

Excerpts from Interviews with Independent fellows

Conceptualised and Conducted by Smriti Vohra

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Arshad Amanullah, Sarai Independent Fellow 2006 Research Project: “New Trends in Madrasa Journalism”

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Smriti Vohra: You have made radical shifts in your intellectual life after matriculation you prepared to study engineering, instead chose Islamic studies, then mass communications; and you are now involved in documentary filmmaking and independent research projects

You are from the Ahl-i-Hadis maslak (sect), and studied for one year at an Ahl-i-Hadis madrasa in Orissa, followed by seven years of study at the Jamia Salafia, the apex madrasa of the sect in India, in Varanasi. You've mentioned elsewhere that you became interested in Islamic studies and sectarian problems after a particular incident you were praying in a mosque of the Barelvi maslak, and since Ahl-i-Hadis members pray in a different manner, you were noticed and driven out of the mosque by the Barelvis.

Was this a turning point in your thinking? How do you feel when you reflect upon that incident today?

Arshad Amanullah: Actually, my awareness of difference began much earlier. Let me describe the incident that first made me focus on my identity, as distinct from the majority of the local Muslims. My family had migrated in 1986 to a predominantly Muslim settlement at the periphery of Bokaro Steel City. One day, in Standard Five, I was on my way to school when I was joined by two students from the same school. They were strangers to me. One of them asked for my name. Hearing my reply, he pointed out that the other boy was also a Muslim. Then the Muslim boy asked: Are you Barelvi or Deobandi or Wahabi? Bewildered, I said, I am a Muslim. Yes, but which kind of Muslim are you? I had no answer, and he suggested that I ask my parents. But by the time I returned home I had forgotten the whole issue.

Over time and through the process of socialisation, my realisation of being an Ahl-e-Hadis in a predominantly Barelvi Muslim locality kept growing. When I was in Standard Nine, a Barelvi colleague of a distant relative of mine became Ahl-e-Hadis after going through some of our literature. As he was a new convert, he, unlike us, was very publicly sensitive to peculiar issues exclusive to the Ahl-e-Hadis community. At the same time, he was very eager to publicly share the truth he had recently discovered. It landed him in trouble several times. He faced hostility while praying like an Ahl-e-Hadis in a Barelvi mosque. His parents were incensed at his conversion. In his frequent visits to us, he used to narrate the problems he was facing due to his being Ahl-e-Hadis.

I listened to him with empathy. Then it happened that during a visit to one of my class-fellows, I went to pray in a mosque nearby where I myself encountered this hostility because of my manner of praying. I tried to defend my right to pray in this manner, but nobody was in the mood to listen. They brought me to the Imam of the mosque, who with his rhetorical mastery tried to confuse me and prove that I was wrong. His followers did not let me argue with him, as I was a mere jahil (crude/uncouth person) whose farz (duty) is to just follow what that Alim sahib was saying. According to them, I did not deserve to present my case to the Alim sahib. Some of them were actually prepared to beat me up, but my classmates managed to stop them from physically subjugating me.

At that time I felt that my position of a non-alim was responsible for my inability to argue in the idiom of the Barelvi alim. So I felt I must become an alim not only to counter the polemic of the Barelvi ulama, but also to show the non-Ahl-e-Hadis community the right way of following Islam.

This incident really proved a turning point in my life. It was the immediate cause of my opting for a madrasa education. But I cannot deny the impact that the Babri Masjid demolition in the early 1990s had on me, though I was just a teenager at that time.

In retrospect, I think of the incident as symbolic of intolerance on the part of any majority towards the diversity in practice to be found in any minority. A non-Ahl-e-Hadis, I am sure, would encounter the same hostility in an Ahl-e-Hadis pocket if he dares to vary from the mainstream way of prayer. The behaviour of the alim can be explained in terms of his efforts to instill in his followers the confidence of being on the truest path of Islam. His efforts have an economic dimension as well. He survives by selling his expertise in explaining Islamic injunctions in a particular framework to his followers. If they stop purchasing his brand of Islam and start consuming other Islam(s), his income will be very seriously compromised. On the other hand, this particular incident reflects the deep and persistent influence the ulama exercise on the hearts and minds of the Muslim community.

SV: Would you characterise the madrasa as an ideological space?

Did your relationship to the madrasa's ideologies change over the seven years you were there – did some grafts never take?

AA: Yes, the madrasa is very much an ideological space. Every educational regime (secular/socialist/religious) or boarding school has its own system of indoctrination, and madrasas are no exception. The madrasa campus, in microcosm, serves as a homogenous society inhabited by humans adhering to a particular denomination of modern Indian Islam. The binding thread of this society consists of issues exclusive to a particular sect. There is no engagement with problems and parameters of identities outside this. A set of norms, which are contentious for other sects, assumes the crucial role of functioning as a liberating theory or a panacea for all ills of the ummah.

Those who do not abide by this set of norms are characterised as the others. There is no specific term for others; however, each sect uses pejorative terms for the other. It may be a distorted form of the sect's name. In a more derogatory mode, Barelvis may be alluded to as Quburi or Qabar-Pujwa (those who worship graves). Similarly, Deobandis may be referred to as Gulabi Wahabi by Barelvis, or Moqallid (conventional) by the Ahl-e-Hadis. Others are looked down upon as they are astray, and in need of help so that they can be drawn out of darkness and misguidance. However, the thinking is that one needs to be very careful while working with the others, as they may outwit their well-intentioned helpers/guides. Thus, the perception of the others is a bizarre amalgam of contradictory emotions: enmity, fear, hatred, inferiority, suspicion, sympathy and others.

My perception of the others changed over the period I spent in Jamia Salafia. In the beginning, I religiously believed in conspiracy theories and denominational polemics. Quite soon I realised, first, the limitations of and, last, the futility of the approach that foregrounds these.

Gradually I developed interests in literature, history and philosophy; it was literature that really emancipated me from the madrasa ideology, pushing my intellectual frontiers beyond the claustrophobic parochialism of the denominational texts. My teacher and great benefactor Maulana Faruqi introduced me to Professor M. Toha who taught sociology at DAV Degree College, Varanasi. He helped me a lot in terms of providing books and magazines, and suggestions about scholarly work. In his company, I discovered Economic and Political Weekly, Seminar, Mainstream, and the analytical writings of Edward Said, Arun Shourie and more.

Every Muslim denomination suffers from the superiority complex of assuming the position of the real follower of Islam. The Ahl-e-Hadis take pride in being the bearer of the legacy of a movement committed to puri-

fying Islam of local influences. They consider themselves as the most monotheistic of all the existent maslaks.

The intellectual engagement the Ahl-e-Hadis ulama have had with Saudi scholars since Independence marked a departure point in the history of Indian Salafism. The Saudi influence did not result only in pushing the Ahl-e-Hadis ulama out of alignment with the social geography of India it also colonised their thinking. Consequently, apart from a very few original works, the contribution of the Ahl-e-Hadis ulama to the body of Islamic knowledge in the last three decades has been reduced to the editing, compilation and translation of Saudi writings. The Saudi connection produced some entrepreneur-ulama who created their own fiefs in different parts of India. It has on the one hand widened the sphere of influence of the Ahl-e-Hadis denomination, while on the other hand, it has also intensified the factional infighting for power in the Markazi Jamiat Ahl-e-Hadis, in India.

Much intelligence is wasted by these contenders in attempts to woo foreign donors and to secure substantial funding for scholastic opportunities. Moreover, criticism of the Saudi monarchy has become taboo in the circles of the Saudi-returned Ahl-e-Hadis ulama. These are some of the arguments and aspects of my critique of the Ahl-e-Hadis madrasa ideology.

SV: Could you describe your relationship to the various languages in which you are proficient: Arabic, Urdu, Hindi, English? Does a different Arshad use each language; have the various linguistic/aesthetic grafts successfully taken ?

AA: The madrasa years really enriched my language-self. My relationship with Hindi here saw a significant decline, as it was overshadowed by a sustained and intimate use of Urdu and Arabic. The primary texts of Muslim theology are studied in Arabic, while Urdu enjoys the status of lingua franca as well as of medium of instruction in the madrasa.

The story of my entry into Arabic is somewhat different, as I started learning it from scratch only after admission into the madrasa. I worked really hard to learn it. After going through some primers packed with religious content, students are introduced to the texts of the Quran and the Hadis. The madrasa lacks the scientific and interactive approach to the language education. Whatever is available there in the name of Arabic literature falls into the category of non-fiction, dealing with religious themes by ulama or the Islamists, hence students do not find them very interesting or enriching. Moreover, there is no way to get access to the contemporary literature being produced in the Arab circles. As this does not conform to the madrasa ideology, the madrasa authorities do not show any interest in providing it to the students. Arabic literature in India is not easily available for other reasons too. Madrasa students generally do not happen to be

affluent enough to import literature from the Gulf. Unlike embassies of other countries, no Arab embassy, to my limited knowledge, offers any course or diploma programme in the language. Therefore, madrasa students acquaintance with the language is terribly restricted to its use as a tool to understand the primary sources of Muslim theology. They seldom are able to express the reality of daily life in the written or spoken form of the language. In this sense their identification with the language is religious rather than emotional.

English was earlier considered to be the language of the Christian colonisers who snatched political power from the Muslims; now it is perceived as the language of secular Muslim intellectuals who argue in the idiom of the West and pose challenges to the madrasa ideology and world-view. However, realising that life outside the campus is difficult for those who are not familiar with English, almost all madrasas have introduced the language into their curriculum. As English does not inherently fit with the scholastic vision of the madrasa, it has never been a priority. The standard of English teaching is not up to mark.

I realised the importance of English when I encountered a dearth of books in Urdu on themes in which I was developing an interest. This led me to focus on sharpening my skills. Though the process started in the concluding years of my madrasa life, I was able to make it my priority only after coming to Jamia Millia Islamia in Delhi. It was really an uphill task to follow lectures here as most of them used to be in English. Later on I overcame this problem with the help of some of my teachers Dr Mohd. Sajjad, Dr Seema Alavi, and many others...

Dr Sajjad made me work on Urdu translations of a number of articles from mainstream English newspapers for the Aligarh-based Urdu monthly *Tahzeebul Akhlaq*, while Dr Alavi encouraged me to start writing letters to the editors of newspapers and journals, which she then meticulously corrected. Some were published in the *Hindu, Hindustan Times, Frontline*, and other magazines.

Today I acknowledge English as my intellectual language, though I cannot relate to it emotionally.

After graduating from the madrasa, my relation to Arabic has been almost dysfunctional. Though I still have a grip on the grammar, I am rapidly losing my vocabulary. In my post-madrasa life I have discovered my connection with Hindi, as the Urdu script is alien to the people I do business with. For example, when I wrote the script for the documentary film *Zarina*, I had to present it in Devnagari script. Earlier it was a problem for me to write Urdu in Hindi, as the script of a language has a psychological impact on the thought-process of the writer. For a period, I used to write my assignments in Persian script then transliterated the work into Devnagari. Later I became accustomed to writing Urdu directly in Devnagari.

My relationship with Urdu is marked by many ups and downs. Before the *madrasa* I used to speak Urdu without observing *sheen-qaf* in pronunciation. In the *madrasa* I learnt to express myself in chaste Urdu. In terms of pronunciation and delivery, I benefited a lot through the debating society sessions. In the *madrasa* environment my Urdu reflexively became thick with Perso-Arabic words. Consequently, it was difficult for people outside to understand my colloquial Urdu, which contained sentences from the writings of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Rasheed Ahmed Siddiqui, Jameel Jalabi and Josh Maleehabadi. Whenever I returned to Bokaro during my *madrasa* years, my old friends used to pass remarks: Now Arshad has come, and we will have to endure *UP ki bhasha* (the speech of UP)...

SV: What do you feel when you return to the *madrasa* environment, as you did during your Sarai research? Does something indefinable still call to you, still claim you?

AA: Since I left Jamia Salafia, I have visited it twice: first in 2002 and recently in 2006. At the time of my first visit, the Principal was Dr Rezaullah Mobarakpuri. At that time, I did not find any difficulty in identifying with the *madrasa* community. Dr *Sahib* was very open to new ideas and wanted to see his students excel wherever they were, in universities of Saudi Arabia or India. It was the summer vacation, and he said, *Agar kuch roz pahle aate to talaba se baat kar sakte* (If you had come a few days earlier, you could have had a dialogue with the students). This was so unlike other teachers, who found even my pant-shirt objectionable. Alas, Dr *Sahib* walked into eternal light in April 2003.

After an interval of three years, during my Sarai research project on new trends in *madrasa* journalism, I happened to visit some *madrastas*, big and small, spread over UP, Punjab and Rajasthan. Some of them are Ahl-e-Hadis, the sect I belong to, while others are Deobandi and Bareilvi.

When I went to Jamia Salafia, different sections of the *madrasa* community received me differently. The editor of the monthly *Mohaddis*, Maulana Abdul Wahab Hijazi, was reluctant in agreeing to being interviewed, though he knew me well. He had taught me several books and had published my articles and translations in the monthly. I do not know where the reluctance was stemming from. Perhaps he found it difficult to trust a person who was clean-shaven and clad in tight jeans and T-shirt. Perhaps he saw me as something incredible from outside the *madrasa* space. Perhaps it was not my person but my association with the media fraternity that he found objectionable. Another reason may be the strict order from the administration to not interact with outsiders; this was a deterrent in his speaking about the magazine. I am not sure. Only after I got permission from the Secretary General was I able to interview the editor.

The talaba received me very well. They were happy to share with me each small detail of madrasa life and the changes that had taken place since I left. They showed me how the list of the rules students had to abide by was getting longer and longer, day after day. The escalating intrusion of state security and intelligence agencies into the madrasa space had taken a severe toll on the lives of the talaba: they were not allowed to have cell phones, their interaction with the city had to be problematically restricted, they could not entertain any guests, etc. Students were interested in discussing their career-related anxieties with me.

During my visits to madrasas of non-Ahl-e-Hadis affiliation, I had to conceal my identity of being an Ahl-e-Hadis alim. I was afraid that if I revealed my identity, I would not have been able to get interviews and other information; and that the students awareness of my identity would have forced a change in the idiom of argument and discussion. While talking to persons who adhere to secular values, the ulama argue in simple religious terms, trying to convert them to the religious fold. Sectarian mistrust runs deep among the ulama. However, on these occasions I felt very uncomfortable about lying. Moreover, when I posed questions about loopholes in the madrasa system and the interviewee did not reply truthfully, though I had insider knowledge I could not press him on the issue as I was already trapped in the untruth myself.

Syed Khalid Jamal, Sarai Independent Fellow 2005
Research Project: "Work Culture in Fast Food Chains"

Smriti Vohra: Your research can be read as an analysis of labour practices; also as part of a larger narrative of development which includes globalisation and new economies. It can also be read ethnographically, as an urban phenomenon involving class dynamics, consumption patterns and social mobility. However, the questions here focus primarily on how this new work culture influences subjectivity. Your postings on the Sarai Reader-list clearly indicate that workers in fast food chains, both managers and crew, do indeed experience significant changes not just professionally and financially, but also in terms of personhood.

You have been researching the domain of fast food culture for quite some time, including earlier on a Sarai student stipendship. What initiated your interest, and what sustains it? Is there a core preoccupation that this research is addressing, consciously and also perhaps subliminally?

Khalid Jamal: My interest comes from my own history with fast food.

When I was in school, I worked briefly with Pizza Hut during my summer vacations. This job lasted for 45 days. At that young age, it was the first time I had earned my own money. I did the job without thinking too much. Some of my older co-workers were in college. They advised me about my future. I was impressed with them because they seemed well-spoken, knowledgeable. Skill on the job seemed to add to their overall confidence.

After schools reopened, I quit the job. I later realised that I had changed a lot in those 45 days. I felt more disciplined, organised, and thoughtful. I had developed new habits, for instance, of making a daily list of things to do, which my manager at Pizza Hut instilled through his insistence on logging everything: the orders taken, the table number, complimentary items given, etc. I also found that I wanted to use my time more constructively than just going to school and returning home to do homework. This made me quite restless.

At that time, whenever I went into a fast food outlet I noticed that I was feeling for the workers there. My behaviour as a customer had also changed. I identified with the workers; to the point that when I was told, Sir, the order may take some time, or asked, How was the pizza, sir? it seemed odd, that I was an outsider. I had been one of them till so recently, I had asked the same questions of customers, and now things were completely reversed. I felt strangely nostalgic as well as alienated. This stayed on my mind.

Then, about seven years later, while in college, I happened to meet an old school friend called Asad. He was working in Pizza Hut. People change over time, of course, but I noticed really big differences in Asad's nature. We sat down in a *dhaba*, ordered. After we had waited to be served for about 15 minutes, he yelled at the *dhabawala*, saying that at work he (Asad) ensured that water was delivered in 1.5 minutes and food within 15 minutes. Later, at his house, I saw that he had painted the walls of his room bright orange, and I noticed that his family seemed angry about this; they had just moved to this new house, and the rest of it was white-washed. Asad explained that he wanted his room to look like his workplace, hence the coloured walls.

That was the catalyst: it prompted me to examine the changes I had observed within myself after my own work experience. Consequently, I formulated this research project.

SV: Your postings also suggest that the subjectivity generated/transformed by the work culture of fast food chains is in some ways a superimposition upon an existent selfhood of the worker; that there is a tension, perhaps an ongoing friction, between these layers, in the case of some workers. In the case of others, there is more a coalescence, a deeper embedding

KJ: That's true. Asad would probably be a good example of this deep internalisation and assimilation. It's peculiar, because in a regimented workspace you are not allowed to assert yourself, so you do this in other areas, e.g., at home. Others' perceptions of you also change, and you begin to question the changes, the perceptions, the others. The conditioning at work is intense and aggressive. I myself became argumentative with regard to my mother's way of doing things in the kitchen, her treatment of *sabzi* and *anda*. When you are denied freedom at work, you will claim it somewhere or the other.

Workers are always conscious that while they cannot be individuals, and always conscious that the customers are free to make demands. Workers might be enjoying MTV while on shift, but if the customer comes up and asks that the channel be changed to Aaj Tak, it is done immediately. I remember working with two Kashmiris; there had been a huge bomb blast in Srinagar that morning, and they asked the manager if they could put on the news channel, they were worried about their families. He refused, and gave them a really hard time for even asking. There is a lot of frustration at the workplace. And when you try to balance things by being aggressive at home, you realise that self-assertion is a real luxury.

But even as a regimented worker, I did experience a certain kind of energy. I always carried it with me. Be it ensuring that my uniform was spotless, or the five second rule, which means that if something falls on the floor, you have to pick it up within this amount of time. Or the engineered actions, from the application of clockwise spiral squirts of ketchup and mustard, to the placement of two pickles and one onion ring on each burger. I even had occasional dreams in which I was repeating this sequence throughout the night! Nothing is spontaneously rendered, in the workplace. Everything "May I?", "Can I?", "Excuse me", "Have a good day", "Try this", "Extra cheese?", "Bigger?", and of course the mandatory SMILE is well scripted and rehearsed in advance. Paradoxically, the implication through such mechanical phrasing and gestures is that the person serving you cares about you, your choices, your personhood. This is completely missing in the ambience of businesses like Haldiram's and Nathu's. They seem to be saying, "Oh, we sell food. If you want to buy, come in, pay, take it, go."

The work culture in fast food chains is supposedly part of a common globalisation ethic, but actually things are different everywhere. I went to McDonald's with a Chinese friend. He was amazed to see the work practices here. He loved the fact that the women workers smiled; and that when the customer wanted small things like salt, napkins, etc., they came: in smiling. The smile is not part of the training in McDonald's in China. There, workers are penalised if they do not deliver the product on time; and customer service is restricted to this. Nothing more. Nothing like what we do here, providing extra service in terms of the smile, music, TV, opening doors, clapping for customers who are celebrating birthdays etc.

and the periodic team dancing on the floor that we have to do, managers included sometimes, which I have recorded and documented as part of my Sarai research. Once the dance took place when I was eating with a Danish friend. He was astounded. Just could not believe it. Is this policy specifically for the workers of Asia? he asked me. This could never happen in Europe. I have been on these teams myself, I have asked many workers about the dance. Some felt it was derogatory and exploitative; one person said it was like prostitution. But for others it was not a big deal; they accepted it as part of their work brief, and they felt there were other aspects of the job that were much more demeaning. There are some workers who absolutely refuse to dance, and the manager cannot force them. But they might be assigned some dirtier, harder work, as a consequence.

The coercion can take various forms. For instance, I worked in an outlet where the company instituted a dry run of a new product among the crews. For three months the company stopped providing lunch tiffins, and instead the workers had to make this new product, eat it and write a report in the evening. Of course, they all gave positive feedback. It was a hollow exercise, and completely futile, but what choice did they have?

SV: Each worker is trained to perform certain tasks within an immutable framework. Simultaneously, each worker is put through a mode of conditioning there is an implicit/explicit demand that the worker subscribe to the corporation's ideology, and accept the corporate vision and treatment. How did you respond to the training, as well as the conditioning?

KJ: It is a fact that from the first day onwards, the worker's autonomy is taken away completely; and then the training and conditioning to be spontaneous begins. The first thing that one learns is that one has to realign one's definition of excellence. There is no affirmation of excellence as something achieved through personally innovating and improving. The same product, exactly the same, has to be delivered today, tomorrow, and every day there is no change unless the company says so. Don't make the product better: make it always the same. Then it is an excellent product. The unchanging product is the better product; the unchanging process is the better process. Exact replication, uniformity: these are the parameters of excellence.

In the beginning, when I started off as a worker, the researcher in me stayed very active and observant. But as the days passed, and I moved from one station and skill to another, I became almost as much a worker as a researcher. Work was fast and intense, very demanding. And without a doubt, when I was on a double shift I was only a worker, desperately wanting to finish up and rush home. But during training, which essentially means cleaning the windowpanes, mopping the floor and kneading dough after watching a few videos of white guys doing the same with a smile

and the correct attitude, I remained more detached. I made notes about everything, the activity, my colleagues, I kept a conscious mental distance. I didn't feel that I was one of the workers till I was part of a regular crew, working 12/13-hour shifts, often on double shift, and often without a weekly off day. Exhausting, greasy, high-pressure work. Workers are expected to be available for any shift. These may be all-night shifts too, from 4 pm to 7 am the next morning. There is no overtime for extra hours worked. Lunch breaks are always shortened on busy days, i.e., Friday nights and weekends. Staff are only allowed to go out for a quick smoke or coffee, to keep themselves alert during the long shifts. We have to serve at speed: customers are expected to wait only two minutes in line and only one minute to be served after the order has been taken! Believe me, this is not a job for slackers.

Three weeks after becoming a worker, I already wanted to avoid kitchen duties, double shifts and split shifts; I was cursing my manager for being too cruel, cursing the salary for being too little, cursing the work for being too much.

All these are general responses of an average fast food worker

All this for Rs 18 per hour! No wonder that within a month, 7 out of 10 starters drop out. If you last 4 months, you are a veteran! No one ever stays for more than 6-9 months, unless they want to get into management. The corporate hiring policies follow the logic of flexible work hours, which amount to an absence of job security and the reduction of labour costs. In the cold language of employers, this means maintaining a core of permanent workers supplemented in by a periphery of part-time and temporary workers.

It was only when I quit one workplace and took a break of a few days before joining another, that I became aware of what I had internalised. Despite my researcher objectivity, I too was conditioned as much as any other worker. I also realised how much I could do in a day. I felt that my body had become much more capable of withstanding pressure, fatigue, stress. I felt that I was sleeping too much, was being under-utilised, not doing enough: I was constantly restless. I do feel that my awareness has been reshaped, and this is something I value, even though I am relieved to be no longer doing that work.

SV: Would you agree that such indoctrination also applies to the customer? Is the customer trained and conditioned to experience particular products, and the act of eating, differently? Is there a fundamental shift in expectations, through this interaction with a work culture/regime based on principles of homogenisation?

KJ: The training and conditioning of the customer, to experience food and dining out in a certain way, is probably the unintended consequence

of the standardisation inherent in the work ethos. As a matter of fact, consumer behaviour sometimes becomes a rule in the book, and eventually becomes standard practice.

It is culturally inflected as well. For instance, a worker cannot play Hindi music in Barista, with its Westernised ambience (unless it is coming on MTV or Channel V!), but if a customer requests Hindi music, he/she is accommodated. Or take personal interaction. For instance, in Pizza Hut, crew in uniform cannot sit on chairs occupied by customers in the dining area. Once a woman came in with her child, to celebrate his birthday. She invited the whole crew to join in. Taking turns, all of us shared the food with them but none of us sat down. The woman requested us to sit and be comfortable, but we declined, stating the rule. Then she became insistent and spoke to the manager. He allowed us to sit.

I observed something with regard to the way many workers talk about their work, about customers, and about themselves. They get very short breaks. So you will often find them standing outside, smoking and talking. When the talk is about work tensions, it is absolutely factual; and then, to use a term from film (in which I have some training), there is a jump cut to discussing some emotional/ personal issue or problem. But this is also discussed in an equally factual manner. It is as if the individual has been shut out, and the worker can access only a standardised expression of feeling, regardless of whether the worker is on break or on shift.

I have also observed that when certain customers came in alone, they were warm and friendly, and addressed workers by name; but when they came in with their family or someone else, they behaved like new clients and the exchange with the worker remained on the level of a formal transaction, not a familiar relation. Customer behaviour also gets standardised in different ways.

I vehemently reject the concept that the customer should always be agreed with, just because this is good for business. Workers should be trained to reason things out with customers, instead of having to follow the injunction to always be submissive. Broadly speaking, the suspension of identity is intrinsic to the work culture, workers are substitutable, expendable, and transient, so customers cannot really build up a relationship with staff, even if they wanted to. It also depends on where the workplace is situated. In places like Lajpat Nagar and Ansal Plaza, where the turnover is high, workers are anonymous. But in areas like Defence Colony and New Friends Colony, where the workplaces are in small elite pockets rather than big bazaars, it is different. The clientele comes from the vicinity, and the younger customers are in the same age group as the workers, so they have a rapport and personal communication, they know each others names. I personally made friends with many customers, I spoke to them about things that were of mutual interest, and our exchanges were not simply a transaction.

And while I am critical of the system, there are also several things that I appreciate about fast food work culture. I like the meticulous way of doing business, in terms of both production and service. Also, I celebrate the sight of a 26-year-old manager sitting at the counter at 4 am, with maybe one or two of his crew, and taking stock of business worth lakhs of rupees. That is a powerful image, of great responsibility with excessive risk, set on so young a shoulder. I rarely see this anywhere else.

Nitoo Das, Sarai Independent Fellow 2005
Research Project: "Hypertext and MSN Poetry Communities"

Smriti Vohra: Do you call yourself/identify as a poet? Has poetry been significant in the development of your aesthetic sensibility?

Nitoo Das: I don't like the idea of calling myself a poet. It makes me uncomfortable, makes me feel as if I will be compelled to do things that I don't want to do; like being pretentiously depressed or having to pretend that I understand the hidden meanings of life, etc. I do realise that these fears arise from the ways in which poets have been defined in most societies. I don't want to fall into the trap of *becoming* a poet, fit into already existing roles. I'd rather call myself a scribbler. It's a good enough word for the present and it works for me. I can still call myself a poet and question/challenge neat definitions, but sometimes I feel that it is too much hard work.

I am not so sure about how I would characterise my aesthetic sensibility, but yes, I can say that I have become more aware of the comic possibilities of poetry and want to explore these. I have also tried consciously to become more detached in my writings. You can sum up my aesthetic sensibility as being equivalent to comic detachment.

SV: How did you get interested in hypertextual poetry? Was it the digital access, the interest in form, or other factors? Was there any one compelling reason?

ND: At this point, I think I should clarify that when I use the term hypertextual poetry, I use it not in the accepted sense of a particular category of poetry, which encompasses innovative poetic practices in various digital media, but as a kind of poetry that can include the theoretical dimensions of hypertextuality.

I use *hypertextuality* to refer to ideas such as:

(a) The shifting, shimmering, interwoven network of links, webs, paths, that the reader has to negotiate. She is no longer trapped within the authority of the page, but becomes a virtual voyager travelling through complex, tangential, circular alleys.

(b) The privileging of recurrence and the confrontation with simultaneity.

(c) Resistance to closure and the acceptance of chaotic incompleteness.

(d) The possibility of all readers becoming potential writers, etc. I became interested in the opportunities that can be available to us through *hypertextuality* after I joined various MSN poetry groups and was able to make close readings of the workings of these groups. They demonstrated an openness toward being read under the rubric of *hypertextuality*, and my researcher self embraced this openness.

Obviously, easy digital access helped to whet my interest in online poetry; but what set me in motion was the fact of the overwhelming number of people who were writing poetry. Why were they doing it? What provided the freedom to use words with such abandon? What was the mechanism that permitted them to flow with their feelings? Most of the poetry was badly written, but that is not what I tried to locate here. My first questions were about the disguising and the opening up of the self, a simultaneous masking and unmasking. The other compelling reason was the need to know whether poetry on a computer screen read differently from poetry on a page.

SV: Has this project taken on unexpected dimensions for you? Have your central questions/preoccupations regarding *hypertextual* poetry, your initial conceptions, expanded and transformed? Or has this research been more of a confirmation of aspects about which you were already certain?

ND: I don't believe that any good research can be created out of certainty. In the case of my research on *hypertext*, my hypotheses have more or less been definitely established. Most of the things I set out to prove through my research have been proved. For instance, the importance of the architecture of the site within which the poetry resides, the ways in which that in itself can generate *hypertextual* meanings of circularity, incompleteness and linkage, was something I set out believing, and saw validated by my research. The predictions of Ted Nelson (the pioneer who conceptualised *hypertextuality* as we know it today), his formulation of *populism* coming true, the instability and the decentredness of the authorial voice, the permeable boundaries between the self and the machine: these are issues that I feel I have looked at carefully and have dealt with at some length.

Populism, for Nelson, refers to the democratic space where the deeper understandings of the few (can) at least (be made) available to the many. In my third posting as an Independent Fellow on the Sarai Reader-list, I cited the theorist Stuart Moulthrop as saying that a poplite culture might mark the first step towards realisation of the game of perfect information where all have equal access to the world of data.

To put it simply, I wished to know if elite conceptions of reading/writing/interpreting poetry could cohabit happily in regions where readers and writers did not have traditional access to such rarefied knowledge, but were allowed entry/intervention in spaces such as the groups I studied.

The unexpected dimensions of my research have been *very* unexpected. I have begun to wonder what role the passive, dull or ineffective link (which John Cayley calls a nilsk) would play in generating/destroying meaning in poetry. What role would corporate houses play in the spawning of poetry? Can the position of code as writing be redefined and re-investigated in order to carry the definition of hypertextuality further? These are just a few of the questions that come immediately to my mind when I think of areas open for additional exploration.

Another surprising offshoot of my research is my new obsession with blogging. Questions of writing and publication became very relevant in the blog world. I feel that the self-publication, the opportunity for readers to comment, the links to similar blogs, the fact that invisible statcounters allow one to spy on visitors, all take hypertextuality to newer regions. But perhaps this needs to be an entirely different research topic.

SV: To what extent has the project reshaped your relationship to the act of writing, the act of reading, if at all? Did the digital/technical components catalyse, foster, such a reshaping?

ND: About a decade ago, for reasons that I will not go into here, I lost the will to write. I did write a few stray pieces here and there, but they were terrible stuff. Navel-gazing of the worst variety. It was only after I got interested in MSN poetry chat-rooms, where people came in to recite their work, that I started writing again. The instant pat on the back after a good poem, or the embarrassed silences after a bad one, aroused my curiosity. Most of these poetry chat-rooms also had proper posting groups. After MSN stopped free chats, these chat-rooms transformed themselves into groups so that the members could stay on to chat, even if they did not post their poetry. This history is necessary in order to explain the transition in my interest from chat-rooms to groups.

One of the main reasons why I started writing again was the speed at which I received criticism. Many people see this as a negative. I do not. Just because a response comes in haste does not automatically mean

that it is not constructive. I became very enthusiastic about the simultaneity, the fact of responses arriving with speed, and from such diverse geographical areas.

To come back to your question: nowadays I do a lot of my writing directly on the computer. In spite of my pen fetish, I feel that I write better with my keyboard. Sometimes I write poetry straight onto the posting pop-up. I also rewrite a lot. I think this derives from the easy neatness of deletion. The sense of hypertextual incompleteness is something that I have learnt to favour, and I feel that it has helped my writing. The lack of closure is empowering in a way. My poems change as I change.

On the other hand, I have become a very critical reader. The fact that one can give unasked-for advice, change a writer's work according to one's own convenience, is enough to corrupt most people, and I am no exception. Of course, the writer need not accept that advice, but it is oddly exhilarating to play around with someone else's work.

SV: How would you describe the communities you interacted with, during your research? Who constitutes these communities?

ND: Most of the communities that I belonged to were open, meaning that there were no restrictions on membership. These groups can be formed by anybody, and the initiator becomes the manager. The creator/manager of a group can design/change the front page, add or delete pages/boards, delete single comments or whole discussion threads, invite or ban members and also assign assistant managers to help in the general running and maintenance of the site. The members post their poetry, but also participate in the games, community gestures such as wishing members on birthdays, anniversaries, etc., share jokes and information, and sometimes also furiously debate political/religious/artistic issues. If you ignore the fact that most of the members use complete disguises (maintain screen identities, have incomplete or false profiles, remain silent about geographical locations, even play around with their gender) these cyber/virtual communities almost seem like real, offline communities.

SV: Does the digital medium permit, encourage, specific kinds of creativity? In your opinion, does hypertextual poetry require particular image-making mechanisms?

ND: Yes, to both questions. The digital medium tolerates vast movements and interchanges between media. A poem can shift happily to/coexist in visual/aural spaces. The movement of the poem from the handwritten version to the typed, on-screen, what I call, the *fonted* version, is a tortuous one and requires some computing skills. For instance, a direct copy-paste from MS Word to the posting pop-up would render the poem unintelligible, since annoying HTML tags would taint the meaning of the poem. Apart from such basic know-how, hypertextual poetry can also gain from knowl-

edge of imaging systems (jpegs, gifs, etc.), performance engines (html, animated gifs, javascript, perl, cgi s, image maps, etc.), programming elements like widths/lengths of pages, links/nilsks etc. The technical aspects of the creation of hypertextuality cannot be overlooked. One should be aware that this is a new system of signs, and like all new systems, has its own particular semiotic demands.

SV: The analysis of hypertextual mechanisms invariably brings to mind Roland Barthes well-known distinction between readerly and writerly texts. Readerly texts follow a linear narrative logic and temporal progression, subscribe to traditional literary conventions, codes, symbolic patterns. The closing of a text happens as you read, and you decide about a work's genre and ideological beliefs. In writerly texts, on the other hand, the networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds ; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively said to be the main one...

Texts thus consist of contiguous fragments or *lexias* , units of reading, which invite readers to manhandle and interrupt their internal chronology. They are an infinity of languages , they are without *before* and *after* and are thereby in a sense mythic ...

Moreover, Barthes says that rather than producing signification (meaning presumed to be stable and singular), writerly texts produce significance , meaning seen in its intertextual sense, i.e., meaning that is never finished, and always involved in more texts and more meanings than can be captured and named; the writerly text disallows an identical second reading, and instead demands an active, productive reading each time it is read. Does hypertextual composition/interpretation make similar demands?

ND: Yes, hypertext is essentially an open entity. It is not a closed, contained form; and it always resists closure. The fixity of printed pages can give way to the beauty of *lexia*. The critic George Landow actually applies this Barthesian term when he connects hypertext to poststructuralist theory. He uses it to denote a hypertext text chunk preferably the amount of text and/or image that will fit on one screen. But there is some discontent among critics of hypertext regarding his borrowing of the term. For instance, one argument is that *lexia* are small portions of text that convey multiple meanings; when these are selected and woven together, they potentially crystallise into certain discourses and ideologies.

However, the *lexia* in hypertext seem to be any paragraph, word or sentence that can be connected by a software-driven link. The analogy appears to be definitely there on the formal level, but not necessarily on the level of content.

In spite of such detractors, I believe that when hypertextual collaborations of various kinds are initiated and sustained, there is a fundamental reconfiguring of text production and also of reception. The reader will have to keep track of the polyvalence of the voices, read through the shifting mass of identities, textual materials and stylistic interweavings.

Rajesh Komath, Sarai Independent Fellow 2006
Research Project: An Ethnobiography of Teyyam Performance from a Practitioner's Perspective

This interview is dedicated to my late father/teacher, Swaminadhan Koorara

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Smriti Vohra: Teyyam is your embodied inheritance, received through lineage and ancestral roots. Has your relationship to your patrimony changed over the years?

Rajesh Komath: I belong to the community of Teyyam performers, from the Malayan caste which is placed very low in the social order of north Malabar. Teyyam, which derives etymologically from the Sanskrit word *daivam* / divine, is purely a caste-bound occupation, and each subordinate caste has to play its role in the highly stratified social system of north Malabar. Yet, during a Teyyam performance, there is a complete reversal of these supposedly inflexible caste hierarchies as performers, we undergo a mode of ritual possession by divine power; the higher castes treat us reverentially as we go into trance, take on a supra-normal status, read the past and predict the future. Other rituals such as *mantravadam* (exorcism) are also enacted by low-caste performers for the welfare of the higher castes and the village population in general: this makes them obliged to us.

In my birthplace, society is divided entirely along caste lines, in the order of Namboothiri, Nambiar, Kurup, Nair, Vaniyar, Maniyani, Tiyya, Chaliar, Asari, Kollan, Malayan, Vannan, Munhottan, Pulayar, Mavilar, Kurichiar, Chingathan, Kopallar, etc. The sense of caste solidifies through myths of origin, and practices of division of labour, deference and discrimination. Consciously or unconsciously, this dialectic of inferiority and superiority has taken deep root in each mind. Caste is the dominant and pervasive mental attitude. When Teyyam is enacted in the shrine or in higher-caste precincts, separate places are marked for spectators according to the

caste hierarchy. Each caste has its own special functions to be observed in connection with the performance.

I have received Teyyam as a gift from my father, who was in charge of enacting rituals for certain parts of our village. This function is sociologically bestowed upon our community as our right to perform actions for the welfare of the local population. I began performing to provide a specified form of help to my father; to satisfy his need for as well as his strong faith in tradition and sanctity. I began slowly and steadily acquiring the ability to enact these rituals, and gained skill in the dancing, singing, playing of particular instruments and through this, to get the blessing of the local people and ensure the sustenance of our community's culture and their beliefs.

Those of us who mature into full-fledged Teyyam performers seem to develop an intuitive power that we inherit from our ancestors, and which is a manifestation of our bond to the collective consciousness and ethos. This collective legacy lies dormant in every villager, and Teyyam is a particular expression of it. All Teyyam practices are transmitted and taught orally, directly transferred to the offspring of the performer's family. This is my patrimony, as a member of this subaltern group. This form of expression is mutually rooted in our own caste beliefs as well as the caste beliefs of the villagers.

As society changed in north Malabar, naturally my own relationship to my practice also underwent some changes. The rituals that earlier had a prescribed and unavoidable social course are now being shifted out of the social space that they inhabited. This space, within which Teyyam was venerated, is now being captured by ideologies such as Marxism and Hindutva. It is a well-documented fact that the Communist Party in Kerala was born in north Malabar, and that the region is today the site of political violence and killings involving the Marxists and the RSS.

I once had to perform a Teyyam at Koorara at Mandamullathi Kavu in Tellichery, Kannur. After the main rituals, the performer has to call out each caste title and list its good qualities, according to its place and order in the hierarchy. The members of the taravadu (patron upper castes) are addressed as Kazhakkars; the Nambiars are addressed as Kaikkomars, the Tiyys as Ettillam Karimanars. In the course of the enunciation, I forgot to present the Tiyys, for which omission I was severely castigated and warned never to repeat the error. Later I came to know that there was a local committee member of the CPI(M) in this group. This is an instance of how it repeatedly became clear to me that all politics and political parties were in fact perpetuating the caste hierarchy and reaping its benefits regardless of the political ideology, what works within all of us is our caste-based disposition, embedded in mind and body, and which asserts itself contextually.

The Communists consider Teyyam to be an art form and a means of livelihood for Malayans and Vannans, the performing castes. The Hindutva groups are critical of Teyyam as a primitive devotional mode, one that is not Aryan enough, but they cannot keep away from it as a ritual practice: they are keen on acquiring the social capital that comes from their supervisory role in Teyyam festivals, to increase their general locus standi. They also want to gain, through ownership of the folkloric knowledge gained from Teyyam communities, and apply these gains for the advancement of Hindutva-oriented cultural domains.

But Teyyam is based on a traditional belief system, not on revolutionary ideas or on state policies that are being influenced by Sanskritised values. Teyyam is a self-contained world where our obligations to caste, community, society and religious faith assume a sacrosanct dimension. However, when modernity intersects with tradition, there are disruptive changes and contradictions. I too am part of these larger changes. I live within the conflicts and complexities and adjust to them, to upper-caste power dynamics as well as to party politics. Given these circumstances, Teyyam performers have to learn to inhabit two modes – that of being subaltern and becoming empowered/divine, simultaneously.

SV: You are a trained economist, and work as one; you have simultaneously continued and developed your Teyyam practice. Is there any conflict between these two dimensions of your subjectivity, how are they reconciled? Are there other performers who, like you, have chosen a path away from the community, even while maintaining their roots?

RK: There is some conflict between my socio-material position as a Teyyam performer, and my persona/personality as a student of economics. I find that most theories of economics are unable to deal adequately with culture, and therefore unable to understand the economy of Teyyam performers in a drastically changing agrarian scenario. Today's economics is based on the principle of market rationality, which deals with human actions impelled by the pursuit of self-interest and by the profit motive. But as a Teyyam performer assumes the role of a god or a deity, becomes possessed, goes into trance, moves in frenzy, lies down on fire, etc., all he receives is whatever little money the upper-caste patrons choose to give. Teyyam is not based on contemporary economics but on a particular inherited psyche and attitude which is completely the opposite of such modern logic. This psyche has been shaped by a social system with its own distinctions, reinforced and perpetuated over the centuries. I have to deliberately check this psyche when I deal in my profession with the theories and concepts of economics and their various manifestations in the context of globalisation. Sometimes these two subjectivities do create tensions and confusions within me.

The first kolam (form of Teyyam) I performed was the poignant story of Kannan, a Tiyya (intermediate lower caste) boy who grazed the cattle

belonging to a Kurup (upper caste). The boy, trembling with starvation, climbed up a mango tree owned by a Kurup, and began eating the fruit. He saw the Kurup's niece approaching. The boy was terrified at the idea of being discovered in the act of stealing. In his panic he dropped a mango on the girl as she passed under the tree. This was an act defying caste taboos, and Kannan had to run away from his native village to escape victimisation. He returned after many years, anticipating that the villagers would have forgotten him. As he was bathing, neck-deep in the village pond, the Kurup, accompanied by Nairs, rushed into the scene, shouting, 'Why have you returned from exile, you dog, after your caste violation!' They decapitated the scapegoat Kannan with a long sword. This enactment was my debut as a Teyyam performer. It was my first public experience of having to undergo, as a social/caste obligation, an artistic identification with the processes of ostracism and injustice.

As the tempo of the chenda (percussion instrument) with high suggestive power, and categorised as an asura vadyam (one that produces demonic sound) rose to a crescendo, I danced as if possessed. My own classmates, including girls, came with tears pouring from their eyes, kneeling before me for my blessing. But inevitably my mind was also full of fear that they might detect my caste identity. When I went back to school later, I found that they knew it was I who had enacted the role of the deity. They began to keep a distance from me, and I overheard them whispering to one another, 'He is a Malayan

Many in my community have broken with the roots of Teyyam and moved away from the tradition, thinking it is devoid of any relevance today. This thinking may also be due to lower-caste inhibitions. I too have moved away, but differently, maintaining Teyyam's roots as a performer, as one who has learnt lessons of sorcery from the earlier generations. I too have the strong sense of diffidence materially characteristic of my community, as we continually struggle with poverty and unemployment. Today, Teyyam is my tradition as well as my research area, a field of enquiry where it is possible for me to acknowledge and understand my identity. With sufficient training, one can analyse any subject. But one who intuitively feels the field within one's own depths will have additional insights

As part of my normal flow of studies, I did postgraduate work in development economics at universities in Calicut and Trivandrum. My understanding of the demands of social science research is that the researcher should be able to understand society at large as well as be self-reflexive about the problems that he/she is studying. The researcher has to be probing and inquisitive, passionate as well as patient. These qualities are more attainable if one takes up an area of study related to one's life and individual self. This choice on the part of the researcher would provide genuinely reflective and interpretive rigour in the process of approaching social facts

SV: As a performer, how do you characterise Teyyam as a social ritual, as a folk art, as an expression of popular devotion and as a caste-based cultural tradition? How do you situate your practice in relation to all these categories?

RK: Teyyam can be approached from many angles, so a satisfactory definition is difficult. In any case, in the region where Teyyam developed as a form, social, historical and cultural complexities do not permit an easy definition. But Teyyam also eludes definition because it is not easily defined in the minds of the people of north Malabar. For each social group and its plane of experience, Teyyam represents something unique. It is art, ritual, dance, folk culture, all of these. It is an expression of a particular community and their mode of venerating their patron mother goddess in the interest of family/community welfare and well-being. Teyyam has a universal and timeless quality because it thematically deals with the fundamental problems of human beings and their existential situation. It has a strong base in Vedantic thought, in the principle that humanity is essentially divine, an aspect of cosmic unity/non-duality, of the oneness of all creation. This metaphysical summation is expressed through the trance state, when in performance the practitioner's psyche is wrought with immeasurably strong emotions, as he transforms into a deity. It is an exalted state of being, a mode of sublimity inexpressible in language. It allows the performer to powerfully transcend the reality of his severely suppressed and negated social status through the rich, rhythmic song/dance and ritual of Teyyam.

SV: How would you characterise the relationship between castes, as mediated during the space and duration of a Teyyam performance?

RK: The dependent position of subordinate castes upon dominant castes, in terms of material existence, is clearly depicted in the obligation and functions of each subordinate caste as reflected in the ritual processes of Teyyam. For instance, there is a ritual known as kalasam, usually performed by the Tiyyas or other backward castes, or one of the intermediate castes, in which toddy is carried in a pot as an offering to the deity. Toddy-tapping is the traditional caste occupation of the Tiyyas. Patron castes/upper castes or tarawad, as organisers of the performance, get this toddy to drink, as part of the ritual. Thus, each caste has its own obligations to perform within the ritualistically ordered space of performance, indicating that the deity belongs to everybody. In social life, Malayan women work as midwives throughout the villages of north Malabar. Their caste status, untouchability and erasure are overlooked by upper-caste women during the time of giving birth. Caste distinctions collapse in the face of this urgency. In trance, caste distinctions collapse as well the Malayan performer can usually appropriate social power, elevate himself to divine status, criticise upper-caste oppression and satirically abuse their landlords.

But when the performance is over, as soon as he removes his costume and wipes off his make-up, he immediately reverts to being an unprivileged lower-caste man, transformed into his isolated Dalit state of being, and commands not an atom of consideration. This is the condition of all Teyyam performers. When the low-caste Malayan encounters the Nambiar or the Kurup, he has to take the towel on his left shoulder and hold it down, lower his head and stand at a particular distance with due respect to the upper caste. This is one picture. On the other hand, there is the sight of the Nambiar and Kurup approaching the Malayan empowered in his Teyyam costume and make-up, and they touch his feet with great respect.

SV: What inspires you during a performance?

RK: For me, the inspiring element in Teyyam is the transformation, through performance, of the human into the divine. It involves total surrender, complete involvement in a process that goes beyond the normal; it is a rare, direct and unnameable personal experience. The performing body does not just function as a mediator between deity and devotee, like the Brahmin priest in temples.

The deprived condition of the performer, his family and his community is also a powerful catalyst, as performance enables a kind of symbolic humiliation and revenge vis-à-vis upper-caste oppressors. But what is really important in this theatre of subversion is the nature of the dynamic reciprocity between lower and upper castes. It is more than psychological empathy or aesthetic sympathy—it is an intuitive mutual understanding of the social order, the complexities of hierarchy and their construction and reconstruction. At the same time, even while impelling his consciousness from the normal to the abnormal, the performer in trance has to stay aware of class, caste and gender markers, signifiers, rites, and differentiate between these in alignment with the existent hierarchies. On no account can these differences be overlooked within the performative space. It is very challenging to perform within such a frame.

SV: Who/what would Rajesh be if he was compelled to give up Teyyam, or gave it up voluntarily? Can you imagine your life without Teyyam?

RK: Teyyam is embedded and ingrained in me. It dwells in my consciousness as a living, dynamic, constant presence. It is reflected in my eyes, hands, mind, body, in my articulate language. Even if I decide to give up Teyyam, if I no longer take the form of God in the shrines, and no longer participate in any kind of rituals, I will not be able to escape Teyyam—it will always accompany me in the form of songs, dance steps, cadences of percussion, slow and fast—in other words, all the signifiers of performance itself.

Whatever my condition, if you look at me closely you will find Teyyam reflected in my life. I can never be alienated from Teyyam, which has nourished my entire being from early childhood onwards.

The impact of performance is tremendous, upon both practitioners and spectators. It is especially strong in my case as I have been totally involved in the study, analysis and interpretation of Teyyam as an object of research—both as a member of the performing community destined to be immersed in the practice, and as a researcher who has invaluable special insight by virtue of also being a contemporary performer. As you can imagine, this relationship is not devoid of contradiction, it has an agonising as well as a benedictory dimension. But Teyyam has given me a potent means of inquiry into the puzzles, paradoxes and riddles surrounding our life, faith, and especially art.

Teyyam has made me what I am—regardless of whether I am an accomplished artist or not, whether I find fulfillment through my practice or not.

Urmila Bhardikar, Sarai Independent Fellow 2004
Research Project: “The Relationship between the Production and Consumption of Thumri and Allied Forms: The Female Impersonator, Balgandharva”

Smriti Vohra: How did you first become interested in the subject of female impersonation, and the enigmatic figure of Balgandharva (1886-1957) in particular? Does your ongoing research trace specific aspects and what keeps you compelled?

Urmila Bhardikar: I grew up in Dharwad, in Karnataka, a town famous for its musical ambience. The nostalgia for Sangit Natak was always in the air. Additionally, my Marathi-speaking family cherished the same memories lovingly. The love of Sangit Natak is not unique to my family but can be explained as a sociological fact in the fashioning of the cultural sphere in which middle-class Marathi life spanned out in the early 20th century. I was fortunate to be in a family of amateur musicians and music lovers who benefited immensely from the tuition of great musicians. Again, among them the figure of Pandit Mallikarjun Mansur stands out as one who shared with all the treasure of his music and thoughts about music in the form of richly textured, historically and musically complex and engaging anecdotes. This ambience enabled me to understand Balgandharva

as one who had imbibed some of the highest goals of music performance.

Balgandharva was always referred to as one who achieved the musical effect (sometimes referred to as *tassir*: the ability to move the audience at will) in which the question of rigidity and correctness of the raga was happily rendered less meaningful. He was also someone who projected a naturally pure mellifluousness, even when the subject of analysis was his complex rendering of *taan* and mastery over the intricate aspects of rhythm and tempo. The apparent contradiction between musical knowledge and music performance, suggested from the point of view of a musician here, has stayed with me as the window to understanding many larger issues regarding the production and consumption of music in the public space.

In the case of Balgandharva (Narayan Shripad Rajhans), this question is further extended to his status as the star heroine, or as the most celebrated female impersonator actor. I initially negotiated the issue when I assisted Rimli Bhattacharya in her research on actresses, and later through participation in the travelling seminar on South Asian Masculinities. At present, I am in the midst of my doctoral dissertation in sociology on the practice of female impersonation in Marathi theatre in the late 19th and early 20th century, in which Balgandharva features prominently. I am engaging with the specificities of the practice of female impersonation in modern mainstream and commercial Marathi theatre as it emerged in the mid-19th century and thrived for nearly a century.

A significant aspect of this theatre is that it involved new participants in the practice of female impersonation in theatre i.e., this form of theatre was dominated by upper-caste men. This fact allows me to locate the genre more specifically within the tradition or conventions of the theatre of impersonation in India. The points of engagement and departure with such a tradition/convention as it manifests in the *Ramlila*, for instance, are crucial to my study, for it is precisely through these one will be able to understand the simultaneously radical and recuperative aspects of this theatre. This further helps me to analyse the constitution of this theatrical-musical practice from a larger perspective.

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SV: Your research describes in detail how Marathi *Natya Sangeet* facilitated the formation of a discourse of respectability. You also point out that this was not homogeneous. On the one hand this theatre was seen as a high art form (in contrast to low/folk forms such as *Tamasha*), and was expected to mirror social evils and uphold moral values; and it had a seating arrangement for respectable women. On the other hand, the handbills of early performances show that prostitutes were seated separately and had to pay higher prices for these seats..

In her study *Two Men and Music: Nationalism in the Making of an Indian Classical Tradition* (Permanent Black, 2005), Janaki Bakhle concludes that Marathi Natya Sangeet was directed at a new respectable middle-class audience, and that women were central to the construction of this audience. Moreover, the new code of dress, mannerisms and behaviour by the cross-dressing Balgandharva, who was acclaimed as having the most melodious female voice and wiles on the Marathi stage, set the standard for the bourgeois women of the period the way he walked, draped his sari, wore his jewellery and flowers in his hair ...

How would you describe Balgandharva's particular paradoxical genius that enabled him to become an unparalleled female icon? How might male spectators have responded to him? Was he ever successful in these men's roles?

UB: Returning to the question of Balgandharva's representation of woman as the model for the fashioning of the bourgeois woman of the period, I would stress again that this representation needs to be seen in the context of an essentially homosocial theatre. The question then is that of the responses of the female segment of the audience, who are *reported* to be enamoured of Balgandharva's rendition of womanhood. I stress the word *reported* in the light of the fact that most of the contemporary and even later assessment of Balgandharva's effect on the audience is from a male perspective and in the voice of male critics. Some scantily available women's voices astutely note the incorporation of risqué and non-elite (therefore non-respectable) elements in his costume and mannerisms: for instance, the too-tight pallu of the saree, the crooked parting in the hair, the exaggerated gestures and body movements. The seductive and desirable aspects of Balgandharva's representation of femininity thus formed an interesting alliance with non-elite practices.

On the other hand, it is precisely the appreciation and imitation of the Balgandharva model of femininity that produced the space for the expression of women's desire. If we take into account the homosocial and homoerotic reception of the same representation, we get a sufficiently complex set of relationships.

Further, the elite participation and sphere of consumption of this theatre, and its valorisation as the hallmark of reformative modernity (and its separation from non-elite forms such as *Tarasha*), illustrate the essential fragility of the theatrical discourse in this period. Thus, it is not only a question of Balgandharva's paradoxical genius the idea is to locate Balgandharva in this larger context.

The first factor requiring analysis perhaps is the fashioning of Balgandharva's acting and musical skills. The brief accounts of his musical training indicate that it was limited to nurturing his natural qualities.

Read in the context of the musical training in general, and specifically in comparison to the training of his contemporaries such as Keshavrao Bhosale or Master Deenanath or even Master Krishanrao, one can see that all three had received the training that would enable them to break out of the sphere of feminine singing; and in their own ways they used this training to establish themselves differentially in male roles once they were past the accepted age to enact female roles.

By all accounts, Balgandharva's later roles produced a response that cut both ways. Post-1934 and after his brief enactment of a male role in the film *Dharmatma* he was simultaneously accepted and not accepted in female roles in theatre. The acceptance was steeped in the nostalgic appreciation of his earlier roles, while the non-acceptance was for his inadequacy to enact male roles, and equally for not accepting Goharbai Karnataki in his place, for representing the ideal and seductive woman. I elaborate on this in the answer to the next question.

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SV: Was female impersonation a strong and recognised convention in other forms of Marathi theatre, and are these conventions critical of one another? Is it generally agreed that Natya Sangeet is characterised by an elite, brahminical, Sanskritised sensibility, as Bakhle claims, in contrast to the more sensuous, robust, resilient popular forms such as Lavni and Gondhal?

UB: Yes. Female impersonation was and still is one of the conventions in many performance forms in Maharashtra, such as the Dashavatar, Tamasha and Lavni. The specific tradition of female impersonation in the commercial Marathi theatre, in which Balgandharva participated as a star heroine, was in reality a phase, and is now almost totally absent in performance. I think there was only one revival of this practice in the recent years, with the well-known male actor-singer Charudatta Aphi rendering a female role. The classics of Sangit Natak are still performed regularly and are very popular, but all the female roles are enacted by women actors. The tradition of female impersonation is totally extinct in this theatre. The aftermath of this tradition is superbly captured in Satish Alekar's play *Begum Barve* (1974).

As it emerged in the mid-19th century in the form of mythological plays, this theatre developed as a commercial, elite, urban, modern form. Its participants were upper-caste men, unwilling to incorporate women from the traditional artist (kalavant) communities. Through its development, it differentiated itself from the non-elite folk forms such as Tamasha, Dashavatar or Lalit, calling them vulgar and obscene. The term stree par-tee (a man who acts the part, i.e., the role, of a stree, i.e., woman) for the impersonator actor in Sangit Natak was posited as more refined than

his counterpart *nachya porya* (literally, dancing boy) in Tamasha.

The fashioning of the stree partee actor, however, depended heavily on learning or imitating professional women artists repertoire of dance and songs. The Lavni style of singing was the mainstay of renditions in the early Sangit Natak; and later too. Many actors including Balgandharva had mastered the Lavni style and had close association with well-known women singers such as Sudarabai and Gulab Bai. Contemporary historians of the early days of the genre have candidly noted these alliances, though in the case of stars like Balgandharva, these associations are only mentioned in passing or sometimes suppressed altogether.

However, there is no evidence as to whether there were any *actual* associations between the female impersonator actors in the elite and the non-elite theatres.

No wonder then that this theatre, with its agenda of respectability, sanitises professional women artists dances and songs. Is this process 'Sanskritisation'? Doesn't Sanskritisation refer to the incorporation of the practices of elite groups by the non-elite? I would prefer to use the term sanitisation for the way in which the elite practice of female impersonation borrowed and rendered the elements from non-elite sources.

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SV: Is it also possible to understand the complexities of Balgandharva's persona from *outside* conventional historical/sociological/aesthetic frames?

As the first cross-dressed star, he is also fascinating because an encounter with transgender subjectivity, be it through performance or otherwise, has the potential to create profound spectator discomfort. Any blurring of gender signifiers into a mode of equivocation from mild androgyny that is simply a lived truth for those so inscribed, to the combatively flaunted postures of high camp, which is a counter-discourse can cause a rupture, destabilise the fixed assumptions of what constitutes a man and what constitutes a woman, through the insinuation of the transgressive into so-called normality...

Susan Sontag has famously defined camp as the furthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theatre, the consistently aesthetic experience of the world; a mode of seduction; a doubling, but not the split-level construction of a literal meaning on the one hand and a symbolic meaning on the other. It is the difference, rather, between the thing as meaning something and the thing as pure artifice. Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It is not a lamp but a lamp; not a woman but a woman. Sontag adds, The question isn't, Why travesty, impersonation, theatricality? The question is rather, When does travesty, impersonation,

theatricality, acquire the special flavour of camp? Camp finds success in a certain committed seriousness that fails; two of its tonalities are pathos and the excruciating; pure camp has to have the proper mix of the exaggerated, the fantastic, the passionate and the naive.

Sontag concludes, most interestingly: Time liberates the work of art from moral benevolence, delivering it over to the camp sensibility.

Can these parameters be applied to Balgandharva as a performer? What are the contemporary responses to his life and work, his unique persona, his tremendous contribution to Marathi theatre and classical music?

UB: This is an interesting framework and offers a chance to focus on the less analysed aspects of Balgandharva. However, this also raises the question of how to look at culture and context-specific phenomena. Thus it is possible to see only certain characteristics of camp cross-culturally, especially the celebration of stylisation, exaggeration and artifice, as these fashion taste. This particular feature, however, has to be qualified with the unmistakable and all-pervading content in the practice of female impersonation during Balgandharva's career. The mid- to late- 19th-century Aakhyani plays, I think, allow more room to see camp, as they minimised plot and exaggerated the elements of style. In the case of Balgandharva, those characteristics are indeed carried forward, but are ensconced in the recuperative goals of this theatre.

***For the interviews in their entirety, see the Sarai website:
<http://www.sarai.net/fellowships/independent/calls/interviews>***

