

# PROJECTS / PROCESSES VOLUME VII

Research and Writing from SAF 2017

commissioned by





## About Projects/Processes

**Projects / Processes** is a new initiative to publish commissioned research essays, longform writing, and in-depth criticism that explore the ideas and processes behind select curatorial projects at Serendipity Arts Festival. Over two years, the Festival has accumulated a rich database of creative energies and partnerships. As an eight-day long event, the Festival is a platform for multidisciplinary collaboration and cultural innovation, and has commissioned over 70 new works across the visual arts and performance since its inception in 2016. The Projects / Processes series offers an opportunity to give some of these works and the stories that they tell an afterlife, through a deeply engaged look at how they came together and their significance to the discourse of contemporary art in India moving forward. Each volume comprises essays covering distinct projects that stand in some dialogue with each other, through the questions they raise and the thematic landscape they cover.

## About Serendipity Arts Festival

**Serendipity Arts Festival** is a multi-disciplinary arts event set over a period of eight days in December in the vibrant settings of Panaji, Goa. Curated by a panel of eminent artists and institutional figures, this festival is a long-term cultural project that hopes to affect positive change in the arts in India on a large scale.

Serendipity Arts Festival 2017 experimented with site, form, scale, and display, featuring over 70 projects including more than 40 projects commissioned specifically for the Festival, alongside a line-up of scintillating programmes spanning music, dance, theatre, visual arts and culinary arts. In addition to the curated events, we believe in collaborations that can give the Festival varied perspectives. As a result, SAF 2017 saw an exciting array of Special Projects which highlight our institutional collaborations.

The Festival also attempts to address pressing issues such as arts education, patronage culture, interdisciplinary discourse and accessibility to the arts. This intensive programme of exhibitions and performances is accompanied by spaces for social and educational engagement.

## About Serendipity Arts Foundation

**Serendipity Arts Foundation** is an arts and cultural development Foundation created to encourage and support the arts as a significant contributor to civil society. It aims to promote new creative strategies, artistic interventions, and cultural partnerships that are responsive and seek to address the social, cultural and environmental milieu of South Asia. Committed to innovation, SAF intends to promote and create platforms for creativity, providing the wider public with a unique source of contemporary art and culture. SAF programmes are designed and initiated through collaborations with partners across a multitude of fields, each intervention created using the arts to impact education, create social initiatives, foster community development, and explore both interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinary in the arts, with a special focus on South Asia.



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# **Maya Bazaar**

A Sri Venkateswara Natya  
Mandali Production  
(Surabhi Theatre)

Presented at Serendipity  
Arts Festival 2017

***Curated by*** Anuradha  
Kapur and Lilette Dubey



# **The Legacy of the Surabhi Family Theatre**

## With special reference to Maya Bazaar (the Carnival of Magic)

**Shaik John Bashur**

Surabhi Theatre, a unique institution of family theatre, has an unrivalled place in the history of Indian theatre. It is perhaps the only example of a professional family theatre, with an unbroken record of performance for 132 years. This unique achievement appears to be the result of the theatre group belonging to one large family, a quality unheard of elsewhere.

-Acharya Modali Nagabhushana Sharma

In ancient Vedic and Buddhist literature, folk theatre first appears as an art form to illustrate the unedited realities of life. Historically, folk theatre dates back to the 15th and 16th centuries, in the form of narrative illustrations drawn from epics like the Puranas, mythological tales, and biographies of celestial heroes. By the medieval period, folk theatre gradually became an integral part of Indian drama, *Natya*. It is right after the colossal success of Indian traditional theatre as an art form that the distinct style of Indian *Natya* changed and developed to include a new theatrical language where mythological tales were dramatized through dance and song.

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Although this particular theatre format came to be known as Indian folk theatre much later, it is indeed not an overstatement to say that the very basic rudiments of folk theatre in establishing itself as an art form already existed in the customs, heritage, and traditions of India. In rural society, which is still regarded as the root of folk theatre, the seeds of drama are traced to rituals. Indian culture animated through the rituals practiced in rural society came to form the very base of the folk theatre tradition in India.

Folk theatre in India is mainly narrative in nature. This indeed points to the origins of storytelling by the *sutradhara* in Indian *Natya*. In order to make his narrative more imaginative, the narrator or the *sutradhara* slowly incorporated drama into his narrative, in a manner that helped evolve the rich tradition of narration in Indian folk theatre, which is practiced to this date. There is a long tradition of folk entertainers who either move alone or in groups in rural India. They serve both as entertainers as well as the preachers of value, of philosophical ideas, and of religion. Folk theatre has adopted their mode of expression amidst dance, music and songs. Spirited, dynamic, and ingenious in its form and rich in variety, Indian folk theatre has established itself as a powerful medium of communication in folk culture. It is more than entertainment; rather an emotional experience and an effort of creating an environment of receptivity in which communication of ideas is an effortless process. More than a simple form of theatre, it unfurls the saga of Indian drama from the eposes to its current modish theatre format. It is the chronicle of Indian drama, where for the very first time, theatre is evidenced as breaking the barrier of orchestra and pits,

successfully reaching the masses in a whole new way- through the quixotic brilliance of music, song, and folklore. Every state in India has its own distinctive form of folk and traditional theatre. Various known as the *Jatra* in Orissa, Bengal, and Eastern Bihar, *Tamasha* in Maharashtra, *Nautanki* in Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Punjab, *Bhavai* in Gujarat, *Yakshagana* in Karnataka, and *Therukuttu* in Tamil Nadu, Indian folk theatre with its sheer vibrancy has been accessible to a vast majority. Aesthetically, folk theatre in India eloquently exemplifies the ‘nine rasas’ of Indian dramaturgy. In Southern India, we find the extraordinary example of ‘Surabhi’- the only family theatre tradition that continues to tour with their fantastical, extravagant productions across the world. This theatre family of Andhra Pradesh has a long and fascinating history in Indian folk-traditional theatre. They have been mesmerizing audiences with their spectacular performances for 132 years. The performance style of Surabhi is drawn from the folk and mythological traditions of India and incorporates the genre of Magical Realism, in which magical elements blend to create a realistic atmosphere that evokes a deeper understanding of reality. The Surabhi theatre performances depict these magical elements as normal occurrences, presented in a candid manner that places the real and the fantastical on the same plane. Surabhi’s more experimental productions such as *Maya Bazaar* present a novel representational style that employs extravagant visual imagery to depict stories from mythological texts as real.

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### Sri Venkateswara Natya Mandali

Sri Venkateswara Natya Mandali (SVNM, also known as Surabhi) was started by Rekandar Peda Venkata Rao and his brother China Venkata Rao in 1933, in Gividipeta village in Srikakulam district of Andhra Pradesh. *Sri Venkateswara Natya Mandali* is the most popular and active group among the 5 existing Surabhi theatre companies. The other companies are: Sri Sarada Vijaya Natya Mandali (est. 1961); Sri Vinayaka Natya Mandali (est. 1971); Vijaya Bharathi Natya Mandali (est. 1982); and Sri Bhanodaya Natya Mandali (est. 2000).

Under the leadership of Subhadramma, the elder daughter of Vanarasa Govinda Rao (who is considered as the father of Surabhi drama), this company has reached even greater heights. Subhadramma is not only famous for her male and female roles, but also known for her administrative capabilities and managerial abilities. She has also introduced new plays to their repertoire. The play *Gangavataranam* directed by Subhadramma was received with much admiration and applause. After her demise, her sons Dasarathi Rao who was a harmonist, and Bhoja Raju who was an actor and technician, took charge of the company for some time. Presently, the company is growing under the leadership of Rekander Nageswar Rao popularly known as 'Surabhi Babji' who is an actor, director, and a successful manager. Mr. Babji took charge of SVNM in 1973 and under his management, SVNM is now performing in theatres across the world.

Mr. Babji was honoured with the Sangeeta Nataka Academy Award in 2012 and the Padma Shri in 2013, by the Government

of India for his tremendous contribution to the field of theatre. Currently Sri Venkateswara Natya Mandali is located at the Public Gardens in Nampally, Hyderabad, where the government has allotted to him a temporary space to set up a theatre.

### **Plays by Sri Venkateswara Natya Mandali**

Currently, Sri Venkateswara Natya Mandali has added ten plays to the group's repertoire, on demand of both audiences and organizers. The list is as follows:

1. *Sri Krishna Leelalu*: The exploits of little Krishna
2. *Jai Pathala Bhairavi*: The story of the folk legend 'Thota Ramudu'
3. *Lavakusa*: The exploits of the twin princes- sons of Lord Sri Rama
4. *Bhakta Prahlada*: The story of great devotee Prahlada
5. *Maya Bazaar*: Carnival of Magic (The tale of Gatotkacha, the demon king)
6. *Veera Brahmam Gari Charitra*: The story of the prophet and Astrologer Veera Brahmam
7. *Balanagamma*: The story of a wicked sorcerer
8. *Chandi Priya*: The story of folk legend Chandi Priya
9. *Bheeshma*: The story of the Bheeshma from the epic *Mahabharatha*
10. *Basthi Devatha Yadamma*: The story of a woman with great virtue

## A brief history of Surabhi Theatre

The ancestors of the Surabhi family migrated from Maharashtra to the ceded (Rayalaseema) districts of Andhra Pradesh and the Karim Nagar district of Telangana in 1850. Known as *maratis* (belonging to the Kshatriya community), the ancestors of the family originally served as soldiers in King Shivaji's army. Most of them eventually settled down to do a wide range of jobs to earn a livelihood. According to M.N. Sharma, Vanarasa Sanjeeva Rao is reported to be the first ancestor of the Surabhi family. His three sons- Krishnaji, Venkoji, and Ramayya learnt the art of leather puppetry from the *lingayath* community members who would perform in their village. Around 1868, the three brothers, along with their mother, Chennamma, traveled to *Hanmadgundam* to perform leather puppet shows, which was also the birthplace of Surabhi theatre's creator and designer, Vanarasa Govinda Rao. The family that enters the tradition of performing arts through leather puppetry shows are known as *Tholubommalata*. Venkoji, his wife Chinnamma and their adopted son Govindappa (Vanarasa Govinda Rao), who eventually became the father of Surabhi theatre, was one such family. Govindappa would accompany his father whenever they were touring to perform shadow puppetry shows, visiting cities like Bombay, Pune, and Madras. It was through these travels that he had the opportunity to see stage plays performed by Parsi theatre companies. Having watched performances by the *Dharwada* Company of the *Snangli* brothers and the Altekar Hindu Nataka Mandali from Kolhapur in Maharashtra, also known

as Dhrwada Nataka Samjam in Andhra Pradesh, perform mythological stories against curtains and elaborate sets in a proscenium theatre, Govindappa was inspired to perform stage plays himself.

In 1885, Surabhi theatre performed their first ever stage play titled *Keechaka Vadha*, under the directorial guidance of Vanarasa Govinda Rao. When Govind Rao's family was invited to perform a leather puppet show as part of a wedding celebration in a village called Sorugu (Surabhi), in Raichoti Taluk of Caddapa district, Andhra Pradesh, Rao convinced the organizers to perform a stage play instead. For the first time, actors came onto stage to perform the *Keechaka Vadha* story from the *Mahabharata* and received a wonderful response from the organizers as well as from the villagers. After this first performance, the group adopted the name of the village, to become what we know today to be Surabhi Theatre.

The first theatre company of Surabhi family was Sarada Vinodini Nataka Sabha. It was later renamed as Sarada Vinodini Sangeeta Nataka Sabha. The word *sangeeta* means music in Telugu, and demonstrates the company's love of incorporating music into their plays. This same company was later renamed Govindaraya Surabhi Natya Mandali.

The Surabhi theatre family consists of five clans: *Vanarasa*, *Rekander*, *Aatok*, *Aveti*, and *Shindhe*, who are all collectively known as Surabhi people. Over the course of time, the Surabhi theatre families expanded to over 30 small family theatre groups and have successfully toured all over the country. At present, these families are settled in different parts of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.

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### **Main features of Surabhi theatre**

From its inception, Surabhi theatre has continued to adopt several performance strategies to make their performances more vibrant and attractive for their audiences. Their productions are well known for their range of innovative and spectacular stage effects that are used differently in every play. The theatre is also known for its quick scene changes, breathtaking tricks, use of magic on stage, colourful, glittering costumes, and perspective-painted curtains with beautiful scenery, illusionistic lighting, and live music.

Much preliminary preparation and ground work goes into the making of a Surabhi play, including the selection of a proper place to construct the temporary performance stage, and arrangement of all the sets and props that go into a production. The theatre normally performs ten to twenty shows on alternative days at one location. To manage all the technicalities and expenses, they need to select a space carefully.

### **Construction of a Temporary Auditorium**

The first criterion for selecting the space is that it should not be far from the present camp, a camp being a site where Surabhi theatre people stay and perform a number of shows on special invitation from the villagers. Once they finish their performances at one camp, they move to another camp. The second criterion necessitates the space having adequate resources of electricity and water. The third criterion is to make sure there is an open place that allows for building a

temporary auditorium, ideally 130 to 150 yards. Living quarters will be attached to the auditorium, along with a canteen, two booking rooms, one generator room, and separate toilets for men and women. In the early days, Surabhi theatres used *Lambda Patti* (a kind of fabric stitched by the Lambadi Community) to cover the auditorium but have now replaced it with zinc sheets– a technique adopted from the Gubbi Veeranna Company of Karnataka. The hall has three entries; two for men and one is exclusively reserved for women. Constructing the temporary hall takes about eight or ten hours, the entirety of which is done by the Surabhi family members themselves. Each member of the family including the women and children, contribute to the construction work and is a demonstration of their commitment towards a professional, commercial family theatre.

The performance hall is divided into two parts: one for the stage and the other for the auditorium, which is further divided into two parts. A third of the auditorium is reserved for first class ticket holders and the rest is meant for general tickets. The building of a temporary stage follows particular measurements so the play is visible to all sections of the audience. Generally, the measurements of the theatre are 48 feet wide and 150 feet in length. Ideally, the stage is 48 feet wide, 60 feet deep, 30 feet high, and the opening of the proscenium is 10 feet. The stage level is 3 1/2 feet above from the ground level and there is a pit right in front of the stage to accommodate musicians (Tabla and Harmonium). There is another pit in the middle of the stage that is 6 feet wide and 3 feet deep. This pit is called *Bhugruham* and works along the

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same lines as the Elizabethan Stage Pit. It is used for special effects, sudden entries, and exits of particular characters.

### Painted Curtains

Curtains occupy a major role in the Surabhi theatre performances. The entire play is performed in front of 3D perspective curtains to create a greater sense of illusion. In order to shape a more realistic sense of place through curtains, the theatre introduced additional wings and set pieces that match the background. There are many curtains hung one behind the other to signify various locations. Of the 15-20 curtains typically used per performance, three are exclusively for forest scenes, three are for royal court scenes (called *darbar* curtains), two are for interior room scenes, and the rest are used to depict different locales of the temple, road, and market place, etc. Surabhi theatre has adapted the technique of using 3D perspective scenery and stage settings from the Parsi theatre style of Dharwada Nataka Samjam to suit their needs. All the small scenes take place in front of the first curtain alternated with scenes that involve the bigger sets, interspersed with gimmicks. Before the first curtain, there is a front curtain or banner called *ankam* that lists the name of the company, its logo alongside a painting of the family goddess. Two lines in Telugu are written on the top of the *ankam* that read:

We are but toys for playing  
and you alone are the player!

Other features of Surabhi theatre include their division of the stage to enhance performances through illusions with the curtains. The stage is divided into three parts: the first being the place between the proscenium arch, the second is the mid curtain that is used for roadside scenes, the third is for non-descriptive locales. The second one is the space between the first mid curtain to second mid curtain, comprising the central part of the stage. The third one is the space between the second mid curtain and back curtain that is used for special effects. A significant amount of manpower is needed to handle these curtains; within a fraction of a second, a scene changes from one locale to another in complete darkness. Surabhi's performers have mastered this technique.

## **Lighting**

Lighting plays a key role in a Surabhi theatre production. Most of the Surabhi effects are executed using different 'intelligent lights' across the stage, made possible by their extensive experimentation with lighting techniques. The theatre uses lights not only for visibility but to also create illusions of reality. Surabhi theatre have adopted different kinds of lights from generation to generation. In the initial days, they used hand held torchlights as their main source of light, gradually shifting to small kerosene lamps. From 1900, they started using a combination of petromax lights and kerosene lamps that were then replaced by dynamo lights that not only helped control the intensity of the light but also the desired mood of the scene. Finally, there came dimmers. Surabhi companies

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used water dimmers also, and from 1960 they've used the current metallic dimmers. Surabhi theatre developed a combination of lighting designs that are perfect for their kind of performance. For instance, use of halogen lights as foot lights, intelligent light for special characters, different color combinations to depict different emotions or moods in the play. Even today, they carry their own lighting equipment to their various performance venues.

### Music

Surabhi theatre mostly performs verse plays or musicals, unlike the other Telugu theatre companies (Nataka Samajam). Music plays a prominent role in the verse plays (Padya Natakam or Sangeeta Natakam). Almost all the plays of Surabhi theatre are musicals. Rendering poems with elaborated *ragas* is one of the most prominent features of *Telugu Padya Natakam* (Verse play). Though the *Telugu Padya Natakam* stopped using songs long ago, Surabhi theatre still continues the tradition till date. Since they evolved from the puppetry tradition, Surabhi people are very fond of music and songs. During puppet shows all the actors used to sing from behind the curtain. In their first theatre production, the *Keechaka vadha*, they followed the same music tradition with small changes. Actors who are not part of a particular scene join in the chorus of songs. They first began by using *dollu* and *maddea* as the main percussions in the early days. Here, we must acknowledge the contribution of late Repati Subbadas, who changed the music dynamics in Surabhi theatre. He

completely eliminated the existing pattern of singing in chorus and shifted the music pit from on stage to inside the wings and introduced the violin while ordering the ragas and songs according to the mood and intensity of the scenes.

The younger members of Surabhi also undergo special training in music and rhythm. In the early days of the company, the managers would send their actors, both male and female, to a reputed guru to learn both vocal and instrumental music. In 1901, the harmonium became a staple part of Surabhi theatre's music repertoire. Surabhi actors practice songs and verses for several hours every day, irrespective of their seniority.

Music directors are given the highest respect, equivalent to that of the director of the play. Most of the trained Surabhi performers were employed as music directors. In special cases, they seek training from outside their family. Usually, even before starting rehearsals for the play, music rehearsals begin. The harmonist and the music director compose the *ragas* and poems. Some of the important *ragas* they use in the play are *Mohana*, *Begada*, *Kharaharipriya*, and *Kambhoji*.

## Costumes and Make up

Surabhi theatre is known for its dazzling costumes and stylized make up, which when executed perfectly, can provide key information about the character at first sight. The Surabhi members themselves design and stitch their costumes. Their costumes are very bright and colorful especially because they perform stories from epics, which in turn make for rich and grand performances. Costumes

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are specially designed for each character in each play, each taken charge of by their respective character. Their expertise in puppetry helped them understand the appropriateness of colours for characters and the use of colour schemes. In the earlier days, when the company was not as financially sound, costumes made of sarees and dhotis were collected from the village landlord. When the Reddy lords became the chief producers of Surabhi, they realized that the company needed to have its own costumes and bore the expenses.

Till date, Surabhi has never hired a makeup artist, as all the actors do their own makeup. Learning the skill is a part of theatre life; elders teach the younger generation, with each generation teaching the next. From using coal on their face to depict the demonic, they now have newer possibilities in makeup. Different colours are used for different characters so that audiences can easily identify with the character. For example, in all the *Padya natakas* (*Verse Plays*) Lord Krishna's character is portrayed through the colour blue. They use a combination of bright and warm colours in various patterns, which have become a trademark of the Surabhi theatre. The red, black, and white coloured makeup of *maayala fakeer* (a wizard) in *Jai Patala bhairavi* gives an indication of the cruel nature of the wizard. Additionally, wigs are used as a common practice in *Padya natakam* in Andhra Pradesh. They prepare their own wigs for actors according to their age, personality, characterization etc. Masks are also used for special characters such as *Ravana*, *Brahma*, *Narasimha avtara* etc. Glittering headgears, ornaments, costumes, and make up signifies the exact period of the play.

## Special Effects

Surabhi plays have become synonymous with special stage effects. Characters take entry from the sky and disappear from the stage. Artificial rain, fire tricks, and wire works are only some of the stunts seen in the Surabhi theatre performances. In some plays, special effects are observed in almost every scene. Surabhi plays are a visual treat to audiences, irrespective of their age. One must watch a Surabhi play to experience these effects on stage, where everything happens quickly, right in front of our eyes. Krishna beheading *Sishupala* with his *Sudarsana chakra* in *Sri Krishna leelalu*, *Kalika* temple scene in *Jai Pataala Bhairavi*, fight scenes in *Maya Bazaar*, the entry of *Yama* on a buffalo in *Sathi Savitri*, Lord Vishnu emerging from the pillar in *Bhakta Prahlada*, the stone breaking scene in *Brahmam Gari Charitra*, are only a few examples of their imagination executed through visual effects. Perfect timing and alertness is required to perform these kinds of visual effects. Effects are different for each play. According to M.N. Sharma, there are three different effects that are common to Surabhi plays: one is the chariot crossing the stage, the second is entry of celestial characters' from the sky, and the third is producing fire through the crossing of one's arms.

### Maya Bazaar (Carnival of Magic)

*Maya Bazaar* is the most celebrated play by *Sri Venkateswara Natya Mandali*. This play was written by Malladi Venkata Krishna Sharama in 1957, dramatized by late Aveti Manohar.

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The duration of the performance is 2 hours and 10 mins. *Maya Bazaar* is not only a commercial success, but also a visual delight. The plot is taken from the epic *Mahabharata*. This play narrates the love story of Sasirekha (daughter of Balarama) and Abhimanyu (son of Arjuna). One of the elders, Balaram who had initially agreed to the couple's wedding chooses to object to it later as he desires his daughter to marry Laxmana Kumara (the son of Duryodhana) instead. After facing insult, Abhimanyu and Subhadra go to the forest to meet Arjuna, who is in exile. With the help of Subhadra, Abhimanyu colludes with Ghatotkacha, a demon king and the son of Bheema and Hidimbi. The narration unfolds further with Ghatotkacha later realizing that Abhimanyu is his brother. Subhadra explains the story to Hidimbi and Ghatotkacha, and Hidimbi sends her son to Dwaraka to settle the matter with the help of lord Krishna. Ghatokcha creates *Maya bazaar* in Dwaraka to teach Balarama a lesson. He kidnaps the sleeping Sasirekha and flies to the forest where Abhimanyu is waiting for her. The story ends in the marriage of Abhimanyu and Sasirekha.

*Maya Bazaar* has been performed frequently in almost all the Surabhi theatre festivals on public demand. The pre-set of the performance gives us the impression of the typical setup of Surabhi Theatres camps, where old devotional songs are played on an old microphone hanging at the top of the auditorium prior to the commencement of *Maya Bazaar*. Though this is the general practice of advertising the play during their camps, Surabhi still follows the same tradition wherever they perform. The word *Maya* itself translates as illusion/magic; it is no surprise then that the play unfolds as a

series of miracles performed in each scene.

Around sixty men and woman, both actors and technicians from age groups starting at 3 months to 75 years take part in this play. The first scene itself when Narada enters from the clouds, gives the audience goose bumps. The visual pageantry of birds flying in the air, the war scene between Abhimanyu and Ghatotkacha, Abhimanyu and his mother traveling to the forest in a chariot, a water fountain in the middle of the stage, Ghatotkacha's feast scene, Sasirekha flying in the air along with her bed, Ghatotkacha transforming into a female, are a few examples to understand how Maya Bazaar is so special. Even though the Surabhi actors follow certain rules prescribed in the *Natyasastra* (physicality, height, gender) to cast roles; in *Maya Bazaar* we see cross casting. For instance, Lord Krishna's character is played by a female actress while Hidimbi, the mother of Ghatotkacha is played by a male actor. Both the actors perform their parts convincingly.

*Maya Bazaar* is a musical production with catchy songs and verse poetry that appeals to audiences of all ages. *Ghatotkacha's comic personality* appeals to the children as does the magic tricks of his assistants. Another important aspect of *Maya Bazaar* is that the audience is rarely distracted as the play unfolds as a series of spectacles. The acting styles of Surabhi are melodramatic with elaborate body gestures. Though the play is performed in Telugu, it is easily understood through the theatrics of acting and visual effects.

Another innovative idea executed by the Surabhi performers in *Maya Bazaar* is the use of montage. For instance, when Balarama rejects Abhimanyu and Sasirekha's wedding

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proposal, they both sing a song in grief from different places. With the help of a net curtain and lights, it appears that they are simultaneously in two separate places on the stage- Abhimanyu talks to the moon in the background, while Sasirekha talks to the moon in the foreground.

Surabhi theatre is also known for its heavy, stirring sets. The house of Ghatotkacha and his dinosaur throne, the royal palace of Dwaraka, and the creation of Maya Bazaar are a few examples. To sum up, *Maya Bazaar* is a spectacle on the stage with all the features of the Surabhi Theatre Company. In the era of globalization, contemporary theatre practice in India is exploring new innovations and technology every day, and the existence of our traditional and folk theatre forms are being questioned. Is it our responsibility to patronize such forms and evolve them for future generations to partake of and enjoy.

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All images from Maya Bazaar, by Sri Venkateswara Natya Mandali (Surabhi Theatre), performed at the Open Air Theatre, Kala Academy at Serendipity Arts Festival 2017 at Panaji Goa, December 20th and 21st 2017.

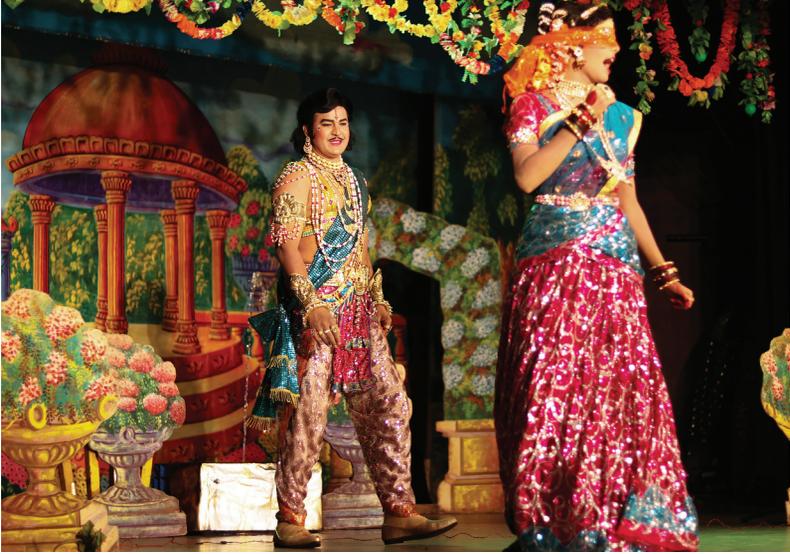












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### Biographies

**Shaik John Bashur** who is a theatre activist and a practitioner of theatre for young audience, completed his Masters with a Gold Medal from the Dept of Theatre Arts, University of Hyderabad, in 2009. He has been conducting workshops and making performances for underprivileged children for the past 10 years. He has been associated with grass root level NGOS, conducting teacher training programmes in the field of Theatre in Education (TiE). He has presented research papers in various national and international conferences such as the University of Stockholm, the University of Oslo, Pondicherry Central University, and the University of Hyderabad. As a theatre practitioner, he has been associated with International Theatre Festival of Kerala (ITFOK), International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR), International Ibsen Festival, and Theatre Outreach Unit (ToU). He is currently pursuing his PhD from University of Hyderabad, and his area of doctoral research mainly focuses on the influence of Henrik Ibsen on Indian Theatre.





# **People's Music**

*Special Project curated by*  
Sumangala Damodaran and  
Sudhanva Deshpande

*In collaboration with*  
Shaaz Ahmed

First showcased at  
Serendipity Arts Festival  
2017



# **The Public Loom**

**Prayas Abhinav**

With research assistance by **Priyamvada Gaur**

## **Introduction**

“We create music when we are happy. We create music when we are sad. We make music to accompany work. We make music for relaxation. There is music that brings entire communities together. There is music that only the truly sophisticated aficionado can appreciate in all its subtleties. There is no feeling that music cannot convey. There is music for every occasion. Including protest and resistance.”

-Excerpt from the exhibition text to *People’s Music*

Much like the fields of sports, teaching, and the performing arts, the joy that music offers is truly and thoroughly enjoyed by the practitioner. Music has an evocative power that is somehow related to our ability to learn [1], allowing it to become a universal language. But what exactly is music? What evolutionary purpose has it served? Why have we, as a global community, spent so much time, energy, and an incredible amount of resources in creating, listening to, and learning how to play music?

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This essay is in the context of the exhibition *People's Music*, curated by Sumangala Damodaran and Sudhanva Deshpande, in collaboration with Shaaz Ahmed and Inderjit Singh. The exhibition was shown at the Serendipity Arts Festival in Goa in 2017, at the Art Park (Children's Park). The exhibition presented archival recordings and visual images of musicians and their acts from the independence struggle, from when the nation and its identity was very young, and the years that have led up till now. The exhibition included material from different linguistic and regional contexts and sought to make connections between the music of the time and the social issues considered significant then. Songs, videos, lyrics, street art, animation, documentation etc., added layers to the project. Additionally, it included contextualization, research, and interpretation of these materials to be able to understand their larger significance and purpose.

Music is often thought to be the voice of the people, it is believed to capture the sentiment or flavour of how they live. But how does it do that? How and why does music occupy a more central role in our media, helping us understand particular moments in our shared history? Whereas painting and other forms of art such as dance and theatre are typified by temporal and historical frameworks, music is often thought to be timeless. Music is of course not necessarily acknowledged or accepted to be any one thing by everyone, and perhaps, it is this split nature of its status that creates space for an activist response in the field.

As a specific field, classical music is as structured and as difficult to 'break into' as any other art form. But in the case of 'people's

music' - the music performed by communities connected either by the practice of their profession, political orientation or social justice context, a spontaneous emergence of a specific quality of sound through the expression of preference and support can be seen. We can make a clear distinction between the music that is carefully curated-institutionally or otherwise - and the music that becomes popular spontaneously by finding resonance with groups of people. In this essay, we will aim to establish the value of a shared emotion or emotional association with a piece of music that has become popular and has come to represent a time or a movement.

Unlike popular music that creates a shared recognition through exposure and distribution, people's music that comes to represent times or movements, achieves its position through the shared practice of singing. This music comes into existence as part of a different process - that of motivating a broad set of people, sharing a set of beliefs, and rehearsing a new attitude with them. So, we come to look at activism and the fruits of activism in a more elaborate way. Activism consists of a set of actions that allows a group of people to express their perspective and voice reasons for their disagreement with the institutional order, state or other symbols of authority. Over time, activism has been understood to refer to the resistance that has needed the support of physical bodies on the street. There has been a great deal of thought about why this tangible and visible form of activism is still the most relevant. There is a kind of immediate pressure that the local authorities feel and that forces them to act and respond. This outcome is a repercussion of the ideas around control and

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access to space. The tension produced by the presence of people in large numbers questions the status quo pointedly and deliberately, manifesting an intense power that is amplified when this group of people starts to sing. The sound of protest as music becomes a surrogate to capture the mood and spirit of the struggle involved.

Music has, at times, been the sole trace of all the group processes that are involved in the different theatres of society. These marks become essential historical records and ways for students and historians to access the past. We need to access history for various reasons. One of these reasons is to study; another is to historicize or reminisce. In the context of cultural studies, the quality and character of music is unpacked in order to trace its connections with the environment from which it has emerged. This last thread is of interest to us to further examine and analyze the music that rose out of activism vis-a-vis the quality of activism that transpired on the ground.

The frame of activism and the criteria of what is visible within it, is one of the variables that we can explore and make broader and more nuanced. What is typically meant by activism is a specific kind of overt behaviour that can be seen, measured, and recognized as activism. Practices that have already been identified and acknowledged as being of an activist nature register as such. This filter (of having an activist intent) is unable to assess novel kinds of human activity that involve the sentiment of activism, and but not its format alone.

Many individuals do not have any concrete political opinion but do share some fundamental grouses with the establishment. Can we consider their responses to

impassioned cultural change as being anxious or abrasive expressions? This essay explores both these kinds of actors.

## Identity

The most popular form of music in India has become background film music. In the last few decades, there have been upstart efforts to help stimulate other channels of consumption. But none of these have developed sufficiently enough to have a reasonably mature community that either produces or consumes their music. So, in turn, film music has become the defining condition of both popular taste as well as parameters of identity. With film music becoming a token and symbol of identity-related beliefs, what was a personal process earlier has now become a process driven by popular culture. With this shift, activism has come to be defined in popular terms related to its motivation and mandate. For instance, the film and music of the Bollywood film, *Rang de Basanti* (dir. Rakesh Omprakash Mehra, 2006) created a mass movement styled after its lead character— a contemporary activist whose protest against a corrupt government fed into a larger, nationwide movement. When such synchronization happens, a circular (looped) relationship is formed between the cinema screen, its soundtrack, and reality. One does not know if cinema is influencing the real world or if it is the other way around. In this scenario, one has to understand cinema music as a kind of reflective amplification device of nascent tendencies manifesting in the populace. If we consider the possibility that the tendencies to perform

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protest naturally exist in the cultural milieu, why are we not able to see these more prominently around us? Why does the idea of protest still seem like a cultural anomaly or some kind of strange behaviour instead of being a part of our everyday experience? The answer is something that should make us reflect upon our contemporary condition more. The truth is that we do not know our immediate surroundings and the world anymore through direct or personal experience, but instead, through the intermediate world consisting of the media, literature, art (in its many manifestations and formats that exist today). This indirect awareness of the world means that we can often be trapped inside a concocted image of what the world is. We can very well be led to believe the world is in a particular condition when it is not. This misapprehension or delusion crafts our worldview in a more direct way than our own experience of or in the world.

Instead of hearing the rumblings around us, we more readily believe that we are an apathetic and detached people who will only be moved and forced to protest by extraordinary circumstances. The instinctive discomfort that we constantly feel on seeing the lack of empathy or the incapacity for sensitive responses, conditions us into thinking that our society is uncaring and unfeeling in general. A casual review of the flavour of stories covered every day in the media will attest this statement. Cynicism produces itself and enters us into a recursive cycle. This cycle can be broken by reinforcing our physical networks and by cautiously interacting with virtual information. It is worth learning how digital and social technologies work to be able to understand their limitations,

as well as know how to extend and design new mechanical possibilities for human interaction.

## Music and Cognition

Music is also a means to measure time. [2] Clocks measure only mechanical time. There is one distinct start and stop point. Continuously staggering sequences of events also need to be measured. These measurements are discreetly performed and have an infinite scale. The scale is vast at all scales of perception. How does this measuring help us? How does this expand the depth of our silence? What we know is that our own personal experience is abstract in nature. We rely on music because we feel more comfortable associating our experience and something external like music rather than developing associations between what we feel and the events in our life. We can generally characterize our emotionally intense moments with soundtracks and musical ambiances.

The word 'music' is a poor descriptor. Music is an experience. Music is a memory in the sense that is known only when experienced. [3] If we rely on the performance or accuracy of this memory, we need to identify its core building blocks. Memories have layers. They have a surgical-precision-quality as well as a map. In this depth there is always a subaltern, the layer or the section that has remained in the shadows (for whichever reason) for a very long time. All the shadow-areas of history can someday be prodded to reveal their history, and this prodding process negotiates between the terrestrial and the subaltern. The mobilisation of the subaltern (in this context: the

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community or social group that has to rely on coherent methods to voice out its angst) or the collective transformation of the subaltern is a profoundly significant historical event. In the broader story of time, one of the ways this story is recorded is through sound. The activist character of music may not necessarily be the quality of music but instead be the quality of time. There are times that produce music that is challenging or provocative, and there are times that create music that is very simple.

Activist music is also the story of a moment. The moments and their qualities don't depend just on the production of events. It also depends on the characters of the musician and to a lesser extent, the qualities of the performer. The significant influence on the quality of the narrative that time produces is the nature of events and the degree to which the actors of the time were known and written about. Sometimes the stories of heroes who are one of us are lesser known than heroes who are distant and have grand narratives attached to them. The emotions, passions, and concerns of those in our vicinity are often not amplified at the same intensity and quality as those that are exhibited by people who are a part of a more visible eco-system. This disparity means that in the lens we are developing to look at activist music generally, and with the *People's Music* project, we are conscious of many kinds of both these groups. This sound, graphic and animation installation, presents music of protest, resistance, and social engagement over the last 80 or so years. *People's Music* showcases material from different languages and regional contexts on everyday concerns of livelihoods, work, hunger, strife, war and conflict.

The opening sequence of the video is an excerpt of Nina Simone's song *Strange Fruit*, in which she sings, "Southern trees bear strange fruit, Blood on the trees and blood on the root," a song which protests racism, speaking directly to the lynching of African Americans in the United States at the time. Also featured are verses by the lesser known Junaid, Akhlaq and Pehlu Khan. Alongside this are Ravi Shankar's moving music for the 1946 film *Dharti ke Laal* (the only film produced by the Indian People's Theatre Association); Makhdoom Mohiuddin's soulful anti-war song; songs of Bangladesh's *Bhasha Andolan* (Language Movement); Iqbal Bano's stirring rendition of Faiz Ahmed Faiz's *Hum Dekhenge*; Paul Robeson's *Ol' Man River* and Sambhaji Bhagat's foot-tapping *Lafda Kai Ko Re*. People's movements that do not have any significant actors in leadership positions as well personal-vision based crusades both feature in the project, and in any honest assessment of activism as a phenomenon, both these kinds of events can be seen.

By urging us to look around and beyond ourselves, perhaps music is a means to bring us together, as a society, we need to collectively make activist culture a little more accessible instead of the unique and extraordinary scenario that it is today. This can be done by consistently and proactively creating an opening for talking about those outside the general consciousness and so avoiding the need for a concentrated articulation by the effected and excluded community. Activism needs to pitch itself as an extra dramatic idealism because there is that much of a disconnect between the ideas it represents and ordinary existence.

If somehow these ideas are synchronized with personal values

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that can be manifested more readily and more ordinarily, then they are validated. This applies not just to activism but also all other ideas that have been imagined to hold the key to the evolution and progress of our society, in general. [4] For an idea to be framed as an ideal does not help its dispersion, integration or adoption. What helps a thought go through these processes is its inclusion in the fundamental charter of what it means to be human. The imagination of what it means to be human (the idea or the notion) is the potential of philosophy and storytelling. Music is often the demonstration/manifestation of philosophy or at least of philosophical perspectives and imagination. [5]

### **Music and storytelling**

What stories does music tell? Music is often the story itself - through the transitions between the up and down of sonic progression- there are stories about human struggles, joys, and sorrows. The stories told through music are conveyed in the form of blocks of musical sensation. Each block of 'musical feeling' is a module of musicality through which the more massive superstructure of the musical experience is built. Similarity is one such block; measure being another. The ambiguity of experience occupies fixed positions with this measure. Density is another block. The air into which music has been transmitted and the space into which music has not been transferred is different. We understand this difference from the perspective of density.

Music is memorized through memory patterns, but the memory of music itself is complex.

When music is retrieved, only the felt experience is remembered; specific details and schematic of the musical moment are often forgotten. When music is not revived, the mind is capable of filling in and creating fiction. Music remembered is often sweeter than the actual music. [6] Music is often simulated in mathematics, but a simulation is always aware that it is not real. A simulation never deludes itself of its makeshift arrangement. When music is the answer, the question is not known. What does it answer? What is the need to come up with a solution? What is the negative space of music? If musical archives were the notebooks of experience, and if narratives were getting recorded in musical form, then music would be known as a kind of shorthand of natural language. Music is the absence of a linear narrative. If the negative of identification were to be the norm, the music would have a precise function irrespective of the allegiances to the institutions that support it. We experience a state of being and do not care about the content. The surface of music contains the essence of musicality without needing to engage with music at all. This surficial ability saves us from the pain of having to progress from aesthetic category to category restlessly. The ability to be static stems from a state of featureless harmony. Noise and music can be packaged together to generate a hum [7] without any differentiation. In a hum, all musical strains can be found, and all harmonies can be distinguished. It is the single flat surface of sound that escapes all other formats and bounds. This hum can also be associated with the drone- the common element to musical practices the world over. The hum/drone in Indian music has been produced

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by the Tanpura. Tuning the Tanpura is understood to be a specific art because it requires one to focus on the form of the formless. We will use the hum to centre ourselves within a universe of featureless obscurity. If we do not need to filter the harmonics of experience, we accumulate the corpus of all that there is to be churned and assimilated. Stirring this corpus develops the honesty required to be able to listen to all voices as identical.

### Historical Snippets of Activist Music

The history of activist music is related to the idea of how we have gradually expanded the notion of what it is ethical or dignified to do as humans. What are the silhouettes of a history? We can do a primary analysis drifting deftly through time in a non-linear fashion.

In 2006, during the elections, a song called “Nauchami Narayana” was released. “Nauchami Narayana deftly manipulates devotional and political content by juxtaposing the imagined greatness of divine rule with the lived ineptness of human rule.” [8] In India’s elections the social group that is not supported/manipulated by a political party is often without a voice and is unable to articulate their concerns. Such groups often need to appeal to interests of a broader scope than political ideology and in India- the religious or mythological belief system is a good alternative. These belief-systems are often of a very narrow regional scope, and so correspondingly such efforts are generally towards asserting a regional identity. The Sidi community in Gujarat is an important case-in-point.

The Sidis are a historical trading community with African heritage, and they face a unique set of social problems such as racial discrimination, marginalization by the media on issues of violence or abuse. “Music, in particular, is of great importance to the Sidi way of life- in the present as in the past. It is through their music that the Sidi became known to the wider Indian public, followed by Western tourists and- over the past few years- to global audiences as well.” [9] Although the musical practices of the community most probably developed as a form of cultural expression, they have also allowed rendered them in a knowable and accessible format. Goma music and its link to the African tradition keeps the community and their stories alive.

Music implies multiple sets of connections oriented around the “voice” (for instance, one is the audible voice, and another is the agency). “...and where in a musical voice do we locate “voice”? Looking for a “voice” implies listening to the audible musical voice for a will, or intention, behind it; in Western musicology, this has become the central work of interpretation...” [10] This lens offers a complex pool of data to look at the issue more closely. The question of who is heard and who is not, and correspondingly who is allowed to speak and who is not has to be dealt with. The field of “subaltern activism” is invariably invoked and brought into focus. Safdar Hashmi was a playwright and a pioneer of political street theatre in India. He was known for giving an amplified voice to issues that ranged from difficulties faced by the labour community to political acts of manipulation. He was associated with the Communist Party of India in the 1970s. His

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work with the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) led to the formation of the Jana Natya Manch (People's Theatre Front; JANAM for short) in 1973. The Jana Natya Manch has staged numerous pieces of proscenium as well as street theatre across the years and has mounted campaigns around price rise, elections, communalism, economic policy, unemployment, trade union rights, globalization, women's rights, the education system, etc.

The Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust, Sahmat was formed in the aftermath of the murder of Safdar Hashmi by communal elements for taking his movement to the masses/the middle class. The trust became a single-issue movement that works in a focused manner to eradicate communal-divides in the country. Numerous musicians, poets, artists, and other intellectuals from around the country joined the movement and contributed their resources and their time to develop the movement. But strangely this phenomenon led to the movement becoming elitist and caused it to lose its connection with the middle-class from which it has itself emerged. [11]

In the post-9/11 climate, radio stations and community-based television-stations around the country received a lot of poetry submissions from their listeners. Poetry is understood to be a community's way of recovering with different kinds of crisis. India has had two poet prime ministers (V P Singh and Atal Behari Vajpayee) who have each, used poetry in a way that captures the complex spirit of the times and deals with difficult times and uncertain futures. [12]

## Some Contemporary Practitioners and Their Stories

Indian Ocean is a band formed in New Delhi, in 1990. Susmit Sen, Asheem Chakravarty, Rahul Ram, and Amit Kilam were the original band members. A lot of Indian Ocean's songs are lyrically and structurally (the story of their staging, their creation, their research) based on contemporary issues like the protection of the environment, state inaction, farmers rights, human rights violations etc. They have been committed to activist struggles around the country. They have lent their celebrity as well as song-composition skills to activists like Kailash Satyarthi in their campaigns against child labour. [13]

In 2011, when Stefan Kaye initiated a ska (a form of music that originated in Jamaica) band in New Delhi, he didn't receive a very encouraging response from the musician community. But gradually the new band became a forum for them to voice their concerns of the university-linked community that they came from. This led to the formation of the Ska Vengers (Delhi Sultanate/Taru Dalmia, Begum X, The Late Nikhil Vasudevan, Tony 'Bass' Guinard, Chaitanya 'Chaz' Bhalla and Stefan 'Flexi' K. At the time of the 2014 elections, they released a cover of Dandy Livingstone's Rudy, *A Message To You* with lyrics about the 2002 riots in Gujarat and the PM-candidate's role in orchestrating them. As a result of that track, they were clubbed along with the Communists by the media in the highly polarized atmosphere of the time. [14]

D'Angelo, an elusive neo-soul artist, came out of his self-imposed sabbatical to support the 'Black Lives Matter'

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movement. The release was considered timely because of the political climate at the time and was very well-received by audiences and critics alike. After the events that followed Fergusson, D'Angelo said that "The only way I do speak out is through music. I want to speak out," soon after that Black Messiah was released. [15]

### **Future Directions and Possibilities for People's Music**

People's music has in many ways lost its connection with the public. We have yet not managed to adopt the new methods and possibilities that have emerged with the Internet to develop new distribution networks that are suitable for activism. Somehow the activist community has accepted their diminished role by working themselves into a corner in a manner that partially ghettoizes them in front of audiences. They have done this by not being either tactical or strategic in the choice of the language or media/platform for engagement. They have consistently failed to see the value in keeping the lines of communication open (across the differing set of perspectives on an issue) and have thereby been satisfied by preaching only to the converted. It has not been able to absorb the means of pop culture and mass media strategically. Until the activist urge is connected back to every day and the commonplace, it is unlikely that there will be any new wave of engagement with the issues that affect our survival and dignity on this planet.

The purpose of the activist project cannot be to be self-

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congratulatory in its tone and message- it will still need to hold the desire to expand itself beyond its circle of support and engagement. The activist community needs to think of how activism and other forms of cultural expression can be blended. A culture in which things are not so neatly and coherently understandable in terms of their intentions are hybrids in tone and form, offering a more complex landscape to parse and analyze for meaning.

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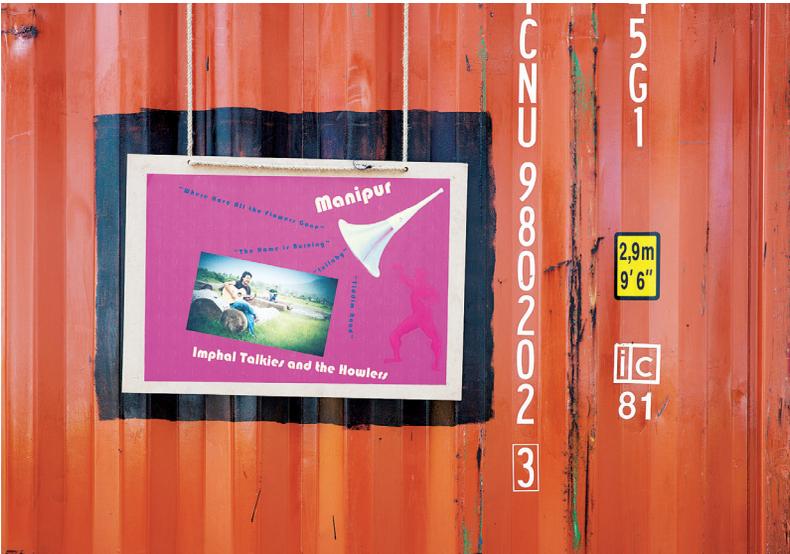
All image from installation views of the exhibition “People’s Music”, showcased at Serendipity Arts Festival, Panaji Goa, 15-22 December 2017. The exhibition, which took place in a cargo container, was displayed on the Promenade, outside the Children’s (Art) Park.

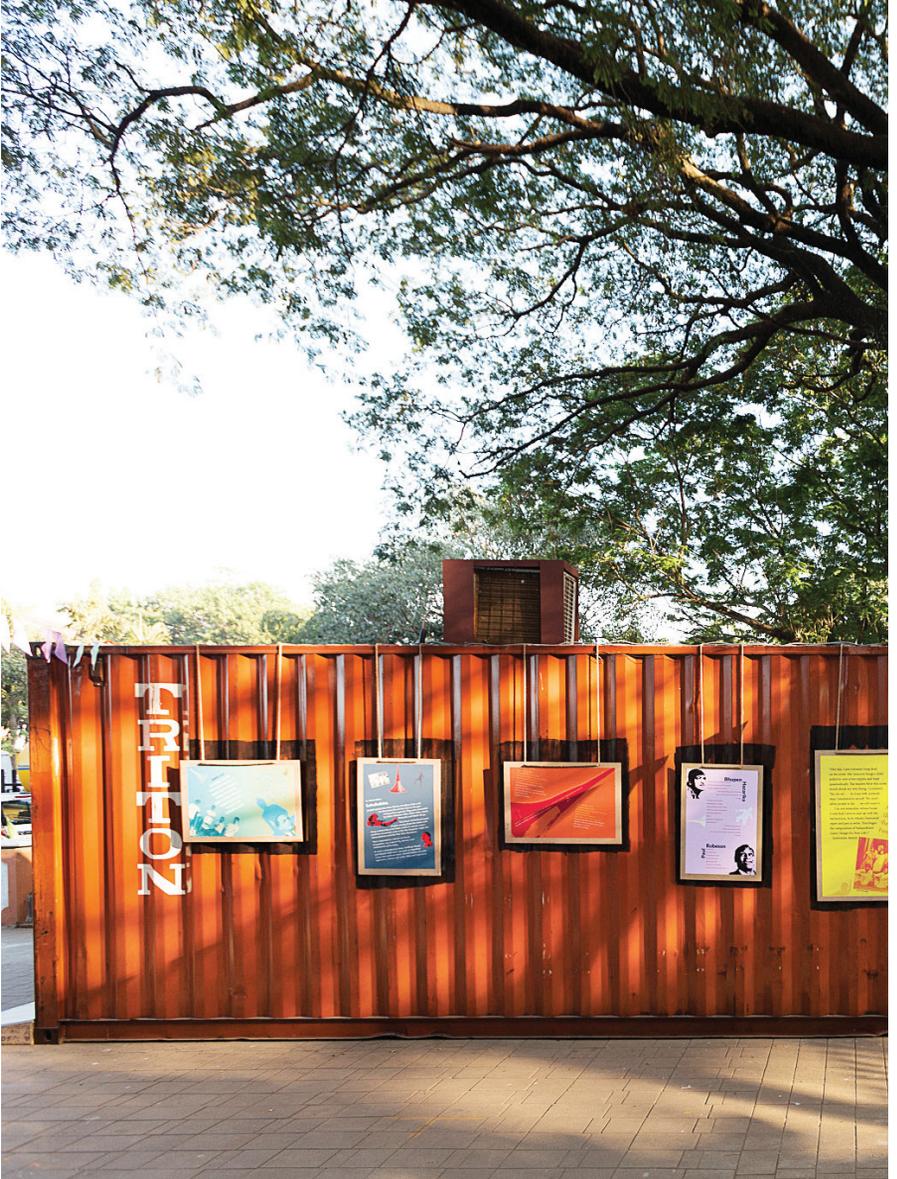














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### Biographics

**Prayas Abhinav** is an artist, teacher, and entrepreneur. At present, he is working on a startup called Storyflock that has interests in e-learning, applied research, and novel forms of content development. He has worked in the last few years on numerous pieces of speculative fiction, software, games, interactive installations, public interventions, and curatorial projects. He has written extensively on poetic thought as a form of lingual communication. He contributed to research and projects at northeastwestsouth (n.e.w.s) (Amsterdam, NL). He has conducted workshops at Centre for Environmental Planning Technology (CEPT) (Ahmedabad), Dutch Art Institute (Arnhem, NL), MICA (Ahmedabad) and National Institute of Design (Ahmedabad & Bangalore). In the past he led the Centre for Experimental Media Arts (CEMA) at the Srishti School of Art, Design and Technology in Bangalore. He is the initiator and the Director of the Museum of Vestigial Desire and founding member of Surfatial.

He has developed his research and practice with the support of fellowships by Sarai, Openspace, the Center for Experimental Media Arts (CEMA), TED and Lucid. He has been in residencies at Khoj (India), Coded Cultures (Austria) and dis-locate (Japan). He has shared his work at a wide range of festivals and venues including Exit Art, Transmediale, 48c, Futuresonic, ISEA and Wintercamp.

**Priyamvada Gaur** is an architecture graduate. She currently works as a designer and researcher at Storyflock. Previously, she has worked on architectural design and research projects during her training years as an architect. In poetry, she finds immense

peace and pleasure and tries her hand at words herself.

**Sumangala Damodaran** is an economist and a musician. She has been involved with teaching and research in Economics, Development Studies, and Popular Music Studies at Ambedkar University Delhi (AUD) for eight years now, after seventeen years teaching at Lady Shri Ram College for Women, Delhi University. She is the author of *The Radical Impulse – Music in the Tradition of the Indian People's Theatre Association* based on her research, and has also collaborated with poets and musicians from South Africa for a project titled 'Insurrections'. She is currently engaged in researching the relationship between music and migration, particularly of women in slavery.

**Sudhanva Deshpande** is an actor, theatre director, and publisher. He's been with Jana Natya Manch since 1987, acting in, helping devise, and directing dozens of plays, both on the streets and in closed spaces. He's performed and led workshops in several countries including Palestine, South Africa, the US, UK, Germany, Poland, and the Netherlands. Deshpande also co-directed two documentary films on the theatre legend Habib Tanvir and his group Naya Theatre, and has taught at several institutions, including National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, and AJK Mass Communication Research Centre, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi. Since 1999, he has been Managing Editor at LeftWord Books.

**Shaaz Ahmed** is an innovative storyteller who works with multiple mediums and methods to construct visual narratives.

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He studied Animation Film Design at the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad. His last film Talking Walls fetched him multiple accolades nationally and internationally. His recent body of work explores art animation and unique animated Installations in spaces like hospitals, educational institutions, and restaurants.



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The Legacy of the Surabhi Family Theatre  
by Shaik John Bashur

The Public Loom  
by Prayas Abhinav

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