community to exist today, and that one should pursue building that community?*

AG: Community is a human need. And that keeps happening in one form or another, maybe not on a large scale. In Kandivli where I live, we started screening films late night —around 10 p.m. or so—in a local school, thinking that people would come with their families after dinner and leisurely watch some of the classic films that we would enable them to see. But what happened most of the time was that it wasn't the people from the neighbourhood who turned up, but people coming all the way from Malabar Hill and Nepean Sea Road. This was a very strange phenomenon.

Unfortunately, this is the age of fast food and shortcuts; everybody wants to learn in the shortest possible time.

Even Tagore's Santiniketan is shortening some of its courses' learning duration! However, talking about a community existence and experience, Ninasam in Karnataka still exists [See Page 6 for Usha Rao's article on the Ninasam Tirugata network]. What is also of concern is that in this country of over one billion, there are hardly any good film-studies departments in universities or outside them. To our young students we have given the fake choices of 'mass media' and 'mass communication' and in the process have created mass(ive) mountains of *kachra*. There are so many Everests in this country, the filth-capped Everests that we don't see but are proud of, many more than the real majestic one in the Himalayas, whose purity we don't seem to be concerned about enough to preserve.

The problem is that people have less time to think, to introspect, to ponder, to read, to listen to music, to really meditate, or look at the sky to feel the moon. Even I don't remember when I last saw the moon! Being unable to look at the sky at our will, we are missing the cinema.



Bengali Little Magazines: Defiant Response to the Dominion

Aryanil Mukherjee

All photographs courtesy Sandipan Chakraborty



Anti-colonial, socially conscious, avant-garde: many are the faces that the Little Magazine Movement of Bengal has worn since its birth in the late-nineteenth century in the shadow of the Tagore family. Its vast body of literature often created upheavals—with the radical Hungry Generation of the 1960s, for instance, or the anarchist spirit that prevailed in the wake of Naxalism and the Emergency—but over the decades it changed public taste and gained widespread acceptance. Aryanil Mukherjee gives us a brief personal assessment of the Movement and focuses on some of the more influential Little Magazines among the thousands that exist in a Bengali India today.



Like many other cultural phenomena that erected strongholds in Bengal, what is popularly called the 'Little Magazine Movement' (and what purists have termed 'Alternative', 'Parallel' or 'Experimental' Magazine Movement) had, for the most part, historically grown as a defiant and anarchist response to the cultural patterns and politics of the dominion. At the same time, it might also be described as 'subaltern' in the sense that it derived a high sense of cogency and self-satisfaction by borrowing from an early-twentieth-century western concept.¹

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Typically, as the term has been used in the western hemisphere, a Little Magazine was either a small or a non-commercial publication (or both) that either catered to a smaller private community or was published to shelf experimental, avant-garde or non-conformist literature (or both), often raising its voice against the ceaseless domination of the largely commercial literary agencies. Whether the concept of the Little Magazine arose from England or North America remains difficult to assess today. Some refer to American poet and essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson's magazines as the first truly 'Little' magazines (that



emerged throughout the nineteenth century from the East Coast of the United States).² When, in 1913, Chicago's Harriet Monroe unleashed *POETRY*, it was just as much a Little Magazine, in concept. Little Magazines were available, if not abundant, in England since the early nineteenth century. Literary critics such as Francis Jeffrey, Sydney Smith and others founded the *Edinburgh Review* in 1802. In France, it is believed that *Revue du Temps Présent*, founded in order to present a



“Catholic point of view”,³ was one of the earliest Little Magazines. These French magazines of rarity mostly addressed *les jeunes* (the fashionable youth) and their “pages exhibited groupings and coalitions which are retrospectively amazing”.⁴ *Revue du Temps Présent* published, among other respectable French litterateurs, Francois Mauriac. By the mid-twentieth century most European countries had an established Little Magazine scene and some like *POETRY*, *Edinburgh Review* or

Westminster Review had turned out to be dandily marketable and decently mainstream.⁵

In a very similar vein, although largely unconscious of these western developments, several literary magazines emerged in the undivided Indian province of Bengal in the nineteenth century. Interestingly, most of Rabindranath Tagore’s early and mid-life work was carried by these magazines. Tagore’s earliest work came out in *Tattwabodhini Patrika*.⁶ Edited by Tagore’s illustrious father Maharshhi Debendranath Tagore, *Tattwabodhini* began its tenure in 1943 with serious social, political, religious and literary motives and ideals at its core. This magazine was seen in those days as an organ of the newly formed Brahma Samaj. Accordingly, forming public opinion about various social reforms remained a major agenda. What made it exemplary in the light of today, however, was the vociferous support it lent to issues such as women’s education and religious openness.

Bangadarshan, *Bharatee* and *Prabasee* were three of the earliest magazines of repute where Tagore began publishing his literary work. *Bangadarshan* was a monthly literary journal founded in

1872, with noted novelist Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838-1894) serving as its editor for the first four years. The magazine focussed on prose and even launched a publishing agency and club called Alochana Sabha for literary dissemination. Many of Tagore's first essays appeared in *Bangadarshan*. Later, Tagore wrote his famous novel *Chokher Bali* for the magazine. *Nastanirh* (which was later brilliantly filmed by Satyajit Ray as *Charulata*) was also published here.

Similar are the histories of *Bharatee* and *Prabasee*. *Bharatee* began with the Tagore family at the helm; it was edited and published by Rabindranath's elder brothers Jyotirindranath and Dwijendranath and, for a brief stint, edited by his elder sister Swarnakumari Devi. Later, in 1898, Rabindranath took charge as editor. *Prabasee* began with Rabindranath's contemporary Ramananda Chattopadhyay (1865-1943) as its chief editor. The name of the magazine *Prabasee* (non-native) suggested, among other things, that a considerable volume of literary work came from writers who lived outside Calcutta (the literary capital of Bengal) and in other states as well.

There were other literary magazines in the mid- to late-nineteenth century that provided room for serious work in 'vernacular' literature: *Abodhbandhu* (which regularly featured Rabindranath and the ideal of his youth, poet Biharilal Chakrabarty), *Bibidharta Sanga* edited by Rajendralal Mitra (which often carried critiques of Bankimchandra's novels by Jogendranath Ghosh), *Pratibimba*, *Annibas* etc.

Most of the nineteenth and early-twentieth century Little Magazines aimed at defining a new Bengali



literature enriched and enlightened by ideas borrowed in part from post-Renaissance Europe and mildly catalysed by the ambience of Victorian literature, while nurturing, at the same time, a nationalist social character and culture in its womb. In design and conception the magazines were fashioned after British and French contemporary journals and printed in the newly developed western 'letter press' printing machines (Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, a versatile scholar, social reformer, polymath and a pillar of the Bengal Renaissance, helped modify the Bangla letter types,

which were first cut in 1780). There was, of course, no outcry against the domineering 'literary establishment' as nothing of the sort existed at that time. However, these magazines were beginning to vaguely form a socio-political awareness of the country's 'colonial' state among the Bengali intelligentsia. In the latter half of the nineteenth century many of these Little Magazines were constantly publishing political essays, satires and spoofs accompanied by witty cartoons.

Tagore's Long Shadow

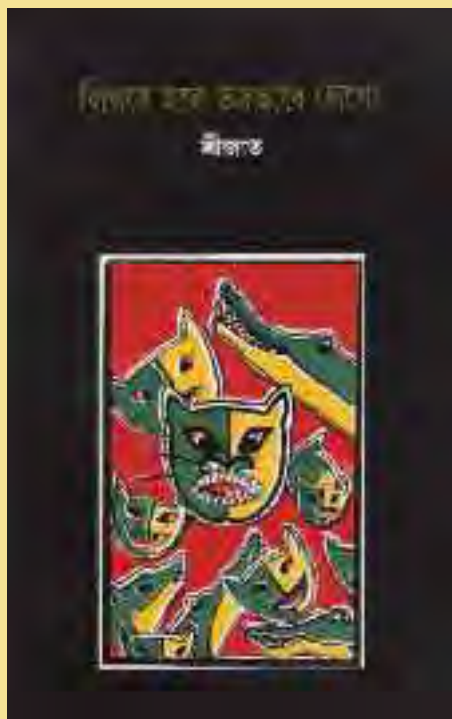
As the gradual spread of socio-political awareness continued past the first quarter of the twentieth century, major literary revisions were taking place simultaneously. Once again Rabindranath Tagore precipitated these events, but this time, they were rebellious attempts at breaking away from mainstream literature that both prospered from and was plagued by his iconic presence. The two most important magazines of this period were *Kallol* and *Kabita*. The *Kallol* group (a band of green, energetic and exceedingly talented poets and writers including Premendra Mitra, Kazi Nazrul Islam, Achintyakumar Sengupta, Gokulchandra Nag, Dineshranjan Das, Manindralal Basu



and Buddhadeb Basu) began publishing the magazine (1923-1935) with the motto of 'modernising' Bengali literature and in order to move out of Tagore's lengthening shadow. By the time the group disbanded in the mid-1930s, largely because of ceaseless attacks by Tagore loyalists, the *Kallol* group and magazine had launched what could be called the first Bengali literary movement. Energised by it, a number of other magazines emerged in the leeway, namely, *Uttara* (1925), *Pragati* (1926), *Kalikalam* (1926) and *Purbasha* (1932).

56 There was also *Shanibarar Chithi*, a pro-Tagore journal that rivalled, and professed contempt for, *Kallol*. This led to a famous literary feud in which Tagore was obliged to intervene. He eventually wrote a few essays in *Kallol* praising its literary efforts while offering a mild critique of its "realistic literature" which displayed a "poverty combined with the unrestraint of lust".⁷

Nearly all members of the *Kallol* group made their mark in Bengali literature and many have earned an immortal place; to name a few: Premendra Mitra, Buddhadeb (Buddhadeva) Basu (Bose), Kazi Nazrul Islam and Jibanananda Das



(who wasn't strictly a member but shared a close camaraderie with the editors, was a regular contributor, and was often a target of the poisoned arrows hurled at him and *Kallol* by *Shanibarar Chithi*, especially by Sajanikanta Das). Of them, Buddhadeb Basu went on to inspire his own and a subsequent generation of poets with his Little Poetry Magazine *Kavita*.

Kavita was the first exclusive poetry magazine in Bengali. The first issue



was published from Calcutta in October 1935. It was initially co-edited with Basu by Premendra Mitra with editorial assistance from a younger Samar Sen. *Kavita* took its name from Harriet Monroe's *Poetry*, which was published from Chicago and known to the world as the first ever exclusive poetry magazine. In an article on Bengali poetry in *The Times Literary Supplement* of 1 February 1936,⁸ Edward Thompson discussed the first issue of *Kavita* at length and called Basu "one of the most

distinguished of Bengal's younger writers".

With the advent of the Mountbatten years leading to the birth of independent India, the 1940s spawned a socialist consciousness especially during The Second World War years. In the thrall of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) movement, a number of magazines were born to protect and represent liberal arts. Of them, *Bohurupee* magazine brought out by the theatre group of the same name, edited by legendary stage-actor Sambhu Mitra and his cohorts, claims significance. *Parichay*, a leftist literary magazine, gained prominence during this time. Sudhindranath Dutta, one of the brightest Bengali poets from the post-Tagore era, was its earliest editor, followed by stalwarts such as Gopal Halder, Subhas Mukhopadhyay and Amitava Dasgupta.

A Radical Storm

Growing out of its formative years, the Little Magazine Movement assumed serious proportions in the 1950s and 1960s, taking the literary stage by a radical storm and changing public taste. Certain important magazines were born during the period that not



only became instruments of thorough experimentation but also gained widespread public acceptance over a decade. Some of them were beginning to throw a significant challenge to mainstream publications. A generation of younger writers emerged in the process; they invaded the big publishing houses and this led to the rapid 'modernisation' (in a colonial sense) of Bangla literature.

In the meanwhile the listless Jibanananda Das, whose poetic dimensions had exceeded those of nearly all his contemporaries but had sadly remained virtually unnoticed, died tragically in 1955 when he was run over by a tram at the junction of Rashbehari Avenue and Sarat Bose Road in Calcutta. Of his peers, only Buddhadeb Basu, the most acclaimed among the 1930s generation, demonstrated the courage of his convictions by hailing Das, through a series of analytical essays, as the worthiest Bengali poet since Tagore. Shortly following Das' premature demise, a Little Magazine called *Mayukh* (edited by poet and scholar Bhumendra Guha) brought out the first special issue on Jibanananda Das. *Mayukh* ran just a handful of issues but gained a legendary place in Bengali literary memory.

One of the earliest and foremost literary magazines in the 1950s that began transforming public taste was *Krittibas*, which first appeared in 1953 and provided a platform for young, experimental writers, mainly poets. Initiated by Sunil Gangopadhyay, Ananda Bagchi and Dipak Mazumdar, *Krittibas* soon turned into virtually a single-editor mode with Sunil Gangopadhyay as the main editor; Sarat Kumar Mukhopadhyay and Samarendra Sengupta filled in during his absence. The magazine did a well-known special issue on Hindi litterateur Phanishwarnath Renu,



edited by Samir Roychoudhury. Despite frequent closures and periods of interrupted printing, *Krittibas* still lives today as a literary magazine that has journeyed the Bengali literary scene for more than half a century. Celebrated author Sunil Gangopadhyay continues to work as the main editor, ably supported by others.

Alongside *Krittibas*, a few other magazines of vitality emerged around the same time, many of them living on for several decades. *Shatabhishha*, primarily a poetry magazine, was edited by stellar poets such as Alok

Sarkar and Alokranjan Dasgupta. It was seen as a foil to *Krittibas* because its literature was profound yet conventional in its approach, while the *Krittibas* writers' radical dissociation from society was reflected in their work, not all of which, however, was of an enduring nature. Pranabendu Dasgupta's *Alinda*, Sunil Kumar Nandy's *Anukta* (both poetry journals), poet-actor Soumitra Chatterjee's *Ekkhan* and Shibnarayan Roy's *Jiggasa* were among the other respected journals of the period that are remembered among other things for their awesome longevity.

The famous Hungry Generation Movement broke out in Calcutta during this time, in the early 1960s and took the fire to other parts of the country as well. Time Magazine wrote in their 20 November 1964 issue:

A thousand years ago, India was the land of Vātsyāyana's Kāma Sūtra, the classic volume that so thoroughly detailed the art of love that its translators still usually leave several key words in Sanskrit. Last week, in a land that has become so straitly laced that its movie heroines must burst into song rather than be kissed, five scruffy young poets were hauled into Calcutta's dreary Bankshall Court for publishing works that would



have melted even Vātsyāyana's pen. The Hungry Generation had arrived.

Born in 1962, with an inspirational assist from visiting U.S. Beatnik Allen Ginsberg, Calcutta's Hungry Generation is a growing band of young Bengalis with tigers in their tanks. Somewhat unoriginally they insist that only in immediate physical pleasure do they find any meaning in life, and they blame modern society for their emptiness. On cheaply printed paper, they pour forth a torrent of starkly explicit erotic writings, most of them based on their own exploits ("In the Taj Mahal with My Sister") or on dreams. "My theme is me," says Hungry Poet Shaileshwar Ghose, 26, a schoolteacher. "I say what I feel. I feel frustration, hunger for love, hunger for food."

Apart from eroticism, the Hungryalists had an aggressive political agenda. In their manifesto they had fiercely proclaimed their goals:

To depoliticise the soul of each solitary individual
To let every individual realise that existence is pre-political
To let it be noted historically that politics invites the man of the third quality, aesthetically the most lowest substratum of society, at its service



To make it clear that the conceptions of Elite and that of the Politician differ absolutely after the death of Gandhi

To declare the belief that all intellectual fakeries called political theory are essentially the founts of fatal and seductive lies erupting out of abominable irresponsibility

To demarcate the actual position of a politician in a modern society, somewhere between the dead body of a harlot and a donkey's tail

To never respect a politician, to



literature and had violated Section 292 of the Indian Penal Code. While several Bengali poets, some branded as their alleged literary nemeses, offered to heroically defend their cause in support of literary freedom, the case continued for months. The young writers were suspended from their jobs immediately upon arrest. Later in the year, charges were dropped against five of them, but the prosecution of Malay Roychoudhury continued. On 28 December 1965, he was found guilty by the court and sentenced to a fine of Rs 200 or one month's imprisonment. Roychoudhury's poem "Prachanda boidyutin chhutaar" (translated into English by the poet as "Stark Electric Jesus") was tainted with ignominy and instantly banned.

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whatever species or organism he may belong to
To never escape from politics, and at the same time, neither let politics escape from the terror of our aesthetic being
To remodel the basis upon which political creeds are founded⁹

The infamous Hungry Generation court case followed in 1965 as six of these poets were arrested following allegations that they published and circulated 'obscene' and 'pornographic'

An article from the *Kaurab Hungry Generation Archive* sums it up thus:

The word Hungry was coined from Geoffrey Chaucer's line "In Sowerie Hungry Tyme". The philosophical background of the movement was based on Oswald Spengler's idea of Non Linear Time in a particular culture. The movement spanned from 1961-1965. It was launched in November 1961 from the Patna residence of Malay Roychoudhury and his elder brother Samir Roychoudhury. As always, the

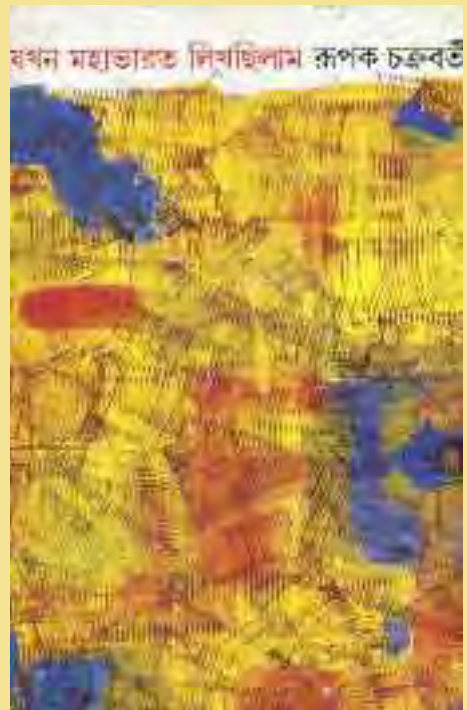
west lives with the misconception that the movement was inspired by the Beat Generation writers especially because Ginsberg lived with Malay and Samir Roychoudhury for a while in Patna in the spring of 1963...

This movement is characterized by expression of closeness to nature and sometimes tenets of existentialism. Although initially based in Kolkata, it had active membership in North Bengal, Tripura and Benares. The movement influenced Allen Ginsberg as much as it influenced American poetry through the Beat poets who visited Calcutta, Patna, Chaibasa and Benaras during the Sixties decade. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, later a professor and editor, was associated with the Hungry Generation movement. Shakti Chattopadhyay, Sandipan Chattopadhyay, Saileshwar Ghosh, Subhas Ghosh left the movement in 1964. More than 100 manifestos were issued during 1961-65...

Howard McCord published Malay Roychoudhury's controversial poem Stark Electric Jesus from Washington State University. This poem has been translated in several languages of the world and was included in the anthology "Poems for the Millennium" edited by Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris. The work of Hungry writers appeared in the

Citylights Journal, edited by Lawrence Ferlinghetti and in special issues of American magazines including Kulchur edited by Lita Hornik, Klactoveedsedsteen edited by Carl Weissner, Elcorno Emplunado edited by Margaret Randall, Evergreen Review edited by Barney Rosset, Salted Feathers, Intrepid, and San Francisco Earthquake, during the 1960s...also known as Hungryalism, the movement challenged mainstream literary genres. The group wrote a largely deviant poetry and prose in style, form and content.¹⁰

The 1960s marked an era of literary



magazines in Bengal: *Shruti* (which was poetry-centric), *Shastravirodhi* (which focused on new modernist fiction), *Dhbangsakalin*, *Khuddharta*, *Nimsahitya* etc. Poetry magazines became increasingly commonplace in the 1960s, and Pabitra Mukhopadhyay's *Kabipatra* is one of the longest living ones from that decade. Poetry was published in exclusive poetry monthlies (*masik kabita*), weeklies and dailies. Celebrated poet Shakti Chattopadhyay brought out *Saptahik Kabita* (Poetry Weekly) while Bimal Roy Choudhury edited *Dainik Kabita* (Daily Poetry). Even

from small towns like Chandannagore, hourly poetry magazines such as *Ghantuki* came out. Together, these literary developments created a vitriolic yet fertile and liberating ground for future generations to reap from.

Spirit of the 1970s

The spirit of anarchism continued into the 1970s, which is perhaps the most volatile period in the history of independent India beginning with the Bangladesh war of 1971, the Naxalite movement, widespread food shortage, far-flung unemployment, a streak of natural calamities and mine collapses leading right up to the Emergency when the world's largest democracy was brought to "a grinding halt".¹¹ Jyotirmoy Dutta, a talented poet (originally from the *Krittibas* group) and the editor of literary magazine *Kolkata*, poet-editor Sambhu Rakkhit and others were thrown into prison. An amazingly fresh generation of Little Magazines arrived on stage, more avant-garde than before in their practice and expression of ingenuity and some never hesitating to pronounce their political agenda. Some of these magazines included *Kolkata*, *Giraffe*, *Korak*, *Atmaprakash*, *Shatabdee* (from Shillong, Ed. Shankar Chakrabarty), *Barruchi* (Ed.



Shymalkanti Das), *Chaturanga, Ebang* (Ed. Dhurjati Chanda) and *Kaurab* (Ed. Kamal Chakrabarty).

My personal association with *Kaurab* began in the early 1990s in the steel city of Jamshedpur from where the magazine had emerged in 1970. The core members of the *Kaurab* group were poets and writers (mainly the fervid foursome: editor Kamal Chakrabarty, Swadesh Sen, Barin Ghosal and Shankar Lahiri) who attempted to ring out a fresh and marginal voice that broke away from existing tropes and values of parallel Bengali literature. Being a Bangla literary magazine published from outside of Bengal (from Jamshedpur, Jharkhand, erstwhile Bihar), *Kaurab* had an outside-in identity. Although intensely urban, they invested deeply in making connections with the emerging industrial culture of a small town gradually transforming itself into a city, and the surrounding hinterland, rich in adivasi (native tribal) cultural traditions. In fact, their urbanity itself was intricately layered, retaining strong creative links with its literary production, the lived memories of the Tata steel furnaces and the robust energies of changing adivasi languages and cultures.



Curiously, in both prose and poetry, their use of language gave currency to a ubiquitous urban Bangla tongue of the everyday, while it resonated deeply with the accent of the inner diaspora and the changing adivasi languages around them. *Kaurab* also pioneered new methodologies of dissemination and poetry appreciation in the form of Poetry Camps or workshops conducted by a small group of writers in nature camps, a technique that found many followers in later years.





Kaurab's poetry, often fuelled by rediscoveries of innovative language patterns from the past, went through austere experiments with language, speech and reading. As I took over as editor of the magazine in 2005 (it is now run in both print and electronic media but with a difference in content), these key values were inculcated in me, my co-editors and other younger writers and we continue to invest in experimental and innovative genres of literature. During my tenure as a budding poet

preparing to plunge into the world of experimental poetry and poetics, I had seen a continuous growth of poetry magazines in the past twenty years. Some of them deserve special mention. In 1991, a handful of poets from the 1980s generation began *Kabita Campus*, a poetry bimonthly devoted to experimental and innovative poetry. They initially followed a 'rotary editing' model where each issue would be edited by a different member of the group. As the youngest member, I had my first opportunity of editing an issue in the early 1990s. The magazine survived the test of time and still continues to live.

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Energised mainly by a large group of poets, a wave of 'postmodernism' swept Bengal in the 1990s, continuing up until 2003-04. Senior poet Samir Roychoudhury (Malay's elder brother) brought out *Hawa 49* (49 Winds), the first Bengali journal of Poetics. Prabhat Choudhury's bi-weekly magazine *Kabita Pakkbik* gathered a teeming generation of bright young poets who were attuned to the postmodern idea of 'incompleteness' and the 'loss of the subject'. Another of my founding associations, *Natun Kabita*, edited by Swapan Roy and Ranjan Maitra, was a poetry journal



published at the turn of the new millennium. It embraced several postmodernist ideas in its own way, furthering them to nurture a new lyrical poetry of sound and language innovations.

The Bengali Little Magazine Movement saw the emergence of some notable authors who largely stayed away from the big presses either by conscious choice or due to rejection or mere happenstance. Many of them were novelists and prose writers. Kamalkumar Mazumdar and Amiyabhusan Mazumdar, two of Bengal's most revered modernist writers, wrote mainly for Little Magazines. Novelists and short-story writers of the likes of Asim Roy, Gopal Halder, Arup Ratan Basu and partly Sandipan Chattopadhyay had to live on the margins and depend on small journals and presses. Udayan Ghosh, Kamal Chakrabarty, Nabarun Bhattacharya, Amalendu Chakrabarty and the likes published the starkest of their experimental work in Little Magazines. Subimal Misra, whose longstanding passive resistance of the Bangla conventional press has become history, has finally emerged after years of rigorous aggression against the literary establishment, blasphemy and self-publishing as a litterateur of great

contemporary interest even among some of the larger English publishers.

Acknowledgement

Partly handicapped by the absence of accurate data, it is hard to say precisely how many Little Magazines are published in Bengal today, and even harder to say how many exist in a Bengali India. However, a rough guess would lead us to tens of thousands. Many of these magazines of the past and present, at least a few hundreds, have made significant contributions to parallel Bengali literature. While it is challenging to elucidate individual contributions, I wish to honour each one of these magazines, which, through rigorous dedication and discipline, has helped materialise a journey that few languages, cultures, traditions and their bearers have experienced.

Sincere thanks go to Shankar Chakrabarty (ex-editor of the now defunct *Shatabdee*, present co-editor of *Kabisammelan*), Shymalkanti Das (ex-editor of *Bararuchi*, present editor of *Kabisammelan*) and literary scholar Somabrata Sarkar for providing research support.



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Marathi Little Magazines: Recasting Language, Resisting Norms

Mangesh Narayanrao Kale
(Translated from the Marathi by Shanta Gokhale)

All photographs courtesy the author

Poetry was the favoured genre of the Little Magazine Movement of Maharashtra, which spanned a stormy decade-and-a-half of social and literary awakening. The poets, who exuded the raw anger of the underdog, cocked a snook at middle class sensibilities, wrote in their regional and sub-cultural dialects and evolved new criteria for literature. Little Magazines appeared sporadically and died prematurely but their influence was overarching and undeniable. Mangesh Narayanrao Kale dwells on their heyday and their contribution to Marathi literature.



Little Magazines reflected an important literary sensibility of the twentieth century, particularly of the post-Second World War years. They fostered writers who aimed at breaking establishment norms—novelists and playwrights who emerged out of social movements such as the Beat Generation in the U.S. and the Angry Young Men in Britain. These movements, which represented a surge of social awakening, had their roots in a new awareness about life that found expression in new literary forms, as also in contemporary art forms—the visual arts in particular underwent a veritable upheaval. Norman Mailer, Herbert Gold and Raymond Chandler were some of the U.S. writers who contributed consistently to Little Magazines, while the U.K. saw a generation of Angry Young writers such as John Wain, Kingsley Amis, Colin Wilson and John Braine.

The Little Magazine Movement spread all over the world. In India, it found voice in Bengali, Assamese, Hindi, Kannada, Udiya, Punjabi, Tamil and Telugu, and its echoes were heard in Marathi too. It chiefly spanned the years after Independence, particularly the 1950s, which was a critical period since the generation of

idealists in the political and social sphere that society had looked up to was in decline, and its place was being rapidly taken by a self-centred generation. During this period the highly respected literary magazine *Satyakatha* emerged, and the short story gained status. This was the age of Dadaism in France, of Allen Ginsberg, Corso, the *Little Review* in England and Kolkata's Hungry Generation (See Page 50 for Aryanil Mukherjee's article on Bengali Little Magazines). Although these influences were not visible in the first phase of the Little Magazine Movement in Marathi, they became sharply evident in publications such as *Atharva* and *Aso* of the second phase.

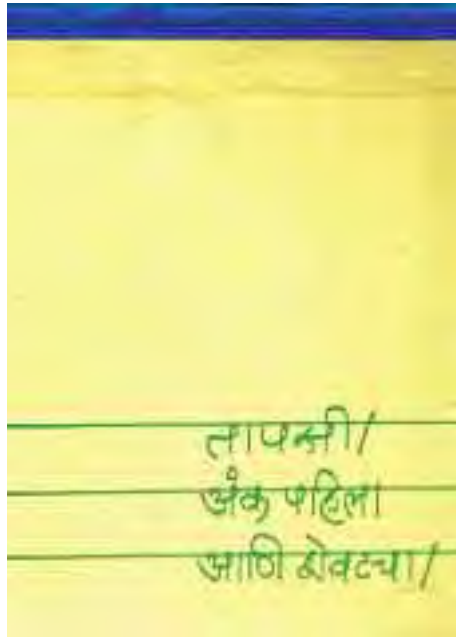
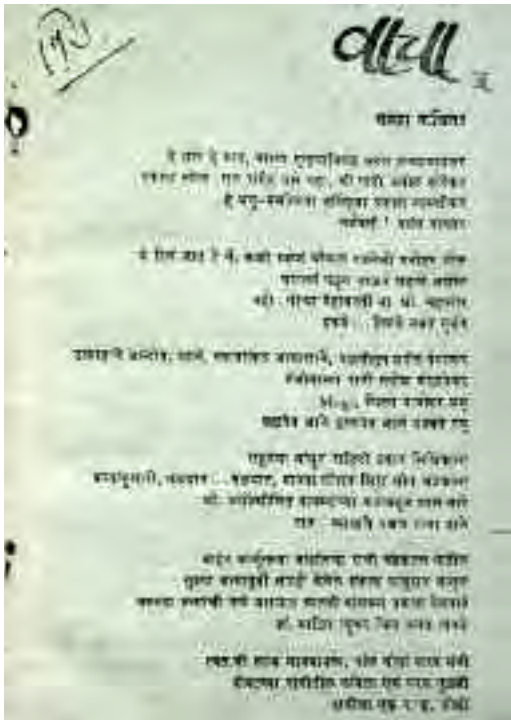
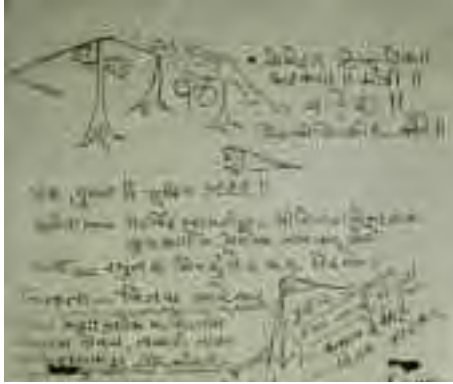
The first phase of the movement began with *Shabd*, edited by Ramesh Samarth (15 June 1955). It is generally considered to be the first Marathi Little Magazine and it was sometimes cyclostyled, sometimes printed. It was followed by *Disha* (3 November 1955), *Nave Lekhan* (September 1958), *Roopagandha* (1959), *Roop* (10 January 1961) and *Rang* (1961).

The second phase that spans the 1960s comprised seventeen publications: *Atharva*, *Aso*, *Ata*,



Bharud, Hema, Akshare, Phakta, Timba, Tapasi, Yeru, Vacha, Kawala, Dainik Chakravarti, Shabd (Complete), Sa. Na. Vi. Vi, Shri Shabd and ABCDE. The special issue that

ABCDE devoted to a bibliography of Little Magazines contains information about twenty-three that were published up to 1969. Some of them wound up during this period while others disappeared for a while and then were back in circulation. These magazines had an unconventional format: they could be four-pagers or eight-pagers, square or rectangular, and could look like inland-letter forms or fliers. But they also were, without exception, short-lived: *Atharva*, *Bharud*, *Tapasi*, and *Hema* lasted only one issue; some stretched to two or three; *Aso*, *Phakta* and *Dainik Chakravarti* were comparatively long-lived, with twelve, fifteen and eighteen issues respectively.



The Editor of *ABCDE*, Chandrakant Khot, devoted its entire fifth (and last) issue to interviews with the editor-publishers of Little Magazines. A few of them proved elusive: Dhale, Nemade, Siras and Pradhan were among those who did not respond despite Khot's pursuing them for over three months. However, through the statements made by the rest of them, one can discern the reasons behind the birth of Little Magazines.

Their Reason for Existence

Ashok Shahane (*Atharva, Aso*): "We didn't even know what Little Magazines were. But we realised that there was something missing in the short stories and poems that appeared in other magazines. We honestly believed that that missing 'something' was gradually taking shape in *Atharva* and *Aso*. But we were not engaged in a big resistance struggle and all that."

Satish Kalsekar and Vasant Dattatreya Gurjar (*Hema, Phakta, Tapasi, Dainik Chakravarti, Yeru*): "We were so convinced of the high standard of our work that we found it impossible to accept the fact that some person other than us should have authority over it. We saw that this was happening with friends who were

close to us, so we began looking for other ways of making our writing public. With few friends and little money, we found that publishing small-size bound sheets would suit us best."

Ramesh Samarth (*Shabd*): "I was always interested in literature. When I saw how little space was being given to writing that was honest and worth publishing, and how this was disabling the fresh, creative energies of the new generation of writers, I felt the need to publish a Little Magazine."

Chandrakant Khot (*ABCDE*): "I decided to publish *ABCDE* as a challenge...The Little Magazine

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Movement's fight against the Establishment is limited to literature."

Arun Khopkar (*Bharud*): "This, more or less, was the thought in our minds: 'There's a lot of nonsense going on in Marathi literature. Marathi writers are writing weird stuff compared to other literatures around us. The idiots put on such airs. They don't see or read anything. They just fool around. Why don't we bloody do something?' But we had no clear plan. We hadn't seen or read the Little Magazines in other languages."

The last issue of *ABCDE* indicates that Khot was acquainted with non-



Marathi Little Magazines in India such as the Hindi *Avesh*, *Amukh* and *A-Kavita*, the Bengali *Bhukhi Pidhi*, the Telugu *Digambar Pidhi*, and the English *Ezra*, *Fakira*, *Damn You*, *Dionysus*, *Modern Poetry*, *Waste Paper* and *Miscellany*. In fact, judging by the presence of non-Marathi and non-Indian writers in the pages of many Marathi Little Magazines, one may infer that their publishers were acquainted with Little Magazine writers from the earliest to contemporary times—writers such as Rainer Maria Rilke, Pablo Neruda, Jibanand Das, Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay, Gopalkrishna Adiga, Suranjan Chattopadhyay, Peter Orlovsky, Allen Ginsberg, Antonin Artaud, Shaileshwar Ghosh, Gregory Corso, Jean Arr, Shakti Chattopadhyay, Tarapad Roy, Leroy Jones, David Meltzer, Utpalkumar Basu, Agehananda Bharati, Sandipan Chattopadhyay, Subimal Basak, Pradeep Choudhury, Vasudev Dasgupta, Atul Sen, Ezra Pound, Kierkegaard, Ortega y Gasset, Ionesco, Brecht, Pirandello, Jean Genet, Norman Mailer, Nijinsky, Ignazio Silone, Nazli Noor, Rajkamal Chowdhary and Sahil Mansuri.

Allen Ginsberg, the inspiration behind the Beat Generation, came to India in



1962. After meeting Malay Roychoudhury and members of the Hungry Generation in Kolkata, he visited Mumbai and met poets writing in English. Two important poets, Arun Kolatkar and Dilip Chitre, had been published in the English Little Magazines of the time. From December 1963 onwards, the mainstream magazine *Satyakatha* began publishing Chitre's essays on poets such as Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Rainer Maria Rilke, Ezra Pound and Wallace Stevens.

In 1969, Avesh Forum held an exhibition of and discussion on Indian and Western Little Magazines in New Delhi. This was evidently the first time that Little Magazine publishers and writers came together. The editorial of the October-December 1969 issue of *Indian Writing Today* said, "Little Magazines were a protest against the Establishment. They were more an expression of anger than reason. But one must admit that the anger was justified. Some of the writings show the influence of the Beat Generation while others that of Europe's Existentialists. Post-Second World War, Indian literature is passing through an aggressive phase. The ideals of the last generation of writers no longer hold true for the



writers of today. Science and civilization have progressed but we are experiencing the fragmentation of the universe. This has been a kind of psychological blow. Indian literature is now plunging deeper into the human mind and condition."

Marathi Little Magazines, which began as a protest against the dominant conventions and canons of literature, flowed into the Dalit literary movement. A historic Dalit literary conference was held in Mumbai in 1958 and inaugurated by Annabhau Sathe, who remarked that Dalits were absent from contemporary literature. This sparked off a Dalit





movement that was not confined to literature alone. Young writers such as Raja Dhale and Namdeo Dhasal attempted to broaden its base to include a social dimension. An important outcome of their attempt was the birth of Little Magazines such as *Magova* and *Tatparya*, which published analyses of social and political issues in addition to literature, thus demonstrating the links between literature and society, literature and politics. One may say that this was the ground from which later sprang a group of Marxist poets and writers. Little Magazine writers were also responsible for introducing to readers the prose of the

Mahanubhav sect (a thirteenth-century socio-religious movement that accepted all castes and rejected ritualistic religion).

The need to fight against social disparities and to propagate forms of literary expression unique to the Dalit sub-culture inspired Little Magazines such as *Asmitadarsh* and *Vidroha*. When Raja Dhale, Namdeo Dhasal and J.V. Pawar founded the Dalit Panther movement (which they dissolved in 1979, citing ideological differences), they were in a way extending the Little Magazine movement to explore the relationship between literature and society. Dhale





fired the first salvo in an article he wrote in the weekly magazine *Sadhana* dated 15 August 1972. It created a huge stir because he had written: "The twenty-fifth anniversary of Independence marks a black day." Soon, Little Magazines linked to the Dalit movement such as *Ambhi*, *Nikai*, *Jatak*, *Sugava*, *Sansad*, *Astitva* and *Prameya* were published. They brought forth a new utterance and new forms of Dalit art, but they turned out to be as short-lived as their predecessors.

Reinventing Language

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The Marathi Little Magazine Movement was Mumbai-centric. Most magazines were published from Mumbai, only a few from Nagpur, Amravati-Aurangabad, Jalna and other towns, and none from rural Maharashtra. But the writing was far from being homogenous or one-dimensional. When one looks back on the age of Little Magazines, what strikes one most forcibly is the groundbreaking work they did in the matter of language. Their writers wrote in the tongues of different dialect groups, unlike those who wrote in conventional magazines that made literary expression the monopoly of a particular social class. There were

Dalits, adivasis (members of native tribes), and writers from rural and urban areas, all writing in their own way. Most crucially, Little Magazines shattered the imagined boundary between the language of books and the language of conversation. Not only did writers write as they spoke but they also put to reinvented use, words and phrases that had disappeared from speech.

At the root of the movement lay the aggressive energy and passion of twenty-five-year-olds, for that was the average age of the publishers. This also probably explained why the



predominant imagery in their writing was related to the body and to sexual relationships. The experiential universe of poets such as Namdeo Dhasal and Prakash Jadhav shocked readers with its rawness and was responsible for Marathi poetry's taking a new turn. Bhalchandra Nemade's 'Gandkari Maharajanche Abhang' and Ashok Shahane's 'Eka Ganduche Garhane', published in *Atharva*, with their sexually suggestive titles, were expressions of self-abuse. Random samples of writing in Little Magazines reveal that they dealt with subjects such as the complexity of man-woman relationships, the meaninglessness of

family relationships, the relationships of those with different sexual orientations, and the emotional experiences of the insane-perverted and the impotent-neutered.

The literary world had, till then, not been exposed to such an illogical and disconnected, yet attractively simple and informal writing style. It had not witnessed such crude and direct expression, and feelings of futile anger, extreme despair, arrogance, recklessness, impotent helplessness and loss of faith in living. The poets of Little Magazines held up to the public a hitherto unseen side of life. They



rejected the middle-class sensibility, looked at their subjects from a new perspective, and sought to establish new criteria for literature.

It must be admitted, however, that Little Magazines did not produce much prose. Neither were they interested in other art forms, as were periodicals such as *Satyakatha* and *Abhiruchi*, which represented the so-called Establishment but extensively covered art, cinema, sculpture, theatre, music and the 'isms' of the day. Poetry was the preferred literary form of

Little Magazines, perhaps because of their small-sized formats and limited number of pages. They also published translations of poetry from other Indian and foreign languages.

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Of the poets who wrote for Little Magazines, few grew to be major poets and many disappeared from the literary scene altogether after the magazines closed down. Some important poets nurtured by Little Magazines were Arun Kolatkar, Bhalchandra Nemade, Tulsi Parab, Manohar Oak, Raghu Dandavate, Vasant Dattatreya Gurjar, Satish Kalsekar, Namdeo Dhasal and Prakash Jadhav. While Kolatkar, Oak, Dandavate, Jadhav and Gurjar firmly and permanently distanced themselves

from the Establishment, the leaders of the anti-Establishment movement were later co-opted into it—Nemade, for example. As a young writer he created a hubbub in literary circles with the question he posed in his article in *Vacha*: “Why do we see so many writers today turning into writer-esquires?” Later Nemade himself quietly settled into the Establishment as a writer-esquire. Paradoxically, Little Magazines also published established writers such as Acharya Atre, Durga Bhagwat, Shirish Pai, Vinda Karandikar, Vijay





sometimes wrote for one another's publications, which is why the same names cropped up in different magazines. The publishers and their writers were friends. Since their main target of protest was *Satyakatha* and its literary sensibility, writers who rejected it or were rejected by it shared a common bond and found a home in the pages of Little Magazines. But if compatible people come together easily, they just as easily split apart. Marathi Little Magazines split into groups when differences of opinion arose. They criticised one another only on occasion, when they aggressively

defended their points of view, but together they created a new generation of writers. In Nagpur and Amravati, Vaman Prabhu, Prabhakar Siraj and Vasant Abaji Dahake formed a likeminded group although *Trishanku* published by Dahake folded up after one issue. One major group, which spanned Mumbai and Pune, included Ashok Shahane, Raghu Dandavate, Vrindavan Dandavate, Damodar Prabhu and Kiran Nagarkar. Within Mumbai there was a large group that included Tara Reddy, Shashi Pradhan, Keshav Meshram, Narayan Surve, Baburao Bagul, Tulsi Parab and Subhash Soman. Yet another in the same city comprised Raja Dhale, Vasant Dattatreya Gurjar, Satish Kalsekar, Chandrakant Khot, Pradeep Nerurkar, Jayant Nerurkar and Rajani Parulekar. The Aurangabad group included Bhalchandra Nemade, Ravindra Kimbahun, Na Dho Mahanor and Chandrakant Patil.

Rudderless Existence

Little Magazine publishers declared that they intended to publish only if they had material worth publishing. If the magazines were short-lived, therefore, one can assume that it was because of the paucity of good material. Rebellion was alive but the



seeds of creativity were missing. Some publishers compromised by publishing established writers, and those who did not compromise wound up their publications. Perhaps they gave up hope because of their disillusionment with the contemporary world and the conviction that they had no place in it and no power to change it. On the whole they appeared rudderless, with no clear purpose and direction. To add to the problem, their *beté noir* *Satyakatha* decided to change its policy and encourage new writing, with the result that several Little Magazine writers moved into its fold.

82 The modus operandi of Little Magazines did not encourage longevity. The format was variable and the number of pages limited. There was no guarantee that the next issue would appear. They carried their rebelliousness on their sleeve with declarations such as these: “We do not observe rules of spelling.” “We will print whatever we please.” “We will not accept subscriptions.” “Send in anything, old or new. Our job is to publish.” An issue might even carry the inscription “Published without reason”. Such stubborn rebelliousness was hardly likely to attract a large body of readers. The editorial in the second issue of *Timba* said they had



distributed the first issue free and also added that they had received no feedback. A magazine might ask for a certain amount to be sent to a certain address as subscription, while another might ask for an annual subscription without any assurance that it would appear regularly or at all during the year. Not too many dared to subscribe under these circumstances.

With such attitudes, the economics of Little Magazines could not be based on reader support. A few subscriptions and some sales appeared to be the only source of income. More





often than not Little Magazines were financed by the publishers themselves, or by their writers or sympathetic colleagues. Their a-periodicity and their publish-when-possible stand made it pointless for them to even try to strengthen their economic base. The distribution system was equally arbitrary. Magazines were sent free of cost to contributors, other publishers of Little Magazines, established writers who were sympathetic to the cause, and new writers who were curious. Some issues

brazenly declared they would be available at the *raddiwala's* (shop that buys old periodicals for recycling)!

This system of distribution served another purpose, however. Since nobody actually bought Little Magazines, the publishers started small publishing houses to make their writing more widely known and garner public acknowledgement as poets. Raja Dhale founded a publishing house called *Ata Prakashan*. It published *Godi*, a



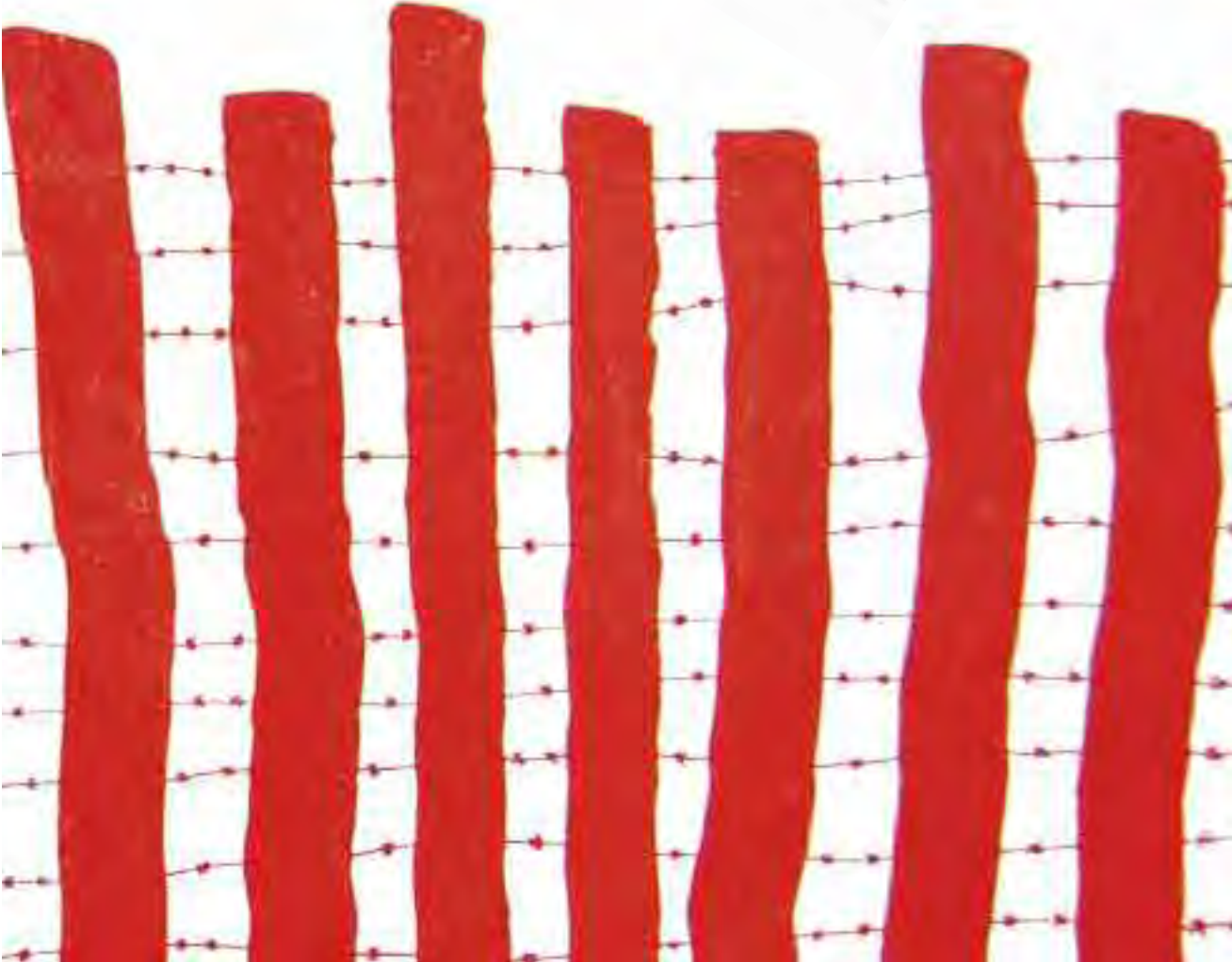
Chitre, Tulsi Parab, Chandrakant Patil and Nemade himself. Later, the publisher of *Atharva* and *Aso*, Ashok Shahane, founded Pras Prakashan to publish the poetry of Arun Kolatkar, Namdeo Dhasal and Raghu Dandavate. With the exception of Pras, all the other publishing houses wound up after Little Magazines stopped being published. Pras too lay dormant for a while before being revived again to publish Arun Kolatkar's poetry and continues to be alive even today. Later, most of these poets with the exception of Kolatkar and to some extent Dhasal were published by mainstream publishing houses.

84 collection of poetry by Vasant Dattatreya Gurjar, Dhale's own anthology, *Sthitichya Kavita*, and a collection of his critical writings on literature, *Tapasi*. The publisher of *Bharud*, Shashi Pradhan, and his colleagues published *Arambh*, a collection of representative poems by new poets, and edited a collection of poems, *When Vietnam Unites in the Future*. The publishers of *Phakta* and *Hema* founded Sanhita Prakashan, which published a collection of Chandrakant Khot's poems, *Martik*, and Satish Kalsekar's collection, *Indriyopanishad*. Bhalchandra Nemade, publisher of *Vacha*, founded Vacha Prakashan, which brought out collections of the poetry of Dilip

The Marathi Little Magazine Movement, which came into being as a protest against the established literary order, lasted for a decade-and-a-half, from 1955 to 1970-72. For two decades after this the writers of the movement remained outside the perimeter of the Marathi literary world. They had to wait until the 1990s before their work was recognised. Magazines such as *Anushtubh* and *Kavitartha*, born in the last decade of the twentieth century, took the same route as *Satyakatha* but they did absorb the writings of some of the so-called rebel poets, while



magazines such as *Shabdavedh*, *Abhida*, *Abhidanantar*, *Khel*, *Darshan*, *Anaghrat*, *Saushthav*, *Aiwaji* and *Atirikta* fully acknowledged the importance of writers of the Little Magazine Movement. They analysed the significance of their work in special issues, brought them into the mainstream and genuinely honoured their contribution.





When poet, actor and playwright Safdar Hashmi was fatally attacked in 1989 on New Year's Day while performing a street play in a working class area just outside Delhi, it brought the entire community of Indian artists together in a spontaneous wave of shock and grief. And the Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust (Sahmat) was born. The thirty-four-year-old activist of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and co-founder of Jana Natya Manch (JANAM), a forum for political and street theatre, was one of the main organisers of the Committee for Communal Harmony, which tried to counter the rise of fundamentalist forces. Besides writing songs for JANAM plays and contributing to its scripts, which dealt with exploited sections of society, Safdar composed poems, drew sketches and made

College Road was renamed Safdar Hashmi Marg after Sahmat sent a letter to the Lieutenant-General of Delhi.

Sahmat: More than a Memorial to a Fallen Hero

All photographs courtesy Sahmat



masks for children, designed hundreds of posters, wrote short film scripts and directed them for television, and wrote articles in various publications on culture and theatre.

What follows is the transcript of an informal, spontaneous conversation between some people who have been associated with Sahmat from the very beginning. It was recorded at the Sahmat office (29 Ferozeshah Road, New Delhi) in April 2011. As such, while it offers an insight into how Sahmat was formed and an outline of how it has worked over the last twenty-two years, it is an incomplete/partial record of Sahmat's journey since the voices of several key persons associated with Sahmat are not a part of this conversation, and, therefore, the full extent of Sahmat's concerns and activities are not covered.

In conversation:

Rajendra Prasad, managing editor and social scientist (Rajen)

M.K. Raina, actor and theatre director (MK)

Indira Chandrasekhar, cultural activist and publisher (Indu)

Ram Rahman, photographer and designer (Ram)

Parthiv Shah, photographer and designer (Parthiv)

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MK: When the attack on Safdar happened [1 January 1989], I was one of the first persons to get a call. I thought he may have broken a leg or something. Anju [MK's wife Anjali Raina, a paediatrician] and I rushed to J.P. Hospital where he was in the casualty ward. He was bleeding, and was getting convulsions. The junior doctor said it would be best to take him to Ram Manohar Lohia Hospital where they have CAT scan and other facilities. They provided oxygen and we rushed him there. He was kept in the general ward for some time...then they took him for a CAT scan. The junior doctor told me to try and get Dr Jain who was on leave. I managed to contact Dr Jain, but he was getting ready to go to a wedding. I tried to persuade him...I told him he would get to know who this patient is by the morning. He came. Mala [Moloyashree Hashmi, Safdar's wife and partner in Jana Natya Manch] walked in and he told her: "We don't see any chance, only a miracle can save him. His brain fluid is coming out

through his ear and we cannot operate on him in this condition. Let us see, we have to wait." Sohail [Safdar's brother Sohail Hashmi] was not there at that time...

Indu: Sohail was attending the Party [CPI-M] Congress in Kerala and many of Safdar's family and friends were there too. He came the next day.

MK: By then a lot of theatre people had come there. I went back home around 10-11... then the call came to say that Safdar had died and to come back. Then the national protest happened.

Indu: Do we have a sense, when we look back, that it was a spontaneous protest cutting across the political spectrum?

MK: What happened at that time went beyond party lines. Rabindra Bhavan, the National School of Drama, became the epicentre of the protest...and every artist, every theatre

person was there. At the hospital, a lot of people had gathered. He was declared dead only on January 2 but so many people had rushed to Rabindra Bhavan...

Indu: At the hospital there was a night vigil.

MK: There were a lot of young theatre people. And a [CPI (M)] party M.P. from the south, I don't recall his name.

Rajen: More than the party, in terms of the arts community, the moment the news spread that Safdar had been

attacked, there was a spontaneous outburst of anger, which manifested itself first at the hospital, and later, once the news spread, at Rabindra Bhavan. That is where the decision was taken about *Halla Bol*,¹ to complete the unfinished play...which was completed on January 4 after the funeral on January 3. They went back and performed the play, which was a huge step.

MK: If you remember, people walked from V.P. House² right up to Nigambodh Ghat, to the electric crematorium, which was such a long distance. Some of the people who

Crowds gathered spontaneously during the funeral procession on 2 January 1989.



IN THE DARK TIMES
WILL THERE ALSO BE
SINGING
YES THERE WILL ALSO
BE SINGING
ABOUT THE DARK TIMES
MUSKET

में तापदायिक दंगों के पदों में नहीं हैं
मे आगामी भाई-भादों गण्ड में हैं

एक बार तापदायिक दंगों में वही सक्स घात गया
जिसका उग्र गट फिली टों कोई रुगडा ही नहीं था

KEEP DISTANCE

DB
25



were walking had no connection with the arts. It was complete outrage that brought them out in protest.

Indu: Ram was photographing...

Ram: Yes, I remember, we got a call at home from [playwright and director] Prasanna. He told us that this had happened to Safdar—this was when he was still in the hospital, before he was declared dead—and my mother Indrani [dancer Indrani Rahman] got very agitated and came rushing with me to that first gathering at Rabindra Bhavan. It was the morning after he was declared dead...Habib [Tanvir], [E.] Alkazi and [M.K.] Raina were there.

MK: A committee was formed...

Ram: That was even before the funeral. Amongst so many different types of people there was a feeling of revulsion about what had happened...

Indu: Out of that spontaneity, how was Sahmat formed? After all we gave it a name, we called it the Safdar Hashmi Memorial Committee. How exactly did that come about?

Rajen: I came back to Delhi from Kerala when the performance was

happening on January 4 and all of you were in Sahibabad...and the next day there was a silent march...

Indu: The torchlight procession?

Rajen: No, before that. There was a silent march that passed through Connaught Place with Safdar's photograph...there were no party banners...and there was pindrop silence. We went to old Delhi also...it started from Minto Road via Connaught Place and then to the Home Minister. January 9 was the National Protest Day and we had the torchlight march.

MK: This started from the Supreme Court...

Rajen: Alkazi played a big role.

MK: There was a meeting at Rabindra Bhavan at which Alkazi, being a meticulous director, said everything has to be done with style and design. Four stages were planned where theatre groups would come and sing songs of protest from their plays, and eminent people would speak for two minutes each. Alkazi, Zohra Segal, Ammaji [Safdar's mother] and Habib Tanvir spoke on that day.³

Rajen: On January 9, Ram and me, we actually brought out the first brochure on Safdar. It was distributed there and we collected some money, and that marked the beginning. We had decided that something more should happen...and we formed a committee.

MK: At the National Protest, Lolly Ramdas [social activist, Admiral Ramdas's wife] happened to be here from the south. I met Anil Chandra [cultural activist] for the first time. He said he would like to give a scholarship in Safdar's name and that is how he became a part of Sahmat.

92 **Rajen:** We decided to publish Safdar's poems...

Indu: 'Artists Alert'⁴ happened at the same time.

Rajen: No, Vivan [visual artist Vivan Sundaram] was not there...'Artists Alert' happened later.

Indu: We decided to do the books...Radhika [Menon], Parthiv and I...and we just did it...

Rajen: Parthiv was actually the in-house designer at Tulika...we had no money and we decided that come what may, we will go ahead. We did

six books [based on Safdar's poems for children, illustrated by artists]. Rajinder Paul [of Paul's Press] was very helpful. He didn't charge anything for that first pamphlet we did...he said he would charge only fifty per cent, which was his cost...and all the printing work was done on credit. We didn't even know if the money would come. At that stage, Alkazi issued an appeal for funds. When the Trust [Sahmat] was formed we had a meeting at V.P. House. Then Vivan came; he was not in Delhi earlier. That's when this whole idea came, that if we have to form a trust, let's collect funds...

Indu: ... let's have an auction of artworks to gather funds. 'Artists Alert' was Sahmat's first major programme.

Parthiv: We had a discussion about the *Safdar* book...whether we should get ads, and finally we decided to carry credit lines at the bottom instead.

Rajen: Some posters have been reproduced in the *Safdar* book. Paintings were also done, and we still have Manu Parekh's portrait of Safdar. The first sign of the organisation coming into shape was with these publications. By April 12 [Safdar's

birthday], we had all these publications in hand; 12-16 April was the first 'Safdar Samaroh', as it was called on Geeta's [art critic and curator Geeta Kapur] suggestion.

The first three months after Safdar's murder were phenomenally productive for Sahmat. Within three months, six books had been published along with a collection of Safdar's writings and we held a five-day cultural festival. 'Artists Alert' [also a name suggested by Geeta] was linked to this. Vivan was the moving force behind this initiative...and he continues to be behind all our visual arts projects.

Indu: The Trust had come into being and we started meeting every Thursday at V.P. House. I remember I wrote the minutes of many of those meetings...

Ram: I remember doing the Sahmat letterheads with all the Committee members' names at the back to indicate a collective...

Indu: We had many debates about whether Sahmat should be called a platform or a collective or...it was finally decided that it is a platform, not an organisation; there is no membership.

Rajen: The Haryana and West Bengal governments gave Mala some funds with which the Trust was formed. The original trustees were G.P. Deshpande, Bhisham Sahni, Habib Tanvir, Utpal Dutt, E. Alkazi, Sohail Hashmi, Moloyashree Hashmi and Vivan Sundaram. The first chairman of the Trust was Bhisham Sahni, and Habib Tanvir was the second chairman—both have since passed away. Now, after twenty-two years, Sahmat's six trustees are: Irfan Habib (Chairman), Vivan Sundaram, M.K. Raina, Sohail Hashmi, Madan Gopal Singh, Ram Rahman.

Indu: These are the trustees now as opposed to the first list because many of them are no longer here...

Rajen: The five-day festival ['Safdar Samaroh'] started with a protest march that went through Connaught Place to the Home Minister, in which schoolchildren and artists participated. We had banners...there are lovely photographs of that first march...It was then that the criticism of Sahmat, calling it an elitist organisation, began...because we were doing T-shirts and so on...but that died down over a period of time.

That festival featured performances by

Durga Lal, who has since passed away, Astad Deboo, Dadi Pudumjee, Habib Tanvir's play *Moteram ka Satyagrah*...then the film on Safdar made by Sashi Kumar [then head of Press Trust of India-TV] was shown...

Indu: The film was later shown on Doordarshan.

Rajen: ...and Artists Alert.⁵

Indu: ...and the art exhibition and auction. That was the first corpus of funds...

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Ram: 'Artists Alert' was also one of the first art exhibitions in which photography was included and we had a big discussion about that. I made the point that Safdar was also a photographer and that this is an aspect of modernist art that must be included. There was an eminent list of photographers also who participated. In terms of art history, it was actually one of the first exhibitions where that happened.

Indu: It was probably also one of the first instances of such a large number of artists and photographers participating voluntarily in a single exhibition.

Rajen: The big thing was that it was judged in comparison to the *Times of India* auction, which had just taken place, as something done for a cause—not commercial...

Ram: ...outside the art market mechanisms or art market forces.

MK: It was Alkazi who initiated this...

Indu: We had very eminent artists like Somnath Hore.

Rajen: We used Ram's frames for the exhibition...

Indu: We were obviously very poor ... we didn't have time on our hands either, and the technology too was different.

MK: We also came out with our first badge, with a black and white image...

Indu: That's one photograph of Safdar, with a scarf around his neck, that became iconic...it was carried on the funeral march with a black border. And we used it in a whole lot of ways. The second Safdar badge was designed by [painter] Shamshad [Husain].



SAHMAT 1857 9699111222

SAHMAT 1857



SAHMAT 1857 9699111222

SAHMAT 1857



Rajen: After 'Safdar Samaroh', the next big thing was when Shabana Azmi read out a statement of protest by performing artists at the inaugural ceremony of the International Film Festival at Siri Fort auditorium in New Delhi.

MK: H.K.L. Bhagat was the Information and Broadcasting Minister. We were outside the auditorium protesting, distributing pamphlets...a group of international film directors, and Gautam Ghosh and [M.S.] Sathyu were also there. Suddenly, Shabana asked us to bring the pamphlet in and said that she would read it out on stage. She said she would move in and some of us pushed our way in. It was all dark inside and we started distributing the pamphlets. Kabir Bedi was the official compere at that point. He called Shabana and Victor [Banerjee] on to the stage and Shabana read from the pamphlet with the international media listening.

Rajen: Sashi was covering this whole thing for PTI-TV... Kabir Bedi knew that Shabana was going to read the statement when he called her to the stage.

MK: It was also flashed on television.

The reading by Shabana caused quite a commotion and H.K.L. Bhagat ran to the stage. There was a reaction from the audience too and a coffee break was announced. A lot of stars present were really angry with Shabana.

Rajen: April 12 was declared National Street Theatre Day.

Ram: That year, in September, we organised 'Chauraha'⁶ and groups came from all over the country. We put them up in the Lodhi Road *baraat ghar*...

Indu: We should summarise the activities we've had, and what are the kinds of events we plan and how we plan them.

MK: Every time we did something we had a discussion, sometimes drawing people from other disciplines to work on an idea.

Indu: Our discussions were always ambitious, and we never thought about where the money would come from.

MK: We had a Convention on the Dramatic Performances Act, which coincided with 'Chauraha', for which

Parthiv designed the poster. We had a two-day programme on 1 January 1990. And since then we have had a programme every year on January 1.

Indu: We had the road on which Shri Ram Centre is located renamed after Safdar. We held the January 1 programme for fourteen years on Safdar Hashmi Marg, before we shifted venue because of metro-related construction.

MK: There was tremendous goodwill and support from the art fraternity from all over the country, and that showed even when we went to request the street to be renamed after Safdar even though they had already refused to do so once.

Rajen: We had written to the LG [Lieutenant Governor of Delhi] saying that the street name should be changed by six o'clock on 1 January 1990 or we will change it ourselves. In 1991 we came up with the idea of 'Artists Against Communalism'. This was the time when L.K. Advani was on his *rath yatra*, and musicians and performers came together on an anti-communal platform in such large numbers. [Late] Sabina Sehgal [journalist] and [S.] Kalidas [art critic and musician] were the moving force.

This programme later travelled to many cities. [Late] Rummana Hussain [painter] came into contact with us for the first time—a great friend who remained committed to Sahmat throughout.

Ram: Going back to a statement that Indu had made, which was a very important part of the culture of Sahmat, whenever we sat in these meetings and people came up with sometimes crazy, wild ideas...right from the beginning there was this culture in Sahmat which never put down any of those ideas. Nothing was ever rejected, or considered too big, whether there was money or not. Our attitude was, let's not worry about the funds. Let's first conceive of what we want to do, do it the way we want to, and we'll figure out how to pay for it later. This has lasted right through the years, the positive attitude of letting the imagination dominate.

Rajen: It started in 1991 with 'Artists against Communalism'—that is when we took our first pledge of fighting against communalism and creating a platform of 'We, the artists of India' to fight communalism, for which Parthiv designed a poster that we got signed by hundreds of artists and creative persons from all disciplines, from all





over India. The names are all there...⁷

MK: The names included the Who's Who of Indian culture...

Rajen: The second major event was 'Anhad Garje'. It happened immediately after the demolition [of the Babri Masjid]...we were the only cultural group that actually protested and came out on the streets of Delhi against the demolition. Madan [Gopal Singh] and MK had been conceiving a Sufi-Bhakti concert for some time. That was the most opportune moment for foregrounding it. The day after the demolition, we came out with a poster and a slogan, '*Aaj koi naara na hoga, Sirf desh bachaana hoga*', given by M.K. Raina.

MK: A picture of a child holding the poster was published on the front page of *Times of India*. Five lakh posters were printed and distributed with the morning newspapers.

Parthiv: We created a new way of distribution...a poster that was not made in the conventional size and was vertically divided into half...it looked completely different. We created a new form, which made it stand out and...

Ram: ... this worked for the folding also.

Parthiv: Yes, and people still have the poster even after so many years. We provided a new kind of imagery and design, which did not exist earlier.

Ram: It was also the timing, which was so instant.

Rajen: Immediately after releasing the poster, we held a two-day street protest at Mandi House. It was huge. The police came and wanted to arrest us.

Ram: That's when Manjit [the late painter Manjit Bawa] made this painting with Paramjit Singh.⁸

MK: We were the first delegation that went to meet Shankar Dayal Sharma, then President of India, on the day after the demolition. That was a most depressing sight—the President had tears in his eyes; he told us to go meet the Prime Minister and tell him that we had met him.

Rajen: Then came 'Anhad Garje', a five-day festival. It included a lecture by Irfan Habib on 'Monotheism', two film screenings—Kumar Shahani's *Khayal Gatha* and Ruchir Joshi's *Eleven Miles*—and Bhisham Sahni and M.K. Raina's play *Kabira Khada Bazaar Mein*. We released six posters made by artists. And we had this

international Sufi-Bhakti concert.⁹

Parthiv: The artists' posters had couplets by Kabir, Bulle Shah and other Sufi poets.

Ram: Artists and designers created the tent within which the concert was held, with Sufi poetry on the walls. Sumant [Jayakrishnan] did the calligraphy, it was designed by Vivan and Romi [Khosla]...the whole idea of the river was Vivan's.

Parthiv: We had a huge tree inside the shamiana, which was eye-catching...

102 **MK:** The idea behind the posters was that they have to be hung in the spaces of homes and create a poster culture.

Parthiv: Another interesting point was that though there were so many creative people involved, and also activists and academicians, we never discussed whether what had been done was good or not. Nobody criticised the work. Everybody had their roles carved out and everybody contributed whatever they could.

Ram: Everyone gave of their expertise and professionalism. For example, if you were a visual arts person, you gave the visual; if you came from a theatre

background like M.K. Raina, or if anyone had concerns about lighting or how it would look, they contributed in that area.

Indu: What was amazing was that all this was voluntary time and effort put in by professionals.

Rajen: In all this we should recall Sohail travelling all over the country with a leg in plaster. We should also not forget Shabnam's [Shabnam Hashmi, Safdar's sister] energy and total commitment

Parthiv: The important thing was that there was accommodation and respect for everybody's ideas. Most of the NGOs and other people's movements don't have documentation; Sahmat is one of the few organisations that kept records.

Ram: The idea of that kind of discipline, which was part of Sahmat from the beginning, I am convinced, actually came from the left...from a certain kind of training.

MK: Rajen had always kept his eye on documentation and would come out with a publication in no time.

Rajen: Then, after the first three or



four years, there was a shift within Sahmat. Our highly artist-oriented activity continued but with a lot of literary input now, as the struggle against the BJP's divisive ideology picked up...

Ram: It began with the Ayodhya campaign, with 'Hum Sub Ayodhya'.

Rajen: It ceased to be purely arts-oriented. Interdisciplinary collaboration started—historians and social scientists interacting with artists. For example, the Ayodhya poster that Ram designed...

104 **Indu:** ...and the exhibition 'Hum Sub Ayodhya'...

Rajen: That poster and exhibition are an example of how designers, artists and historians came together and

created something for historical reference.

Indu: We don't need to debate about the role of the left. Many of us within Sahmat were either with, or close sympathisers, of the left from the beginning. Sahmat was a space in which people who were broadly progressive, and not all from the left, came together.

Parthiv: Sahmat created a way of functioning, which people are trying to copy, and we have done a lot of things...

Rajen: ...that is pioneering work.

Ram: In many ways, what happened at Ayodhya was our way of responding to big events happening in the nation, which were crucial. These



were very negative historical developments in our politics and social space. The whole interest or engagement with history, and reinterpretation of history, began with Ayodhya.¹⁰

When the communal slaughter happened in Gujarat a decade later, we, along with *Communalism Combat*, organised a public hearing of the victims of Gujarat amidst a very tense situation. The victims were in great danger for coming to Delhi and speaking publicly. The interaction there with parliamentarians and politicians, social activists and artists, was very important. A bridge to the politicians was created. The President of India made his first statement on Gujarat when the delegation of victims taken by Sahmat and *Communalism Combat* visited him. Before that he had not made any reference to Gujarat.

MK: The happenings in India have shaped our programmes. When the BJP was in power, we took up a struggle for education, in which both intellectuals and artists participated. As time passed, our strategies and modes of protest changed...the fax machine became a new means for communication.¹¹

Rajen: We had no money. We even lost one of our telephone connections for not paying the bill.

MK: Creative art, experimental art and technology were used as part of our strategy.

Rajen: In the Gandhi project, artists made postcards for Gandhi...

Parthiv: ...using symbols...

MK: ...how Gandhi was a great artist and used salt, the *danda* and charkha as symbols...

Rajen: Madan says we were the first to combine the traditions of Sufi and Bhakti music as a weapon to fight communalism, showing the diversity from Afghanistan to Manipur, Badke from Maharashtra, Chavan from Gujarat and the Bauls from Bengal.

Ram: ... and making a political point. There was a politics to the placing of that poetry and music and celebrating it.

Rajen: It was not Sufi music for the sake of Sufi music.

MK: Not a soap opera of Sufi music. It was placed politically, diagonally.

Rajen: Another major campaign was

against the communalisation of history.

MK: The best minds in academia were involved, including vice-chancellors of universities. And we invited politicians and education ministers, who initially had no clue what was going on, to come there...but once they got that booklet we had published and started reading it, there was an uproar. Murli Manohar Joshi and Lalu Prasad [Yadav] even raised it in Parliament.¹²

106 **Indu:** This has been recognised by the world outside, that Sahmat today is a force to reckon with. When references started to be made in Parliament to our kind of intervention, when people started getting bothered by us, parliamentarians took us seriously. And that is the difference between 'Mukt Naad' [the concert at Ayodhya] and Gujarat. When we did 'Mukt Naad' and 'Hum Sab Ayodhya', we were not as strong on the political scene of India as we became ten years later. It made a big difference that we did the Gujarat testimonies.

MK: Remember the onslaught, the cases against us...of criminal conspiracy against the State.

Indu: We had a discussion within

Sahmat, wondering whether we should go to Ayodhya.

Parthiv: We made posters that were meant for homes, and published books for children illustrated by artists.¹³

MK: Penetrating into spaces where culture becomes education...disseminating progressive ideas...

Rajen: ...rational ideas. That is the original 1936 statement of the PWA,¹⁴ the same thing, rational ideas.

Parthiv: We also started a film society and it was really successful...

MK: ...with informative posters...

Ram: The whole idea of culture in the broader sense being central to Sahmat's functioning, and the politics of culture after Ayodhya, started with 'Mukt Naad', when we did the performances in Ayodhya. We opened the exhibition on Quit India Day, so we linked it to the traditions of the national movement, which were progressive traditions in the broad sense, to which the Hindu right did not have any claim—and we were fighting that through the histories of

our modernity but through the window of culture. So if we commemorated Jallianwala Bagh, we did so by picking up those poems that had been banned by the British. We took songs, Tagore's statement—all through the window of culture.

MK: The nautanki play we did at Gyarah Murti was about Jallianwala Bagh...

Rajen: Intervening in the political, social and cultural milieu only through the cultural window is very significant. In the post-independence era, after IPTA [Indian People's Theatre Association] and PWA, this is the first major conscious effort that has been successful.

Take the campaign to defend [artist M.F.] Husain's right to do what he did. In the midst of all the misinformation that was spread about him and the misreading of his work, we defended him at the cost of great personal risk. They came and attacked our exhibition and office; we have been threatened. Notwithstanding all that, we have been in the forefront of defending Husain.¹⁵

MK: We have been taken great care to do whatever we have done well. Like

the posters, or the 'Anhad Garje' audio and video cassettes, which have become collector's items, and people want to buy them as souvenirs and gift items.

Indu: These are also ways of fund-raising. There is a general impression that Sahmat relies on huge funds and whereas we have never been shy about saying where we get our funds from, the day-to-day functioning of Sahmat has been financed by selling posters, T-shirts, books, artworks donated by artists. We should not forget the Friends of Sahmat concept we floated right in the beginning. To date, all kinds of people contribute towards the January 1 programme. Those contributions can vary from hundred rupees to a lakh, but they cut across class. It is actually like a political party collecting funds except that it is entirely for a cultural cause...we don't go out on the streets asking for donations.

Rajen: There are two sources we have always drawn upon for this idea of a plural India, a democratic and secular India. One is Sufi-Bhakti, which is a people's living tradition, which breaks ritualism, orthodoxy and religiosity of a bigoted kind. The other is the national movement, whether it is

لہو رنگ تھا، لہو جو بھا
لہو رنگ تھی، آگ بھڑکی हुई
لہو رنگ تھی، دھار تلوار کی
لہو رنگ تھا ہاتھ، تھامے हुए
لہو رنگ تھی فِئلی جَمی
اُجَب سال تھا وہ اُجَب سال تھا...

کُماؤں کا لوکگیت



Red the blood that flowed
red the fire that burned
Red the sword
red the hand that held it
And red the earth,
that year, that year...

لہو رنگ تھا وہ
لہو رنگ تھی، آگ بھڑکی
لہو رنگ تھی، دھار تلوار کی
لہو رنگ تھا ہاتھ، تھامے
لہو رنگ تھی، فِئلی جَمی

اُجَب سال تھا وہ اُجَب سال تھا...



Jallianwala Bagh, 1857, or Gandhi. We have drawn upon both these, consciously. There is a thought process, a certain amount of theoretical understanding. It is not a bohemian exercise, where six or seven people sit together and decide.¹⁶

MK: All our projects have been multidisciplinary. We have done exhibitions, we have music, poetry, sometimes dance, lectures, which are all linked, even banners and backdrops—all these are conceived together and artists have always responded favourably to us.

Rajen: We have been here for twenty-two years. There is no major rift in Sahmat. Hundreds of artists have stayed with Sahmat, not a single artist has deserted Sahmat. It is to our credit that we did not wind up in five or ten years. We have maintained a tempo of activity that has not slackened.

Parthiv: We have not taken any foreign funding.

MK: This office is unique. Anybody is welcome, it is an open house—no one has a clue where the food comes from. [Ms] Ashok [secretary, Sahmat] is the universal mother! As Zoya Hasan says, “*Tum logon ke yahan to gareeb*

nawaaz ki deg hai” [There is food here for everyone who comes].

Rajen: Prabhat [Patnaik] calls it Sabarmati Ashram at Rafi Marg.¹⁷

Indu: What are the kinds of criticism that have come against Sahmat? Are we aware of them, do we take them into account, do we know how to counter them?

Parthiv: A lot of articles have been written...

Indu: There was an early phase when Sahmat was criticised for the funds we took from the State, and we made our position very clear... 109

Ram: That State funds are people’s funds, they are the cleanest funds that one can access, they are earmarked funds that anyone can apply for.

Rajen: There is a section that calls us elite, which we are and that is because of our intention. They also think that we function only in a particular area—that is also our mandate.

MK: We are not a political party that we can be at Parliament House every day.

Ram: There was criticism that we

don't reach out to the people outside [Delhi]. One of our early projects was 'Janotsav' which was held in Mangolpuri with the purpose of taking art to the people. After that experience, we realised that this was the kind of intervention we cannot do as a momentary thing. We realised what our strengths were and the spaces we work in, and to network in much wider spaces was not something we necessarily wanted to take on.

Indu: The kind of intervention we have made, is a symbolic one, which could perhaps have a different type of effect, a ripple effect...

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Parthiv: We are not here to do relief work.

MK: Another important area in which we have functioned is defence of freedom of expression. We have protested whenever this fundamental right is violated, whether it is for Taslima Nasreen or Salman Rushdie.

ENDNOTES

1. The street play that was being performed by Jana Natya Manch at Sahibabad on January 1, when the attack happened.
2. A small room created by enclosing a balcony at 8 Vitthalbhai Patel House, the office of the Janwadi Lekhak Sangh, which was where Sahmat functioned from for nineteen years.
3. This protest is documented in the catalogue *Safdar* (Sahmat, 1989).
4. Art exhibition and auction with contributions from more than 100 artists.
5. The catalogue *Artists Alert* has black and white reproductions of the works of the participating artists. The list of artists who contributed is also published in *Sahmat, 20 years: A document of activities and statements* (Sahmat, 2009).
6. A festival of street theatre performances and a workshop. A catalogue, *Chauraha*, was published. For details, see *Sahmat, 20 years*.
7. The poster can be accessed on Sahmat's website, www.sahmat.org.
8. The painting, on a 4' x 5' canvas, can be seen on the Sahmat website.
9. This programme later travelled to Ahmedabad, Bombay, Baroda and Lucknow.
10. On 14-15 August 1993, Sahmat took about 1,000 artists, academics and cultural activists to Ayodhya and held a nightlong vigil and concert at the Ram ki Pairi Ghat. From 9-21 August 1993, the exhibition

'Hum Sab Ayodhya' travelled to seventeen cities. The exhibition is still in use. A controversy surrounding one panel in the exhibition was raised in Parliament and in the media. The controversy is documented in the publication *Hum Sab Ayodhya*; also see the parliamentary proceedings of August-September 1993. Finally a panel of the exhibition was confiscated by the Delhi government, an action which was struck down by the Delhi High Court on 17 July 2001.

11. The bulletin *Secularism Alert* was sent to 350 fax numbers all over the country, and that became the basis for a resource centre. Several articles written by historians, journalists and other activists were sent to different newspapers as a free news service.

12. These are all collected in a volume titled *Secularism Alert*, published by Sahmat. There are a number of Sahmat publications on the subject: *The Saffron Agenda in Education* (2001), *Against Communalisation of Education* (2001), *Saffronised and Substandard* (2002), *The Assault on History* (2002), *Plagiarised and Communalised* (2003), *Against Communalisation of Archaeology* (2004).

13. The following children's books have been published by Sahmat over the years: *Natak ki Duniya*, *Duniya Sabki*, *Sare Mausam Achhe*, *Bag ki Sair*, *Bansuriwala*, *Ped*, *Gadbad Ghotala*, *Holi*, *Red Flower*, *Kitabein*—all based on Safdar's poems and plays; *Bapu*, *Champa*, *Bapu ka Aitihāsik Muqaddama*, *Idgaah*, *Sitara Gir Padega*.

14. All-India Progressive Writers' Association, an anti-imperialist, left-oriented writers movement launched in

Lucknow, April 1936.

15. Sahmat has brought out several publications relating to Husain: *Iconography Now* (2006), *Harassing Husain* (2007), *M.F. Husain...Petitioner* (2008), *Husain at 94* (2010).

16. The arts projects relating to the national movement are Postcards for Gandhi, 125th birth anniversary of Gandhi, 140th and 150th anniversaries of 1857, the 50th and 60th anniversaries of Indian independence, and related exhibitions, posters, postcards and publications.

17. This was before the Sahmat office shifted to 29 Ferozeshah Road.



About IFA

India Foundation for the Arts (IFA) is one of the country's leading independent arts funders, championing the cause of arts philanthropy and advocating the importance of the arts in public life. In the last decade and a half we have substantially enriched India's cultural landscape and infused passion and professionalism into the business of arts philanthropy.



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IFA was set up in 1993 to focus on urgent but unattended needs in specific areas of the arts. Since we began we have committed more than more than sixteen crore rupees (approximately three-and-a-half million US dollars) to projects located in almost every corner of the country.

Our support has gone out to independent research and teaching institutions, cultural and development organisations, scholars and artists. Musicians and choreographers, writers and visual artists, filmmakers and film scholars, architects and conservationists, sociologists and art historians, craftspersons and folk performers have been among the beneficiaries of our support.

Today we fund cutting edge artistic practice, support initiatives to bring the arts into the classroom, assist in institution development and infrastructure creation, fund research in the arts, help in the preservation and transmission of valuable cultural knowledge, and create public platforms for the dissemination and advocacy of the arts. We also act as a source of information and expertise to those in the arts community and beyond.

To receive regular information about our activities, send an email to contactus@indiaifa.org asking to join our mailing list.

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An IFA Publication

Volume 5, Number 2
July-December 2011

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