

25

INTERVIEWS FROM 25 YEARS OF CELEBRATING THE ARTS

INDIA FOUNDATION
FOR THE ARTS

We completed 25 years of grantmaking (1995 - 1996 to 2020 - 2021) in a year that the world will remember as one of tremendous loss—of lives, safety, intimacy and freedoms—much of what the privileged take for granted. With the deadly COVID-19 invading the world, the arts and culture sector in India was particularly impacted. The lockdown severely broke the back of the fragile economies that barely hold it together. The sector, which receives very little attention and support from the government or private philanthropies, felt further weighed down. The worry was not just about financial sustenance, but also of creative and artistic continuity and the ability to adapt to the transforming world. And in a year as disturbing as this, we at IFA were wondering how to mark the milestone of supporting over 650 artistic and cultural projects in a country where artists, for the longest time, have been used to being ‘atmanirbhar’!

It is not for nothing that some call artists the hope-makers of the future, the shamans of our deepest desire who heal broken worlds. While coping with their own losses and incapacities during the pandemic, artists came together in India and across the world to alleviate anguish with the solace of the arts and remind people of the power of solidarities. They showed us that the future holds the promise of a better world. With masks on and blindfolds off, many also pointed to the structural and systemic inequalities and injustices that we must all fight to change. The arts has held us together through this pandemic.

Thus we felt the only ways to mark our 25 years of grantmaking would be to do what we have always done—celebrate artists and scholars and their vision, rigour, audacity, and explorations—rejoice in the incorrigible beings that they are. Since this year was also the 25th anniversary of the internet in the country, we undertook 25X25, an initiative to support 25 projects of 25 artists on themes around the internet. And as we looked forward towards a more hopeful albeit tentative and uncertain future in a slowly evolving post pandemic world, we decided to reminisce about the 25 years gone by, and the unforgettable journey that it has been.



That is how this publication came about. Over the years we had conducted detailed interviews with grantees across our programmes and their various arts disciplines, and published them in our newsletters.



Artwork by Afrah Shafiq, multi/new media artist and documentary filmmaker, made in collaboration with the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences Calcutta (CSSSC)

These interviews are meant to reveal their processes and methodologies of work, share their concerns and challenges, and introduce us to the many worlds they inhabit. This publication curates 25 of these interviews keeping in mind the focus of our mandates, the priorities that shaped our programmes over time, and our attempts to make grantmaking strategies more diverse and inclusive. We hope you find something of interest to you.

On behalf of everyone at IFA today I would like to thank our first Executive Director, all our erstwhile staff members and Trustees, our donors and supporters, grantees and project coordinators, and experts and critics who have been part of this journey. And more importantly You – our audiences, our readers, our friends and well-wishers without whom this journey would not have been half as enriching, or this much fun! Thank you so much for your many gifts of love, faith and hope. As we heal from this pandemic, we collectively look forward to a new tomorrow with the arts by our side.

Arundhati Ghosh

Arundhati Ghosh,
Executive Director, IFA



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SCHARADA BAIL (SCHARADA DUBEY)

Arts Research and Documentation | 1999 - 2000



You have chosen to write about a community that is poor, marginalised and invisible. As you point out, toymakers receive no institutional support, their creations are fragile and improvised, and they often travel great distances to find markets. Can you say a little about what drew you to this community?

Scharada Bail (Dubey): I would say it's the fact of their reinventing themselves time and again in response to the conditions of their lives. That part of the urban poor that is referred to as the 'unorganised sector' is made up of many freelancing communities. People sell vegetables one year, then they find the capital to start a small tea-shop (with absolutely no help from the regular financial institutions!) and they take to doing that. Often, upward mobility is represented through successively better and more profitable occupations. Toymakers are those freelancers whose response to the challenges of urban poverty is not driven by totally prosaic factors—they are doing what they choose to do because it is most important to them to live by whatever creative skills they possess, and be in control of their time, place and nature of work. Of course, the prices of things, demand and supply, do affect them, and they adapt accordingly. But the quirky, ingenious part of the toymaker's response to his life conditions struck a chord in me. After all, I have been a freelancer myself all my working life, and in the toymakers, I saw ample expression of both the factors that drive me forward: a need for autonomy, and an often-playful creativity.

You point out that those who fetishise the greatness of India's traditional heritage would not admit these "sometimes undeniably tacky" toys into the category of Indian craft. You also emphasise how there is, in the toymaker's spirit of confronting the odds and in his ingenuity (jugaad), something instantly recognisable to an Indian. Why this need to pin down the 'Indianness' or otherwise of the toymaker?

Scharada Bail (Dubey) is a writer, internet consultant and Tarot practitioner. She received a grant to research and write a book on Indian toymakers. Her project resulted in a book titled, *The Toymakers: Light from India's Urban Poor*, which is a celebration of the resilience, resourcefulness and creativity of this self-employed community.

Scharada Bail (Dubey): I think this is connected to the time in which the book was written—2002. For some time, we had been collectively pre-occupied with notions of identity and Indianness. Even today, on one side there is a great need to re-affirm the growing global brand equity of India, and on the other there exist ideological threads in our political mainstream that trade in questions of who is more Indian, or Maharashtrian, or patriotic or whatever. In the midst of such self-congratulation and delusion, and as an antidote to both, I thought it was more important to focus on what people want to sweep under the carpet—'jugaad' that is sometimes art, and skills that help people survive in the fiercely competitive landscape of urban India.



Samarooh, photographed in Agalpura, near Varanasi

Street toymakers have rarely received their due, except from the work of Aravind Gupta or Sudarshan Khanna. In the past several years there has been so much hoopla on the Bollywood-is-beautiful theme or advertisements that endorse the desi factor. Toymakers represent all that is desi, yet people scarcely give them a thought. When I celebrate the “sometimes undeniably tacky” it is to subvert the designer desi with which we are constantly being fed by all manner of agencies and media.

You humanise the toymakers by having conversations with them, narrating their life journeys, going into their homes, and describing their toys. Would you consider this itself a form of activism—writing about the urban poor from a ground-level perspective instead of a top-heavy one?

Scharada Bail (Dubey): Yes, of course. Unfortunately, however, it is an approach that has yet to acquire the respectability of a more academic or theoretical enquiry in our country.





Sitaram Raghuvanshi at his workstation

When you look at the books being written (especially in English, because I am not sure about the scope of regional writing, which could be considerably larger), you either have the much lauded works of fiction that engage with some section of Indian society, or formal academic works that use data or observations to hammer home some lofty premise. What if you want to cross genres, or social classes, write a book that occasionally touches a reader's heart, yet does not need him or her to suspend critical thinking? I think of mine as just such a troublesome book! Its long ordeal as a manuscript before finally being published is another pointer to this crossing of genres. It would have made the grade sooner if it was a children's book, or fiction about the toymakers of Varanasi, or a beautifully illustrated tome about 'khilonas'. If there's any form of activism in the writing, it is a demand that each one of us individually engage with the problem of poverty and survival that defines life for so many people around us.

You outline possible ways of improving things for the toymakers such as providing them with working capital and design inputs.



Dipen Das at work

Do you see your own involvement with the toymakers continuing into the future?

Scharada Bail (Dubey): Yes, definitely. I have recently relocated to Faizabad, Uttar Pradesh and am in the process of setting up the Sahriday Samiti—my initiative to help toymakers, rickshaw drivers and other poor self-employed communities. In October, I am looking forward to going to Varanasi and connecting with some of the subjects of my book. What I would like to do for them is arrange exhibitions of their toys in cities and archive their work at a single venue, perhaps Faizabad itself, or Lucknow. I am also keen to have them covered by insurance—it is fatal for a toymaker to fall sick during the build up to a festive or ‘mela’ season, and yet, illness is a grim punctuation for most of them all their professional lives. Finally, in terms of communication and outreach, I want the stories and struggles of toymakers and other marginalised communities to become part of the urban middle-class Indian’s knowledge base, increasing the possibilities of people’s engagement with the lives of toymakers and others. If these efforts lead to more toymakers staying with their craft, or more individuals taking to making toys for a living, it will be wonderful indeed.





What does a typical Bhand Pather performance consist of?

MK Raina: It is an open-air form performed around Sufi shrines during the annual Urs of Sufi pirs. Thousands of people gather around the shrines during the Urs. They watch the performance and pay the Bhands—sometimes with cash but mostly in kind. The Bhands also perform around Hindu temples. They go into villages during harvest time and they could turn a village courtyard or an orchard into a performance space. They climb trees, they go into houses and peep at their audience from windows, they act entirely according to their whims and fancies. The performance starts with a wind instrument called swarnai—if you hear the sound of the swarnai, you know the performance is about to begin. The music is dominant and then there are the maskaras or jesters—there could be five or eight or or ten maskaras. They are the spirit of the performance. There is often the figure of a ruler from outside who is exploiting the natives; the jesters fool him and bring him to some kind of an understanding. He will normally speak Persian or gibberish English or Punjabi. They will speak in Kashmiri. He cannot understand them and they cannot understand him. He has a whip which creates a sound of a pistol when he cracks it and that's a very vivid element. Sometimes the stories are mythological; sometimes you find traces of the Ramayana. Each performer has a special musical score called mukam. Each mukam has its own name and comes from the classical Sufiana qalaam tradition of Kashmir. The Bhands sometimes sing Sufiana verses too. They mix these with theatre songs and peasant songs; it's a distinct repertoire of music. They play two percussion instruments—the dhol and the nagara—along with the swarnai and thalej or cymbals.

MK Raina is a theatre director and actor. He received a grant to conduct a month-long theatre workshop in the Akingam village of Kashmir. The workshop participants were children from families that have traditionally performed Bhand Pather. Bhand Pather is a form of farcical theatre that is said to have entered Kashmir from Persia through the Muslim courts in the 14th century and then spread through the rest of north India.

Bhand Pather has been suppressed by militants over the last two decades. What were the greatest challenges you faced conducting the workshop in Akingam village?

MK Raina: The performers of Akingam lost their mentor and teacher Guru Mohammed Subhan, a SNA awardee. He became a victim. The militants didn't want Subhan to perform Bhand Pather, they considered it unIslamic. They put him under house arrest for nine months. Eventually he died from extreme humiliation and shock. His death was a big blow to the performers and they lost their self-confidence. Yet, I chose Akingam village because one of the oldest Bhand theatre companies in the Kashmir valley—the Kashmir Bhagat Theatre—is based here.



MK Raina with participants of a month-long theatre workshop in the village of Akingam in Kashmir

Also, Akingam is surrounded by many heritage and sacred sites and there are villages around which also have groups performing Bhand Pather. A village called Muhurpur, next to Akingam, used to have Kashmiri Pandits Bhand performers but they left the village in 1990. The people of Akingam are deeply Sufi and philosophical in outlook, you start chatting with them and before you know it you are involved in an intellectual discussion on the meaning of existence. The villagers took us in. The whole village was galvanised into action. The women started cooking for us. The young participants of the workshop staged a performance at the end of the four weeks. A huge crowd turned up from Akingam and from the surrounding villages. I am certain that this was the first time in 19 years that that such a large crowd has gathered together for a cultural event in Kashmir. Some of our friends from Srinagar who had come for the performance could not believe that such a gathering was possible without government support and without any security or police. It is also true that though we met with some resistance along the way, it was minor. The militants do not oppose the Bhand Pather today as much as they used to.





People gathered
to watch a Bhand Pather
performance

You have said: “Kashmiri children have lost their power of imagination and self-expression...perhaps it has to do with the collapse of the education system and two decades of violence.” Can you tell us how children and young people responded to the workshop and what you did to draw them out?

MK Raina: Because of the threat of violence, children have to be indoors by 3 pm. They suffer from a lack of exposure. Nobody asks them to think for themselves, to imagine. All adults tell them is—shut up, keep quiet, don’t go out because this or that will happen. A people who have traditionally lived their lives in forests and among nature have had to confine themselves to their houses. I went to the houses of Bhand performers in three or four villages and told them, “Look, you have to send your kids to this workshop.” They sent them gladly. These elders themselves visited the workshop and performed too—we had a week which was like a little folk festival. We got a flavour of Bhand from other regions of Kashmir. When working with the boys, my collaborator Rakesh and I woke up to the fact that their bodies were not in the right proportion. There was a stiffness, a distortion, a lack of grace.





I started asking myself whether these problems were due to the stresses and tensions that their mothers had gone through before the children were born or if they were a result of the atmosphere, they had grown up in. Initially, it was difficult for the boys to understand that meaningful images and ideas can be communicated just by making an instrument out of the body, like any musical instrument. But eventually they got it. Performance is in their blood after all.

You will soon embark on a two-year IFA-supported project wherein young performers will be trained in different aspects of the form by Ustads. What are the ways in which you see these younger performers making Bhand Pather their own?

MK Raina: I am hoping to set up a little school in Akingam. My worry has been that the elders will die. Two are very old and they are the best. I've told them, "I will come to the village when you die and shower rose petals on your grave only if you've taught children. Otherwise, I'll only say you were a good man, but I won't come with rose petals!" The thing is that these Ustads have a methodology for teaching what they know, but they are very tough and they tend to get impatient. I have to teach them to be patient with young people. But they have seen me working so I think they understand the importance of making a child relax. One of my conditions is also that the children will have to continue with their formal schooling. They will have to understand the basics of the form first. Later they can experiment. I don't necessarily want them to only perform the traditional repertoire. My dream is to do *King Lear* with them. But right now, the focus is on setting up this school. Akingam has been designated a heritage tourist village. The government is making a campus where a small building has already come up which has been given to us to use as a rehearsal and teaching space. The idea behind the heritage tourist village is that since Akingam is on the way to Pehelgam and Amarnath, maybe tourists will stop here. And if they do, we can perform for them.

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

Saba Dewan: I think one of the most surprising discoveries for me in the early months of research was the extent to which families with tawaif background have moved away from the arts as well as the lifestyle and sexuality associated with the earlier tawaif tradition. The present generation of family members of those women who had occupied the highest echelons of the tawaif community, for instance the Hindu Gandharva and the Muslim Dereydar tawaifs of Varanasi, have over the past decades generally moved into the lifestyle associated with middle class 'respectability'. The girls of these families are not exposed to any training in music or dance and have mostly been married off. The sons, because the families had the resources to afford it, have been educated and encouraged to seek jobs in the government or private sector or even begin their own businesses. There has been a deliberate attempt within these families to erase the earlier customs associated with the tawaif community. In a marked reversal of earlier practices, sons are preferred to daughters, who are now seen as liabilities fit only to be married off and 'settled'. However, the descendents of less well-off or poor tawaifs have had to make different life choices. There was an economic compulsion here for the women to continue earning for the family, though not necessarily the resources or patronage to receive the intensive training in music of the earlier generations. Many of the girls in these families have therefore moved on to perform in the dance bars of Mumbai and Bangalore, in the orchestra parties that perform at family and other celebrations, especially in smaller towns and in dance troupes that form the staple of the nautanki performance in its new avatar.

Saba Dewan is a filmmaker. She received a grant to create a film exploring the social and cultural history of the tawaifs of North India. The project resulted in the film titled *The Other Song*, which focuses on the art forms associated with tawaifs and the relationship between aesthetic expression and sexual identity.

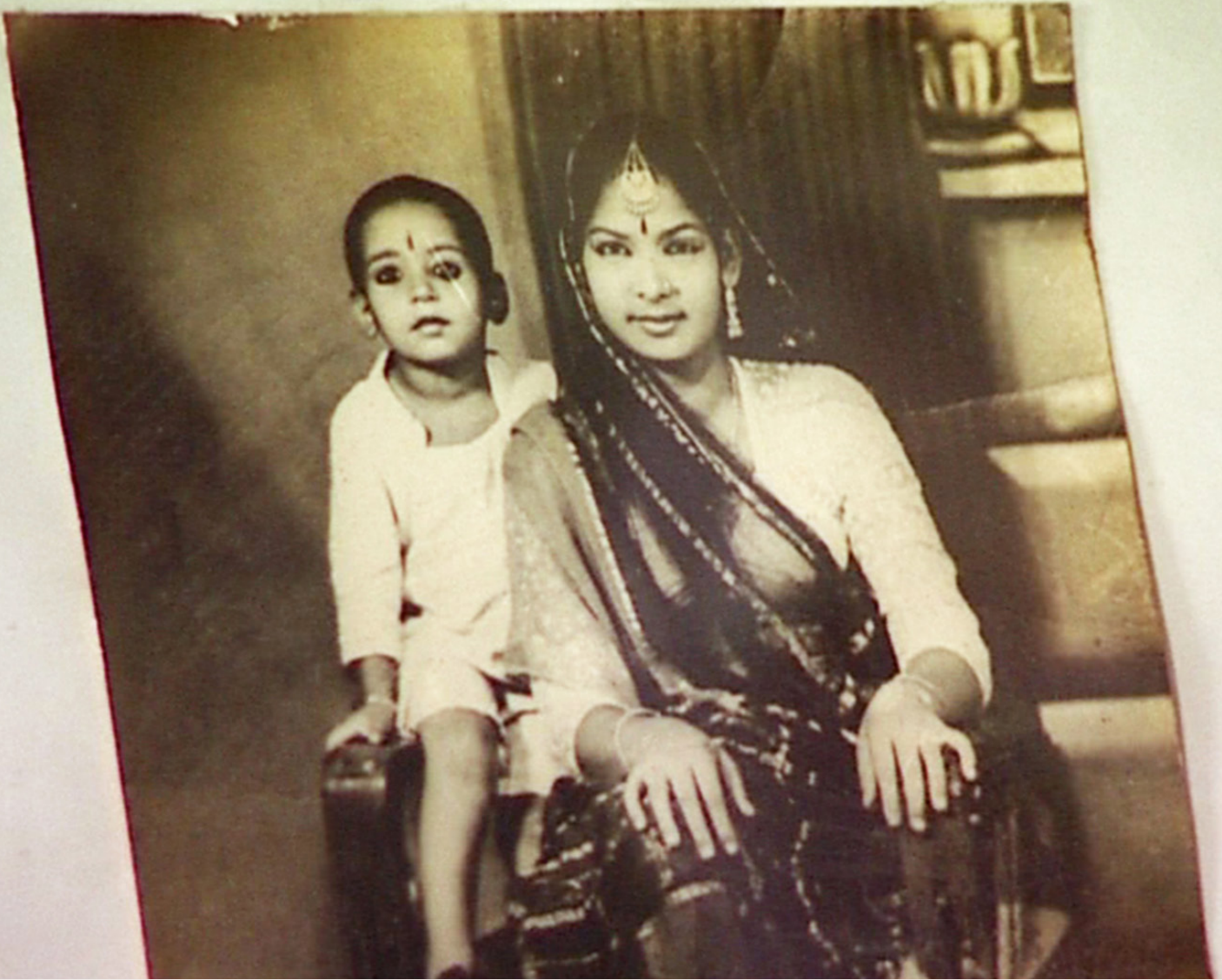
By recalling the two different versions of a thumri that Rasoolan Bai recorded—one of which talks about wounds of the heart and the other, wounds of the breasts—you place the subject of sexuality before the film's characters in a very interesting way. Would you like to comment on this and on the response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

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



Rasoolan Bai

musician in his own right. What is the significance of the seemingly minor difference in poetry of the two versions sung by Rasoolan Bai? Shastri ji had not enlightened me about this and in my literal understanding of jobanwa as yauvan or youth/youthfulness, I could see nothing particularly reprehensible in the 1935 version sung by Rasoolan Bai. I noticed, however, the discomfort with the term 'jobanwa' among everyone I spoke to subsequently. Several people insisted upon the literal translation that I too had given the term. Others spoke of it at a more metaphorical level, locating in the term youthfulness, playfulness, the prime of life, ascendancy etc. There were still others who felt too embarrassed to discuss the term with me at all. Soon enough though I realised that in poetic usage, and in colloquial use, joban or jobanwa also refers to breasts, especially young women's breasts. 'Lagat jobanwa ma chot, phul gendwa naa maar' therefore would mean 'My breasts are wounded, do not throw flowers at me'. The other question that I wanted answers to was about Rasoolan Bai. She remains an enigmatic and mysterious figure in the tawaif history of Banaras. Though the response to any query related to the contribution of tawaif singers includes an almost ritual incantation of Rasoolan's name, few people, including her contemporary musicians and patrons, seemed inclined to share with me the texture of her life. I noticed the subtle ways in which attempts were made to remove Rasoolan from her tawaif lifestyle and background, now perceived as unsuitable, even unsavoury. Her absence in popular memory interested me because although her career as a musician coincided with attempts by nationalist reformers to stigmatise the tawaif and her arts, Rasoolan Bai along with Siddheshwari Devi and Kashi Bai, were successful in forming the triumvirate that defined Banarasi thumri in the 20th century. Why did Rasoolan Bai never sing the jobanwa version of the thumri again? Was it just the spur of the moment whim by the artiste? Did the fact that the jobanwa thumri (performed perhaps primarily within a small mehfil) was now being recorded for a mass audience, play a role in Rasoolan feeling it was unsuitable to record again? Could this change in text point towards more significant transitions that were taking place in the early 20th century in the recasting of Hindustani music and of the lifestyle of its women practitioners? Increasingly I felt that the story of the lost thumri encapsulated the many issues related to the links between the tawaif's identity; as an artiste and her lifestyle and sexuality as also the transitions that had taken place and I therefore decided to structure the film around this.



Mother with child: A still
from the documentary
The Other Song

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

Saba Dewan: Saira Begum, Rani Begum, Daya Kumari and Zarina Begum are very different from each other as people and their views on life are individualistic, though of course framed within shared circumstances. Saira has consciously distanced herself and her family from her background. Once her children were born she stopped performing for patrons within her own house, preferring instead to perform only outside Banaras where few people knew her personally. Her extended family, which has over the decades moved away completely from any connection with their tawaif past, played a major role in putting pressure on her to avoid bringing any ‘shame’ upon them.



Lost grandeur: A still
from the documentary
The Other Song

Saira, however, loves music and her identity as a musician is central to her being and she stood up to the pressure to quit performing altogether. Her dilemma revolves around her love for music but an equally strong desire to move away from her tawaif background. Zarina Begum has also made similar but not such conscious or complete choices as Saira Begum. An extremely gifted singer with strong emotional attachment to her music and pride in her identity as a performer, Zarina ji's choice to move away from her tawaif identity was as much a product of the social and cultural circumstances surrounding her as her personal decision. She had a ways performed for a select set of patrons belonging to old aristocratic families of Lucknow and its neighbouring taluqdari states. As the fortunes of this class dipped, so did the occasions for her to perform. She has had the most doors to new performance venues opened to her including films and radio. However, being temperamentally steeped in the earlier tradition of a more personal relationship that existed between musicians (whether women or men) and their patrons, Zarina Begum has found the more impersonal new equations alien and difficult to negotiate. Rani is very different from either Saira or Zarina. An extremely confident person, Rani is the undisputed leader of the tawaif community in Muzzafarpur. She is now making her mark as a politician in the area. Despite the pressures of politics to conform to a 'respectable' image she is proud of her tawaif background and very open about it. I remember that when I met her initially, in deference to an unspoken rule amongst the women, I had avoided using the term 'tawaif'. Rani surprised me completely by using the term proudly for herself and was enthusiastically part of the film from the very beginning. Daya Kumari, on the other hand, views her tawaif identity as secondary, even as an impediment to her identity as a successful theatre actor on the Calcutta stage through the 1940s. Her ambivalence towards her tawaif past is not shaped, I feel, due to a fear of stigma or sense of shame but more from a feeling that she lost her true calling as an actor because of her mother's insistence that she pursue the more lucrative career as a tawaif performer at weddings etc. Daya Kumari has a very strong sense of herself as an actor and a musician, and whatever her ambivalence about being seen as a 'mere' tawaif performer feels no hesitation in embracing as her choice the non-marital sexuality of the tawaif which she feels provided her the space to pursue her calling as an artiste.



The commentary is personal, in your voice, and also includes a second person 'you' with whom you keep a conversation going throughout the film. Are there ways in which your own thinking about this culture changed as you went along? Were there any stumbling blocks along the way?

Saba Dewan: I had begun this project, I realise now, with a somewhat simplistic, even romantic need, to celebrate what some feminist scholars have termed the 'free' space available to the tawaif for inversion of socially sanctioned gender roles. The most striking example of this being that the birth of a daughter was celebrated with far greater enthusiasm than that of a son who was viewed as an economic liability. The inversion of gender norms was reflected within the wider kotha community as well. Tawaifs along with male accompanist musicians formed the core of this community. In Varanasi, for instance, till well into the 1940s, senior tawaifs were traditionally nominated the choudharayin or leaders of the musicians' panchayat called the saat taat—or the seven mats – empowered to resolve all internal disputes and issues within the community. As a woman filmmaker, it was tempting to read in the reversal within the kotha of normative gender norms, a woman-centered space liberated from the domination by men as a group, the bedrock principle of all patriarchies. However, as I proceeded in my research, I realised that this construction posed not only the obvious danger of romanticising the material reality of the art forms and lifestyle of tawaifs but also of fragmenting female sexualities within a simplistic binary division – for example, the Madonna and the whore. Binary oppositions are born out of patriarchal anxieties to control and do not reflect the real, lived or imagined desires and experiences of women and men which often traverse a much larger area than what is socially ordained. Within pre-colonial cultural economy, given the dependency of all performers, men and women, on patronage of individual male members of the aristocracy, the tawaif was not, and neither could she afford to be, a social rebel. As a professional woman artiste and entertainer, she occupied space perhaps on the margins of patriarchy but not in opposition to it. Throughout history, these 'feminine' spaces have stood on the margins of the patriarchal order—neither totally engulfed by it nor entirely liberated, but negotiating an extremely thin strip of space pregnant with possibilities.





You are a traditional pena player and a person deeply interested in the rituals of Manipur, with an experimental approach to your work as well, in which you often blend innovation with the traditional, particularly in the project you worked on most recently under support from IFA. How did this particular performance evolve?

M Mangangsana Meitei: At the time I applied for the IFA New Performance grant, I was working in traditional ballad forms of Manipur. I was planning to fuse the Manipuri Ballad with Manipuri Opera. I was also working with opera singers in Manipur and visual artists. I wanted the upcoming performance to break out of the traditional mode. Incorporating a strong supporting visual component would be one of the ways I would bring new elements into the performance. For example, I wanted the sets to be not mere props but function as an installation that would create an environment in which the ritual could be experienced as a performance piece. The performance itself draws from the ancient Manipuri ballad of *Phou-Oibi*, the Manipuri Goddess of rice-paddy, and is based on her mythological story, of how her influence reaches across the state and how she brings about good harvest. Though it is rooted in rituals, we wanted to present it as a performance per se in a theatre or stage, which would push it out of its 'traditional' form (when it is performed in fields or shrines) and into more public spheres. The idea was to challenge notions of performance in Manipur and create a new language.

M Mangangsana Meitei is a pena player, musician and balladeer. He received a grant to develop a performance based on the mythical story of *Phou-Oibi* or *Lady of the Paddy*, whose legend is famous in the rice-growing culture of Manipur. The project resulted in a production titled, *Phou-Oibi*, the rice goddess, a *Manipuri Ballad Opera*, that relocates the radical within the traditional.

You have had diverse creative projects to your credit and have worked in various capacities with individuals and organisations, mostly with the pena. Now with *Phou-Oibi*, you try to go beyond the pena. How do you trace your movement from the traditional towards the experimental?

M Mangangsana Meitei: I have always been surrounded by traditional performances of the pena, as a child and learning under my father, and later with Oja Leimapokpam Yaima, then Pena Shanglakpa of Lainingthou Sanamahi Temple Board. Later on, it was through working with Dr L Gojendra of Manipur Dramatic Union and Shri H Kanhailal of Kalakshetra Manipur that I became interested in contemporary theatre and dance. As I gained experience, I was eager to perform in my own immediate context and later on, outside it. Then I had an opportunity to work with Priti Patel of Anjika, Kolkata, where I was very influenced by contemporary modern forms.



From a performance of *Phou-Oibi*,
the rice goddess

The more involved I was in contemporary dance/performance, the more I wanted to explore my tradition and extend it, drawing from the rich resource of stories and forms of storytelling I had been exposed to as a child in Manipur, to create a new medium for performance. In my childhood I had seen performances of folk and legendary stories which, though ritualistic, were also entertaining. They were stories about reincarnation or star-crossed lovers, and something within me wanted to recreate them as performing art.

My collaborations have been a big influence on me in this regard. When I was working with Yoshiko Chuma and the School of Hard Knocks, I was deeply influenced by her practice. I saw how fusing tradition and experimentation can create complex art forms. Performing with her was a great learning experience.

In a way, I am neither comfortable with traditional forms of performance nor with contemporary performance. The former is not my way of functioning, and so much of the latter seems to shut people off by avoiding any obvious meaning. So more and more now I find my

traditional training and roots helpful in experimenting within my own practice, be it in performance or music. In a way, a lot of my work is trying to straddle that ground between tradition and innovation and trying to create a middle way.

What were some of your ideas which you incorporated into the performance of *Phou-Oibi* that you thought were crucial to its “making new” of the ritual/traditional performance?

M Mangangsana Meitei: In this effort, the music, sets and actors all played a big part in breaking the mould of the conventional ritual performance, which I was never comfortable working, anyways. Like I have mentioned above, we wanted the sets to be an installation. This supporting visual material, along with the lights and music, created the environment we tried to achieve, and helped us accentuate details of the narrative. Of course, the ritual performances do not have the stage lighting that we used to create an ambience and underscore shifts in the narrative. Similarly, with the music, we incorporated other instruments and several kinds of musical styles by orchestrating the pena with the vocal and rhythmic expressions of Moirang Sai, Moirang Parva, Sankirtana, Wari Liba and Lai Haraoba because we found that using only the pena was very limiting to the narrative.

Likewise, opposed to the framework of the ritual in which only one person would enact the part of *Phou-Oibi*, we had multiple actors perform the same parts. On the other hand, it was interesting to me that the rituals had no rigid parameters for whether a male or a female shaman, priest or priestess should conduct them, and so we used this ambiguity to our advantage, creating a cacophony of characters and voices.



Tell us a little bit more about your artists. How do you select them and how are they trained for the performance?

M Mangangsana Meitei: The artists who participated in this performance are not just actors—they are complete performers who sing, act and dance. They are traditional dancers and musicians who we train in various exercises for about six months before the performance. They are not real actors because in a way they lack expression.



From a performance of *Phou-Oibi*,
the rice goddess

We don't train them in expressing themselves as performers in theatre. To me, it was more important that through their actions onstage—not through facial expression—the actors evoke the spirit of the rituals. So the actors were trained in ways that would help them physically manifest the grace and spirituality of the rituals and create that aura or energy even in a stage or a professional venue. They were allowed to meet the priests and priestesses who conduct the rituals; they were asked to chant the hymns and songs that are used in the rituals and, of course, there was much conversation and exchange about the rituals themselves.

A particular kind of physical exercises allowed them to embody the spirit of the rituals. These exercises called *Sajel* have been used in Manipur for generations now: simple, effective exercises that help with breathing and posture and have a very positive effect on the body. Such exercises were especially helpful to the female performers, who would normally face discomfort during their periods. However, the women never complained and were able to maintain their energy during the rehearsal and performances because of these exercises that are so deep-rooted in our culture and are a part of that tradition.



How does the space that you inhabit—the geographical space that you call home—influence your work? Do you find it limiting to be working in relative isolation? In such a case, what does it mean to be able to perform in a cosmopolitan city?



M Mangangsana Meitei: Though I live in Manipur, which is fairly isolated from a mainstream performance scene, I have performed internationally in Osaka, Tokyo, Singapore and New York and throughout India because of the many other performances and organisations I have been involved in. Of course, Manipur has a strong influence on my work, since my actors, instruments, and performances are all based in its rich culture. However, to represent the contemporary state of affairs in Manipur, one would think I would be obliged to address the political scenario of this part of the country. But I am not interested in politics that way. My work is an aesthetic exploration through a spiritual medium. Or rather, through my work I try to create that medium in which all these aspects can co-exist. As experimenting with traditional forms extends them into the contemporary, performing in a cosmopolitan or international city is like extending the origins and the reach of the rituals. Performing in other cities is not only an opportunity for me to present the work we do to a larger audience; it also helps me rethink my own performances and the ways in which they can change over time, according to the audience.

Do your performances change from venue to venue? Is what you are showing now a form of the play that has been finalised, or is it a constantly evolving process?

M Mangangsana Meitei: Yes, my production's performances do change from venue to venue, and no performance of mine is ever finalised, because I like to think of the creative process as constantly evolving. The venue matters little to me; in a way, it adds to the challenge of recreating the energy of the rituals, irrespective of whether we are performing at a royal courtyard, in an auditorium or a field. Depending on the venue, I manoeuvre the use of supporting visual material, installations, lighting and music to our advantage.

Language, however, is the biggest challenge when performing outside Manipur. We must keep in mind that what we communicate through actions on stage becomes more important to the narrative than what is sung or spoken, and in that case everything else takes on a heightened importance. For the upcoming performance of *Phou-Oibi* in Kolkata, the performance will change in that there will be more focus on physical movement, rhythmic juxtapositions and visual atmosphere, through which we will try to make the narrative as comprehensible as possible. I believe the sound of what we say rather than the meaning becomes more important because sound or rhythm can act as a common language. My work is always trying to find that median between ritual and performance, traditional and contemporary, music/dance and language. My primary concern is to create a medium or environment in which the audience can feel what we perform, really experience its energy, rather than just be witnesses.

What will you be working on next?

M Mangangsana Meitei: Currently, I am working on orchestrating a musical composition with seventy-five drummers from across the country, to be performed in New Delhi on September 18, 2010 at Purana Qila. This performance has been organised in collaboration with the UN Systems in India, as a part of Stand Up and Take Action 2010, and as a call to end poverty now. And then of course there is the version of *Phou-Oibi* I am developing for the upcoming New Performance Festival, which I am excited to present to the audience in Kolkata.





In an interview with *The Hindu*, you had said, “Everyone is willing to pour her heart out until the camera is switched on. Then, it is a different story!” This makes us curious about your role as an interviewer: Can you take us back to how you began talking to people and getting their stories; and share with us how you have changed as an interviewer with each film you have made?

Merajur Rahman Baruah: Well, you are right. It has happened on many occasions. As I start investigating a subject or an issue, I approach people associated with it. During this research and recce period, they are very open and express themselves without much inhibition. But during the shooting phase, when the camera is switched on, at times, they choose to be selective with their vocabulary. I respect their concern and never push them to speak before the camera if they suddenly feel uncomfortable. I instead talk to them again, discuss issues they are comfortable with and once they are at ease, I ask for permission to switch on the camera. If the person agrees, my interview happens. If not, I postpone the shooting for another time when my interviewee would be ready to have an in-depth conversation. Yes, there are various reasons that make the interviewee clam up: first, the camera itself often becomes obtrusive, then the situation or the milieu may go completely against the interview or the timing can be really unfortunate. Quite often the choice of time is crucial—filmmakers working with limited budgets endeavour to schedule the shoot in such a way that they can maximise their shooting time. So what could happen is that the person we would want to speak to may have another prior engagement and would like to rush, but sometimes we push her/him to suit our needs and budgets, thereby leading to a conflict of interests. But if we are a little sensitive and empathise with the people we are trying to explore, then we can avoid compromising the quality of the interviews that we propose to translate into a cinematic expression or reality.

You have made documentaries and television programmes on a number of issues. This must have included entering a community (secular, religious, professional, artistic etc.) as an outsider—have you ever encountered distrust or even exceptionally surprising faith?

Merajur Rahman Baruah is a documentary filmmaker. He received a grant to make *Nine Months*, a film documenting the mobile theatre or, the Bhramyaman theatre in Assam. The film recorded the transformation in themes and repertoire of this genre of performance, captured the experience and perspectives of its promoters, directors, actors, technicians and stagehands, and documented the impact of globalisation on its practice.



Stills from the film *Nine Months*

How does such an encounter shape the ethics of your filmmaking?

Merajur Rahman Baruah: Well, as documentary filmmakers, we often encounter such situations during the research phase. While embarking on in-depth research work, we try to meet as many people to explore different perspectives and also assess their stake. In such situations, until we have established a rapport with the people and earned their full trust, people do get sceptical about the intention and even the credibility of the filmmaker. Well, I would like to share my experience while making my film *Nine Months*. For my research, I was travelling across the state of Assam—visiting many small and big theatre companies, and watching them rehearse. They would all welcome me, but when I told them about the need for shooting their rehearsals, a few theatre groups became extremely apprehensive about my intention—that I might misappropriate the footage or show it to other theatre companies about the new things and techniques they are doing before the release of their production, which may lose its innovative appeal. So I had to try hard to convince them with utmost sincerity. But once they understood my intention and

trusted me, most of the theatre companies were more than happy to allow me to shoot.

I would like to share another experience. While shooting, I discovered that one of the theatre groups had a six year old girl acting in their productions. I was quite keen to have her as one of the characters in my narrative—to unfold the mobile theatre from a holistic perspective. Hence, I wanted to shoot her live—like the way she lived and travelled with the other 120 senior members of the troupe for the duration of nine months, but the producer was a little apprehensive about this. He had no problem or reservation about my shooting other members or travelling with the group, which I did. I also filmed the plays the little girl was acting in, but somehow I no longer felt it was right to shoot the girl live, so I eventually dropped her as a character from the film. She is seen in the film in bits and pieces. We as filmmakers can't be rigid and force our desired narrative on our potential subjects.



A still from the film *Nine Months*

Nine Months, which you created with an IFA grant, has achieved a lot. Can you please share with us its journey and the number of exciting developments it has brought about?

Merajur Rahman Baruah: I am really happy that my film *Nine Months* has contributed to the medium, i.e. the mobile theatre itself. I would like to share some anecdotes. I have done extensive research on the subject, and it has been a pioneering study. It has been 48 years since the inception of mobile theatre but very few studies have focused on this medium. Outside the state of Assam, not many people have been exposed to this particular form of theatre. When I did the research, even the people engaged with the mobile theatre felt the importance of an in-depth research and realised the need to start initiating a method to archive their plays, props, scripts, etc., because till then the life of a play used to be for one theatre season only. The following year, nothing would be in store—no reference, nothing and most surprisingly the playscript itself would no longer exist. The scriptwriter would also have no memory of it! However, in a positive turn of events, the National School of Drama (NSD), New Delhi invited the biggest mobile theatre company in Assam called Kohinoor Theatre to Delhi in April 2010. They performed for five days. During this five-day festival of the mobile theatre, NSD also wanted to showcase its history, using old posters, props and so on but they had difficulties finding the required materials. They just barely managed and also had to commission someone to film the mobile theatre before the exhibition. The performance went well with a lot of appreciation and extensive coverage on national media. However, the biggest achievement

of the mobile theatre as a genre is that the NSD has incorporated the study of mobile theatre into its second year syllabus. And recently, a group of second year students were sent to Assam to get a hands-on experience of the medium. The students got the training of dual stage performance which is unique to mobile theatre, and now they are rehearsing for one of the popular plays called the *Titanic*. It is an adaptation of the Hollywood blockbuster of the same title. After the training and rehearsal period, the second year students will perform the play in its pure form across the country.

Also, *Nine Months* is doing reasonably well in terms of reaching a wider audience. It's going to different festivals and recently won the second best film award at the Jeevika-Asia Livelihood Documentary Film Festival, Delhi, 2010. NDTV 24x7 has also requested for the film to be telecast on their channel. So we have got into a two-year agreement with NDTV whereby they will telecast the film four times. After the release of *Nine Months*, I have been getting calls and emails from different organisations and media persons enquiring about mobile theatres. I have also received a call from the National Centre for the Performing Art, Mumbai, who wanted to enquire about how to get a mobile theatre company to perform in Mumbai. Recently, the mobile theatre groups have collectively released their first book on the history of mobile theatre. So I feel that my film has in some way given them the impetus to reach national and international audiences.

What is the travelling experience of a documentary film-maker like you? Does the fact that you are going to turn a particular travel into something later on change your experience of a place and its people?

Merajur Rahman Baruah: While making a film we often encounter incidents or hear stories that unfold in a completely different arena, perhaps independent of the subject under study. It may draw us to the core of our subject and help us unfold the realities in a more exciting way. But my personal experience is that we often fail to tell the stories that have to be told because of the many handicaps we face as independent documentary filmmaker...that is another story. But coming back to your question about changing my perception about a place and its people, well, it does not really happen because as a matter of principle and training, I don't visit any place with a preconceived notion. I essentially let my imagination and understanding evolve with every successive visit to the place.



This grant was made possible with support from Mrs Sudha Murty.



This interview was conducted with Sukracharjya Rabha, who is part of the Badungduppa Kalakendra.

What is the nature of mainstream theatre practices in Assam today?

Sukracharjya Rabha: Mainstream theatre, including mobile theatre, focuses on producing formulaic, saleable products that promote cultural stereotypes in Assam. They fail to be representative of the cultural and social realities of contemporary Assamese society with its extant forms of oppression, rapid industrialisation and cultural changes. Their function remains to reinforce established and accepted values and manners, and a lot of their material is borrowed from television soap operas and from Bollywood. Much of the work being created in Assamese theatre today neither emerges from an inner impulse nor responds to the immediate contexts in which artists and audiences live and create.

Despite the government's considerable financial support to North Eastern States like Assam, artists are not critically engaging with the creative process involved in the making of a new performance piece. Government sponsored workshops conducted by trained theatre practitioners from the National School of Drama fail to produce remarkable results in Assam because these experts cannot encourage the creation of work within the Assamese context. An example of this disconnect is seen through past performances of Rupalim (one of Sukracharjya's earlier productions). It was done at a time when I was deeply influenced by my workshops with NSD theatre artists. The sets, props and costumes used for the play were colourful and elaborate. The entire production was not very economical. It is difficult to stage such grand plays in rural Assam. I soon realised that in order to reach larger audiences I needed to make do with existing infrastructure. This is one of the reasons why Badungduppa plays today are performed in open spaces with simple costumes and minimal props.

Where does Badungduppa's work fit into this scenario?

Sukracharjya Rabha: Through Badungduppa, we make an attempt to hear our own voices and reflect on the process through which each performance journeys. Our scripts and performance styles are rooted in Assamese traditions and legends. In addition to creating our own performances, we conduct a range of activities like workshops and community-centred projects for performing artists.

Badungduppa Kalakendra is a theatre group from Assam. They received a grant to hold a series of exploratory workshops for four contemporary theatre directors and their groups. The workshops culminated in a two-day festival, titled *Under the Sal Tree 2011 – Parichay + Atma Parichay*, which premiered the four performances of the visiting directors at the Badungduppa premises in the village of Rampur, Goalpara district, Assam.



Performance at the festival
Under the Sal Tree 2011 — Parichay
+ Atma Parichay

Badungduppa Kalakendra's aim is to create performances that resonate with rural audiences, yet craft stories within the present context of life in Assam. All said and done, our plays do not pander to the tastes of our audience; instead we try to give them something to think about. It is for this reason that one of our critical focus areas has been the creation of a healthy network of audience members who appreciate our work.

This year, you decided to change the format of *Under the Sal Tree* to make its focus more about encouraging young directors to critically engage with the theatre-making process through experimentation. What were the reasons behind the decision?

Sukracharjya Rabha: Since its inception, *Under the Sal Tree* has always been festival centric. The first *Under the Sal Tree* theatre festival focused on the celebration of rituals through theatre. Over the next few years our themes revolved around the dramatisation of folk tales and on retelling legends through theatre. Our intention in those years was to encourage the collection of scattered and endangered folk tales and legends while creating a theatre identity unique to our region and expanding our reach to the common audience. This year, we shifted our focus from the festival format of our earlier efforts to the content of the plays being performed and to the theatre-making process followed by the visiting directors. We wanted young artists to experiment with the theatre-making process, drawing inspiration from their rich cultural heritage, to create a theatre language unique to the region.

Under the old format we found that we were not able to engage with our participants in the long term. We also felt that the 'invitation only' format of the festival was restricting young artists from approaching us and that by performing only for audiences in Rampur we were shutting out voices from other parts of Assam. *Under the Sal Tree 2011* addresses these concerns.

In what way?

Sukracharjya Rabha: To begin with, we made the festival process-oriented, placing emphasis on the interactions between the participants and a panel of facilitators, consisting of Mrinal Bora, Sankar Venkateswaran and I. We gave each participant an outsider's perspective of their work. In addition to this, our theme this year was 'Parichay + Atma Parichay', which, roughly translated, refers to Personal Identity. Assam has been going through many changes over the past few years, both political and cultural.





Performance at the festival
Under the Sal Tree 2011—Parichay
+ Atma Parichay

On the one hand, traditional hierarchies are getting strengthened and on the other hand new societal hierarchies are emerging. How do we, as artists, respond to these changes? This is the question we posed to all our participants.

Interestingly, this may well be the first forum to encourage interactions between theatre groups from both Upper and Lower Assam. Four groups from Dhemaji, Mongaldoi, Jorhat and Tinsukia, got a chance to critique each other through *Under the Sal Tree 2011* and travelled together to perform their plays to their respective audiences.



I am very happy with the outcome of *Under the Sal Tree* this year. Each theatre group that participated in it came with an entourage of 20 members. Each was trained to open up their approach to the theatre-making process. It is heartening to think that all these participants will now go back to their respective regions and put all the lessons into practice.



After completing your Bachelors in Journalism from Lady Sri Ram College how and why did you make the transition to comic book writing?

Vidyun Sabhaney: I wrote my dissertation on comic journalism with a focus on the work of Joe Sacco, a reputed Maltese-American comics artist and journalist who achieved international acclaim for his graphic novels on the Palestinian conflict and the Bosnian War. That was when I developed a serious interest in comics. Of course I have always been a fan growing up and my library contained all the regulars—Asterix, Tintin, Calvin and Hobbes, Amar Chitra Katha, etc.

While working on my dissertation I also participated in a comic book workshop, titled *The Comix Workshop*, organised by Sarai, CSDS and the French Information and Resource Center. I figured that if I was writing about comics it would make sense to learn how to make them. That was where I met Shohei Emura, with whom I began my first collaboration, i.e. *The Chilka Project*.

Since then, I have collaborated with other artists and have recently begun to draw my own comics—one of these was published by Blaft Publications. I started drawing because it was important for me to understand the physical process of actually making a comic.

The Mahabharata seems to be the common link connecting your work on *The Chilka Project* and the project you are pursuing with a grant from IFA. Could you tell us more about your fascination with the epic?

Vidyun Sabhaney: My interest in the Mahabharata was initially about finding a space within the epic, where new stories could be generated. ‘Chilka’ is a story that Shohei and I wrote about a forgetful old warrior who is obsessed with ideas of destiny and heroism. The comic is the story of his journey to the battle of Kurukshetra, and the kind of mischief he unwittingly gets up to there. In some ways, it uses a new character to poke fun at the incongruity between what the epic seems to tell us to believe and how its central characters behave.

Vidyun Sabhaney is a comic book/graphic novel artist. She received a grant to study how stories from the Mahabharata are told in three picture-based performance traditions—*Patuachitra* from Bengal, *Kaavad* from Rajasthan and *Togalu Gombeyatta* from Karnataka—with the aim of extending and enriching her practice as a comic book artist.



A patuachitra painting



Patuachitra artists holding their work

On reading more about the epics, I realised that this ‘experimentation’ with characters and incidents was not new or unnatural in any way—for centuries, this playful and inventive approach has been an important part of the process that created the epic. The spaces where the epics developed were oral storytelling traditions—several of which used sequential visual narrative to tell their stories. As a comic book artist, this piqued my interest. I began to get interested in which images were chosen for these visual narratives, how they were chosen and what affects their composition. I finally narrowed down on three forms, which was quite a task, given the number of picture-based storytelling forms in India that tell stories from the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. The forms are Bengali *Patuachitra*, Rajasthani *Kaavad* and *Togalu Gombeyatta* from Karnataka.

What determined your choice?

Vidyun Sabhaney: A basic requirement was some element of sequentiality in the visual language used in the storytelling object. Apart from that, there were other factors—the first was material. I wanted some



diversity with respect to the materials that the forms employed—comic book artists do not have spaces that can train them to work with different materials, so this was a golden opportunity in that sense. The other factor was, of course, how accessible the form and its practicing artists are—after all, several pictorial narrative forms are on the brink of extinction.

Taking all of these things into consideration, *Patuachitra* was the first and most natural choice, given its panelised format. My initial interest in it stemmed from a desire to see if I could take its narrative format one step further in the form of a comic. The second was *Togalu Gombeyatta* (the fieldwork for which is complete), which uses two-dimensional puppets made of leather to tell stories from the epics. An older form of *Togalu* uses compositional puppets, which means they can represent more than one character and story element in one puppet. *Kaavad* is very different—it is in the format of a wooden folding temple, wherein the story is revealed as the temple is ‘opened’. How the shape and design of the object here acutely affect the experience of the story, is what drew me to this form.

I find that the materials that these forms employ are becoming more and more important for the project.

How will you study these art forms?

Vidyun Sabhaney: I have just returned from Karnataka where I spent a month studying *Togalu Gombeyatta*. My research focused on understanding the storytelling technique of the form through conversations and interviews with puppeteers, and on the nuances of the medium through lessons in puppet making. The older form of *Togalu Gombeyatta* is called ‘Jamkat Baavl’, wherein compositional puppets are used. In the puppeteers’ own estimation, this older form fell out of fashion almost fifty years ago. As a result, I found it very hard to find practicing puppeteers who knew about the compositional technique and production unique to the older style. Often I found myself quizzing artists about what their fathers had told them, filling in the blanks with calculated guesses.



A patuachitra painting

This is also why it was important for me to study the material used in the art form. By making leather used for puppets, I understood a few of the physical restraints that the puppeteer could have been under when he made the puppet, at least a hundred years ago, even though he wasn't there to tell us himself.

I find this approach to be a very good entry point into understanding the nuances of all the forms, as each of them uses unique materials. Next, I look forward to learning how to make dyes and paper from *Patuachitra* artists.

What do you seek to understand through your research?

Vidyun Sabhaney: In exploring the three oral traditions, I want to open up the dialogue on the logic that underpins the visual language that they use. I cannot predict how much of this will actually flow into my future work as a comic book artist but I perceive this study as a prism through which to view my own techniques.



From a Kaavad storytelling session

It gives me the opportunity to understand visual narratives that have functioned without using the comic book panel, a tool that I am so accustomed to. I want to bring these learnings to other comic book artists as well. For this, I have planned two things. Once all the field-work is complete, I plan to create an online archive of images, interviews, performances and articles based on our travels. These forms and their practitioners should be easily accessible to comic book artists in India. The website will be designed for those interested in the visual narrative, specifically. The second is a workshop on these forms specifically for comic book artists, later in the year.

I also plan a series of short comics based on our experiences of travelling and attempting to understand these forms, for which work has begun. I hope it can strike a balance between wholesome information and excellent comix.





Can you tell us a little bit about how you encountered these murals and why you decided to study them?

Shashwati Talukdar: I am from Dehradun so the Guru Ram Rai Durbar was a familiar sight growing up. When I saw its murals later in life, I was intrigued by how unusual they were; how they so closely reflected the life of people in the town. I have wanted to make a film on them for the longest time. In 2010, I worked on a project for Tasveer Ghar—a digital archive of South Asian popular visual culture—for which I studied the aesthetic of picture postcards of hill stations from the colonial era. These postcards are part of the Priya Paul collection of popular art, which have been digitised and archived at Tasveer Ghar. Working on this project further fueled my deep fascination with the history of this part of the country (the Garhwal district, now Uttarakhand).

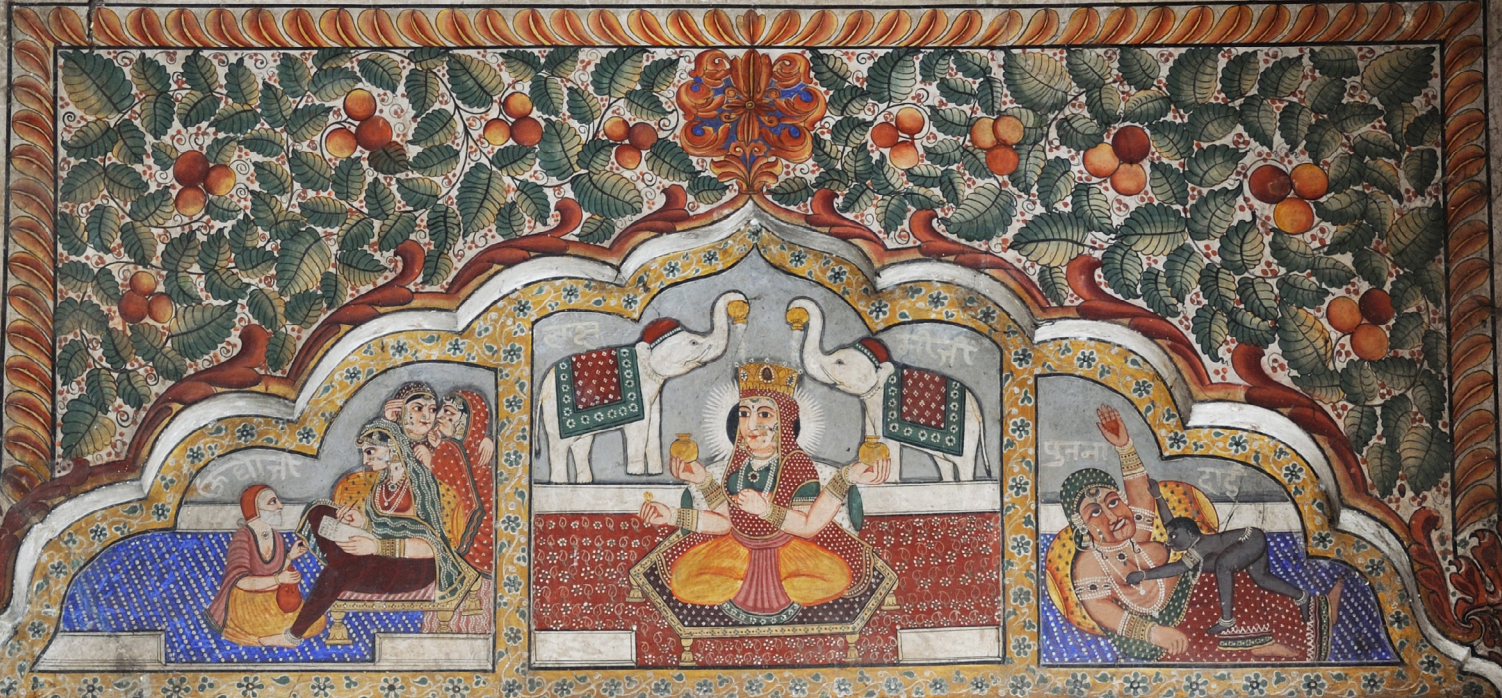
Why do you find the murals in the Guru Ram Rai Durbar unusual?

Shashwati Talukdar: To begin with, they cover a very interesting period in our history—from the end of the 17th century to the beginning of the 20th century. This region witnessed a lot of change and continuously evolved during this period and as a result, layers and layers of its social and cultural history got deposited in this location, and what's more, they have been preserved. While in most cases, each subsequent change would have destroyed all evidence of anything that came before it, murals in the Durbar Sahib seem to have captured layer upon layer of the social and cultural life of the valley, through its many changes. Thus, you find Hindu deities sharing wall space with rich merchants, peons, chaprasis, munshis and guards as well as Mughal emperors and British lords and ladies.

Why did Dehradun witness such an incredible proliferation of wall art? Is there a common thread tying all the murals in the region together?

Shashwati Talukdar: The proliferation of wall art in the region was largely influenced by the nature of the population that settled in the hills. The hills have been a popular destination for immigrants not only now, but for centuries; communities from Bengal, Rajasthan, Punjab, Gujarat, among other regions have settled here. A lot of the mural traditions come from Rajasthan and Punjab.

Shashwati Talukdar is an academic and independent filmmaker. She received a grant to study the murals adorning the walls of religious shrines and homes in the Garhwal region of India. In particular, she studied the murals of the Guru Ram Rai Darbar in Dehradun, and their history and significance to the keepers of the shrine, art historians, restorers and devotees. Her research has resulted in a film titled *Wall Stories*.



श्री कृत प्रेमदास राजा देन सीन ज्ञी



Mural found in the Garhwal region in the Western Himalayas

In addition to this, the geographical location of Dehradun—in a valley between the rivers Ganga and Yamuna—made it an important stopover for pilgrims travelling through the region. The religious imagination of the country found a canvas in the mountains, and therefore Dehradun.

Finally, Dehradun experienced colonial rule differently from the rest of the nation. The damage done here was more ecological than social. The British colonial government needed wood in massive quantities for the new railway network it was constructing and it relied on local contractors to provide it with this resource. Thus, the British rule did not disrupt the native elite of the region as much as create one. It was also not as feudal as other regions in India. Land distribution and taxation did not work in the same way as it did in other parts of the country, which was again a feature of the terrain and ecology of the Garhwal region.

In some of your earlier conversations with us, you have spoken about how the historical narrative of these murals is quite different from established narratives of history taught in the classroom. In what way are they different?

Shashwati Talukdar: These murals provide evidence that contradict the effects of historical revisionism. Take the emperor Aurangzeb for instance; Amar Chitra Katha comics and classroom syllabuses in several states would have you believe that he was an evil, rigid, religious ideologue who despised the arts and culture. But if you look at the history of the shrine you realise that the land on which it was built was granted to Guru Ram Rai through Emperor Aurangzeb's intervention. He also supported the construction of the inner shrine. In addition to this, if you look at the murals adorning the walls of the Durbar Sahib, particularly those that feature the emperor in conversation with Guru Ram Rai, who was an Udasi saint, a very different portrait begins to emerge.



If you look at the conventions of Mughal painting, the way the characters are seated speaks volumes about their social relationship with each other. In the murals, Guru Ram Rai and Aurangzeb are shown to share a close friendship. This contradicts normative narratives of popular history which indicate that the only relationship Aurangzeb was capable of conducting was one of domination. But here they are seen conversing with each other in a perfectly Mughal gentlemanly manner.



Mural found in the Garhwal region
in the Western Himalayas

Could you tell us a little about the Udasi religion? Would it be correct to describe it as a sect of Sikhism or Hinduism?

Shashwati Talukdar: The story of the Udasis is interesting. The short version is that they revere the same Gurus as the Sikhs, but also incorporate religious figures like Gorakhnath and other saints, something that would be unacceptable in modern Sikhism. Their status as being either a part or out of Sikhism has changed over time, depending on theological disputes and institutional changes within the religion. Today, you find both Hindus and Sikhs visiting the shrine. So people might formally declare themselves as Sikhs or Hindus, but they also incorporate Guru Ram Rai in their religious practice. Most of the non-local visitors I encountered at the shrine, were from Punjab and formally Sikhs. Their families have visited the Durbar Sahib for generations and it has become part of the tradition of the region to do so. While the local people who came to the shrine were all Hindus, and the Durbar was a part of their religious practice or the place they came for social and leisure reasons. It's interesting how the independent status of the Durbar makes it accessible to all and one of the most welcoming places in the city.

One part of your film deals with questions of preservation and the paucity of scholarly reflection on the murals of the Garhwal region. Could you briefly dwell upon these very serious concerns? Do you hope that your film will address them in some way?

Shashwati Talukdar: I believe that my film has only scratched the surface of the issue. Looking at the state of preservation of these paintings, the situation is quite dire. Other than the paintings in the Durbar Sahib, the others are deteriorating very quickly. The problem seems to be two-fold. Private owners of structures that have these paintings lack the resources to take care of them, while the buildings owned by religious trusts and institutions, may have the resources but lack the necessary information and cultural capital to have the paintings restored. I was also very surprised to find that there is very little quality writing on the region. While there is some good work on its ecology, like Ramchandra Guha's book on the history of the region vis-à-vis the changing relationship of the population with the forest, and there is some good work in Anthropology, the region seems to have escaped the attention of modern art historians. There is not that much literature about the social and historical meaning and implications of these paintings.

That said, some effort has been made to catalogue the murals. In this regard, Jagriti Dobhal's work is quite important. I interviewed her for my film *Wall Stories*. She completed her PhD from the local university in Art History. Years ago, she undertook the task of cataloguing the murals in Dehradun. Some of the buildings that contained the work she chronicled were demolished many years ago, and many are falling into ruin as we speak, only to be replaced by shopping complexes and car parks.

I hope my film will be a catalyst to scholars to give this region the attention it deserves, and also increase the appreciation for this living heritage before it vanishes.



Mural of a cherub at the Guru Ram Rai Darbar in Dehradun



Can you tell us about Nagaland's Tsungkotepsu tradition of shawl painting?

Ruchika Negi: Among the Naga tribes, shawls have culturally been a symbol of one's tribal and social identity. Tsungkotepsu is a particular kind of shawl meant only for men of the Ao tribe. In its original form, the main band of the shawl was hand-painted with the ink extracted from the sap of a tree, and this was what made it unique among all Naga shawls. Most of the other shawls are entirely woven. Traditionally, this shawl was meant to signify the achievements of a warrior who had won enemy heads in head hunting raids. The figurative motifs of the band thus symbolise the bravery and fame of a warrior. Even though head hunting days are long gone, the figure of the warrior continues to be an important part of the heritage of the Ao, as well as other tribes. Today, the Tsungkotepsu shawl is commonly referred to as the 'warrior's shawl' and remains one of the most important shawls of the Ao.

Why did you decide to study this particular tradition?

Ruchika Negi: For me, the shawl symbolises a certain kind of language, a knowledge system that has been passed down from generation to generation, without the aid of any formal documentation. Most of the Naga traditions are oral in nature and therefore do not express themselves in words or language. Yet, each motif of the shawl has its own unique meaning and import, and constitutes its own language. In this sense, the shawl stands for a form of knowledge and expression that was rooted in a specific historical, cultural and social context. We were interested in knowing more about this kind of language and how it has evolved, both in expression and meaning over time.

We were also interested in understanding how the external and internal markers of social and political change impact the trajectory of a tradition. This is of particular interest to us because as we all know, the political history of Nagaland on the whole has been very complicated. With the coming of the American Baptist missionaries in the state in the late 19th century, most of the beliefs, practices and cultural symbols of the Ao tribe were termed pagan and heathen.

Ruchika Negi is an independent filmmaker and researcher based in Delhi. She received a grant to study and document Tsungkotepsu, a particular tradition of shawl painting that is found among the tribes of Nagaland. Ruchika collaborated with Delhi-based filmmaker Amit Mahanti and made a film titled *Every Time you Tell a Story* as part of the project.



Atangla shawl, Nagaland

Simultaneously, the presence of the colonisers and early anthropologists in the area also meant that the Naga population began to get framed in a certain kind of language, which perhaps though well intentioned, left behind a legacy of stereotypes and definitions that exists even today when we talk about 'Naga culture'. Post-Independence, the forced political assimilation of the region into the Indian Union was yet another violent phase in Naga history, where people and their cultural heritage were erased on a large scale, creating a cultural vacuum of sorts from within, for many years to come. We are interested in understanding how a fluid tradition like Tsungkotepsu navigates its way through all these external pressures and ruptures.

Share with us your experience and findings during the research trip with your collaborators Amit Mahanti and Jimmy Chishi to Nagaland.

Ruchika Negi: We were aware that the tradition found limited mention in anthropological or research writing. Our research experience was useful in that it made apparent the impossibility of arriving at any

fixed representation of a tradition like Tsungkotepsu that is strongly rooted in orality. Rather than looking for definitive accounts or narratives we became interested in the larger ideas associated with the shawl, for instance, the figure of the warrior who is iconic for the Ao and is central to their heritage; or through the importance attached to the attire, which is still an important social marker that distinguishes one tribe from the other.



Some of the other ways through which we could understand the significance of this shawl were stories, songs or myths associated with this tradition. The dynamic nature of an oral tradition, stories which seem to move almost seamlessly between the past and the present, is evident in the way in which the lore around the shawl continues even today.

Your research in this tradition has become a window into the socio-political history of Nagaland. Could you elaborate on this?

Ruchika Negi: For us, it is difficult to try and understand a tradition like Tsungkotepsu without looking at the socio-political changes that Nagaland has been witness to. One cannot attribute a direct cause and effect relationship between the socio-political history of Nagaland and a tradition like Tsungkotepsu. However, if we look at the larger cultural landscape of the region and how it has been traditionally represented, we can draw some inferences. Early anthropological documentation of the Nagas and their cultural practices, despite being well intentioned, seems to have unwittingly framed them as the exotic ‘other’. While on the one hand, these works became a way for us to access information about a culture that we knew very little about until then; on the other hand, these also left behind a legacy of gaze, a way of looking at the ‘other’, which we seem to have inherited.



Sama painting, a shawl painting technique, Nagaland

The formation of the Indian state and its propaganda further strengthened this representation, formalising it through its own narrative of ‘Naga people and their culture’ in an attempt to co-opt it into the Indian Nation State. Therefore, while looking at an art tradition in Nagaland, it is important for us to explore these interpretations that could have shaped the journey of a tradition like Tsungkotepsu and one’s relationship to it in the present. Our attempt is to suggest how a tradition negotiates itself through these layers of representations and constructs that are imposed on it from the outside.



Display of the Tsungkotepsu shawl
at the museum of Nagaland

To that extent, we are interested in exploring how socio-political contexts influence our gaze on culture itself, and how this gaze has a bearing on the way a tradition like Tsungkotepsu shapes itself, both from within and outside.

Despite the fact that Nagaland is not known for its puppetry tradition, it is interesting how you have collaborated with a puppeteer. Tell us about this collaboration.

Ruchika Negi: Tsungkotepsu is essentially a visual/pictorial form where each motif stands for a specific idea or meaning which is contained in a story or a myth or a song related to the world of the warrior. In a way, we can look at the shawl as a visual text that lends itself to a story telling form like puppetry. Puppetry offers us one way in which we can enter the world of orality within which Tsungkotepsu is embedded. At the same time, it also allows us to reimagine a visual form like Tsungkotepsu from the point of view of the present and our own interpretation of it.



Could you tell us a little bit about the unique history of the museum?

Latika Gupta: The Munshi Aziz Bhat Museum was established in Kargil in 2004 by two brothers Gulzar Husain Munshi and Ajaz Munshi, descendents of Munshi Aziz Bhat, a prominent trader in Kargil. In 1920, he established “Munshi Aziz Bhat and Sons” a family business with his two sons. He also set up the Aziz Bhat Sarai, the ruined structure of which can still be seen in the old Bazaar area of Kargil. This was apparently a central hub of trading activities in Kargil, with seven shops selling imported luxury goods and an inn for Central Asian trading caravans.

The bulk of the material that forms the museum collection was recovered from the Aziz Bhat Sarai. This includes animal accessories (saddles, harnesses, bells), imported personal use items (such as soap, razor blades, buttons), local and imported medicines, coins and currency, a range of textiles and clothing items (including embroidery edging, a miscellany of caps, boots, bolts of fabric, muslin turbans), stationery, dye boxes, imported torches and lamps, rugs and carpets, manuscripts, silver jewellery, educational pamphlets, magazines and newsletters from various countries abroad, and importantly also a rich collection of personal and trade correspondence in the form of telegraphs, revenue records, letters, etc. The collection continues to grow, with donations from prominent families in the region and with the Munshi brothers acquiring a miscellany of goods they come across while travelling through villages in and around Kargil district.

The artifacts lay in storage until 2004 when Jaqueline Fewkes, a visiting researcher from the UK, stressed the importance of material artifacts and encouraged their preservation in the interest of history. The museum was thus set up in the attic of the Munshi residence which houses Gulzar Munshi and his family. Gulzar Munshi is the Director of the Museum, Ajaz Munshi the Curator and their nephew Muzammil Husain Munshi is in-charge of Outreach.

Latika Gupta is a researcher and curator. She received a fellowship to curate the permanent exhibition of the Munshi Aziz Bhat Museum of Central Asian & Kargil Trade Artifacts, Kargil. This fellowship enabled Latika to relook at the vast number of objects from the ethnological museum in Kargil, and contextualise them in such a way that it would reflect historical moment of the place, both in terms of space and time. The project ended in an exhibition titled *Kargil: Crossroads of Trade and Culture*.



Photographs and clothing items on display at the Munshi Aziz Bhat Museum

What interested you about working with the The Munshi Aziz Bhat Museum?

Latika Gupta: Curating a new permanent exhibition for the Kargil museum was of particular interest to me for a number of reasons. I had first visited the museum as a tourist in 2008 and had been struck by, one, the eclectic and unusual nature of the collection; two, the initiative taken by the Munshi family to begin a museum in the attic of their home; and three, the ‘idea’ of the museum that had been conceived of and translated into its form, based on the format of traditional ethnographic museums. Additionally, that there was little in the collection that could be called ‘art’; that it was a museum of ‘things’, objects of use, of material culture; and the project combined my research and professional interests perfectly. The location of the museum in Kargil, on the border of India and Pakistan, within Buddhist dominated Ladakh in the state of Kashmir, made this project both challenging and important. The Museum’s primary audience was tourists, both local and foreign, who spend a single night in Kargil while travelling between Leh, Srinagar and Zanskar. The Museum could



potentially help re-position Kargil, which in popular imagination—particularly that of Indians—is viewed only within the paradigm of the 1999-2000 Kargil War. The Museum’s collection of local and foreign goods could highlight Kargil’s role as an important node on the trade routes and in cross cultural exchanges from places as far flung as Japan, America, Germany, Central Asia and China, and also underline the rich cosmopolitan history of the region.

The collaboration between Munshi Aziz Bhat Museum, IFA and Inlaks Shivdasani Foundation for the Museum Fellowship presented an unusual opportunity for someone with my background to combine their professional and academic interests. Previously, I have worked as a curator at Khoj International Artists’ Association, a not-for-profit cutting edge contemporary arts space and at the National Gallery of Modern Art in Delhi, a state museum of modern art, besides curating exhibitions for private galleries and multi-city touring exhibitions on commission from international collections. My academic research as a PhD student focuses on material culture associated with Tibetan Buddhist ritual in the trans- Himalayan regions of Ladakh and Spiti.

How did you envision this project? What were some of the ideas that helped you frame the theme of the exhibition?

Latika Gupta: The curatorial process and strategies were formulated with the clear understanding that all the objects in the museum would be used in the new exhibition. Since this is a permanent display, a selected set of objects could not be used to weave a narrative. Accordingly, the research and fieldwork was done to unearth links that would underlie and connect the entire collection in a single exhibition. My primary objectives were to contextualise the trade artefacts and objects of everyday use in the museum by underlining the relationships between things and the people who used them, in order to activate historic objects to make them relevant to contemporary audiences. It was also important to be able to highlight the cosmopolitan history of the region, through the many communities and individuals associated with trade, who lived and worked in Kargil including porters, foreign travellers, traders and common and elite local customers.





Display case for saddles, straps and carpet bags, and other animal accessories at the Munshi Aziz Bhat Museum

To highlight the importance of trade and the coming together of individuals and communities, I hoped, would also allow for an alternative reading and understanding of borders, and the politics of nationhood.

In terms of curatorial strategy, I was interested in the questions of how things of everyday use may be displayed and made interesting in a manner that goes beyond assigning value to objects based on age or monetary worth. How, for example, could these things be made relevant to contemporary audiences? Firstly for the locals, who may not be familiar with the region's cosmopolitan history and also bring their contexts, embedded in local politics, to their viewing of the museum, and secondly, for tourists from India and abroad. These concerns fed directly into the categorisation of the objects and the design of the display. My intention was to attempt to conceptualise as transparent a system of display as was possible to allow for the context in which these objects were found, used and first displayed, visible. The Munshi Aziz Bhat Sarai became the under-arching motif for the exhibition, and an emblem of the position of Kargil on the



trade routes and its cosmopolitanism due to the coming together of communities from towns like Amritsar and Hoshiarpur in Punjab, Yarkandis or Hors from Yarkand, merchants from Khotan, and Kashmiris and Tibetans. Accordingly, the exhibition was divided into sections in which things will be displayed according to their usage and circulation by the people who lived and passed through Kargil on the trade routes.

The exhibition was a great success, congratulations! What do you think the exhibition means for Kargil?

Latika Gupta: For me, one of the most significant responses came during the inauguration. A large number of local Kargilis who had not previously visited the museum, engaged with the collection for the first time, and spoke about their own families' histories in Kargil before Independence in 1947. I can only hope that the remarkable cultural and political histories that are revealed through the material artifacts in the Munshi Aziz Bhat Museum have an impact on the positioning of Kargil in popular imagination and contemporary histories.

Do you think the Museum Fellowships supported by IFA could help to animate museum collections?

Latika Gupta: The Museum Fellowships certainly have the potential to impact existing institutions, in big and small ways. Whether it is the re-establishing of a small museum or curating a set of objects from a prestigious collection, the Fellowships encourage innovative thought and fresh approaches to looking at objects, animating them with new ideas, and presenting them in a variety of constellations. This having been said, the ambitions of the Fellowship and its Fellows would work to their fullest potential only with the complete cooperation of the partner organisations. Additionally, one of the great successes of the Museum Fellowship programme through the variety of institutions it works with would be the emergence of concepts on museums and their potential in India, and indeed across the world, where a single template cannot be applied, theoretically or conceptually.

This fellowship was made possible with support from INLAKS Shivdasani Foundation.





How did you identify the visual materials that you wanted to work with, what inspired you to work with this collection? How did the research at the archive shape the narrative of your video?

Afrah Shafiq: My interest in working with visual material in an archive was pretty much centred around the idea of a collage, or the act of looking at a variety of material and making your own meaning out of it by the way you bring them together. What felt fun about it, was that not only will there always be a particular pattern or story that will emerge if you work with one set of images over time, but that even if a hundred other people work with the exact same set of images, the stories will always be different. And this is something I saw as emerging very distinctly in our time at the archive as well, going by the conversations with the other fellows who were also working with the collection at CSSSC over the last year, where we would be interested in the same image, but for very different reasons—and that was quite interesting to see. The fact that the visual collection at the CSSSC archive is so diverse in form as well as period, felt for me like it lends itself well to this collage approach—almost as if you are given a pile of magazines and newspapers—some are sport, some are wildlife, you have some architecture, some fashion... it gives you more leverage and room to create your story. Similarly at the archive there are lithographs, photographs, paintings, sketches, film posters, and magazine illustrations—the range is very diverse and it is this diversity that made me want to work with the collection.

Afrah Shafiq is a multi/new media artist and documentary filmmaker. She received a fellowship to work with the cultural history archive at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences Calcutta (CSSSC). Afrah's research culminated in a series of short videos that portrayed stories of resistance of women in the 19th century, loosely themed around *Women and Impudence/Cheeky Girls*.

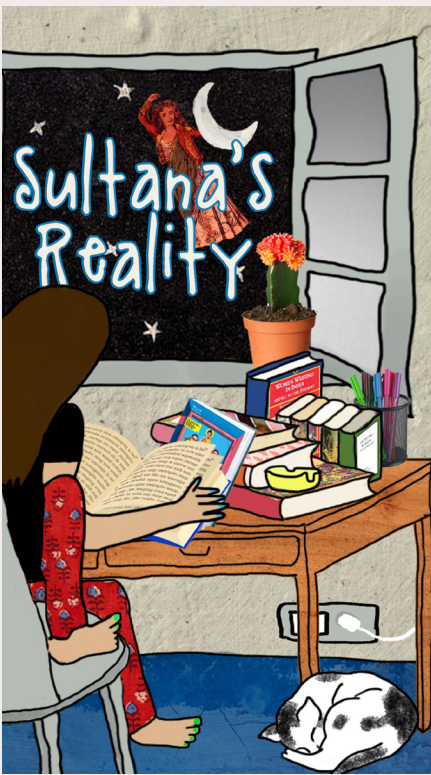
I actually went in with a very broad idea of cheeky girls. That I would somehow try to locate in the archive, women who were impudent, who refused to conform to whatever expectation that was laid upon them at their time. This was more of an indication of the kind of region I am looking into, and not specifically a researched or structured story. I was also planning to look carefully at the general visual representation of women in this archive and see what that image revealed to me, and to play with that existing imagery—tweak, re-alter, change context—to create this image of cheek. So the narrative of the video, or the outcome of the fellowship was to take shape entirely based on what emerged through the research at the archive.



Ladies, what plans for the weekend? Artwork by Afrah Shafiq

What has been the most interesting discovery? Is there any particular visual source that helped centre your work?

Afrab Shafiq: I spent about a month at the archive and it took some time to develop a methodology for myself. First I was going by collection, or period and trying to get familiar with the history behind the images... but that started feeling really overwhelming since there literally is a sea of things in an archive and it's easy to drown. Finally what I decided to do was to just look through every image in every collection—and when an image 'spoke' to me to just put it aside. As random as this sounds, after days of doing this when I went back to have a look at the images I had put aside, some very distinct patterns emerged. I think this was the first most interesting discovery while working at the archive... that the images automatically grouped themselves into four distinct categories. There were intimate all women groups—doing various things like collecting water, or dancing and performing, or lying down in each other's laps, or chatting. Then there were images of women and books—sometimes the women were into their books, sometimes they were rejecting the books, other times the books being used to lecture or school them or just as objects of show. The next one was of women alone and insular, in reverie and day dreaming—mostly looking out of windows or into space. And the third category, which was personally the most exciting one, was of women flying or floating. This category was made up almost entirely of the most fanciful works of Dharmanarayan Dasgupta which were just absolutely beautiful in their fantasy of women, and cityscapes and lovers. The thread and narrative of the work that is being made from the material in the archive is drawn directly from these four categories.



Artwork by Afrab Shafiq

You have a very interesting working title, could you please unpack it for us?

Afrab Shafiq: The working title of the video is *Sultana's Reality*. It's a short account of a history of women and books that starts in the andharmahal as a site of women's popular form of entertainment that was definitely cheeky and outrageous. Historically, there was an attempt to shut down this practice of song, dance and games by the British as well as Indian reformists through the introduction of an education that was meant to cure women of their lascivious tendencies. There are stories of women who resisted this refinement on the one hand, and took their new found education to an unintended level on the other...



STRISABHAVA = WOMEN'S SPONTANEOUS NATURE = LIBIDINOUS
 STRIDHARMA = WOMEN'S DUTY = ?

Artwork by Afrah Shafiq

and one direct result of this is that women started adding their voices to the existing books through their own writing, and with it they added their many imaginations of the world and their place in it. One such very popular imagination that does this is a piece of early writing in the country, *Sultana's Dream* by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, which most of us are familiar with. And in fact, if one looks into the life of Rokeya, one can almost see a similar trajectory as the story assimilated from the images in the archive—where she was born into the purdah system, where she was educated but only meant to read certain books, where she studied other subjects secretly by a candle at night after everyone was asleep, and finally ended up writing a piece of her feminist utopia. So on one level the story of the women in the video that I am working on can be equated to the story of women around the same time and in similar contexts as Rokeya Sakhawat. However, the structure of the video also makes a few references to *Sultana's Dream*—and in fact the opening of the video is directly drawn from the opening of the story, and this is another reason why I wanted to connect the video title to that piece of writing.

Do you think these fellowships instituted by IFA help bring these collections alive?

Afrah Shafiq: Absolutely! Most of these archives are like treasure troves with so much khazana in them that is of use not only to scholars and academicians but also to artists and practitioners who have an interest in working with archives. The only way that the collections can breathe and still exist in a lived form today is through these interpretations and through making newer work from this existing material. My time at the archive was amazing; I would find at least one image that blew my mind every single day so I feel lucky to just be able to look through all of this stuff and to have the liberty to make something with it.

This fellowship was made possible with support from Voltas Limited.



Could you tell us more about evolution and modification of Malayalam script in response to technological intervention?

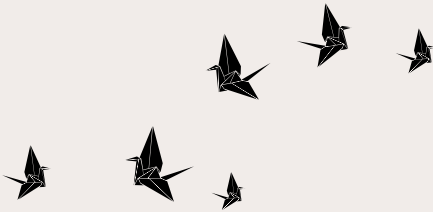
KH Hussain: Malayalam is one of the Dravidian languages bestowed with a classical status. Though its origin is often traced back 1500 years, it is the youngest among the national languages of India. Malayalam script began to evolve from 8th century AD, with many regional variations across this relatively small geographical area. As with the other Indian languages, Malayalam script has elements of ancient Brahmi script, and evolution of its signs was mediated by the interests and requirements of power wielding sections of the society, including the ruling classes. Until 1824 when Benjamin Bailey, a British, Church of England missionary, designed the first movable metal typefaces, the main medium of writing Malayalam was palm leaf with metal stylus. The efforts of Benjamin Bailey lead to standardisation of the Malayalam alphabet for the first time, integrating all its local variations. The fact that this standardisation was coterminous with the beginning of modernity in various social and public arenas of Kerala is a significant event. Since then, printing and publishing proliferated in the state, and majority of the population got a chance for the first time to see, learn and write their script. In this respect printing in the early decades of 19th century was a definite technological intervention in the 'social life of Malayalam scripts', and initiated a long process of fine tuning and embellishing. After nearly 150 years of its robust existence and proliferation, two related episodes of technology driven modification of scripts turned out to be crucial. Firstly, the refashioning of scripts in 1970s to enable Malayalam typewriting, and secondly the codification of Malayalam characters to enable Malayalam computing. These efforts proved to be limiting instead of liberative experiences due to the unholy link of technology, ideology and authority.

KH Hussain is a researcher and designer. He received a grant to document the complex and conflicted history of the evolution of the Malayalam script in the computer era, through the exploration of the Rachana movement in Kerala.

What are the major shifts and structural ruptures that effected Malayalam scripts at various stages of modernisation? Were there any ideological underpinnings involved? What were they?

KH Hussain: Within 25 years of its origin, many more conjuncts (ligatures) were added to the 600 set of characters identified and standardised by Benjamin Bailey, and all of them were used in printing. With minimum changes, this character set existed without

any confusion in reading and writing for nearly one and half centuries. A major shift occurred when these original characters were officially reformed in 1970 for use in Malayalam typewriters. A majority of conjuncts and some important consonant-vowel formations were discarded to accommodate characters in the limited number of keys available in a typewriter keyboard. Severe confusion arose due to the artificiality of the newly introduced signs. The traditional script emulated free-flow handwriting. Economy and efficiency of the traditional conjuncts and consonant-vowel formations in representing sounds was imbibed into the writing systems, and fixed through many centuries. This was lost in the new script. Soon after the introduction of this modified script, the generation who witnessed these changes were still writing in the traditional script. They were forced to read in a script which was different from what is used in their writing. In 1973, by introducing these 'truncated' characters in the text books of primary schools, the non-systemisation began to spread within the education system as well. As a result, words and sounds in Malayalam were represented by different character sets on the blackboard, printed pages of text books, newspapers, magazines, and books, which led to a chaotic situation, very often affecting comprehension in schools. After four decades of pedagogy using the new script, Malayalam writing/printing is yet to escape from the simultaneous use of different types of character sets.



The characters made for the typewriters were first called 'Reformed Lipi' and subsequently referred to as 'New Lipi', whereupon the original characters were referred to as 'Old Lipi' ! This gave a wrong attribute of 'primitiveness' to the traditional script, and a pseudo 'modern'/'scientific' feel for the modified script. The alterations in the characters began to affect the formation of words and representation of sounds they were supposed to stand for, very often leading to an erroneous spelling system. Language teachers themselves were confused. A hybrid set of scripts with an idiosyncratic mixture of varying degrees of traditional and new script signs came into use.

While this is just an instance of heedless modification of a seasoned, traditional script in response to a technological challenge in the 1970s, the situation was complicated still further when the existing hybrid script system was encoded for Malayalam word processing with the advent of computer technology in the 20th century. Many word processing packages marketed in Kerala used their own selection of conjuncts to make their fonts. At one time more than 40 different character mappings were available for Malayalam ASCII fonts, which could be a record among the 700 world languages having scripts!

വായിച്ചാലും വളരും വായിച്ചിലെങ്കിലും വളരും
വായിച്ചു വളർന്നാൽ വിളയും വായിക്കാതെ വളർന്നാൽ വളയും

- കൺതൃണ്ണിമാഷ്

പുക്കളെ നിങ്ങൾക്ക് നള്ളിയെറിയാം, പക്ഷെ വസന്തത്തിന്റെ വരവിനെ
തടയാൻ ആവില്ല

- പാബ്ലോ നെരൂദ.

ജാതി ചോദിക്കരുത്, പറയരുത്, വിചാരിക്കരുത്.

- ശ്രീനാരായണഗുരു

Quotes in Malayalam, as they
appeared in the Keraleeyam font

This confusion emerged partially due to some uniqueness of Malayalam script, together with the intervention of the state in grading the character set and imposing it on the educational system, as this modified script was thought to represent the spirit of modernity, science, progress and development. This act was not innocent of ideology. It was an act of preparing a language used by 300 lakh people for the emerging future of computation in a society, where one of the accepted signs of 'progress' was becoming free from traditions and influences of nature (as opposed to culture).



In 1999 'Rachana Aksharavedi' (Rachana Lipi Forum) was formed with the slogan 'Our Script for Our Language' by a small group of experts in linguistics, computation and literature. 'Rachana Aksharavedi' declared that the 'Old Lipi' was the only solution for the anarchy created by the 'modified script'. Rachana team members collected variants of all the characters in writing and printing that existed for centuries and designed the font named 'Rachana'. However 'authorities' such as agencies of public instruction were hesitant to accept this font set while independent literary figures and the general public embraced it whole heartedly.

When Unicode encoding system made its appearance in 2003, this exhaustive character set of Rachana played a major part in the advancement of language technology in Malayalam.

Could you tell us, how in your view, the series of attempts to modernise the script impacted the aesthetics of the script?

KH Hussain: At the time of designing the first metal typefaces for Malayalam in 1824, Bailey studied various forms of letters prevalent in the southern and northern parts of Kerala. He was keen on assimilating common structural characteristics of all Indian scripts born out of ancient Brahmi script. His design attempt was thereby pan-Indian in nature. When he modelled his types after the shapes found in palm leaf manuscripts written with stylus, he perfected the inherent roundness of Malayalam characters in view of the surface of paper. His attempts consequently moulded not only metal types but the orthography of Malayalam itself.

Beauty of Malayalam language is most visible in its rich variety of conjuncts that easily exceeds 900 in number. Pattern of conjunct formation is either horizontal or vertical depending on the basic letters. Curves formed in juxtaposing letters to make a horizontal conjunct, or sizing and positioning a character under another to make a vertical conjunct is an unending source of deriving beauty for calligraphers and type designers. But the modification of script in 1970s made conjuncts redundant and disturbed the aesthetics of the script. When desktop computers started to replace typewriters in 1980s, very few conjuncts found a slot in Malayalam ASCII fonts. The truncation of letters that characterised New Lipi continued until Rachana movement. Even during the years when truncated letters were used commercial artists were using Old Lipi to design most of the signboards, wall writings and cinema posters. Designers and calligraphers preferred original conjuncts because of its inherent beauty, continuity, flow and its ability to quickly catch the attention of audience. During the decades that followed Malayalam packages had only truncated typefaces, which imposed an aesthetic monotony in Malayalam print-art and design, until Rachana Akshravedi reclaimed and brought back the beauty of traditional curvatures.

Current Unicode language technology is a boon to all Indian scripts because a single font can accommodate more than sixty thousand characters. The exhaustive character set advocated by Rachana finds its full expression in Unicode fonts.

‘Swathanthra Malayalam Computing’ (SMC), a group of young IT professionals is engaged in perfecting Unicode Malayalam based on Rachana and they have released nearly eight Unicode fonts. Their current focus is to create more ornamental fonts in Malayalam which can be used for headings and titles. Ornamental fonts will be an infinite terrain for experimentation with orthographies and aesthetics, especially with the progress of graphics in IT.

A group like SMC was established despite the state sponsored agencies with their inherent hesitation in undoing ‘script-reformation’. Moreover the current ideology and thrust of ‘progress and development’ saw such a move of reclaiming the traditional scripts as retrogressive, working against the spirit of modernity.

How is your new font ‘Keraleeyam’, developed as a part of the grant by IFA, different from the existing ones? What is the motive behind having a new font?

KH Hussain: One of the consequences of above mentioned ‘State’ of affairs regarding the script was serious monotony of typefaces in Malayalam word processing, digital hoardings, bill boards, commercial arts, etc., where the once rich Malayalam calligraphy almost died out in the public sphere. Impoverishment in the imaginative sphere of almost a quarter century of Malayalam typefaces was visible in all realms of artistic expression ranging from print publications, commercials, hoardings and flex printing, titling in the movies and TV, web designing, etc.

The font ‘Keraleeyam’, designed as a part of the IFA project, is essentially a Malayalam traditional font that inherits all the philosophy that gave birth to Rachana and its traditional character set. While Rachana and Meera are ‘body text’ fonts like Times Roman and Arial, Keraleeyam is a heavy font like ‘Impact’, which is best suited for headings, titles and for other design works like signboards, posters, flex, etc. That is why I left out around 400 rare conjuncts of Rachana to form a subset for Keraleeyam, in the belief that no letters from this discarded set will find an expression in design work. Even if it occurs while typesetting using Keraleeyam, the same character can be produced using other characters present in the font without obliterating the basic traditional characteristics.



Formation of such a subset of traditional conjuncts is important for making Unicode fonts in the future, which are in line with

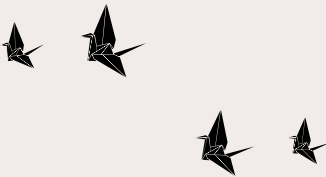
Rachana. Currently Rachana possesses the largest collection of Malayalam characters and creating such a font demands months and years. Weeklies and magazines in Malayalam are slowly adopting 'Old Lipi', thereby page layout demands variety in fonts. We urgently need an array of traditional ornamental fonts to meet the page layout demands of weeklies and magazines. Creating Keraleeyam actually served as a comprehensive model for Malayalam ornamental fonts that can be pursued by Malayalam typographers in the future. Based on Keraleeyam's character set I have designed an ornamental font named 'Uroob', other similar fonts are in the process of design.

You are in the process of finishing your book on the Malayalam script. Could you give us more details on your intended readers and form of the book?

KH Hussain: First thing I want to do is to compile all the events chronologically that lead to the development of present Unicode based Malayalam language technology promulgated by Rachana movement in 1999. This can be achieved by compiling my own articles published in the past 16 years in Malayalam magazines. State Institute of Language, Kerala, had launched strong campaigns against Rachana from the very beginning and we had to defend our cause for a traditional script, answering every article they published. Naturally their contestations subsided after some years as they came to learn that the support for the 'New Lipi' was gradually declining by new developments in information technology. To their surprise, youngsters who had been taught in 'New Lipi' at schools preferred 'Old Lipi' in IT applications. I have about twenty such articles for the book, but I must be cautious on repetitions. Presently I'm reworking these articles avoiding duplication of ideas.

Structural linguistics and its post-structural critique have heavily influenced theories of semiotics and ideas on semantics. However, not many have considered the unique case of fontography, typefaces, and the status of signs. Conventional theories and understanding of sign and sound are inadequate to explain the slips in sounds/words, and their representation using Lipi sets. The dialectic of this process will be taken up afresh in the book with ample illustrations drawn from 'Old Lipi' and 'New Lipi'.

Yet another dimension I would like to uncover is the ideology that coined the phrases such as 'Old Lipi' and 'New Lipi' as explained earlier. I would like to argue here that this was a product of the mentality behind 'modernity'.



Meera

മാതൃഭാഷ രാഷ്ട്രീയം
സ്വാതന്ത്ര്യം സൂക്ഷം ഭൂമി
സൃഷ്ടി വസ്തു സംസ്കൃതം
ശ്രീകൃഷ്ണൻ യേശുക്രിസ്തു

Examples of Meera Unicode Font

I do not intend to document the whole history and evolution of Malayalam script from the very beginning, but want to elaborate on the themes and attempts behind the developments in language technology, following the advent of Rachana. I should focus and highlight the new directions and vision it offered to Malayalam computing. Main audience of the book will be linguists, IT experts working on language, besides experts in pedagogy and thinkers in the field of education.

My book will not be about fonts and typography but it will certainly be about Malayalam script. One of the chapters will be exclusively on Malayalam fonts intended for a new generation of graphic experts engaged in designing Malayalam fonts. They should have a clear idea on which characters they have to work, what are the possibilities in working with the rich array of conjuncts, what models like Keraleeyam are there to depend on to reduce their labour, etc. Without knowing your characters you cannot make fonts!

This interview will also provide a theme for a chapter. The book will be published under the license of Creative Common Attributes, i.e. it will have the license of 'Copy Left' instead of 'Copy Right'. The website to be launched soon as part of the project will have links to download e-book versions freely.

This grant was made possible with support from the Bajaj Group.



SAMREEN FAROOQUI SHABANI HASSANWALIA

Arts Research and Documentation | 2014 - 2015



Your project has moved beyond the attempt to represent one village at the crossroads of globalisation, Khirki in Delhi, to talk about the culture of hip hop and B-boying across the city. How did that shift happen?

Samreen Farooqui and Shabani Hassanwalia: Over the early half of the grant period, while spending time with the dancers in Khirki village, we started hearing things. That you know, the boys at Pulbangash in East Delhi, they do this fantastic Toprock. All because one of them has a job so he can get a 3G data pack. And they learn it from YouTube. So we took the metro to Rithala, watched Delhi rise up in endless matchbox constructions, lie low in junk metal graveyards, and finally met them. And then, we met the boys who practiced at Central Park in Connaught Place, before they left to collect clothes to wash from their basti. Then we met the boys in Sector 4, RK Puram, who practice after they serve hungry customers at the Chinese restaurant in Malviya Nagar. And then, someone said, “This is not it. You have to meet Ticko. He is a legend.” So, we did. And then they said, “You have to meet Runjun, he has just moved into a small room somewhere in South Delhi—but he doesn’t like fame. He lives the ‘true hiphop life’.” The film we set out to make had just become larger than what we had imagined. Khirki, by itself, is now a part of a heaving metropolis that serves as a backdrop to a particular kind of response to urbanisation. It’s ‘the hip hop life’, as boys in resettlement colonies understand it, adapt it, and celebrate it across the city. We decided to let the film, and the dance movement takes us where it will, and it’s taken us everywhere. The film as it stands, is now not just about Khirki, but about a new way cities shape aspiration and rebellion.

Samreen Farooqui and Shabani Hassanwalia are filmmakers. They received a grant to make *Gali*, a documentary film exploring the subculture of B-boying and Breaking as an Indian form of contemporary street dance. The film focused on the performers at Khirki village, New Delhi, a volatile melting pot of Jats, Biharis, Nigerians, Afghanis, and struggling artists which is shaping the area’s youth in the unlikeliest of ways.

What do you think dance does for/in the marginal communities that have embraced these forms?

Samreen Farooqui and Shabani Hassanwalia: Pretty much what it does for any community, mainstream or marginal. It’s a release and throws open questions of identity and conflict. However, as we realised during research and filming, here, it is the community of dancers and rappers that are marginalised. They are at the periphery, invisible to the mainstream.



A dancer practicing at Shival Main Road in Delhi

Who are the characters who populate your film, are there any anecdotes that you could share with us?

Samreen Farooqui and Shabani Hassanwalia: The characters and scenes range from Bhupinder aka Ticko, a reality TV star and a teacher to Nitish and Shubham, two boys who live and work at a dhobi ghat in Central Delhi. Aastik, the philosopher, scene maker. Sumko, one of the few B-girls in Delhi. The Republic Day celebration in Khirki village. The rap battle in Vaishali. The B-Boy battle in RK Puram. The Nepali crew that calls itself *8 Hindus*. And the city of Delhi as the most prominent character.

What do you think b-boying has contributed to their negotiations with identity?

Samreen Farooqui and Shabani Hassanwalia: The fertile soil of history and economics spread across the settlements of Delhi, is reminiscent of a point in time when the United States of America, followed by almost every capitalist economy in the world, was giving



birth to a completely unfamiliar but instinctively accurate set of tools to a generation that was being asked to 'skill up'. They did, but not like the systemic forces wanted. We didn't meet any upper class hip hop artist in all of National Capital Region. As we were told, "The rich don't want to break their bones." That could be one part of the story. The rich hold their fragile limbs in greater esteem than those who live by it. Our deeply internalised caste system privileges the Brahmanical mind, over those who can walk on their hands, flip over and fly. How then, does one get seen by a society still suffering under a Brahmanical mind? By taking over their streets, their malls, their music video channels and telling them that their older systems of knowledge have all but disintegrated. Speaking truth to power, the second sacred tenet of hip hop, presumes power lies with the other, and hence speaking truth to it is a compulsory act. And this is where rap comes in. Ray, who works in a call centre in Gurgaon to support his family, speaks his truth in raps he scribbles passionately on recycled old notebooks. He talks about identity, resilience and class, and in the film he does so in the middle of his home, in the middle of the street, in the middle of shiny Gurugram that casts its long shadow over every dream of his. Prabhdeep, MC and rapper from Tilaknagar, documents every act of casual violence in powerful Punjabi, raps about his Delhi -18, raps about his mother being insulted by his school principle for non-payment of fees, his father throwing a brick from his balcony to break the skull of neighbourhood goons, of beloved friends he has lost to drugs. In rap and dance battles in shady bars where no one participating can afford the price of beer, they speak truth to power in metaphor and rage. As you see in the film, they curse each other's fathers for corrupting them with expectations, in this lane in Hauz Khas Village, right behind hipster central, where people waltzing in a sea of perfume sometimes wait and listen to what they are saying. They oblige by turning their boom box low, their voices high. Hip hop shares an uneasy relationship with the hipster scene, as we can see in the Hauz Khas sequence in Gali. It's an aspiration to belong to those who seem to live independent, creative lives, but it's abundantly clear that those lives are enabled by money, and hence they don't want to seem to want to belong to old privilege. Hence, a lot of raps in Delhi are about making it, getting rich, getting a car and showing it to the naysayers that see, I am NOT nothing.



You also talk about the negotiations with masculinity in these spaces, what are these discussions, and how did they come to your notice?

Samreen Farooqui and Shabani Hassanwalia: Hip hop the world over

is a male space. It's no different in India, or Delhi. But what we found interesting is, and what some people said to us during the making of the documentary was how the dance battles evolved from, and replaced street fights. It's a legitimate alternative to violent confrontations. Even the rap battles we attended are deeply misogynistic, and also seriously 'diss' each other's family pride, etc. But at the end of it they shake hands, which is the most interesting part.

Which brings us to the brotherhood. The most important thing the scene has given these young boys is the feeling that they have a community, somebody who gets them, has their back. And it usually is a fellow rapper or dancer. Somebody who totally gets how hard it is to resist and want the mainstream, all at the same time.

You mention the use of smart phones and technology by the younger inhabitants of this community, what do you think has been the role of technology and dance?

Samreen Farooqui and Shabani Hassanwalia: The role technology is playing in re-negotiating our terms with the world was visible in every frame of our film. We are still discovering what the ubiquitous screen means in how it's re-wiring access, aspiration and possibilities for those in whose hands these screens lie. It has meant the complete dissolution of geographical and linguistic boundaries; we watched children and young adults whose first language is Hindi, watching English documentaries on the philosophy of Hip Hop. Whatever was lost in language was made up for in their immense capacity to pick up the non-verbal signal. Knowledge, today, rides over airwaves and comes out of cheap earphones at 720 p, to anybody with a data connection of a few hundred rupees a month.

How easy or difficult was it to work with the community, and tell their stories without losing their perspective?

Samreen Farooqui and Shabani Hassanwalia: Working with them was not so hard. Filming struggles like matching of timelines and availability is a part and parcel of every character driven project. The film is our interpretation of what we experienced and filmed.





Member of 8 Hindus B-boy group showing his moves at a metro station

Could you tell us more about the filmmaking process itself? Please feel free to talk about any challenges, or any anecdotes that particularly struck you during this process.

Samreen Farooqui and Shabani Hassanwalia: We started working on this film in Khirkee, an urban village in south Delhi and soon realised that the scope was much larger and deeper. There was this movement creating an alternate history of the city. We wanted to see it from there and not make it mainstream the way most hip hop is depicted today. So Delhi became a character in the film, not the Delhi that we usually see but the Delhi of these artistes, as seen from their rooftops, the DDA parks they practice in, the metro stations they are thrown out from and their rooms where they hole themselves in to dance or write that rap for 16 -17 hours at a stretch. One of the challenges for us has been finding a language to experience the form of hip hop in Delhi. We wanted to not succumb to the popular tropes of how hip hop is shown.

This grant was made possible with support from Titan Company Limited.



Could you give us a short introduction to the school, the context that you are working in, and talk about its students?

Ramesh Narayanrao: I selected the Government Model Primary School, Hesaraghatta, Bangalore (Rural), for the project. It is situated to the north-east of Bangalore, off the Bangalore – Mumbai National Highway. The school is located on one side of the village, with a big play ground and adequate class rooms. There are 240 students studying in this school, with eight teachers. Most of the students come from lower middle class backgrounds and hail from communities that are financially challenged. Many of their parents either work in garment factories or farming and agriculture. The students I work with are from the sixth and seventh grade. Their abilities in communication and language are poor, both with writing as well as speaking. The context that they come from and their communication problems, however, do not hinder their interest in learning art. Since the number of students are large, I decided to conduct a test and select interested students for the art classes—zeroing in on 30 students from both the grades for this project.

Why did you want to concentrate on the visual medium?

Ramesh Narayanrao: Our communication is strongly structured around oral and textual mediums. These mediums effectively help us in our daily transactions. We fulfil our basic needs through speech and the written word. There are many questions that we have not thought of seriously, such as, ‘who are we?’, ‘what are our abilities?’ and ‘how far can we expand our self to make our life fruitful and meaningful?’ Senses such as seeing, hearing, tangible experiences and tasting come naturally to us by birth. Seeing comes before speaking and writing. But as we grow, we engage with an education system, which doesn’t enhance these inherent abilities. Rather, it curtails them and reduces our ability to react and communicate through them. But if we look back at our past, it is evident throughout history that visual expression was a more powerful medium than text; indeed text was born essentially out of the visual medium.

In my present project in arts education, I am trying to ignite/provoke the ability to think through the visual medium. And through this experiential learning, students will learn new skills which will help them express themselves and communicate in better ways.

Ramesh Narayanrao is an artist. He received a grant towards a series of exercises in the visual arts – drawing, painting and design – and storytelling, to sensitise the students to their environment. This project was undertaken with 40 students, from the sixth and seventh grades of the Government Model Primary School, in Hesaraghatta, Bangalore.



Puppets made by the students



They can think visually and respond to a situation or context more effectively. They can also develop better insight about an issue or a problem and be more capable of addressing it.

How did you start the process of introducing the visual medium as a learning tool to the students?

Ramesh Narayanrao: At first I tried to introduce a few visual elements to the students, through which they could identify, and classify the visual world around them. Next we worked on learning to draw, and using drawing as a tool in their communication. These exercises sensitise their observation and thinking. What I experienced in these classes is that the children have a lot of curiosity, and the speed at which they learn such things is very encouraging. They have allowed their mind to play and move with freehand line drawing. They are capable of doing much better than they are doing now, only if the entire learning system changes completely.

In the next few classes, I encouraged them to observe what they see

around them and draw in their sketch book after their classes. Most of them draw, from their text books or cartoons. I had to struggle to make them really see their immediate visual world around. So I am encouraging them by providing drawing materials and asking them to sketch more and more. That is the only way I can make them ‘SEE’, ‘LOOK’ and ‘OBSERVE’ the visual details, and relate them with their immediate life.

You plan to use other visual mediums, beyond drawing. Please do talk about the other sessions you have planned.

Ramesh Narayanrao: Drawing is obviously a core tool in all the classes. But to increase the possibilities of visual exploration, I am employing painting—using pastels, poster colours, colour pencils—and creating collages. I’m also planning to use straw pipes, clay and corrugated sheets to work on three-dimensional explorations. This leads to learning three-dimensional thinking. Apart from these visual mediums, I have already conducted storytelling sessions, encouraging them to imagine the characters. Learning through stop-motion animation, especially how the visuals move has helped me communicate my ideas.

You talk about a change that is needed in the entire educational system to help the students perform better. Please tell us what these changes could be for the school that you are working in?

Ramesh Narayanrao: In the present scenario, as I have observed, our educational practice of learning is mostly planned from the perspective of a committee. There is a lacuna in terms of incorporating training of children in visual medium and visual sensibility. Visual medium is the mother of all other mediums and there is an urgency to consider this while planning the syllabus. The present syllabus in this regard does not have any research base. Visual medium is an independent course which makes learning other subject areas better. In the present school I observed from my experience that the performance of the students who are practicing in art and design improve. They appear more confident in thinking and doing. Their performance in other areas will improve if the classes on art are continuously organised over the years.



What are the challenges you faced while working with the students?

Ramesh Narayanrao: Unfortunately these children do not have natural surrounding around their school that can inspire them. Trees, insects, birds, animals and all the natural life is replaced by urban visuals such as buildings, automobiles, dust and smoke. Sadly, children can see nature only in their text books and copy them.

While working with the students I am also facing challenges in communication, in terms of their ability to understand and speak on different subjects. Their writing ability is poor and they cannot speak on the given subject. Their ability to think freely is not addressed by the syllabus or the teaching methods. They cannot articulate their ideas.

Other issues with the school environment include the lack of interest among the teachers to come and see what the students are doing. They do not volunteer or participate in the sessions though they were asked to. I'm also finding it difficult to achieve the objectives of this project within this short duration; consistency and continuity is difficult without internal support from the system of the school.

What are some of your key learnings from this project, that you wish to communicate to the larger audience interested in pedagogy in art?

Ramesh Narayanrao: This project is opening my eyes to several issues. One is that our society is rushing without direction. This materialistic world is leading people towards aiming only for monetary benefits and comforts. There is a need to address this larger problem by bringing changes in grassroots education and learning practices. The visual medium can help address this effectively, together with other mediums of learning. Exposure to the visual medium at an early age can fine-tune all their senses of learning and articulation. It also provides a strong human and ethical base to the individual. This can provide answers in our search for the meaning of life, in a larger context.



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Zubeni Lotha is a photographer from Nagaland. She received a grant to study the construction of identity of the Konyak Nagas, by representation through photographic images. For this project, she focused on Austrian ethnologist Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf's images, seeking to understand the context of their creation through the lens of photography. The emphasis on documenting Nagas' 'exoticism' is evident in Haimendorf's images and has influenced not only subsequent representations but self-representations by the Nagas, as well.

What is the archetypal-stereotype of the Konyak Nagas you are attempting to re-articulate within your project? Was Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf the only one who contributed to this stereotype? If not, please do elaborate further on the ways in which this stereotype has circulated through time.

Zubeni Lotha: In my opinion 'Nagas' have become almost synonymous with 'head hunting' or 'head-hunters'. The Konyaks are especially prone to this definition because of Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf. I have attempted to look at Haimendorf's photographs not because his are the only ones but because he was the first ethnographer to document the Nagas with a particular study of the Konyaks. He lived a year with them and took hundreds of photographs as part of his field study. It is these photographs that have greatly interested me. It is available on an online database along with his diary, which I have looked at along with his photographs and it is very revealing. Many of the photographs were staged, especially the photographs depicting the headhunting raid or ceremonial dance. Many of the bare-chested women were also staged although some were candid. Most of the women were shy and not willing to be photographed according to his diary. But one cannot know these things by looking at the photographs. The photos are fantastic images of men and women in rich ceremonial or traditional costumes against a clear sky or landscape. And because of the headhunting history and later with the insurgent movement in Naga history there has been a tendency to depict the Nagas as fierce tribal warriors in a conflict area. They created a certain stereotype in the imagination, of violent tribal men or exotic tribal women. There are plenty of these stereotypical images of the Nagas in their traditional costumes with a spear in their hand ready for warfare or the women half naked in their colourful costumes. These images are reproduced over and over in popular media both by 'outsiders' and 'insiders'. The Hornbill Festival in Nagaland is a popular festival where tourists are welcomed to view the culture of the Nagas where many of these photographs are reproduced for the 'exotic' effect. And I think such stereotyping has limited our understanding of the Nagas. Haimendorf may have started this but others after him are carrying on this tradition of exoticising the Nagas till today.



In your project you are looking at the ‘photographic encounter’ that changed the way people looked at themselves. Please elaborate on what you see as the lasting effects of this encounter on the way the Nagas view themselves. How is your work engaging with this ‘encounter’?

Zubeni Lotha: As part of my project I have visited some of the villages in the Konyak region and other villages that are not of that region. Many of the villages are still quite wild and natural apart from the interference of modernity like mobile towers, satellite television, cement houses instead of thatch roofs and bamboo walls. The roads are bad, the region is mountainous, resources are few and life is hard. But people are proud of their culture and are always willing to ‘dress-up’ for the camera. Many are shy to be photographed but the ones willing would like to dress in their costumes. And when asked why, the response is that it is a mark of their identity. In the Konyak areas many are aware of the interest in their culture and they try to live up to the imagination of the visitors by trying to keep some of the tradition intact. I believe the Konyak region is one of the most popular tourist spots in Nagaland and somehow, even if in the most smallest way, this can be attributed to Haimendorf.



Photograph by Zubeni Lotha



I tried to photograph very differently from Haimendorf. So I decided that no one would be in traditional costumes, and I would not use typical Naga motifs like the skull or traditional huts/morungs, etc. But as the work progressed I realized that by doing away with all of that I was not being honest in my representation of the people. So I started to look at the people, environment, landscape, details, etc., as they were; objects and subjects existing side by side in everyday life. I have felt in this project that many of the objects that I have seen or photographed are also found in museums. The Nagas are studied by anthropologists and often represented as culturally interesting people or a community exemplifying ‘simple’ society. But what is not often understood is that the Nagas are living this reality and there is much complexity within that reality which is not often shown. I tried to address that in my work. My style of photographing became almost documentary in the classical sense. But I also looked at the things and details, which may not be typical and I almost did away with classical portraiture, although I did take some photos, I did not think it fit into the narrative of this project. I was photographing what I could see as their lived reality but also tried to photograph details that make up the fabric of their culture or life.

Photography was a big part of building the stereotype of the Konyak Naga. Please tell us more about the many ways in which your project, which is based in photography once again, seeks to undo the lasting effects of Fürer-Haimendorf's portrayal?

Zubeni Lotha: The problems I have with Haimendorf's photograph is the way he has framed them, his composition/perspective and finally the choice of photos that feature in his book *The Naked Nagas*. Often when looking at a photographic project one is forced to start questioning the edit, why a certain photograph has been chosen over others, etc. But with his photographs a sense of a narrative is lost to me. There are no photographs leading me to the next and the next but rather it was more like looking at the same type of photos only in different settings or showcasing different costumes. So, I felt that he was documenting without trying to tell the story of the people or place, focusing on one aspect of their culture or life. I think the headhunting and what he saw as a very 'primitive' society fascinated him. The men and women living so freely as compared to the rigid Victorian morals he must have come from. Looking at the photographs one could not sense that change was happening and headhunting was not the norm. And that there were moral codes guiding their everyday lives.



Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf's photographic representation of the Konyak Nagas

Initially, when I started the project I really wanted to directly confront Haimendorf's photographs through my own work. At first I wanted to construct some portraits against the background of his portraits to create a strong contrast of the past and the present. But this was not to be as I continued with the project, because studying and photographing one type of culture or people is not one or even two-dimensional. It is much more complex and I don't think one can ever understand it enough to create a body of work about it. I began questioning the very definition of identity and culture. I photographed the small details that seemed meaningless. I looked at a stone for example but when you got to the story of the stone it became clear that this is as much a part of the culture as the headhunting stories. In this project I have attempted not a clear straight forward body of work but rather an abstract way of looking, because to me that's what culture or identity is, a complex and abstract idea.

Please tell us more about the outcome of this grant and how you hope it will contribute to the dialogue around representation.

Zubeni Lotha: This project has been an enriching experience for me.



Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf's
photographic representation of the
Konyak Nagas

I went into it with a definite assumption but it went through a process of change and I finally came out with a very different outlook. I was ready to charge Haimendorf directly when I started out but in the course of my project I have found that there is an element of truth to his photographs and this led me to question my own practice—stepping out of his shadows almost. It made me look at my own photographic practices too, especially the concept of portraiture and I had to re-think my understanding of images and its construction. I believe that image construction plays a vital role in representation and the Naga identity, as we understand it today is maybe one example of that I think. I understand that if I see Haimendorf's photographs as creating certain kinds of stereotypes then I have to take into account that my own work could be doing the same thing. I hope this work can show that identity, representation, and culture are all ideas that are complex and abstract. These things are constructed, created many times by forces beyond our control. I have tried to debunk the idea of one-dimensional 'Naga' as much as I can.

This grant was made possible with support from Titan Company Limited.



Your play, *Three Hearings on the Existence of Snakes in the Human Bloodstream*, is an adaptation of James Alan Gardner's science fiction story of the same name, that examines how 'otherness' is manufactured, magnified and fostered in human societies. Why did you choose this text and subject matter for your play?

Shena Gamat: I read the short story almost a decade ago, and was struck by how visual it was and also by how it moved me. I enjoyed the science in it and appreciated the very elemental and universal human theme of 'otherness'. I thought the instances of hearings, or court scenes, were inherently dramatic and a wonderfully clever way of taking snapshots of our possible Pasts and Future. At the time I felt that it would make a great play, and immediately photocopied it with the thought of "maybe adapting it one day". Like most 'maybes', it began to gather dust.

And then, in the recent past, instances of otherness and divisiveness kept rearing their ugly heads around me.

I have been, very quietly and personally, a political being. I generally concern myself with human rights issues and I 'do my bit' as best I can. If someone asked me if I was a 'political person'—I would probably reply that we are all political, that everything we do is political, but, no, I've never really 'followed politics' and I'd be hard-pressed to name leaders of political parties, beyond a handful.

But, even I, who doesn't own a TV with cable, who doesn't read the papers except occasionally, who generally leaves a room when discussions turn to politics—could not but help feel the weight of events unfolding around me. A man being murdered for what he ate, rhetoric that can only be described as hate mongering, students being beaten up simply for asking questions, the charge of 'sedition' being levied with seeming ease, the term 'rationalists' beginning to sound like an accusation. A mixture of anger and fear, and deep sadness engulfed me and before I knew it I was picking up the photocopied pages once again, and this time did a search on the author and sent him an email, requesting his permission to adapt his story to the Indian stage.

Shena Gamat is a theatre practitioner. She received a grant to create an interactive play based on a science fiction story by James Alan Gardner, titled *Three Hearings on the Existence of Snakes in the Human Bloodstream*. Shena's play examines how 'otherness' is manufactured, magnified and fostered in human societies. All over the world today, societies are growing increasingly intolerant of people and cultures that are different from or unfamiliar to them. The story engages with this relevant question where the 'science' borders on fiction while the incidents resemble real life closely.



From a performance of
*Three Hearings on the Existence of
Snakes in the Human Bloodstream*

Please tell us more about the process of putting together this piece, especially the workshops and other endeavours made towards weaving the actors' personal experiences with elements of the play.

Shena Gamat: I didn't want a play that 'gives gyaan' or tries to teach anything, but I did want to create the experience of what an open space of dialogue might feel like. For this to happen, we have to reveal something of ourselves, don't we? Therefore, actors address the audience directly, revealing their own grappling and questions, and associations with the material. They speak in either Hindi or English, depending on their comfort level or desire. They bring the large-scale, political and philosophical arena into the here and now and the personal. To my mind, THIS is at the heart of the play (which I'd rather call an experience actually!)—an invitation and acknowledgement of the empathy that can exist between human beings.

This has been the most difficult part of creating this work—finding the right tone for this kind of sharing. Performance and story and music—we could find our way through these, but vulnerability, transparency, connection?

An audience can smell a false note a mile off, and the ‘step outs’, when actors step out of character and address the audience as themselves, have frankly been difficult to get quite right. One thing we learned after the first run, is that we absolutely have to stay away from being didactic, preachy or even minimally judgemental—and it was a huge learning to discover how quickly we fell into these modes, sometimes very subtly, almost without realising it. We have come closer to understanding how to work with being simple and present, and I hope that in our next run of shows we will get closer still.

In terms of workshops and processes towards this, the ensemble went through three months of just about everything I could throw at them! Discussions, debates and copious amounts of research as well as rhythm, movement and body work, memory mapping and long visualisations. For the step-outs in particular, each actor worked individually with material that THEY wanted to bring to the piece, which meant something to them personally.

You are working with audience feedback in a unique way. Please do tell us more about this process.

Shena Gamat: Ah yes! The controversial, not-quite-ironed-out mechanism of audience feedback in this play!

On the surface of it there does not seem to be anything to argue with in this production—many people would agree that divisiveness is harmful, and if that is all that this story was saying it would be a bit of a non-starter. But, the key line that ends the play—“why concern yourself with the snake in front of you when you are blind to the serpents in your own heart?”—is really the push of the piece. It asks us to examine ourselves, to question whether we ourselves are part of the ‘urge to demonise the different’. If anything, that is my ‘agenda’—to invoke the spirit of questioning, particularly of oneself.

In order to do this, the actors literally collect questions that audience members scribble down during the course of the performance (they are handed pens and slips of paper when they enter). In other words, the audience is encouraged to actively think, articulate associations and reflect on the questions that arise in their minds during the show.



These questions are then reflected back, examined and held up to the light by the actors. The idea isn't so much to 'answer' them, as to delight in the spirit of enquiry and allow the myriad possibilities of 'answers' to hang in the air, connecting everyone present.

I've had people say that this exercise 'breaks the flow of the play', or is 'uncomfortable' or even 'unnecessary'. While I may agree with the first two comments, I don't worry overmuch—a performance need not always flow and need not always be comfortable. But I certainly don't think it is 'unnecessary'. The play is about 'othering' and divisiveness. I do not want to contribute to the ongoing debate between 'us' and 'them', I am looking for spaces of connection. This is why I HAVE to include the questions and 'step outs' and work towards creating a lived experience – and I truly believe that a live theatre experience can do this. Perhaps I will ultimately fail with this show in this aspect, but I must try. I am grateful to IFA for supporting the endeavour, and being willing to take this risk.

Besides, when audience members have shared questions such as “Is faith just perception—what you choose to see?”, “Is there a vaccine for fear?”, “How the hell do I stay away from judgement and labels and habit?”, “Draw a monster—what makes it a monster?”, or “Is there music in colours?” and these have been shared in the here-and-now of a live performance—I feel a little vindicated!

You have already performed in a couple of spaces. Please talk to us about your experience thus far.

Shena Gamat: Both runs have been in Delhi. The first (December 2016) was at OddBird Theatre, an upcoming theatre space frequented by audiences who for the most part speak English and are theatre-going savvy. These were ticketed shows. The second run (March 2017) was held at Anand Lok Community Centre, a neighbourhood Residents' Association space. These shows were not ticketed. Most of the residents of the area are not regular theatre-goers, although they are familiar with English. Both runs were open to the general public. For the second run, a large part of the promotions were done within the neighbourhood itself, through the local Residents' Association. For this run, we also created a small 'exhibition' of our process work, in order to engage with audiences before and after the show.

Like any somewhat experimental and developing work, we were able to change/edit portions of the show between runs using our experience of the first to inform the second.



From a performance of *Three Hearings on the Existence of Snakes in the Human Bloodstream*



Feedback from the local community at Anand Lok who came to watch the play has been encouraging. Some were watching a performance for the first time, a few were senior citizens and almost all of them were pleased to find the show stimulating. Many of them asked us to perform again, as they wanted their neighbours and relatives to watch the show as well.

Interestingly, although the show is intense and full of ‘science’, no one mentioned not being able to understand what was going on. Most people seem to have gained something out of it; the opportunity and challenge of engaging with a densely-packed show like this seems to have been appreciated, most importantly—among non-theatre goers as well.

This project also seeks to move the play beyond the esoteric world of theatre, to spaces that do not usually participate in such engagements. How are you moving forward with this idea? Why is this an important part of your project?

Shena Gamat: I’m glad you call it a ‘project’. That’s exactly how I feel about it. For me, this is more of an ongoing project than solely a play.

The idea of taking the performance to places that are varied and easily accessible, so that ‘non-theatre-goers’ can participate is, for me, imperative—and very closely linked to the subject matter and treatment. Since the play is ultimately about ‘otherness’ and the factors that make up our propensity for divisiveness, it is important that conversations and questions around these topics involve people from a wide variety of backgrounds and interests, and not just ‘intellectuals’ or people interested in the arts, who often sport a fairly liberal stance. Putting a production into the ‘box’ of an auditorium or in certain locales means missing out on sharing it with people who may feel that such ‘high-brow’ theatre is not for them, or for whom it is simply just too difficult to get to in terms of physical distance and traffic.

Since the play is basically in English, this would mean that one is restricted to areas where English, if not first language or spoken, is at least readily understood. Within this though, there is a wide variety of people—particularly those who may never have watched a play before. This means that one will be able to share the performance with people of varying political beliefs and/or world views.



From a performance of
*Three Hearings on the Existence of
Snakes in the Human Bloodstream*

On a more general note, and a selfish one as a theatre practitioner, the idea is also to grow audiences. These days whenever a group of theatre folk gets together in Delhi, conversation invariably turns around to how difficult it is to stage plays, how there's no money, how part of the problem is the expensive auditoriums, but also how there seems to be no audiences beyond the loyal few who rotate at most shows—most of them being friends and family of performers or people involved in the production.

A high-profile theatre event such as 'Meta Awards', the NSD festival or 'Short and Sweet Festival' or a performance from a well-known personality, particularly if they're from out of town, would suddenly see a burst of a new theatre-going crowd, but these events are expensive to put up and one wonders where the crowd disappears after the events are over, while other plays are (bravely) being staged.



So, where is the general public and why don't they come watch a theatrical production?

Shena Gamat: I believe there are two main reasons. One, plays in Delhi are mostly concentrated in auditoriums that are in the Central part of the city. This makes them inaccessible in that they are just too far away physically to get to for many people and also there is a sense that such places are not meant for those who are not 'theatre and arts aficionados' or 'intellectuals'. Two, many people who are not regular theatre-goers have had the unfortunate experience of having watched a bad play, and consequently they write off all plays as being stuffy, boring and unrelated to their lives.

I hope that *Three Hearings on the Existence of Snakes in the Human Bloodstream* is vibrant, engaging and thought-provoking. The music score (Anant Dayal) and songs (Aditi 'Dot' Saigal) are certainly more than I could have hoped for. Overall, I have some hope that it will be a positive experience for first-time theatre goers.

Going forward, we're looking at venues such as schools, colleges, science institutions and other non-conventional spaces for further shows.

Please tell us more about any challenges encountered in the process of making this play.

Shena Gamat: One of the biggest challenges has been working with the ensemble cast (twelve actors and three musicians) of highly talented and busy individuals—purely from the scheduling point of view!

Other challenges have mostly centered around getting the step-outs by actors and questions from the audience to work so that they are well integrated into the structure and content of the whole show, with truth and grace.

Regarding the script itself, I feel that the device of a 'parallel reality' works very well—it manages to distance the events to the degree that one can actually view them critically, allowing the rational mind to work through the imaginative one. While some personal and philosophical or political associations naturally crop up in an audience member's mind, such associations are also drawn out within the performance itself. The challenge has been how to manage this without overpowering the beauty and 'distancing effect' of the story itself.





You began this project with an ambitious list of events that you would curate at the museum. Were you able to implement all of them? Could you tell us about the challenges you faced and the final ideas that you were actually able to execute?

Supriya Menon: The Fellowship called for programmes and exhibitions that would allow visitors to meaningfully engage with the museum's collection. I began traditionally, by trying to understand what 'visitors' could mean—school students, families, tourists, local residents and so on, and what events were already in place at the museum. By understanding what types of visitors were coming into the museum, it would be possible to formulate targeted programmes which enabled the museum's traditional audiences to engage better with the collection, brought new groups into the museum, and ultimately increased the museum's visitor numbers.

So coming in, the list comprised the widest possible range of events that could potentially be executed in the museum, based on my past work experiences with other institutions. This included gallery trails, film screenings, tours for the disabled, new exhibitions and workshops and so on.

When I finally began working at the museum, I had a nice reality check. I needed time to research to actually understand the collection, as well as the realities of the city's cultural landscape, the museum's position within it, and importantly, the resources available to execute any programme. For example, the museum is located outside the city's cultural circuit, and has limited systems to market its events. Visitors unfortunately won't just conveniently turn up to engage with events or exhibitions if the museum was not on their radar. So this meant forming networks with influential interest groups such as art colleges or the artist community. I was able to meet many different kinds of people who I could collaborate with and tap into for museum events, and who were able to act as an informal network to spread word about the museum's activities.

Ultimately, I was able to set up two exhibitions, one artist performance, two film screenings, two workshops, and also organised the Google Art Project to come in to document the collection!

Supriya Menon is a Mumbai based curator and researcher. She received a fellowship to work with the Kerala Museum, Kochi to envisage and curate a series of public engagements with the museum's collection that includes exhibitions, public programmes and outreach events for both adults and children. The project concluded with an exhibition titled *Collecting the Artist*, that traced the untold story of the collection at the museum and paid homage to the vision of its founder, Madhavan Nayar.



Image from the printmaking workshop *Hot Off The Press* at the Kerala Museum, Kochi

You have tried to actively engage the public with the Kerala Museum and its collection through your fellowship period. Please tell us about some of the activities and events you organised, and the response these events received.

Supriya Menon: I organised two exhibitions: *Shifting Narratives* (December 2016-February 2017) and *Collecting the Artist* (August 2017-November 2017). With both exhibitions, the aim was to use my research about the artists and the works to tell new stories about the collection.

Two film screenings were organised while *Shifting Narratives* was on. The first one was the National Award winning documentary *A Far Afternoon*, which we loaned from Chennai based filmmaker Sruti Harihara. It follows artist Krishen Khanna as he goes about making a five-part painting called *A Far Afternoon*, (it's lovely, do look it up). We have Krishen Khanna's works in the collection and one was on display in *Shifting Narratives*, so it made sense to screen the film during this period. Screening a documentary about art could (and did) end up being a rather niche event, so I went about to two art colleges in and outside of Kochi to meet the heads of department, promote the event and invite them to the museum. To my surprise, nearly 80 students travelled in to watch the film and we had to organise a special screening for them! We were also able to form a good relationship with both colleges. One of them took up our offer to host their postgraduate students' final art show at the Kerala Museum in April 2017, and we continue to be in touch with them to explore more collaborations.

Few members of the public attended screenings of both *A Far Afternoon* and the second film, *Gaman*, despite listing it in the newspapers, online, and promoting it through the museum's newsletters. Marketing continues to be a challenge.

Workshops were quite successful! The first one, *Storytelling through Comics*, was led by children's book illustrator Priya Kuriyan and was immensely popular. The aim was to explore a theme from our collection (in this case, migration), and invite people to think of creative ways to structure and tell stories. The second workshop, *Hot Off the Press*, saw award-winning, young printmaker Jayesh Barsathi lead a two-day printmaking workshop, talking about printmaking techniques to a very talented bunch of participants.

Both workshops brought in an eclectic mix of people: a sound engineer, radio jockey, filmmaker, artists, students, home-makers.





Image from the printmaking workshop *Hot Off The Press* at the Kerala Museum, Kochi

Your fellowship concluded with the exhibition, *Collecting the Artist*. Could you tell us a little about your choice of title and the works in this exhibition?

Supriya Menon: Let's break the title down. First, about the 'collecting' part:

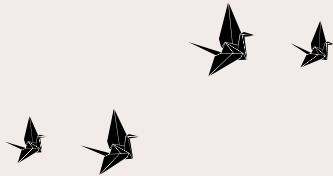
When I started out on the fellowship, the vast scope of this tiny collection and its fragmentary nature used to baffle me. I needed to know why it was the way it was – about its collector Madhavan Nayar, his collecting process (230 works in three years!) and his vision for the space. The collector is, after all, everywhere: his bust greets the visitor at the entrance, his efforts are laid out before them and the museum foundation is named after him. Yet, he is nowhere within the space. So the exhibition sets off exploring his story, the very act of 'collecting'.

As for 'the artist': Nayar envisioned his collection as a resource for art students and the general public. The artists whose works are in the collection are widely acknowledged as significant figures in Indian art, and for Nayar, the inclusion of their works was necessary to offer a

panoramic view of modern Indian art. We recently came across many of Nayar's correspondences with artists among the museum's files, and these are a part of the exhibition. They offer a glimpse into his nature, his dogged pursuit of works of certain artists, his relationship with them and the importance he assigned to the artist—often over the actual artwork. It was really exciting bringing the archive into the exhibition space, and it provided important context about the collection and its history.

The artists whose works are in the collection include Raja Ravi Varma, Abanindranath Tagore, Ramkinkar Baij, Jamini Roy, MF Husain, FN Souza, Ram Kumar, Jogen Chowdhury, Somanth Hore, Ganesh Haloi, KG Subramanyan, Bhupen Khakhar, Rekha Rodwittiya, Surendran Nair, and Jeram Patel. Their works are organised by time—each cluster brings together works influenced by a common ideology, or school of art.

On the inauguration day, we had artist Murali Cheeroth visit us from Bangalore, and he led guests through an experimental walk through the galleries. Murali used to work with Madhavan Nayar when the collection was being assembled, and he was instrumental in helping Nayar acquire works of artists in Bengal, particularly those of stalwarts from Shantiniketan. Murali led a multi-sensory walk which saw him revisit his interactions with Nayar, and the artists whose works were on display. His lively personal stories about the early days of the collection shed new light on the processes that led to the works coming to the museum, and added a very important layer of interpretation to the exhibition. The recording of his performance will form an important part of the museum's archive.



Do you think these fellowships instituted by IFA help bring these spaces alive? Could you talk about your experience as a fellow at the Kerala Museum.

Supriya Menon: Absolutely. Museums struggling for financial and institutional resources often get bogged down by the day-to-day business of just running the space. There is also a tendency to continue established trends, which may just be out-dated. Museums have moved on so much—we have such exciting things happening in the sector, so much experimentation and important discussions about what the purpose of a museum is, how it should be serving audiences, and the need to shift from didactic displays to interactive, engaging programmes where learning can actually be fun and experiential.



Images from the workshop
Storytelling Through Comics at the
 Kerala Museum, Kochi

The Kerala Museum trustees are open-minded—they are willing to try new things but needed someone who could formulate new ideas and execute them. The IFA fellowship was ideal for them because it allowed us to explore what is possible in such a space, and think about what steps need to be taken so that more engaging programmes can be created and run here. For me, this was a brilliant opportunity to explore modern Indian art, actively undertaking programming, negotiating audience needs and museum resources, and working fairly independently in an institution that was flexible and eager to experiment along with me!

After your one-year stint at the museum, how do you see the space moving forward in the future?

Supriya Menon: The museum has just completed 30 years and is currently in the process of formulating a new goal and vision for its future. It plans to update its programmes and facilities, and reconnect with audiences. Lots of potential and exciting times ahead!

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How did you become interested in the Raseshori Pala of the Sankirtan tradition and what led you to eventually study it?

Rekha Konsam: The first time I came across the Raseshori Pala was during my school days (in grade 10) in Imphal when the women who were carrying on the Raseshori performance at that point in time, performed at the death ceremony of my maternal grandmother—in the presence of a painting. As I came to know later, the painting was that of Raseshori—the Princess Bimbavati, daughter of Maharaja Bhagyachandra (1748–1799) of Manipur who initiated this tradition. My grandmother who was born into the Karta family, was a member of the Raseshori Pala, but had participated in the tradition only for a very short duration.

Coming back to the painting—its significance and symbolism—I must add that ‘her’ (Princess Bimbavati’s) presence was crucial for the performance. From what I have now learnt, a portrait of Bimbavati graces the Raseshori performance when it is performed outside temples. This portrait, it seems, is neither based on the living princess nor was it originally painted during her lifetime; rather it is an artist’s imagination of the woman known as ‘Shija Laioibi’, the ‘semi-divine princess-saint’. The acclaimed painter of Manipur, R K Chandrajitsana Singh, popularly known as ‘R K C S’, was mentioned at the outset as the artist who produced this work. He is himself of Karta (Bhagyachandra) descent, and his paintings of Bimbavati were depictions based on his imagination rather than a physical likeness of the living princess. There are other paintings of the princess by ‘R K C S’ but the one that is used in the performance is one in which she is dressed in the striped lower-wear (phanek) in the pink hues of the lotus and white cotton wrap over her shoulders, with cymbals in her hands. This has been described to me as the princess being dressed for the event of the Raseshori Pala performance. This painting, described as a ‘photo’ (the one that is currently in use is technically a photo of the painting), seems to have been reproduced by other artists—with or without certain changes. At the moment, I am yet to verify the name of the artist as the ‘photo’ does not bear the signature of the artist. For the women of the pala, the presence of the photograph is symbolic of her presence in the performance outside the temple. This ‘presence’ has been given more importance than the ‘photo’/painting or its reproductions or that of the artist himself.

Rekha Konsam is a researcher and writer. She received a grant for enquiring into the understudied Raseshori Pala of the Sankirtan tradition in Manipur to draw attention to certain aspects of Vaishnavism and its devotional expression through the contribution of women. The project explored the roles of women as custodians for maintaining and carrying forward this artistic tradition.



Dr Ch Jamini Devi, secretary of the Shri Govinda Raseshori Pala Marup and early chronicler of the Raseshori Pal of the Sankirtan tradition, which was once a closely guarded tradition

Sometime after the demise of my grandmother, my mother, a school teacher, started participating in the performance. It was something quite unexpected—to find our strict mother move away from the usual routine of family and school life; to catch her humming Sankirtan tunes, preparing to participate in Sankirtan performance, and later on to venture on trips outside the state away from family. From time to time, I would hear my mother and her sisters (who are also part of the group) talk about the Raseshori with great affection. At this point I did not have much of an idea of what the Raseshori Pala was more than the fact that it was a Sankirtan group comprising women and that this group performed very selectively. Ironically, my interest in the subject piqued during my PhD research on the Lai Haraoba festival. During that period, I spent a long duration of time at home for my fieldwork that stretched over three festival seasons. The Lai Haraoba is a religious festival held collectively by the community and officiated by ritual practitioners (maiba, maibi, pena) of the pre-Hindu Meitei faith. The festival is held at neighbourhoods in honour of its resident umanglai deities who are revered as guardian deities. At its core, it is an elaborate set of rituals that is performed through the course of several days.



Dance rituals constitute an essential part of it as also are the lore, music, beliefs that are central to the reclamation of the Meitei ethnic self.

When I was engrossed in following the Lai Haraoba, I spent a lot of time with many maibi (spirit mediums who are largely women) who served at these religious festivals. What was striking was that the maibis and the Raseshori Pala were at one level women of the Meitei society engaged in religious performance; on another level, they were distinctly different in so many ways. It was this stark difference that first drew my attention and interest.

Could you elaborate on the structure of this tradition in the royal household in Manipur and some of the changes that may have taken place over the decades/centuries? Please also tell us about the meaning and significance of this tradition.

Rekha Kongsam: To understand the structure of this performance tradition, we need to shift the lens to look beyond the royal household and see how political power and religion come into play in the conception and practices of Manipuri Vaishnavism. In this interplay, descent groups and alliances play a crucial role. This is why it is important to remember that women were central to the equation. There were twists and turns and wars of succession that involved the direct line of descent from Bhagyachandra (Karta) and those of Narsingh in close quarters, as I will discuss. At one level, they could be seen as dynasties vying for political power but at another level, the two are also bound by kinship.

The history of the Raseshori Pala and that of Jalakeli Pala is intertwined with the reigns of the Meitei kings. Raseshori Pala was instituted during the time of Bhagyachandra (18th century) as a group comprising the daughters and granddaughters of the Karta descent, while Jalakeli was instituted during the reign of Narsingh (19th century) along similar lines of women of the Narsingh family. Jalakeli Pala was given a new lease of life with the coming to power of Churachand, who was appointed king when he was a young boy, following the defeat of Manipur in the Anglo–Manipuri War of 1891. A new section of people was introduced into the Jalakeli during the time of Churachand Maharaj. This was the mou pala which marks the inclusion of women married into the Narsingh fold. Instrumental to this development was Maharani Dhanamanjuri, the chief queen of Churachand, more popularly known as Ngangbi Maharani.

The significance of the Raseshori Pala is that it is the first women's Sankirtan Pala. At that point, the sankirtan performance was basically the domain of men, and women were excluded from it. The setting up of the Raseshori meant a revisiting of the structures of the performance, to include women. The semi-divine status of Bimbavati seems to have been crucial in enabling this reworking. The reworking was not a substituting in the sense of women being allowed to sing these devotional songs initially sung by men, but the formulation of a Sankirtan specifically structured for the participation of these women. This inclusion was not extended to all women, but only to the women born to the Karta group and their daughters. What is significant is that while the women sing devotional songs, their singing is not complete in itself but part of the whole performance which can be divided into components or segments. Thus, the Raseshori Pala performance is as per custom, initiated by male singers and culminates in their presence, while the women perform in between. Two other unique features are the use of kortal (cymbals)—not otherwise sanctioned to women, and the inclusion of a short dance sequence in their performance. While the Jalakeli was also a women's Sankirtan Pala, it is not a copy of the Raseshori Pala as it is markedly different in its structure. Neither the dance nor the kortal are part of the Jalakeli performance. These are significant points that push one to re-examine the structure of the Sankirtan performance, particularly with reference to the inclusion and the delimitations of women in this arena.

One might be tempted to say that there are the Nupi Pala now but as I have been informed, this goes back to the Raseshori Pala which initiated the inclusion of women. It is for this reason that the Raseshori Pala becomes significant in the Meitei Hindu world where the participation of women was structurally worked out. Yet again, we have to remember that both the Raseshori and the Jalakeli are both exclusive groups of women who are in close proximity to political power. It leaves us with the thought of women who are removed from this power structure and kin-based alliance.



The cymbals (kortal) and the drum (Meitei pung) are laid out for consecration at the pre-event ritual at the Shri Shri Govindaji Temple. Aesthetics and finesse are important hallmarks of the Manipuri Vaishnava tradition. This is reflected in the layout of a betel offering: the cutting and layering of the banana leaves to the number and size of betel pieces placed. In official events, the number of items and the cutting of the nut pieces may differ according to the status of the recipients.



The cymbals (kortal) (rear, extreme left) and the drum (Meitei pung) (centre front) are laid out for consecration at the pre-event ritual at the Shri Shri Govindaji Temple.

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What have been some of your findings on the role of women in Manipuri society in the context of performative traditions, with a focus on the Raseshori Pala? Please elucidate also on how this tradition is carried forth and manifested by way of conduct, etiquette, aesthetic and its social organisation—hierarchy and status—as you have highlighted in your project outline.

Rekha Konsam: This is not an easy question to answer but from what I have explored so far, devotional performances are a crucial part of the practice of Manipuri Vaishnavism. There is a variety of these performances, but in all of these, it appears that the active participation of women has been delimited. It is significant to remember that not only is the Raseshori Pala embedded in the power and hierarchy of the royal court in many ways, but that its most important event is the yearly performance at the Shri Shri Govindaji Temple. One might be aware that the said temple is not just any temple—but the centre of the Hindu world of Manipuri Vaishnavism. It is the deity that was sculpted as a replica of the image that Bhagyachandra saw in his dream vision, and it is this deity that Bhagyachandra crowned as the king of Manipur

and appointed himself as the bhandar of this king. To this day, significant attention is given to ensure that the Raseshori tradition, as passed down through generations in the strict sense, is observed in as much detail as possible. This includes the seating arrangement being earmarked in terms of rank and status in traditional hierarchy. This is also reiterated in the arrangement of the betel nut offered. In this respect, the movement of the sacred images from the interior of the sanctum sanatorium to the bhadrachakra in the open mandap is an important step for the Kartas to venerate its glorious past. This practice had been discontinued but was again brought back after the instituting of the Govinda Temple Board in 1972. There are only a few select events that are privileged with the presence of the sacred images gracing the bhadrachakra which is placed outside in the mandap, rather than the usual enclosure.

For the women carrying forward this tradition, the Raseshori tradition is as much a sacred religious tradition as it is about beauty, aesthetics and elegance. The lower-wear of the pink mayeknaiba phanek and white cotton wrap, with the fineries of jewellery and accessories are an essential part of the Raseshori tradition, as markers of refinement (ching-lemba). While for others outside the group, knowledge and tradition refer to the structures of its Sankirtan performance that is given prime importance, for these women it is a legacy and a responsibility that they carry on. It is a relation of affect and emotional connect. This is particularly strong in the case of the daughters of the Karta women—the second generation of women, whose association with the group goes back to nostalgic memories of their mothers being part of it. Reverence is a compelling motivation in carrying forward the devotional tradition of the Raseshori Pala. In addition, elegance and beauty are quintessential to Raseshori women. Part of it is how they present themselves as carrying forward age-old ideals of refinement such as the simple white cotton wrap, the soft hues of the striped pink mayek-naiba (lower-wear), floral adornments, and jewellery.

What does one understand by the scant studies conducted on the subject, including that of Dr Jamini Devi's? What has your trajectory been like or methodology in gathering information, in understanding the nuances of this tradition, while conducting interviews with Sankirtan teachers and performers and archival research?

Rekha Konsam: The dearth of literature on the topic is remarkable; more so because both the Raseshori and the Jalakeli are traditions that rest at the centre of the political powers and sustained through the royal patronage of the time. Also because it entails a reworking of the structural principles and theoretical base, it is striking that it had been relegated to the periphery. While one may remark on the scant literature, one also needs to remember its persistence as an exclusive tradition. It has remained a jealously guarded tradition so much so that in the past, majority of its own members had no access to the lyrics of the song. Dr Jamini recounts how she was reprimanded by her seniors for gathering and printing the lyrics to make it accessible. Her writings in newspapers and books on the Raseshori Pala have been very important. In the case of the Jalakeli Pala, the materials available for reference are even less. Smt Lakshmipriya, who has been actively engaged in it, is in the process of publishing her book, which would be an important reference. She is someone who is familiar with the tradition through her grandmother, Maharani Dhanamanjuri, and her mother, Maharajkumari Angousana, who are closely associated with the Jalakeli.

Given the lack of resources, I have relied on interviews of members, interactions with the group, besides attending their meetings, and going through their resources. Outside of the two groups, I have also consulted Sankirtan teachers and performers and particularly, Hindu scholars well-versed in the practices of Manipuri Vaishnavism. In this respect, I have been fortunate that pabung A Chitreshwar Sharma took an interest in the subject and gave me time to answer questions that I had. He is someone who has been deeply involved in the inclusion of the Manipuri Sankirtan in the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Discussions with him helped me understand some of the nuances in the conception of Manipuri Vaishnavism.





The women are seated on a red cloth with legs folded together to the side for the entire performance. The white cloth placed in front of them is for the kortal that they use. The Raseshori performance is highly structured and the performance area is forbidden to all men with the exception of the drummers (though drumming is forbidden for women). The assisting women also have to belong to the leima-shija group that have a connection with royal lineage

I have also not been able to find much archival materials on the subject. Khomdram Surendra Singh, a retired personnel of the Manipur State Kala Akademi who was involved in documenting various aspects of the Sankirtan tradition, also points out that the State Kala, Sahitya Parishad, or the Jawaharlal Nehru Manipur Dance Academy have not ventured too far in documenting the field.

Although resources seem scant, the topic has generated much interest. Considering that not much work has been carried out on this subject and because there is a timeline against which this study needed to be completed, a workshop was organised as a platform to initiate discussion on the specific issue of women in the context of Hindu religious practices in Manipur. It attempted to highlight that the once flourishing Raseshori and the Jalakeli traditions, are struggling to survive today. This workshop was made possible with the loving support and encouragement of the two pala groups, the resource persons, and all the participants who felt that it was a topic that needed to be taken up.

What is your understanding of the practice and documentation of devotion among women in India over the decades/centuries of both the Raseshori Pala and other similar devotional forms?



Rekha Konsam: I am acquainted with a few works that have addressed women in other devotional traditions. These have highlighted particular trajectories within these traditions. While the voice of women has been an important trajectory, the nature of its reception was also significant. One can say that neither is the structure of the Raseshori performance formulated by women, nor is the song sung by them. The exception to this is a paragraph of the song which is said to have been a prayer sung by Bimbavati. Thus, when viewed keeping this trajectory in mind, not much is offered to draw similarity. If there are other paths, I am yet to discover them. The women are seated on a red cloth with legs folded together to the side for the entire performance. The white cloth placed in front of them is for the kortal that they use. The Raseshori performance is highly structured and the performance area is forbidden to all men with the exception of the drummers (though drumming is forbidden to women). The assisting women also have to belong to the leima-shija group that have a connection with royal lineage.

How does your project contribute to the way(s) in which Hinduism and Vaishnavism are understood and interpreted—both historically and in the contemporary moment—in Manipur?

Rekha Konsam: I would say that it is a little too early to be able to answer that but I do hope that it would highlight the conceptualisation and practices of Manipuri Vaishnavism that are distinct in themselves. What this project entails is to approach this understanding through an exclusive performance tradition wherein women of a certain social status are the prime focus. Outside the state, the Manipuri Raslila is well recognised and Manipur figures as part of a pan-India Hindu world. This has perpetuated a discourse that overemphasises its Hindu elements while undermining the non-Hindu traditions and thus within the state, it has been met with strong reactions to the point of rejecting it altogether and rediscovering the traditions prior to the coming of Hinduism. Between these extremes, we need to remember that Hinduism in Manipur has its own historicity and complexities. And pivotal to this is how we understand the location of

the Meitei king. As mentioned earlier, Shri Shri Govindaji Temple is at the centre of this conception. In common parlance, the word konung is a term that refers to this temple as well as the king's palace and capital cities.

If Shri Shri Govindaji Temple is at the centre of the Manipuri Vaishnava world and the deity Shri Govinda the king of the land, then Princess Bimbavati is his consort. Raseshori Pala is her legacy. It is her dedication to her Lord.

What have been the challenges that you have faced during this project? Please give us an idea of how you have dealt with the same.

Rekha Konsam: As previously mentioned, the lack of resources was a key issue, but, in another way it was also a driving point for me as I started thinking about why so little is available on it. Given this limitation, I had opted to work with the women who are engaged in the group and its activities. However, it turned out more challenging than I had initially thought. Time was a factor. While I could meet them in groups in their meetings and practice sessions, it was difficult to carry conversations at length with them on such occasions. Meeting them separately was almost impossible as they would be tied with familial responsibilities, social obligations and work life (many women in the Raseshori Pala were either working or retired from service). Majority of the members were seniors at their own homes which meant that they carried on the responsibilities of family matters. Added to this is the fact they were often self-conscious about what they said or did not say. Hence, they preferred to have a few other members alongside during these conversations which was again delimiting.

This performance tradition is one that is situated in a deeply hierarchised world where codes of conduct and etiquettes of the traditional elite of the Meitei society hold a significance of its own and the transgression of which is taken as a slight. As someone removed from this world, many of these codes or their importance caught my attention. Not only is it hierarchised but it is also one with defined and marked boundaries of who is/can or isn't/can't be a part of it—this is in fact one of the points that the members hold as pre-eminently part of its tradition. I happen to be someone who stood just outside that boundary line. In that way, I was someone in proximity and yet not quite a part of their world—someone who could/would never be a part of that world.





The Raseshori performance concludes with the aarti after which the images of the deity Raseshori and Radha-Krishna are brought back inside the sacred sanctum. Here, the women line up as the priests perform the rite

In this respect, the process of organising the workshop and the event itself proved to be a learning experience. Initially conceived as a gathering for an interaction much in the way of a round-table, various details cropped up as the day drew closer. Such as from the venue, structure of the event and the seating arrangements to the protocols that are or aren't to be followed. Considering that it is a performance tradition on which the deliberations are to be concentrated, and that this would necessarily be a part of how the workshop is carried out as well, the question we were faced with was how much of its 'tradition' was to be a part of the event? To what extent would 'tradition' be observed as courtesy, in for instance the seating arrangement? Would it be in terms of rank and hierarchy as per monarchical system? Given the etchings of the traditional hierarchy, who would take the dais, and who would be the chief guest or guest of honour? If anyone in the direct line of enthroned kings were to attend, would the official red and white cloth be laid out for them? If an IFA representative were to attend, where would he/she be placed? In other words, the question placed before me was also to what extent do we maintain the formal traditional world and allow to be opened up for discussion to be able to understand the performance tradition and its underpinnings.

What do you understand from your study as a contemporary documentation of the Raseshori Pala of the Sankirtan tradition?

Rekha Konsam: It has been an interesting journey so far. At the start of the study, I was led by a curiosity about this tradition of women performing in the public realm. The fact that these women were exclusively drawn from a section that constituted the traditional elites of the Meitei society made it particularly intriguing as also the fact that, in the present times, it was the women themselves actively engaged in keeping it alive.

To me, as a researcher, what I see is a tradition that has been carried on to the present, that is the year 2018 with all that it entails, while for the women practitioners, it is a tradition of the 18th century monarchical Manipur which is an exclusive legacy left to them, the women descendants, by their forefathers. In other words, the point that is constantly stressed is the importance of maintaining the codes of conduct as it has been followed since its inception; ‘change’ can only be thought of in moderation, if at all. This is particularly intriguing given that records on the subject are scarce (aside from oral narratives of the women themselves or people associated with these women). Hence the question is as to how we understand change/continuity.

Again, while the women see it as an exclusive legacy, one has to remember that as a women’s Sankirtan Pala, it is a subject that has significance beyond the group—one, as a Manipuri Sankirtan tradition specially formulated for the participation of women of a certain status; and two, as a concern of women in general within the conception and formulations of Manipuri Vaishnavism. The first raises questions that are fundamental to the theoretical formulations in the practice of the said religion, while the second raises the question of gender within this construct, and as such it makes one wonder that though today the women are the custodians of this tradition, but was it always so? Intriguing as these questions are, I find the initiatives and the efforts taken by the Pala women (of both Raseshori and Jalakeli) to keep their respective traditions alive, particularly thought-provoking.



RONIDKUMAR CHINGANGBAM (AKHU)

Arts Practice | 2017 - 2018



Please tell us about your journey in this project and the people you met.

Ronidkumar Chingangbam (Akhu): The project has taken me deeper into my roots and the past of my ancestors. Through my journey I have come across noteworthy literatures and folklores which I would never have been able to glean from publications. I have met people who started museums to preserve the stories of their pasts and use it to educate coming generations. I have met poets who sacrificed their lives writing about the land which will never remember them. Walking the paddy fields of Vanugach, Bangladesh, which are owned by Manipuris for centuries, I felt at home. I had the luxury to sit with them and listen to their stories. I also met many people including folk singers, poets, writers, teachers, social workers, student activists, revivalists, publishers, etc. I have come across like-minded people in my journey and we are in the process of starting something together to bring us closer through various art forms. And my journey to Assam took me to the Barak and Surma rivers in Bangladesh. Just as the history of Manipuris in Assam and Bangladesh are connected and intertwined, so are these two rivers. These Manipuris have been settling for two centuries on the banks of these rivers.

Do elucidate on the unwritten histories of Manipur that have emerged from your journeys.

Ronidkumar Chingangbam (Akhu) is a lyricist, singer and founder of the folk rock band Imphal Talkies and The Howlers. He received a grant to create a musical performance based on notions of Manipuri identity that lie embedded in the literature and folklore of the Meitei diaspora, spread across Assam, Tripura and Bangladesh.

Ronidkumar Chingangbam (Akhu): These are stories of Manipuris in Bangladesh and Assam:

A small village named Banubil in Bangladesh had witnessed two peasants' movements—in 1900 and 1930. The movement in 1930 is still remembered today. The Meiteis of Banubil and other nearby villages were subjects of one zamindar. Because of the exploitation of the Meiteis by the zamindar, the peasants initiated the movement. The movement, which drew the attention of the British Parliament and the peasants of the Banubil, won the case against the zamindar. The movement was later known as 'Kishan Praja Andolan Banubil'. Oja AK Sheram, a writer, poet, social worker shared this story with me during my trip. He has written a Bengali play based on this movement of 1930.



Ronidkumar Chindangam (also known as Akhu) posing at the banks of river Barak, in Singerband, Assam, as a scooter passes by
Image Credit: Oinam Doren

During my conversation with Oja Thokchom Bihswanath, a poet, writer and cultural activist from Assam, he mentioned that the first Meitei to play football was Sorokhaibam Thambou, the brother of Sorokhaibam Lalit who was a contemporary of the Manipuri politician, social activist and sportsperson Hijam Irabot. Thambou was a student of Johnstone High School in Imphal. It was also the time the Meiteis were Hinduised. One day, Thambou entered a bungalow which was occupied by the British. He requested the British agent for a football while he was having breakfast. Thambou probed the agent, “What are you eating?” The agent replied, “It is deer meat, come and join me.” Thambou replied, “To even retrieve a football from you, I will have to leave my clothes at the gate and bathe. And here, you are asking me to eat deer meat.” This story also proves how people used to seriously adhere to Vaishnavism as a religion. Even when we were growing up we had to change our clothes to enter my great-grandmother’s kitchen as she was a Vaishnavite.



Oja also mentioned how great Bhagyachandra was as a king, It was during his time that Ras Lila, a classical dance form, was invented. Further, there are oral narratives about the king capturing a wild elephant

to establish his greatness. But Oja said, “I don’t think it ever happened as it seems quite impossible for one man to capture a huge wild elephant. If it really happened there should be mention of it in Assamese history, but there is none.”

There are many such stories and oral traditions that I have come across during my journey. And it sheds some light on an understanding of our own history and folklores of Manipuris. Most importantly their stories showcase the resilience and struggle as a minority in different places which actually would be a good lesson for Manipur to learn.

What imaginations of Manipur exist in the diaspora?

Ronidkumar Chingangbam (Akhu): Before my journey began, my understanding of the diaspora was through their literatures only. After my trip to various places in Assam and Bangladesh I realised my earlier understanding of Manipuris outside Manipur was somewhat unclear. In Bangladesh I have met Manipuris who do not want to be known as Manipuri diaspora. They have an affinity towards Manipur but not at the cost of giving up their identity as citizens of Bangladesh. It is also felt in some of the patriotic Manipuri songs I heard in Sylhet. Yet all of this is contradictory in my personal thoughts on being Indian. I was born in Manipur which is supposedly a part of India and I have never felt like an ‘Indian’ for many reasons.

Some of the Manipuri writers and poets in Assam and Bangladesh have in their writings reflected on social issues and various conflicts in Manipur. Of course they want Manipur to be a peaceful kingdom.

Also some Manipuris located both in Assam and Bangladesh have deep expectations from the Manipur Government to start certain policies for them to access their native land easily. In addition, writer Khoirom Indrajit shared that Manipur should have marked a day called ‘Seven Years Devastation Remembrance Day’ to celebrate and honour the Manipuris in Bangladesh, Assam, Tripura, Myanmar, etc. He believes this would bring us all together and the bonding would become stronger.

Seven Years Devastation (1819-1826) was the period when the Burmese invaded Manipur and depopulated the land. Because of which, many Manipuris ran away to nearby villages, hills, Cachar, Sylhet, etc.





Romd Kumar Chingangbam (also known as Akhu) along with his band members posing with the auto announcing their performance in Singarband, Assam
Image Credit: Oinam Doren

Please elaborate on the songs and collaborations of this endeavour.

Ronidkumar Chingangbam (Akhu): There are six songs already penned on my experience and journey. I am trying to add one more song to make it a complete album. This is going to be a concept album, one of its kind. All the songs are interrelated, lyrically and musically. The introduction of the album starts with the Burmese invasion of Manipur, followed by the depopulation of the society, displacement, settlement in Barak Valley, etc. Basically it is a narrative.

Lyrically, I am inspired by a couple of poets and writers. The late writer Nongthombam Kunjamohan's short story *Elisha amagi mahao* (Taste of a Hilsha) and poet Yumnam Illabanta's poem *Barak Turel Nangdi Yamna Phajei* (Barak River, You are very pretty) are some literary pieces which have inspired me to write some songs on the Barak River.

I have been collaborating with folk musicians largely. I am also striving to tease out the aggression in folk music instruments as some songs demand it. I have also hired other session artists such as a bass guitar player, drummer and keyboard player.

For you, the personal has always been political. Do tell us how this has been carried forth in your project.

Ronidkumar Chingangbam (Akhu): This project, though a very personal one, is not the personal story that I am looking for. I am looking for a very broad answer to the question 'Who is a Manipuri?' My personal understanding of life and politics is inspired often by sociopolitical issues around me. And I reflect upon it through my music and writings which are very personal. In this project my journey is personal but the experiences that I have had in the last eight months, through stories and people heard and met, are political. These are the stories of patriots, alienation, peasants, displacement, longing, nostalgia, love, etc. Most of the songs that I am working on now are both personal and political. But I don't think an outsider would miss the personal side once the songs are ready. Because I am just a storyteller here, with my own twists and turns.

V PADMA (A MANGAI)

Arts Research | 2017 - 2018



You've had a long journey in theatre and writing on cultural history. Could you tell us how you came across the work of Pammal Sambhandha Mudaliar and what drew you to it?

V Padma (A Mangai): All of us in the field of Tamil theatre are familiar with the Father of Tamil Theatre—Tamil Nataka Thanthai—Pammal Sambhandha Mudaliar (1873-1964). We also learnt of the pioneer of Tamil Theatre Sankaradas Swamigal (1867-1922). Between the two of them, they almost covered the whole of Tamil Nadu—North and South. Swamigal seems to have assimilated the folk idiom, music and proscenium stage in a seamless continuum of sorts. He focused on mythologies and established Boys Companies, a unique aspect of Tamil theatre. Pammal on the other hand was an interventionist. He represented the urban elite, a product of colonial education with exposure to world drama through English education and also the growing developments in the techniques of theatre and performance in the country.

V Padma (A Mangai) is a scholar and theatre practitioner. She received a grant to write a critical history of Tamil theatre during the early 20th century, studying the writings of Pammal Sambhandha Mudaliar, who is considered the founding father of modern Tamil theatre. The project critically examined the categorisation of Tamil theatre into 'rural' and 'urban' forms, highlighting the struggles of theatre practitioners against the backdrop of anti-colonial and the emergent anti-Brahminical movements in the region.

Apart from practicing his art, Pammal also documented his works, thoughts and opinions. There is no other documentation of Tamil theatre so meticulously done. Even now, not all his Tamil works have been made available completely for today's readers. There has not been a conscientious effort to study his writings critically in order to trace the transactions that took place regionally and nationally. And his expertise does not stop with theatre alone. He worked with Talkies and has written about his experience of the same. I was drawn to him primarily because of that.

Do tell us about what kind of literature you have discovered during your research, not previously known.

V Padma (A Mangai): The whole process began about 25 years ago, in 1992. Dr V Arasu, Professor and Head, Department of Tamil Literature, University of Madras, who is also my husband, visited No 13, Acharappan Street, Parry's Corner, the residence of Pammal until his death, to take a look at the stalwart's house, along with a few theatre lovers. They met Pammal's grandson Mr Murugesan, who was in his 70s then. While talking to Mr Murugesan, he mentioned how books by Pammal were lying in the attic.



Opening pages of late theatre artist Pammal Sambhanda Mudaliar's play *The Fair Ghost*

Arasu promised to sort them out and help distribute it. As promised, the books were bundled as sets of plays and other works. About 50 such sets were made and distributed to libraries, theatre people and also sold at the book fair to raise funds for the family. The family was in an impoverished state at that time.

Before this, the State Eyal Isai Nataka Manram had published two of Pammal's unpublished manuscripts edited by TN Sivadhanu, a committed actor, who was a member of TKS Brothers' group in 1989.

In 1998, the Director of International Institute of Tamil Studies (IITS) at that time, Prof Sa Su Ramar Ilango showed keen interest in reprinting Pammal's works. Arasu helped compile the six-part publication of Pammal's *Over Forty Years Before the Footlights* (English title Pammal's) that documents his experiences on Tamil Stage into one single volume of 730 pages. The same year, two other volumes of Pammal's prose were published in smaller volumes by IITS.

In 2012, Dr G Palani, Department of Tamil Literature, University of

Madras brought out Pammal's plays, classified into five parts and in seven volumes. These were published by New Century Book House. Palani is continuing to reprint other works of Pammal as well. All these publications prove the amazing quantum of Pammal's work.

All of them also provide encomiums on his productive career. However, there is no critical study of these materials. In the light of the fact that no other theatre practitioner published as much as Pammal did, it becomes important to read these writings against the background of other practitioners who were his contemporaries.

A comparison of compiling Sankaradas Swamigal's plays will not be out of place here. Swamigal did not publish any of his plays during his lifetime. There were different stories about how many plays he had written. Finally, two people attempted to collect his plays, Arasu (2009) and Arimalam Pathamanathan (2008). Arasu has 18 plays and the other collection has 16 plays. Arasu explains how the artists learnt their texts from a handwritten notebook each teacher possessed. The artists still perform those plays as overnight shows. There is no way we can make sure they perform the complete text. It is a tradition handed down by artists, generation after generation with a great deal of interludes that are filmy. There is also one text titled Sarangadara attributed to both Pammal and Swamigal. It is probably a popular tale prevalent among people, dramatised by both of them.



I am hoping to read the two stalwarts' works as parallel texts, now that we have some form of compilation available for both of them. And also, except a brief note on them and translation of a few chapters of Pammal in the Sangeet Natak journal; these materials are not known to the theatre people in India. I feel it is important to make the connections within Tamil Nadu and also with the other regions in the country.

Please give us a detailed insight into Pammal Sambhandha Mudaliar's cultural universe—his influences and impact.

V Padma (A Mangai): The first major influence on Pammal was Bellary Sri Krishnamacharlu. His Sarasa Vinothini Sabha visited Chennai (then known as Madras) to perform in 1891. They performed at Victoria Public Hall. The show was in Telugu. It was a five-and-a-half-hour-long performance.

It converted Pammal Sambhandha to become a lover of this form. He records how he was bewitched by their plays:

All the characters had good make up. The female parts looked almost as if they were actually women. Even though I was not proficient in music then, their singing was melodious to my ears. I was content with the acting of all characters. I did not wince during the whole play. (1998, 10)

Also, this group consisted of educated lawyers and government officials. Therefore, the elite class in Chennai thronged to watch their shows. The professionalism and the urbanity of the group made Pammal form such a group in Chennai.

Before him Govindasami Rao of Manamohana Nataka Company had given up his government job to run a professional theatre company. Pammal speaks highly of him as well. Pammal records how Govindasami Rao was influenced by Sangli Company from Pune that visited Thanjavur with their performance. Govindasami Rao was influenced by that group to form his own group. Govindasami Rao was a multilingual person well versed in Tamil, Telugu, Marathi and Hindustani.

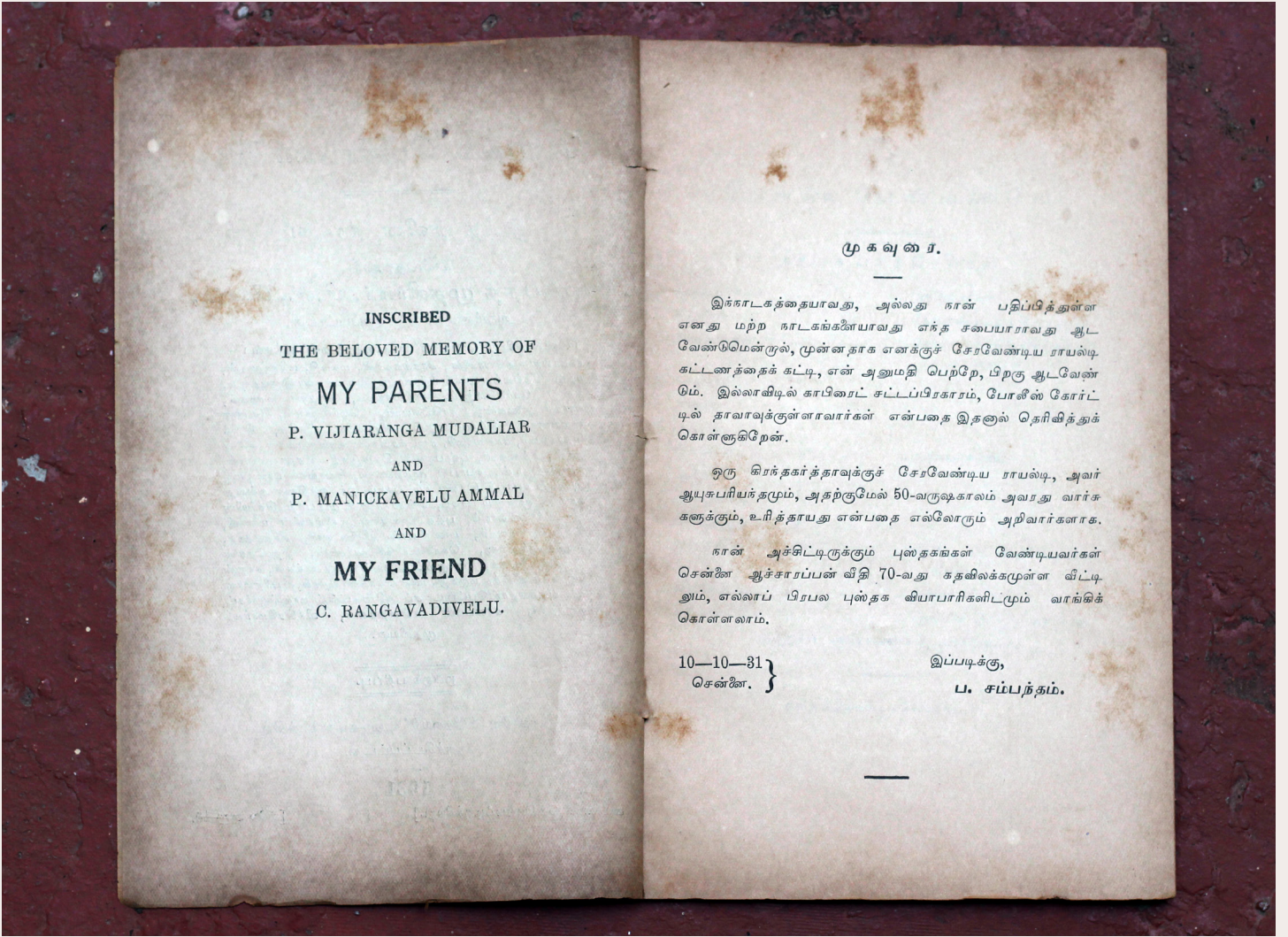
He mentions over and over how the touring Parsi companies used their drop curtain, suitable scenic back curtains, costumes and make-up:

It is the Parsi Theatre Companies that visited Chennai, who taught the idea of using drop curtain twice or thrice to gain time for scene changes to Chennai-based groups. If the playwrights can write accordingly, it might help. If there were major shifts to be made on stage, small scenes that can be performed with just drop curtain can be introduced in the middle. That would reduce the time required for scene changes and the play will end sooner. (1998, 113)

Pammal was greatly influenced by Shakespeare. Even in his prose writings, one finds him quoting Shakespeare. He adapted Shakespeare for Tamil stage. *As You Like It*, *Merchant of Venice* and *Hamlet* are some of the popular adaptations of Shakespeare. His vast reading helped him come up with new scripts.

Pammal was ever willing and open to learn new techniques from people, big or small. He comments extensively on rehearsal procedures, discipline within the group, make-up and costumes. This is what inspired him to take up talkies, when this new media took over the cultural scene. He has written specifically on his film experiences.





Opening pages of *Nataka Medai Ninaivuhal*: Forty Years before the Footlights by Pammal Sambanda Mudaliar

Please elaborate on the basic premise of your criticism of Tamil theatre into rural and urban forms and the struggles of lesser-known practitioners against the sociopolitical backdrop of that time.

V Padma (A Mangai): Pammal's six volumes on his stage experiences give us ample examples of mutual exchanges between what he calls as professional drama companies and amateur groups. Right from Pammal's texts being performed by other groups, to lending his expertise by training the actors, sometimes even participating along with those artists in the professional companies, Pammal was very much a part of the overall theatre scene in the State. Pammal's *Leelavathi Sulochana* was performed by Sundara Rao's group. All his publications have an announcement that people should get his permission to perform his scripts. But he also refers to instances of the plays being performed without his permission. Velu Nair's group performed *Kalvar Thalaivan* many times. Velu Nair had also taken the role of Manoharan. He records that Manoharan has been performed by almost all companies in Tamil Nadu. He has kept count of 859 shows and says, there must have been another 859 shows done without his permission. The script

of this play saw six editions even when he was alive. This play was later made into film twice. There are scholarly writings arguing that the play has close semblance to Hamlet. But he has denied any influence, even though the ghost scene was inspired by Hamlet and Julius Caesar.

We also learn that Pammal's prose text *Brahmananum Suthiranum* was made into a play by PV Ponnusami and performed by Pasumathur Dravida Sangam on March 11, 1938. A summary and review of the play have been published in *Kudiyarasu*, journal of Dravidar Kazhagam, edited by EV Ramasami Periyar on April 3, 1938 (Ramaswami, Mu, Dravida Iyakkamum Kalaithuraiyum, NCBH, 2014, 25). Therefore, I suppose that the groups did not remain exclusive of each other. They had ground level collaborations and probably in-fights too. The later groups like the TKS Brothers Shanmuganandha Sabha performed both Swamigal's and Pammal's scripts with élan.

Pammal wrote three volumes, one each about the writers, musicians and theatre artists he had great regard for. There are 54 theatre artists mentioned by him. Though some names are popularly known like Sankaradas Swamigal, TKS Brothers, MGR, and Shivaji Ganesan, there are many others who have not been explored enough. He also refers to Gubbi Veeranna.

Govinadasami Rao of Manamohana Nataka Sabha and some of the actors in his group like Panchanatha Rao, Sundara Rao, Kuppanna Rao are mentioned in his monograph. He refers to Subbaraya Achari who enacted the role of Harischandra even when he was ripe in age. He was a disciple of Bengaluru Appavu Pillai. Kannaiah is praised for his sets, props and convincing costumes. Kittappa and Sundarambal later became a popular couple in early films. Sundarambal went on to join Gandhian politics. M Kandasami Mudaliar, who started his career with Suguna Vilasa Sabha moved onto becoming a teacher in many groups. Many Boys Companies recruited him to be a teacher. He also worked with Balambal and Balamani Ammal's companies that were almost all women groups. He includes Sankaradas Swamigal as one of the playwrights in the late 19th century. Surprisingly, the entry on Swamigal is just a page long. Krishnasami Pavalur, who began acting with Pammal formed his own Boys Company. He also wrote social dramas and had taken his group to perform in England during the Silver Jubilee celebrations of George V. One of his plays is called Kadhar Bhakti. Balambal had her own company. She had done the role of



Manoharan. Balamani Ammal formed an all women's group. Pammal does not, however, refer to Balamani Special trains that ran between Madurai to Kumbakonam by the then rulers. Perhaps he did not register it.

Some of these artists have either written their experiences or have been written about. But many like Govindasami Rao, Kannaiah and Kandasami Mudaliar have not been made part of Tamil history of theatre. More work needs to be done in order to establish their contribution to the Tamil stage.

Is there any new area that has emerged as your major interest while reading Pammal's writings?

V Padma (A Mangai): I find his preoccupation with streepart very interesting. As we know, female impersonation is a convention that was widely prevalent in India in various art forms. Marathi and Gujarati theatre have explored this in detail. We also have the autobiography of Jaishankar Sundari of Gujarati stage. Pammal's views on female impersonation are rampant in all his writings. He mentions C Rangavadivelu who remained the female partner of Pammal until his death. Pammal is struck by extreme grief when he passes away.

On the contrary, when his wife passed away, he went to work after the funeral. Even when friends had asked him to take time off he felt he needed to distract himself. On the other hand, in 1923 when he loses his friend he falls into depression:

In order to avoid memories about my close friend, I tried reading non-stop. I also engaged myself in playing cards and billiards with my other friends. I went for walks on the beach. I tried all measures to get my mind to focus on reality, but in vain. A thorn in the body can be removed; but how does one remove the thorn in the heart? (1998, 609).

He wrote a burlesque, inverting the story of Harischandra and titled it *Chandrahari*. He claims that it is probably the first burlesque in India. He published the text in 1923. A few other companies tried to enact it once or twice. Their company never performed this play. Years later Koothu-P-Pattarai, the only repertory company in Tamil Nadu performed this play as homage to Pammal.

It would be interesting to study Pammal's views on female parts in the turn of the century. He worked with women actors in talkies later.



Do tell us about your approach and methodologies you have used for your research. What are some of the challenges you have faced and how did you overcome them?

V Padma (A Mangai): Pammal's writings are essentially anecdotal in nature. Though he has followed a strict chronology, he also inserts incidents or advices to the artists in the middle. Finding the major thematic focus in his writings is proving to be a major challenge. I think I am still sorting it out.

On crosschecking his narratives about people, plays and historical events like government funds collected for flood or famine relief etc., I am keen on finding the corollary historical facts. I might have to use the archive for that purpose.

Pammal has referred to an English journal run by his company called Indian Stage. He quotes his friend VV Srinivasa Iyengar's review of plays written in that journal. He also edited it.

I am unable to trace that journal and am not able to decide how many issues must have been published. I am also looking for Pammal's relatives, artists who had met him, and also any other materials like photographs, drama notices, reviews, etc.

I am also trying to trace any other plays by other playwrights published during this period. It is surprising that Pammal had been the only theatre person who had published his works meticulously year after year.

I am yet to overcome these challenges. But I am working on them, and I hope there will be an opening somewhere.

This grant was made possible with support from Titan Company Limited.

BHAVIN SHUKLA
KOYNA TOMAR

Archival and Museum Fellowships | 2017 - 2018



What drew you to the collection of the Delhi Visual Archive at the Centre for Community Knowledge (CCK), Ambedkar University Delhi and what were your discoveries along the way?

Bhavin Shukla: The idea of a community archive is something that I have always been fascinated with. As human beings I feel we have a strange connection to stories, especially those believed to have happened in the past. CCK's approach to build the history of Delhi through community knowledge and participation as opposed to expert knowledge is something that interested me. It is a 'bottom-up' retelling of the story of the city through the lives of its people. The idea of a travelling exhibition meant taking it out of the gallery and designing it for a diverse audience in public spaces. My quest for finding the appropriate use of architecture in India pushed me to stretch the limits of architecture and bring it into the public realm. The idea of coupling design and research is the need of the hour, with the increasing demand for fast paced production of places. Being an ardent collector of everyday objects myself, I was equally fascinated by how these photographs came to be procured by CCK as much as their content. Delhi has always been talked about as the national capital with power, but seldom as one created through migration of diverse groups of people. The Delhi Visual Archive helped me discover the local history of the national capital.

Koyna Tomar: My grandparents migrated from a village called Mahua in Uttar Pradesh to Delhi in the 1950s. My father was born in the city and also did his schooling here. So, during my childhood, and pretty much my entire life, Delhi has been a part of family conversations, memories, and I have always felt that I knew the city before I landed there for my studies. In 2003 I did a 'tour' of Delhi over 15 days with my father, who wanted to show me the city and all the places he remembered—the now crumbling one-bedroom house that his family of five had lived in, the school he went to, and of course all the historical monuments. Although even here there were many family micro-histories—of visits, picnics, and walks that he could recall. So, I have always had a personal interest in Delhi and its lived history.

As a student at Lady Shri Ram College, New Delhi I first heard about the Delhi oralities and other projects that the Centre for Community Knowledge (CCK) was conducting at Ambedkar University Delhi.

Bhavin Shukla is an architect and academic. **Koyna Tomar** is a research scholar and a visual researcher. They received fellowships to work with the Delhi Visual Archive housed in the Centre for Community Knowledge (CCK), Ambedkar University, Delhi. Bhavin worked towards curating a physical exhibition titled *Delhi Dialogues* that explored the relationship between people and the built environment of Delhi and Koyna curated a virtual exhibition that attempted to use various vantage points in the city to explore life around it.



Shakuntala (photographer Lala Narain Prasad's younger sister) drinking Coca Cola with an AISF (All India Students' Federation) comrade and sporting CPI (Communist Party of India) flag badges in 1945
Photo Credit: Lala Narain Prasad
Courtesy: Delhi Visual Archive, Centre for Community Knowledge (CCK), Ambedkar University Delhi (AUD)

When an opportunity to work with them came up, I was excited from the start. Meanwhile, I have also become interested in the possibilities that the digital world offers to archives and museums. And a project such as *Delhi Memories* which hopes to make public the entirety of its archive seems to be a perfect challenge. Along the way, I have discovered new software, methods, and the nitty-gritties of making a web-archive. I am also very grateful to the Centre for sharing with me their oral history recordings and various other material that made me better contextualise the images. The project also made me look back on my own family's histories and led to several interviews with my family, especially my grandmother. We were able to scan a section of my family's photographic records that related to their life living in the Sunder Nursery quarters which have been recently demolished. These images and memories are now part of the web-archive.

Can you tell us about the spatial dynamics of Delhi and its inhabitants as captured in these photographs?

Bhavin Shukla: One striking difference between the Delhi today and

that seen in the photographs is the use of the bicycle. A photograph showing large numbers of bicycles parked at Connaught Place struck many visitors at the exhibition. This tells us a fair bit about how people navigated the city in those times and how the physical form of the city allowed for this kind of mobility. The stark difference between the crowded Old Delhi and imperial New Delhi with its wide empty roads was telling of how the rulers of Delhi used space to assert power. Personally, I was particularly drawn to a photograph showing a bare piece of land with few small houses. For me, it was indicative of the growth of the city and how peripheries struggle between the invasion of the city and the stagnation of the village. Some anthropologists have described the medieval cities as fortified markets, a phenomenon quite prevalent in the photographs. The idea of the 'bazaar' goes back centuries and still continues to characterise the experience of Delhi. Spiro Kostof, a great architectural and urban historian, in his book, *The City Shaped* describes a city as 'a place of energised crowding of people'. The CCK collection of photos illustrates this very clearly.

What did the photographs tell us about life in everyday life in the capital from the 1930s to the 1990s?

Bhavin Shukla: According to historian John Tosh, we look to the past to understand our present and plan our future. The photographs are evidence that everyday life is not a trivial aspect in the evolution of the city. Our future is not the glamorous visual on the billboards, but the small changes we experience in our daily lives. They (the photographs) depict Delhi as a city of complexity and contradiction. "I feel a strange connection with these photographs. But it is definitely not Delhi," exclaimed a visitor at the inauguration of the exhibition at Ambedkar University Delhi. He spoke of how the photographs surprised and moved him at the same time, as someone who was not only born in the city, but also lived there for 30 years. Another visitor confessed, "My first time in Delhi reminds me of the harsh summer, Nizamuddin Station, crowds and fast-moving unknown people. It was very disorienting, like a small fish in a huge ocean." Yes, the life in the capital was very different back then but there are certain things that remain central to human nature. Poetry reading gives way to television, cycles give way to cars, tiffin dabbas give way to home deliveries, neighbours give way to Facebook friends. However, the fear of getting lost, the fatigue of remaining hopeful, waiting for the monsoons, the joy of childhood, and picnics in gardens are the ways in which we experience the city even today.





Connaught Place,
New Delhi, 1984
Image Credit: Christophe Fanjat
Courtesy: Delhi Visual Archive,
CCK, AUD

Who really is the true ‘Dilliwalla’—the man who sells bird feeders for a living, the storyteller at Red Fort, or the grandfather playing chess with his grandson in the courtyard of their haveli? Maybe all of them.

Do we learn anything about the photographers or collectors of these images?

Bhavin Shukla: The photographer of most of these images is Lala Narain Prasad. A chartered accountant by profession, he was privileged enough to possess a box camera in those times. It is interesting how he has captured life around him without any preconceived intention of building up a theme, etc. His flair for photography is evident from how he frames his photographs—good enough to tell the story, but interesting enough not to reveal the whole of it. Most of these photos open out infinite possibilities of interpretation owing to the fact that the exact dates and places where they were shot are still unknown. This is what makes the collection rich with stories of the city. Other contributors include Jan Freise, a photojournalist; Gossi Soto, a Mexican journalist who came to post-independence India to study at Delhi University; and Christophe Fanjat, a French scholar.



The amount of time and energy that CCK has invested in collecting these photographs and documenting their stories through long sessions with the photographers and/or their family members is commendable. For example, in case of the Fozan Ali Ahmed collection, his khaala (aunt) Nafeesa, the last of the survivors from the time period in which the photos were taken, has very kindly spent time explaining the context of many of the photographs. It is interesting to listen to these recordings as their personal narratives help contextualise the photographs.

What is the curatorial concept of *Delhi Dialogues*?

Bhavin Shukla: Inspired by the writer Chimamanda Adichie, the exhibition is based on the concept that ‘there is no single story’. It captures multiple, fragmented narratives without forcibly stringing them into one theme. Owing to the fact that social memory is inherently fragmented, it strives to evoke thoughts and connections that can result in rich discussions about life in the city. I wanted to reach out to people from different walks of life and build a sense of compassion towards people we don’t meet often but are as much part of the city we live in. At a time when the future of cities is the talk of the town, I felt the need to use these photographs of the past to create a narrative about the future. With the intention of making the displays provocative, a line of text from memoirs and other books on Delhi was added to the description of each photograph. There were two types of displays—single panels and fold-outs. The fold-outs depicted some common threads that emerged from a seemingly disparate set of photographs. For example, *The Individual and the Collective* shows the individual’s perseverance and the energy of the collective. A city is like a human being, with its own mood swings, tantrums, joy, anger and sadness. Hence, *Moods of the City* captures the pensive mood of the Jama Masjid and the authoritative air of New Delhi alike.



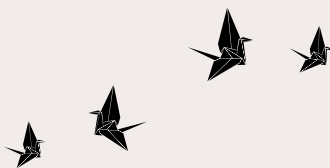
The structure that you designed for the exhibition looks really interesting. Could you describe it to us?

Bhavin Shukla: During the process of discussions and curating the exhibition we took a stand that we would like to exhibit the photographs in everyday spaces. Hence we decided to conceptualise the

exhibition as a marketplace, where dialogue between strangers would serve as the crux. We used this photograph from the archive as inspiration for the exhibition structure. The awnings that extend from the shops into the street create a temporary space of their own. The exhibition too is like that, opening and closing, expanding and contracting—an extension of the everyday. Through repetition, the red columns create the sense of a street. The exhibition is modular, so the length and configuration can be changed based on where it is located. The structure can easily be assembled and disassembled in a matter of hours and does not require any special skills. The ambient light is inbuilt and so with just one plug point or source of electricity, the entire structure is lit up in the evenings. The structure also provides space for two soft boards. During the exhibition, these were used to pin up postcards, visitors' experiences and notices for the events.

The photographs in the exhibition are interspersed with a lot of text—what is the relation between the images and the text?

Bhavin Shukla: Contemporary authors, anthropologists, and historians such as William Dalrymple, Aravind Adiga, Emma Tarlo, Saraswati Haider, David Prager, Pamela Timms and others have described Delhi as it exists today through different genres of writing. The combination of the past as photographs and present as text provides a conversation for the viewer. Historian EH Carr in his book *What is History?* writes, "History is an unending dialogue between the present and the past." The exhibition is a dialogue about life in a city. Very often while looking at old photographs we become nostalgic; as a curator this was something I explicitly did not want to engage with. The text allows for the photographs to be seen in more recent context. It's only when we see the relevance of these photographs in today's time that we can appreciate our everyday. The relation between the text and photographs is not very direct. The text-image relationship in exhibition is almost like being in the 'house of mirrors', offering multiple reflections of the same city. As a curator, I thoroughly enjoyed the process of identifying the most appropriate and provocative text for each image.





Architect Bhavin Shukla curated *Delhi Dialogues* at Ambedkar University, Karampura Campus, New Delhi in September 2018
Image Credit: Neel Jain

You had organised a number of parallel events during the time of the exhibition, how did these events relate to the exhibition?

Bhavin Shukla: The events that I organised were meant to complement and extend the dialogue that the exhibition intended to create. Vani Subramanian's film *New (Improved) Delhi* spoke of the ruthless eviction of informal settlements in Delhi and the experience of being evicted. Sameera Jain's film *Bhai Mian* was about looking at Delhi through the perspective of a kite-maker, Bhai Mian, a jeweller who turned to kite-making and represented India at international/national kite flying and making events. Shaunak Sen, through his film, *Cities of Sleep*, looked at Delhi through the life of a pavement dweller and the struggle for sleep. In the sharing circle, people came to share their stories and experiences about Delhi. These events opened up different perspectives of looking at the city.





The exhibition travelled to Kankaria Lakefront, Ahmedabad in March 2019
Image Credit: Neel Jain

Where else has this exhibition travelled subsequently?

Bhavin Shukla: After opening in Delhi, the exhibition travelled to Ahmedabad in March 2019. We set it up on the Kankaria Lake front, an outdoor public space in the city, visited by people from all walks of life. The lakefront has many public attractions including a zoo, toy train, kids' city, tethered balloon ride, water rides, food stalls, and entertainment facilities. In the mornings people use it to exercise, cycle, walk and in the evenings they come for a stroll or just to enjoy the ambiance and view. It truly is an everyday space of the city. The Municipal Commissioner for the venue granted us permission to set up the exhibition at no extra cost, for which we are grateful. This according to me this was a great step which allowed the exhibition go that extra mile and truly immerse itself in the public realm. It was almost like closing a full loop. At the start of my fellowship I had outlined the intention of the exhibition as a public installation that pops-up and disappears. And it was finally at the Ahmedabad exhibition that this was achieved. Though it was a short three-day exhibition, the feedback we received was fantastic. A lot of visitors could connect to these photographs and

wished to see similar ones of Ahmedabad. The administration too showed interest and asked if such an exhibition about the city could be on permanent display.

Can you tell us about the architecture and design of the website? In what sense is the website ‘interactive’?

Koyna Tomar: From the beginning we wanted to keep the archive open-ended. By that I mean it was important for us that anyone using the website would have multiple entry-points into the archive. I chose the software CollectiveAccess to do the ‘back-end’ of the website, which is where the collections are digitally stored. CollectiveAccess gave me the flexibility to build its architecture from scratch and organise the entire archives according to various criteria—keywords, places, people, collectors, etc. This is reflected directly in the format of the website; users can search the images via keywords, and we have tried to incorporate as many as we can, or they can use the more ‘structured’ options of places, people, or collectors to filter the images. The website has the option for people to login and signup—which allows them to make their own galleries from the images in the archive. This opens up the space for public curation of the work. The website also allows for people to comment, point out any factual mistakes and contribute with new stories or information.

Can you tell us about the audio, textual and visual components that you have attempted to connect in the online archive?

Koyna Tomar: Currently the website contains textual and visual elements. I have worked to make the back-end flexible enough to incorporate audio clips. The Centre is keen on adding interviews and other media to the website, so we should see this in the future. The map on the homepage provides a way to spatially locate our entire archive. All the pictures are plugged into the place they have been shot. Users can also filter the images by places, collection, or themes (forthcoming). The individual images are connected with the larger CCK collections through the information they carry. We have tried our best to locate images in their historical context. Sometimes, I have also added snippets of relevant songs, texts from newspapers in the descriptions.



FEATURED GALLERIES



Elephants drawing canons for Delhi Durbar, 1911

ANIMALS

8 ITEMS

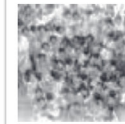
Whether it is spotting Mynas on Sunday picnics in Lodhi Garden, the sound of Koyal bringing in the morning, or the tales of pet-lions let loose in the 1960's Nizamuddin, memories of Delhi are full of human-animal interactions. As this gallery makes evident, animals share our living, working, and leisure spaces, changing them in some respects while also being changed by them. Selective care and breeding have led to the thriving of some species, whilst the others disappear. The social ecologies of the human world have also fostered interesting practices in animal care. The Bird hospital in Old Delhi, biggest in the city, caters only to "vegetarian" birds, excluding in process the Vultures, the Pariahs, and the Eagles, all already threatened by the rapid urbanisation. Future changes will continue to reshape human-nonhuman relationships, these photographs offer some insight into this ongoing process.

VIEW GALLERY



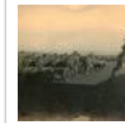
AIR RAID PRECAUTION DRILL

8 ITEMS



ALI MANZIL

10 ITEMS



ANIMALS

8 ITEMS

Koyna Tomar created an online exhibition titled *Memories of Delhi / Dilli ki Yaadein* which attempted to use various vantage points in the city to explore life around it

You have curated 'featured exhibits' for the website; can you describe them to us?

Koyna Tomar: The website has a total of fifteen 'featured exhibits'. These are sets of images that tell stories that appealed to me the most. Eight of these are narrative threads while the rest are galleries in the sense that they draw largely from specific collections. Deciding on the galleries was a collaborative exercise. There was deliberation and negotiation with Surajit Sarkar, the director of CCK, and Vinitha Jayaprakasan, the research assistant responsible for Delhi Memories. All of us had our favorites but we decided to narrow on the 15 that resonated with each of us. One of my favourite galleries that I have curated is the narrative thread on the theme of 'Animals'. I was struck by how invisible animals are rendered in our narratives of the city even though we interact with them on an everyday basis. The gallery tries to emphasise this interconnectedness while also highlighting the invisibility of their labour. Thus there are images of elephants drawing carts from the colonial era, donkeys and horses carrying loads in the streets of Chandni Chowk, along with images of pet cats, bird-hospitals, and horses that feature in family picnic along the Badhkal lake. Another personal favourite is the gallery 'Women and College Spaces'. Having studied at a women's college I was excited to find images of women students that spanned decades. I decided to thread these together in a gallery that showed some of the excitement and tensions of being a woman student in Delhi's extremely vibrant college spaces.

These fellowships were made possible with support from Tata Trusts.





Can you give us a broad impression of your childhood—some of the landscapes (emotional and physical and also of the ‘middle-class’) that you may remember vividly that seep into *Ramblings*? What do you think has been the aftermath of that period that has also crept into your work/consciousness?

Sarbajit Sen: It may sound odd, but I don’t romanticise my childhood much as the most blissful chapter in my life. True, some magical and sweet moments flash at times—like sudden shafts of light. Otherwise it was a drab continuum. In retrospect I can look at my childhood as a broad collage where a strange array of varied gestures, tones and infinite vagaries of living faces lie intertwined.


The eventless small town of Birati where I grew up is the cradle of my story. The dramatis personae—all victims of Partition—were from bleak squatters’ colonies. They crowd my pages with their many accounts—of love and treachery, meanness and goodness, hope and despair. Birati, in my childhood days, hangs out of time. Yet it is connected somehow with the many upheavals of the world outside. Here the physical seeps into the emotional. The inner landscape emerges as a vital character.

My only disclaimer for *Ramblings* is that nothing is fictitious here. Many of the faces—now worn out in time—still exist. Though in a different Birati.

Sarbajit Sen is a cartoonist/graphic artist and filmmaker. He received a grant to create a graphic novel titled *Ramblings* which explores the tumultuous history of the Left Front rule in West Bengal and its eventual collapse in 2011. The project attempted to analyse multiple marginal voices from the fractures of history, with autobiographical references to the artist’s own life.

I grew up hearing stories of Radcliffe and riots from my grandparents. Their faces betrayed vestiges of loss and displacement. Life in the refugee colonies was a constant story of harsh and crude struggle for a decent living. The stray stories narrated here are essentially no-stories. But, stitched together, they unfold an intricate trajectory of the Bengali middle-class mindset through some important social political junctures.

All these experiences have shaped my ways of seeing things. What has most strongly crept into my consciousness since childhood is the concept of displacement. From painful memories of personal scars to a relentless humiliation of the common people in face of the present paradigm of development—displacement attains a non-personal dimension for me. Often my stories try to address it.



NEXT DAY THE
ELDERS TALK
ABOUT HOW
A FOOT TRACK
OFF THE MAIN
ROAD WAS TAKEN
BY THEM ...

TO REACH THE REMOTE WESTERN FRINGE OF BIRATI ...

IT WAS A NIGHT OF FULL MOON AND FIREFLIES

THE ELDERS TALK ABOUT THE HUGE DESOLATE STRETCH OF SWAMP ALONG THE TRAIN TRACK WHERE PEOPLE ARE OFTEN BROUGHT TO BE KILLED AND DUMPED IN THE SLUSH ...



I WONDER IF THE MAN I SAW LAST NIGHT WAS DRAGGED DOWN HERE ...

HIS FACE TURNED TOWARD THE DARK SKY ...



Do give us an overview of some of the cultural influences over the decades on your work and thinking. What are your thoughts on how the time period in *Ramblings* has been documented across some of the arts, in literature, music, cinema and in the news?

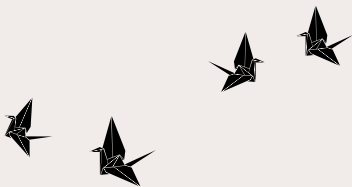
Sarbajit Sen: My father and his friends, mostly left-liberal, literary activists or artists, highly influenced me in my childhood. Their animated sessions, in our house or at the College Street Coffee House, spun around names such as the poets Subhash Mukhopadhyay and Mangalacharan Chattopadhyay; writer Somen Chanda; filmmakers Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen and the IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association).

In the same breath they also talked about cultural and literary greats such as Maxim Gorky and Vladimir Mayakovsky, Julius Fučík, Langston Hughes, Albert Maltz, Mahmoud Darwish, Pablo Neruda and African poets such as Birago Diop, David Diop, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and so on. Russian publications, which took up much of the space on our bookshelves, were forever an alluring el dorado. Their illustrations transported me to a different world and highly enriched my visual orientation.

Stepping out to the city to join a college in the mid-70s exposed me to a different world of poetry and protest, dreams and doubts. The roads widened.

West Bengal had already witnessed the Naxalbari movement. The writings of The Hungryalists had already stirred the mid-60s. Shakti Chattopadhyay, Malay Roy Choudhury, Samir Roychoudhury or Allen Ginsberg emerged as significant names. In the same vein, *Krittibas*, a Bengali poetry magazine, became a fascinating powerhouse for our generation.

The Naxalbari movement had given birth to a new imagination. Writings of Saroj Datta, Samar Sen, Srijan Sen, Biren (Virendranath) Chattopadhyay, Mahasweta Devi, Nabarun Bhattacharya, Raghab Bandyopadhyay and many others were a permanent inspiration.



Yet another major inspiration was the group theatre movement. The relevance of Ajitesh Bandopadhyay, Sombhu Mitra, Tripti Mitra, Utpal Dutt, Rudraprasad Sengupta, Arun Mukherjee, Badal Sarkar and many other theatre activists was strongly valid throughout the 80s and 90s when popular support for the Left Front was on the wane for many reasons. A rich, organic history of protest was being summarised under a theory of patron–client relationships, of vote banks and faction leaders.

I SEE CHUK AND GEK – THE TWO LITTLE BROTHERS ...

THEY MUST HAVE WALKED MANY MANY
VERSTS TO REACH MY LAND ...

ARE THEY STILL NOW
LOOKING FOR THEIR FATHER ?! ...

A DISTANT SNOW COVERED LAND
MERGES INTO OUR SULTRY
SQUATTERS' COLONY ...

From the chapter titled
Of Mists and Moments

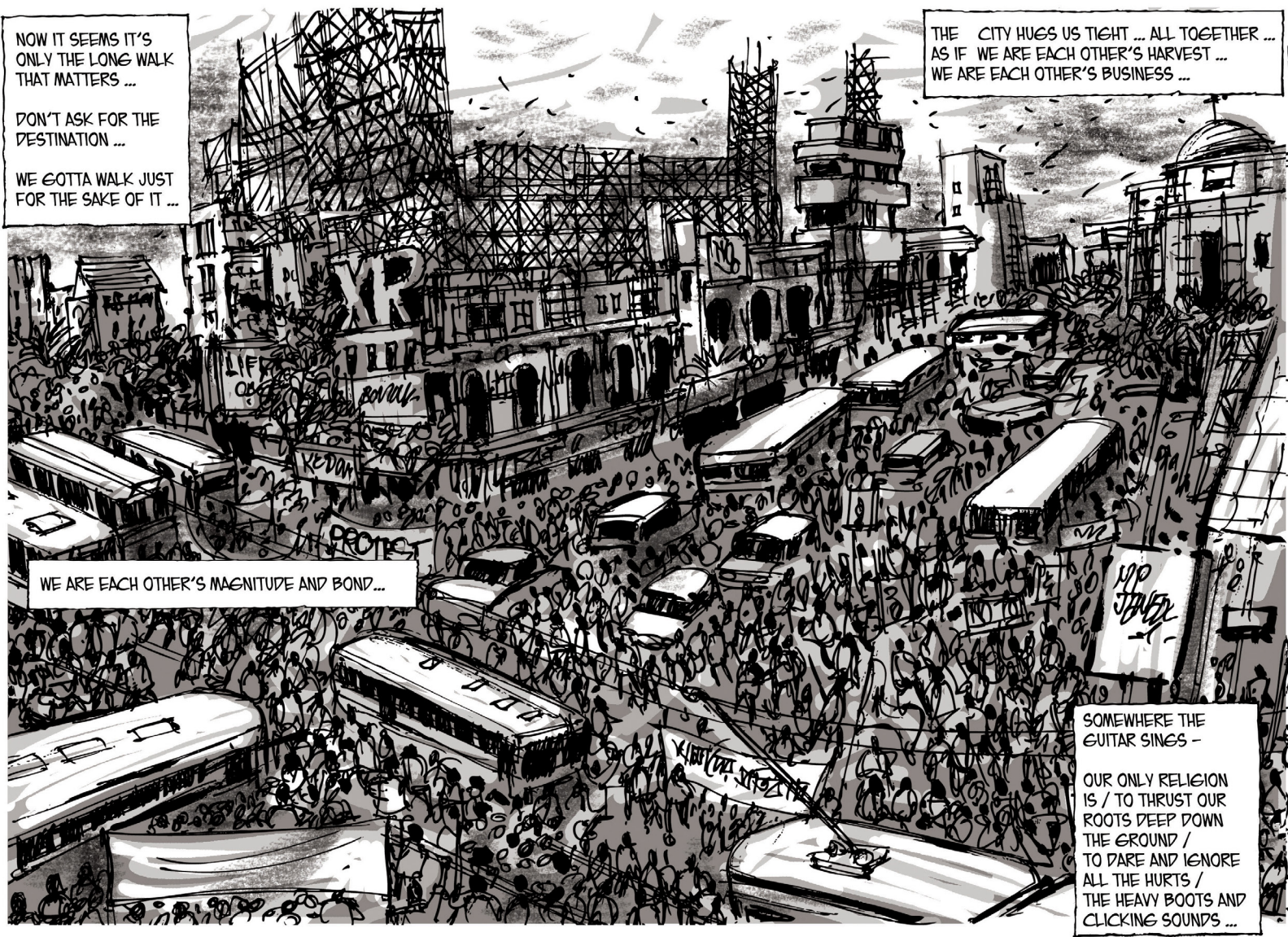
The vacuum was setting in. Many chapters of *Ramblings* attempt to capture this said vacuum.

World cinema and the French New Wave, with its radical experimentation with narrative as well as engagement with the sociopolitical upheavals of the time, helped us question the very construct of a 'story'.

Tell us a bit about your style in *Ramblings* and what you seek to convey through moods and emotions of people and land?

Sarbajit Sen: If it is about the style of storytelling then the cue may be taken from the last statement given above. My 'story' is based on no-story first of all. So there is no pre-ordained pattern of a pyramidal progression. *Ramblings* is not a larger than life kind of story. I am also inspired by Will Eisner's style of storytelling (*City People Notebook*, *Invisible People*, and so on). I would rather love to stitch together some loose narratives in an apparently stray, zigzag course. Almost like a Jim Jarmusch script.





NOW IT SEEMS IT'S ONLY THE LONG WALK THAT MATTERS ...

DON'T ASK FOR THE DESTINATION ...

WE GOTTA WALK JUST FOR THE SAKE OF IT ...

THE CITY HUGS US TIGHT ... ALL TOGETHER ... AS IF WE ARE EACH OTHER'S HARVEST ... WE ARE EACH OTHER'S BUSINESS ...

WE ARE EACH OTHER'S MAGNITUDE AND BOND...

SOMEWHERE THE GUITAR SINGS -

OUR ONLY RELIGION IS / TO THRUST OUR ROOTS DEEP DOWN THE GROUND / TO DARE AND IGNORE ALL THE HURTS / THE HEAVY BOOTS AND CLICKING SOUNDS ...

From the chapter titled
Hit the Streets

About my style of drawing I would like to elaborate. The style changes according to the different moods of the chapters. I generally prefer swift, quirky brushstrokes. But, if and when needed, my drawings can be quasi-realistic. Distortion or exaggeration comes only when inevitably required. It all depends on the story. Precisely, I don't like to confine myself too much to one particular style in this particular narrative. Edmond Baudoin's graphic novel *Dali* is a huge inspiration in this regard.

The few opening pages of a certain chapter titled *The Walk in Ramblings* depict a dream-walk in an absurdly unmanned suburb enveloped in a visible darkness. This is a symbolical depiction of the hollow despair that grabbed a huge populace after the fall of the Left Front government. My long walk in search of the possible core of a crumbling middle-class psyche starts from here. This kind of backdrop calls for a different lens other than a normal one. Black was much needed to accentuate the grim mood. I deliberately opted for the linocut look as a tribute to Chittaprosad Bhattacharya and Käthe Kollwitz and also to the pioneers of the world of woodcut Graphic Novels, Lynd Ward and Frans Masereel.

A particular chapter titled *Night of the Fireflies* is about the bloody political violence of the early 70s. It depicts an act of annihilation on a particular night. I decided to work in mixed media on grainy handmade papers to give some particular frames a smudgy look. The chapters depicting the Emergency and the Bangladesh Liberation War have been treated with the same appearance.

What are your impressions of official history narratives that aim to present a linear, coherent one? Can you give us an example of how you have moved away and also articulated this in your work? Could you also tell us about working on memory and the challenges of this project?

Sarbajit Sen: We often tend to understand history in a conventional sense as some occurrence of events. ‘History’ for that matter is not a definitive monolithic structure—a sanctum sanctorum. History is what we make of it. It’s all about understanding ‘the world behind the text’. My narrative seeks to read the multiple layers of a specific stretch of time and the behaviour of a set of characters—myself included. It’s not my gaze alone. I know about my looking glass through which I look, and the ‘limit’ and frame that I intend to take. I may love to imagine the experience of the observed subject. But how can I ignore the experience of the subject observing me? Our different gazes are bound to cross each other.

Ramblings is structured like fiction. I do not mean to say, however, that truth is therefore absent. It seems that the possibility exists for fiction to function in truth. One often ‘fictions’ history on the basis of a political reality that makes it true.

I am not a political analyst. So I am unable to write a coherent ‘history’ of the Left movement in West Bengal. Moreover *Ramblings* is not a straightforward ‘historical’ account. In the first place, it is not linear in structure—neither in chronological sequence, nor in the unfolding of a single series of ideas. It is based on the premise that the social processes one tries to understand must be approached through their intertextuality. The history of a society should become an articulation of many histories.

The background here is built on memories and lived experiences over a huge span of time that went through significant junctures. Each and every bit of a memory or experience may be a pointer to a different reading of the same stretch of time. There have been a lot of shifts in our ‘familiar’ paradigms over the past three decades after all.





THAT IS HOW THE DAYS
ROLL INTO AFTERNOONS ...

AFTERNOONS
INTO MONOTONOUS
EVENINGS ...

AND NIGHTS ...

From the chapter titled
Of Mists and Moments

From romanticising socialism à la the USSR model to an addiction for power at the cost of compromises and resultantly losing the connects and, later, subverting popular support through a coercive and corrupt clientelism and procreating generations of a complacent middle-class gentry as a corpulent, though corrosive, humongous body of sheer vote bank—it has really been a weary walk for the Left Front in Bengal over a stretch of more than three decades.

Digging out remote and not too remote memories that illustrate or interpret such transitions and fitting them in accordance in the narrative is an exciting game for me.



This grant was made possible with support from Technicolor India Private Limited.



How did you encounter the history and evolution of the Royal Carnatic Orchestra of the Mysore Court, now known as the Mysore Police Band?

Deepti Navaratna: On one of my visits to the Mysore palace in 1995, I saw some policemen playing Carnatic music using both Indian and Western instruments—mridangam, veena and clarinet, xylophone respectively. This piqued my interest since the sound of their music was familiar yet different. However, apart from the magnificent backdrop of the well-lit palace, their performance was a lonely affair. There were no rasikas nodding their heads. Visitors just floated in and out without paying any heed to the performance. Despite this, they played on dutifully and beautifully! For several days, I wondered why the police played in a band and sought answers from my Mysorean ‘culture-vulture’ relatives. To my surprise, most Mysoreans didn’t know that the current police band is the vestige of the Royal Carnatic Band, though both the English and Carnatic bands played regularly as part of the yearly royal Dasara celebrations. Policemen doubling up as musicians intrigued me further. I wanted to know if this was part of the government protocol. They are so unconventionally ‘Carnatic’, fully removed from mainstream Carnatic prestige circles, where things are ‘proper’ and ‘elite.’

Deepti Navaratna is a neuroscientist and musician. She received a grant to study the history and evolution of the Royal Carnatic Orchestra of the Mysore Court which has now evolved into the Mysore Police Band. The project traced the journey of the Orchestra from being considered as ‘exotic’ in 19th century India to the current perception of it being an ignored ‘relic’ of the British Raj.

Later in 2016, while I was doing Masters in Contemporary Music at the New England Conservatory, a colleague of mine said, “The Beatles discovered Raaga music and showed it to the world”. This cliché of the West, handpicking traditional gems in the East somehow annoyed me. I remembered the Mysore Police Band and started researching its history. The very first East-meets-West musical encounters happened not in the 20th century with bands like Shakti or in the Ravishankar era, but back in the hay days of Nalwadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar in this soil, not abroad. It all came together in my mind—I had to study the Carnatic orchestra, its music and its history to tell the story of the very first and significant encounters between Western Classical music and the music of South India.



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(ದ್ವಿತೀಯ ಸಾಲು) M.A. ದಾಮೋದರ, M.S. ಗಣೇಶ್, N. ಜಯರಾಮ, M.R. ಉದಯಕುಮಾರ್, M. ಕೃಷ್ಣ ಮೂರ್ತಿ, M.R. ಹನುಮಂತರಾಜು, R. ದಾಸಪ್ಪ, S. ಮಂಜು, T. ಗೋವಿಂದರಾಜು.

(ಕುಳಿತಿರುವವರು) P. ನಾಗರಾಜು, A.V. ದತ್ತಾತ್ರೇಯ, S. ಜಯರಾಮು, D.C. ಸುಧರ್ಮ, V. ರಾಜಗೋಪಾಲ್ (ಬ್ಯಾಂಡ್‌ಮಾಸ್ಟರ್), D. ನಾರಾಯಣ, M.A. ಅಂಜನಪ್ಪ, T. ಪ್ರಕಾಶ್, T. M. ಶಂಕರ್.

Official photograph of the
Carnatic Orchestra which won the
Karnataka Kalashri award in 2001

Can you elaborate on the current state, relevance, and evolution of the Mysore Police Band? What are your comments on the cultural transactions between Western and Indian music?

Deepti Navaratna: The police band operates out of its 'Mounted Police Office' close to Bannimantap near Mysore. Their performance venues are government functions, Mysore Dasara, and in-the-city performances. This is fully removed from the Carnatic performance circuit and community in Mysore. It is very clear they are not considered 'serious' music. My study argues that such exclusion stems from a certain discomfort at owning a very hybrid history to Carnatic music that is currently being sold as 'untouched' and 'pure.'

The back-stories on the Carnatic band speak eloquently about the sustained intercultural transactions that have impacted both Western music and Indian Classical music. Back in those days, cultural transactions between both styles were definitely not symptomatic as today. At present, we find musicians getting together to put together concerts or concert series at the most, and that is it.





Band members of the
Carnatic Orchestra

In the history of the Mysore Court, one finds instances of people who moved across continents, assimilated in an alien culture, adding their own distinct hue to the larger canvas of Mysore. European composers and conductors were brought to Mysore, who participated in a more organic influencing of each other's cultures. Venkatagiriappa, a celebrated Veena player actively arranged music for the Carnatic Orchestra, after having learnt Western Classical music. Sheshanna, adroit Veena player, played piano and harp, after understanding Western tonal vocabulary. The Maharajas themselves led the way by inventing raagas based on Western tonal vocabulary. Some 30-odd raagas invented by the Maharaja Jayachamarajendra Wodeyar are not merely 'sisters' of allied Carnatic raagas, they embody an alien grammar of Western music brought into the world of raaga construction. The band today plays some of that music, interestingly, unaware of its importance in the historical sense. Less known and to be dissected is the impact Indian Classical music had on Western music in that era, given that JC Wodeyar commissioned several works across the globe—concertos, piano music and such.

Tell us about the band's journey from 'exotic' trailblazer to 'ignored colonial relic' against the backdrop of sociopolitical and cultural transformation in South India. Please elucidate on the class and caste backgrounds of the practitioners; and the experimentation that the band was open to, under royal patronage.

Deepti Navaratna: In my opinion, the Royal Orchestra was very diverse in its demographic—different races, ethnicities and cultural backgrounds truly came together under the royal patronage. The remarkable point to note is that these musicians felt 'free' to use their musical knowledge in ways not done before. Perhaps there was no fear of being criticised and shamed for trying to 'dilute' the 'sacred' and for supposedly 'messing with' something that was composed 'perfectly' in the past.

The Mysore and Tanjore Court (under Serfoji) enjoyed these very fertile and open mindsets towards cross-cultural experiments and encounters. Many experiments failed, some lived on as raagas, some became 'Classical' kritis, some lives forgotten, some celebrated—the tapestry of lives, experiences, and music is beautiful.

The post-Independence cultural project of erasing and cleansing Carnatic music of European composers and local musicians in the Mysore court, resonates with and is enmeshed in both the 'nationalist' and 'regional' consciousness agenda. Do give us details about this cultural amnesia and how it connects with the recent controversy that erupted with the 'Christian appropriation of Carnatic music.'

Deepti Navaratna: When the state melded into the nation, when traditional became synonymous with Classical—only for Hindustani or Carnatic musical styles (it did not happen with traditional folk forms, that were and are traditional enough, but well!)—a subtly reimagined history was sold to the new nation. The past was imagined as an unbroken chain of musical enterprise, where Carnatic composers were depicted as 'chaste' musicians who never heard world sounds, shut themselves off from reality and composed in the pious 'confines' of their minds. We were sold the notion of this 'pure' music that has met with 'six sigma standards' of transmission right from the Sama Veda to the now. However, the truth is that Carnatic music has evolved with many musical influences, Persian, Western and Oriental musical styles. Even Muttuswamy Diskhitar, one of the Carnatic Trinity, was quite well travelled and was familiar with musical styles of many cultures. He tried to engage with the music of Western bands by creating a new genre called 'Nottuswara' compositions. These compositions used Western tunes 'reappropriated' with fully religious Hindu text.





A band member of the
Carnatic Orchestra

This act is not any different from the current Christian appropriation efforts. However, the history of world music is testament to such transfection of melodies with different text, either for artistic composition or for evangelical / religious conversion purposes. The agenda behind such appropriation should be considered; had Dikshitar used it to convert people to Hindu faith, then it would have amounted to misappropriation.

What is your take on the effort of ethnomusicologists such as Gregory Booth—especially in his book *Brass Baja: Stories from the World of Indian Wedding Bands* and if you drew any similarities on the perception of Indian brass bands today, from his work?

Deepti Navaratna: Gregory Booth's work is an inspiration to this project in many ways. From extolling pageantry and pomp in the British era, the brass bands are now almost considered 'mass' bands or 'crass' bands. They are grouped with musical styles receiving the least attention or adulation in India today. Sadly, the Police Band has started taking up playing for large parties and everyday ceremonies in the name of pulling it out of the government tag.



Band members of the
Carnatic Orchestra

This is neither elevating its class in today's musical hierarchies nor raising its sustenance potential in any way.

What are some of the challenges you have faced in your research, and how have you tried to overcome the same? Do tell us about the kind of material that you have accessed—photographs, documentation, notations and recordings.

Deepti Navaratna: My primary sources are band members, archives of the Police Band and palace records about emoluments paid to the band, salaries of band members, gazettes released about hiring certain composers from Europe. The biggest challenge has been gaining access to archives. The Oriental Institute, Mysore has huge archival collections, but none of it is easily accessible. The Carnatic band has no library or archives of music arranged during its stint at the Royal Court. This is a big hindrance in trying to investigate matters. Visitors get shooed away or are made to wait.



This grant was made possible with support from Titan Company Limited.



What drew you to the Buguri Community Library project?

Pallavi Chander: The library essentially is a space for children from the community to play and learn from stories and imagination. The first time I stepped into the library, I saw children staring at pictures in books, some reading aloud, some who could not read were making up stories and narrating it to their friends. I could not help but be drawn to their magical worlds. I spent about four months at the library before initiating the Creative Arts Therapy (CAT) program. I was stepping in for the coordinator who was on a break at a residency. It was in that time, that I understood the importance of Buguri in the community and the difference it intends to create in the lives of the children.

The organisation – Harisudala, who largely work with waste pickers were trying to create safe learning spaces for their children; in the hope to provide an alternative where they could work through some of the dire issues and challenges they faced within the community, i.e., alcohol and drug misuse, school dropouts, early / child marriages, and violence to name a few. The library was already using art-forms such as visual arts, craft work and drama activities in their daily reading programmes. Reading and telling stories by itself seemed to be therapeutic, therefore bringing a therapeutic approach using the arts seemed like a natural progression to their existent programmes. The CAT program also helped to build a safe container for children to therapeutically work through some of these issues mentioned above. Additionally, using the arts for therapy is an up and coming field in India and I am very grateful to the organisation and Lakshmi Karunakaran, the children's programme coordinator, for not only trusting the process but also helping in raising funds for the programme. It is the openness and support from the organisation, the children, and the donors that encouraged me to set-up the CAT programme and it continues to draw me to work at the library.

Pallavi Chander is a creative arts therapist. She received a grant for sharing, through artistic practices, an arts-based therapy intervention by the children of the MGR colony in Banashankari, Bangalore. The adolescent residents and participants of the Creative Arts Expression programme of the Buguri Community Library shared their experiences in a year-long engagement with this intervention.

Why did you choose to work with adolescent children?

Pallavi Chander: Do you remember that phase in your life when you felt that you are not a child anymore, but also not entrusted with all the burdens of being an adult? It is a phase charged with a weird sense of freedom and a rush of social activities; where friends suddenly occupy an important dynamic in shaping your understanding of the world.



A page from *Oota Aayutha?*
(‘Have you eaten your meal?’)

The body feels different, you notice changes and there is a hurry to do everything under the sun. I remember it as the most confusing and overwhelming phase of my developmental years. I yearned for a space to pause and think through things. I leaned on the arts which allowed me to understand and respond to my world in a way that felt necessary and relevant. It was mostly drama and visual arts that allowed me to create a space, within myself and with my peers, where we could voice our thoughts and emotions. In retrospect, I think I was more idealistic and had the energy to conquer any problem or issue and also acknowledge that we were all probably confused. But somehow it mattered to have that space, it was liberating, irrespective of all that confusion. Looking back, I know it was not easy and I had a difficult time trying to make meaning of things in isolation and the arts gave me some grounding.

When I started working with children, I was naturally drawn to adolescent children because I think somewhere I recognised that resistance, that need to ‘act out’ to ‘be heard’ and although it isn’t pretty to the least, I can empathise with those manifestations. I strongly believe that as adults who engage with young adults, our responses

matter as it could impact how young adults adapt to situations, build coping strategies and this is in many ways are the building blocks to adulthood. Young adults are growing up with not just a surge of media influences but seem to find very creative ways of using it. I think we adults need to learn from them and listen to their challenges. Rather than complain about millennials changing culture and simply brush them away with humare zamane pe... ('in our time') stories, which I think we do to avoid our own anxieties. Yes, when we were at their age, we did not have as much, but they do and it can be overwhelming to wade through it and blaming them only adds to their challenges. I feel we have much to learn from them and we need to include them in this process.

Your programme requires participants to communicate actively with you and with each other. How did you manage to create a safe space for children to share openly?

Pallavi Chander: The CAT programme uses art forms such as drama, movement and visual arts therapeutically to create a safe, confidential and client-led process in a non-confrontational and non-judgemental manner. This translates to a process that is more allowing and playful, establishing required boundaries that is built into the sessions along with the participants. Moreover, the programme is set-up as an open group where the participants come on a voluntary basis, so no one is forced to attend these sessions.

We started the programme with trial sessions where we informed the children about these terms and conditions in a way that was accessible to them, i.e., using the language of play and stories. Before we started, I also visited their parents in the community to inform them about the programme and shared a letter of consent in Kannada which the children had to get signed from their parents.

During the programme, it did take a few sessions initially to build these boundaries into our sessions, to create an environment of trust and group rapport among the participants. The therapeutic sessions explore activities such as, using beginnings and closure rituals, improvisations and spontaneity, projective play with materials, stories and enactment, spontaneous play, image work, drawings, movement, and so on, which encouraged the participants to share their thoughts and emotions through the symbols and metaphors of the characters from a story or drawing. This way they shared whatever they felt like, when they felt ready and comfortable and it was at their own pace.





Closing circle ritual at Mysuru

Also, the participants came from the same community where they lived in close proximity to one another, many of them went to the same school and some were even related. In that sense, most of them knew each other and like most relationships, this had its pros and cons in the sessions. However, being together in the sessions also brought them closer and I feel they built strong bonds through the course of the programme.

Tell us about the two books authored by children. How did you come up with this idea? What were the processes involved?

Pallavi Chander: The books are offerings from their experiences of the programme. Aye Reena, authored by the girls was put together towards the end of the programme. One of the recurrent themes that emerged from our sessions was the menstrual rites, as all the participants in this group were adolescent girls and a couple of them got their first period during the course of the programme. So we explored this theme by creating a play using materials to enact their experience of the menstrual rites during one of the sessions. In successive sessions, we created scenes using Eric Carle's style of collage-making from coloured textured paper.

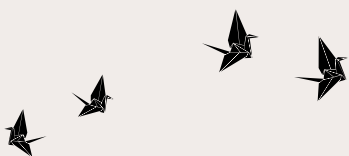
Eventually, towards the end of the programme, the girls collectively felt the need to share these scenes as a story with the younger girls and boys so they could understand and be aware of what girls go through during their menstrual cycle. And so, Reena was the character who holds the experiences of the girls and takes us through the journey of her first period as well as the many thoughts and emotions she traverses during these rites and additionally gives some suggestions on how to manage period pain and what kind of cloth or sanitary pads to use in a safe and healthy way.

Similarly, with the boys, the book *Oota Aayutha?* (Have you eaten your meal?) was the result of participants documenting the recipes of the dishes they cooked. The participants illustrated the process of cooking each dish—from procuring the ingredients, calculating the budgets, understanding the procedure, i.e., cutting, kneading or baking (in some recipes), cooking, and finally eating it. As we came to the end of the programme, the participants decided to put these illustrations together to share it with their friends and family and we turned those illustrations into a recipe book!

These books were then given to a designer to digitise, lay out scenes and illustrations into a book format. Finally, with the help of an IFA grant under the Project 560 programme, we managed to print a limited edition of these books. The books are displayed at the Buguri libraries and a few copies have been distributed to other community libraries. We do have a lot of requests for more copies and we hope to raise funds to print them in future.

Tell us about your interactions with parents. Were they open to their kids participating in the experience sharing events you organised, especially when it involved travelling to Mysuru?

Pallavi Chander: The parents were supportive and encouraged their children to attend the programme and some of them even attended the closure event which was held at the library in April 2019. However, their turnout for the event was rather low. It would have been good to have all their parents and family members attend the event. Most of them informed us that with both parents working for daily wages through the day, attending such an event would have meant missing out on a day's pay, even if it was for an hour and it might have been difficult for them to do so. This is not to say that the parents were not



interested but acknowledge the fact that they were working under certain constraints. Also being so close to the elections, the team at the library was informed that many parents were busy attending different campaigns. Consequently, for the next phase, we are planning to have a few sessions with parents. That might help us understand how we can include them into such a process and also open out avenues for conversation about certain topics between parents and children.

The trip to meet the Buguri community in Mysuru was something all the children were really looking forward to and they had informed their parents much in advance. So the parents knew about it and they seemed quite excited for their children. Also, the library has had several events where children have gone for day-trips, i.e., to Freedom Park for the annual summer camp, Cubbon Park for a Sunday session and Ranga Shankara to watch plays; so parents are quite familiar with the process. However, going to Mysuru was a full-day affair, so there was a lot of planning that the team had to put in place to make it happen and we made all efforts from our end to make sure the parents were kept informed at all times.

Many of your sessions were focused on breaking gender stereotypes. How did the children respond to it? Were there any challenges along the way?

Pallavi Chander: Honestly, there were several challenges but that is the work. Talking about gender stereotypes and gendered behaviours we consciously or unconsciously carry due to social training is not an easy area to thread. I had to keep in mind not to hound them with information as the children still had to go back to their environments (home and school) where these stereotypes are celebrated as the norm. Instead, I worked with what they brought into the session, encouraged them to ask questions and be curious about things that made them uncomfortable or bothered them. This way, they were involved in the process of breaking these notions down with me, they came up with questions and arrived at finding some answers. In some sessions, we used symbols and metaphors from stories with puppets and dramatic projections to address these issues. Sometimes we spoke about their experiences and acknowledged their challenges as young teenagers.

Also when the group felt challenged and frustrated with certain issues, as a facilitator and therapist, I was stuck with my privileged upbringing and class politics. I could only wait in the wings till the children arrived at unpacking certain aspects of gendered





Participants of the experience sharing session at the Buguri Community Library in Mysuru

behaviours and I could only go as far as the group wanted to go. One example was when the boys would casually but violently hit each other in the name of play or when they felt it was okay to tease girls and rag younger boys because they felt a sense of power over them. This was very difficult for me to confront but we managed to address it in a way where the boys were able to talk about it and think through what that idea of 'power' was and where it was coming from. On the contrary, there were times when I was pleasantly surprised at how my privilege and knowledge of popular discourse also restricted my view and cushioned me to bracket certain experiences as uncomfortable or challenging. Instead, I found myself questioning certain discourses which have expanded my understanding of certain issues through their experiences. An example is that of the menstrual rituals. Growing up, I completely detested the ritual and blocked it off as something unholy and prejudice. However, when the girls' spoke of their experiences, my unbiased therapist hat forced me see beyond my experiences and I am grateful for that.

This grant was made possible with support from Citi India.



Your IFA project involved the designing of the archive at the RRI. What were the first steps in your research? Have you worked with a scientific institution earlier?

Ramya Ramesh: I spent the first few weeks of my fellowship trying to understand the institution itself, apart from beginning to work with the material they had collected over the years. This was the first time I was working with a scientific institution, that too, an institution for research in fundamental science! It was also the first time I was working so closely with the Librarian (head of RRI library) and library staff, whom one does not usually interact with beyond the circulation counter.

Initially, I spent a good lot of time reading and understanding their website, which also consists of their digital repository. The library staff had already digitised most of the available collection. However, the material was difficult to comprehend as the scanned photographs and newspaper articles were yet to be titled according to the content. I downloaded it all onto my system and began reorganising and retitling them as per my understanding. In parallel, I started going through the physical archival material and organising them by type, viz. photos, newspaper articles, correspondence and research articles.

The first few days also involved understanding how the Librarian, who spearheaded the project, and the Director of the institute envisioned the archival gallery, which I was to design as part of the fellowship. The core team consisted of the Librarian, the Scientific Officer (a scientist, who is the Executive Assistant to the Director) and I. After several discussions, we together wrote down a vision statement—the purpose of the exhibition. So, along with reorganising the archive, I began conceptualising the design of the gallery, building upon my fellowship proposal. All of this happened in the first month!

Along with this, I started reading about the life and science of CV Raman, which has been documented in detail in a book called *Journey into Light* by Dr G Venkataraman, and also in several other books and articles. The Librarian initiated a parallel project that we both thought could help me better understand the institute, its people and their work - a series of oral history interviews with current and former scientists at RRI.

The first month was both exciting and overwhelming for me!

Ramya Ramesh is an architect and urban designer. She received a fellowship to work with the Raman Research Institute (RRI), Bangalore, founded by Nobel Laureate Sir CV Raman, which houses more than 5,000 historical photographs, handwritten letters, artefacts and instruments that Prof Raman used in his lifetime. This fellowship supported archival research and design of a permanent exhibition of archival material at the Raman Research Institute.



Timeline from 1888 tracing the life of Sir CV Raman at the Raman Research Institute (RRI) Archival Gallery, RRI Bangalore

How did your training as an architect inform your design of the physical and intellectual space of the archive?

Ramya Ramesh: I have been reflecting upon this question myself. I have always believed that the skills of an architect can be put to use in diverse ways to create an engaging experience, and this project has made me quite optimistic about this prospect. I realised that as an architect, I was able to visualise not just the physical space, but also information, and how it can be effectively communicated in the limited available space. In hindsight, I was able to assess the situation and give a physical form to abstract ideas by moving back and forth between research and design.

It is unusual that the curator of an archival gallery in a scientific institute is neither a scientist, nor a writer, nor a historian, isn't it? As challenging as this was, my training as an architect also came in handy at this point. As an architect, one is able to interact with people from different backgrounds and create a place using all their knowledge. Here, I constantly interacted with scientists and library staff, read published books, and discussed extensively with the Librarian and the Scientific Officer, and with them, chalked out a plan for the project.



Raman Research Institute Library

I presented my design to the Director, the committee overlooking the archival gallery, library staff and scientists, and revised it several times based on their inputs. We had several discussions on the purpose of a physical gallery when an extensive one can be put up online. I pointed out that the physical space of the gallery provides a geographical context for the history depicted. Through our discussions, we realised that it becomes a space for collective reflection, with history on the walls, and the central space being used for a dynamic display of current research. Movie screenings, demonstrations, interactive digital screens, etc., would give life to the place while being surrounded by its legacy. Through this process, we were able to convert the former photo-lab into a gallery, with stimulating interiors and lighting. The physical space conveyed the spirit of the institute through its materials and design. I am happy that I was able to initiate a participatory design process for the gallery.

In addition to designing the archive, you have also worked on mapping the trees in the RRI. What prompted you to do this and how did you go about it?



Ramya Ramesh: The first time I visited the institute for the fellowship

interview, I was struck by two things—the trees and the library building. I had already read that the RRI library building was one of the first modernist and exposed, concrete buildings to be built in Bengaluru. It was designed by the famous architect, PK Venkataramanan, of Venkataramanan Associates. When I saw it for myself, I was overcome with awe. So, when I got the fellowship, I decided to trace down the original drawings of this building. This is where the mapping exercise began to take shape in my mind.

In the initial days, while I was going about getting a feel for the institute trying to understand where the different labs are located, I happened to visit the estates and buildings department. As an architect, I cannot help but make sense of history by visualising the transformation of physical space. I was getting uncomfortable trying to string together facts without having a complete image of the institute in front of me. So, I asked the RRI civil engineer for a detailed map of the institute that I could pin up on my tack board. I needed it to anchor my thoughts. However, the department probably didn't see the need for a detailed map since they knew every corner of the institute. I saw this as an opportunity to use my knowledge of visualisation, scale and representation to create a beautiful map for the institute.

I wanted to ensure that the map fit into the narrative of the exhibition. After several discussions, we decided that it is indeed important for visitors to see the institute as a whole, before delving into its history. Raman, the founder, was instrumental in planting several trees at the institute. Several RRI members too had spoken about how much they value the trees, so I thought of including that in the mapping of the institute.

Considering the fact that I had to dedicate my time and effort to the archive, I knew I might not do full justice to the map if I did it on my own. So, I gave the task to two fresh architecture graduates who were enthusiastic about mapping the landscape. It took them about two months to map, draw, redraw, model and render the map. We also called on two tree experts to help us with the botanical names and characteristics of the trees.

Could you describe some of your important learnings and challenges as a fellow at the RRI.



Ramya Ramesh: I learnt that exhibition design is indeed a team effort of researchers, content writers, graphic designers, interaction designers and architects. My challenges lay in constantly switching my role, as the project required me to step into the shoes of a researcher and designer at the same time.





An exhibition of photos at RRI

From all my discussions with scientists at RRI, I have learnt to go about my research more scientifically. They would not accept any content without evidence. They were also tough task masters when it came to passing the design. At every stage, they urged me to create prototypes and test my design. Unlike a product designer, I am not used to prototyping. Now, I have come to believe that it is important.

I learnt that library science is a beautiful subject, more than what we may think. It really goes deep into the organisation of knowledge. Working with the archive has been a wonderful experience.

My biggest learning from the project has been in the domain of communication, be it the text in the exhibition panels, or e-mails we wrote to scientists. I realised the importance of clear and coherent communication while discussing design and content.

Content aggregation and creation was a challenge in itself. It involved visiting labs and coordinating with around 35 scientists from the four research groups to provide images and textual content, and systematically communicating our suggestions for edits.



School students visiting a temporary exhibition of archival photos at RRI, set up as part of National Science Day



The exhibition panels, although describing very complex physics, had to be made comprehensible to high-school students. Each panel has thus gone through several iterations. It has also taken time, as scientists need to spare time from their busy research schedules for this.

The Librarian and the Scientific Officer were very supportive and stood by me when I needed them. It was important for me to understand the role of the scientists, how long they have been associated with the institute and what they see as valuable in this exhibition. I learnt that if projects like these need to be made inclusive, they truly require time, patience and perseverance. I am very happy that IFA and RRI gave me the opportunity to contribute to the cultural and educational space of this esteemed science institution.

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