ANTHROPOLOGY OF ARTISTIC COMMUNITIES

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Original Article

ARTISTIC COMMUNITIES TODAY: IDENTITY, UNCERTAINTY, HOPE FOR FUTURE

This article analyses the ethnographic profile of the several traditional artistic communities, who performed for the public in the specific ethno-cultural spaces and made this their main profession. Traditional performing and visual arts, a matter of national pride in many countries today, until recently were the jobs of grossly socially marginal communities and groups. Often a socially inherited profession, integrated in a system of exchange, art was often a highly uncertain source of income. For a long time, the social status of many traditional artistic communities all over the world was very low. But between the 1900s and 1950s, music, dance, and theater went through a crucial transformation: from being predominantly dependent they got the status of high art worldwide. The ideas of the "national", "classic", and "modern", "contemporary", were attached to the various art forms. While certain segments of art practice were codified and even frozen, creating somewhat like a "museum of art", or cultural heritage (which leads to the so-called phenomena of "heritagesation" and "exotisation", wiping out the traditional cultural and social contexts of art and alienating it), other practices continue to develop and still find themselves under perpetual transformation. Today the situation in different communities, social strata, and ethnic groups, whose traditional job is connected to art and performance, varies significantly. While some communities of musicians, dancers, various drama players, storytellers, puppeteers, martial artists are successful and engaged in national and international festivals, others decline or even vanish. While using the data of her ethnographic fieldwork, as well as the material of the discussion that happened during the Panel "Artistic Communities Today: Identity, Uncertainty, Hope for Future", organized by her within the World Anthropological Congress, 2023 (New Delhi, India), Svetlana Ryzhakova analyzes the common places and similarities in the identity of the artistic communities, the problems they face nowadays, as well as prospects for the future. The article also contains the fieldwork material collected by the author in Gujarat and related to the Targala community, artists who perform the folk theater Bhavai.

Keywords: *artistic communities, performance, ethnography, social changes, traditions, transformation*

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This article emerged as a result of my longitude ethnographic study, which lasted for more than 20 years (while my practical involvement in the dance world has continued for more than 30 years). It aims at a complex analysis of the ethnographic profile of several traditional artistic communities, who perform for the public in specific ethno-cultural spaces, making this their main profession and source of income. During the last decade, I explored this topic mostly on the diverse and highly exciting Indian material, and discussed it profoundly at many conferences, including the annual conference of the Indian Society for Theater Studies, since 2012. I gained a lot of insights from the long talks with my dear colleagues engaged in theater, music, and dance studies — Ravi Chaturvedi, Vibha Sharma, Urmimala Sarkar Munshi, Rustom Bharucha, Purushottam Bilimale, Prabodh Jhingan, and many other scholars. Apart from that, being a disciple of Kathak dancer and teacher, Guru Rajendra Gangani, I got a lot of support and knowledge from him and his extended family, engaged in performing art for ages. Apart from that, I have observed the artistic scene and situation in India from the ethnographic point of view for more than three decades, visiting festivals, talking with the artists, and analyzing all published materials available on this wide topic.

Let me first elaborate on the subject of the research. Traditional performing and visual arts, a matter of national pride in many countries today, until recently were jobs of grossly socially marginal communities and groups (for example *Soneji* 2012). Often a socially inherited profession, integrated in a system of exchange, art was often a highly uncertain source of income. For a long time, the social status of many traditional artistic communities all over the world was very low. But between the 1900s and 1950s, music, dance, and theater went through a crucial transformation: from being predominantly dependent they got the status of high art worldwide *(O'Shea 2005;* Gaston 1996). Due to vital changes in patronage and the emergence of the government institutions as main patrons, traditional artistic families were replaced by other forms of social organization of art (see *Kramrisch* 1956). The ideas of the "national", "classic", and "modern", "contemporary", were attached to the various art forms and developed (*Vatsyayan* 1998; *Kothari* 1989; *Chakravorty, Gupta* 2010; *Walker* 2014). While certain segments of art practice were codified and even frozen, creating somewhat like a "museum of art", or cultural heritage, other practices continue to develop and still find themselves under perpetual transformation. This leads to the so-called phenomena of "heritagesation" and "exotisation", wiping out the traditional cultural and social contexts of art and alienating it. Since the mid-20th century, theatre, folklore, and anthropological studies have opened up new ways of engagement with the world for practitioners (*Schechner* 1985; *Sarkar Munshi, Burridge* 2011; *Chakravorty, Gupta* 2018). A very valuable series of books on the topic called "Dance and Performance Studies" has been published by Berghahn Books publishing house (New York and Oxford) since 2007.

Today the situation in various communities, social strata, and ethnic groups, whose traditional job is connected to art and performance, varies a lot. While some communities of musicians, dancers, drama players, storytellers, puppeteers, martial artists, etc. show

some success and social mobility, engaged in national and international festivals, others decline or even vanish. One example of an artistic community still surviving in today's India is the so-called Targala caste of Gujarat, the main object of my longitude fieldwork study in 2015–2023. I analyzed the current socio-cultural outlook of Nayak, Vyas, and Bhojak groups, jointly known as the Targala caste, whose traditional profession was a performance of Bhavai, the traditional theater of northern Gujarat and Saurashtra. This study resulted in a paper titled "Targala Community and Bhavai of Gujarat: Hereditary Performers of a Traditional Indian Theatre. Cultural Context and Social Functions", delivered on the Panel at the World Anthropological Congress, 2023 (New Delhi, India).

Targala community: traditional performers of Bhavai folk theater of Gujarat

Understanding the social status and relationships of specific communities in India is an exciting yet uneasy task. Indian society is dotted with many forms of identity, among which is the socially hierarchical principle, which includes the functional principle of *varnas* and which turns out to be hereditarily fixed, and *castes*, usually coming from belonging to a *jati*, mostly endogamous, but in everyday life interdependent groups.

Many communities do not fit neatly into one cell or another and may have double, triple, or intermediate forms of identity. Particularly dynamic are both the statuses and relationships of groups or communities engaged in art and worship: storytellers, musicians, actors, dancers, and various ritual specialists. The social function of mediators they perform puts them in a kind of intermediate position between "high" and "low", "pure" and "impure" groups, positions, and situations.

A notable case of the conflicting conjugation of *varna* and *jati* statuses and the formation of a specific identity is the tradition of Bhavai folk theater performed by traditional troupes settled in the central and northern regions of Gujarat. These are representatives of the castes (or subcastes) called Nayak, Vyas, and Bhojak, united under the umbrella name of Targala or Taragala, which is often interpreted by my informants as a "three-folds community", or *tra-ghara*, "three-houses [community]" (FM 2016–2018, Gujarat. Informants: A. Nayak, B. Vyas)[1].

There are, however, other explanations of this word, for example, "thirteen <communities>" who have the right to eat together. The differences between the Nayaks, Vyas, and Bhojaks appear to be partly regional: while the Nayaks and Bhojaks are settled in North Gujarat, well aware of each other, the Vyas are residents of the more remote areas of Saurashtra. The second difference turned out to be confessional: Bhojaks serve Jain families and in a few cases could be Jains themselves. They are fewer in number than the Nayaks and Vyas. Like the other performers in India, their social status is supposed to be quite "low". John Emigh writes of the performing Bhavai as traveling troupes (*Emigh* 2003: 63), which indicates the low or marginal status of these communities from the Brahmanic point of view. However, in the cultural memory of the Targalas themselves there is a legend about their mixed origin, which traces the formation of Bhavai in their modern form to a specific creator, a Brahmin named Asaita Thakkar, who lived in the 14th century.

The legend of the origin of the Bhavai theater takes us to the era of medieval Gujarat and speaks about the complex relationships between different communities — the Audi-

[1] FM (here and below) — Fieldwork material collected by author; fieldwork data (observations, talks and interviews) are fixed in the dairies.

Fig. 1. Baldev Dhalsuk Nayak, Bhavai performer. Kalol village, Gujarat.
Photo by Svetlana Ryzhakova, 2018

chhya Brahmins and Kanbi landowners, who, from the Brahmanical perspective, are of the much "lower" status, as well as Koli employees and some acting communities, whose caste names we do not know.

The Audichhya Brahmins trace their origins back to the 12th century, the "golden era" in the history of the future Gujarat, the reign of King Jayasimha Siddharaja, the fourth of the Solanki Rajput dynasty (he ruled approximately in 1094–1143). According to the legend, it was he who invited 1001 Brahmins from Varanasi to Gujarat for regular cult service to Shiva in the form of a *lingam* with a thousand faces, *sahasralingam*, near the sacred lake. The descendants of those Brahmin priests settled here and became known as the Gujarati Audichhya Brahmins.

Kanbi is a vast community of peasants, formally classified as Shudras but differing in class: there are both the village poor and wealthy people and even dominant castes and rulers of small areas. Over time, the Kanbis adopted the titles Patidar and Patel, which have become much more common today, while the name Kanbi is now perceived as somewhat offensive. Kanbi were economically independent, they had a widespread collective property system of *mahalvari*. They worshipped Mother-Goddesses, were not vegetarians, and had a tradition of bride price.

The legend of the origin of the Bhavai, transmitted orally (FM), states that Ganga, the daughter of Hemal Patel, a Kanbi ruler in the small princely state of Unjha, was abducted by the Muslim governor (*subedar*) Jahan Roz of the Khilji clan. Patel's family priest Asaita Thakar, an Audichhya Brahmin known for his communication skills and artistry, was sent to rescue the girl from captivity. He went to the kidnapper, sang for him, gained his trust, and finally declared that Ganga was his daughter and demanded her back. Then the cunning *subedar*, being well informed of the local caste norms, said: "Alright, I'll return her to you, just sit down and eat with her." Asaita Thakar sat down and ate, and the girl was returned, but he was expelled from his caste because he had "defiled" himself by eating with a girl who formally belonged to the Shudra class. Forced to look for a new home and a new in-

come source, Asaita began to create plays for the actors, *kathakars*, and tellers of epic stories and undertook a reform of their theater. According to the legend, Asaita himself wrote 360 plays, *vesha* (which, apparently means "scenarios, plays"), of which 60 have reached our days (*Desai* 1972). The troupes he reformed formed the basis of Bhavai as a special theater; the performers became known as Bhavaiya, "those who represent the Bhavai". According to the legend, Hemal Patel granted him land, provided financial support, and arranged his marriage with Hemal Patel's daughter, Ganga. Either the three sons of Ganga and Asaita and their descendants or all the artists he mentored, who consider themselves his spiritual "children", became the Targala caste. They say they are Brahmins, but their daily habits are of an intermediate caste. Many of them are illiterate, which is hardly possible for Brahmins. According to statistics from 1901, there were 12,889 Bhavaiyas in the Bombay Presidency, which included a large area of modern Gujarat (*Kirparam* 1988: 222). There are also Brahmins of the Thakkar caste in Gujarat, who are different from the Targalas and are not engaged in artistic life.

Bhavai theater is an important cultural institution in Gujarat. It fulfills several functions, both ritual and secular, such as information, entertainment, ceremonial, and didactic; it is a tool for social integration and criticism. The collective patrons of the Bhavai theater are people of two castes (*Kirparam* 1988: 223): the Kanbi, better known today as the Patidar or Patel, Thakur, Rajpurs, and the Koli, who are believed to have sheltered the exiled Asaita Thakkar (*Jhala* 2009: 69–71).

Bhavai troupes, in addition to performing *veshas*, can also engage in other professions — agriculture, small business, and trade. An important feature of these troupes is mobility. If they are artists, they are busy with their artistic job for about six or eight months of the year: during the monsoon, there are no performances and actors stay at home.

At present there is a gradual, although not complete, disappearance of both the traditional space for the per-

Fig. 2. Bhavai artist on stage.
Bharate Rang Mahotsav, New Delhi, 2018.
Photo by Svetlana Ryzhakova

formance of Bhavai and the activities of troupes. Apparently, at the beginning of the 21st century, there were about three dozen regularly operating troupes (even though in the middle of the twentieth century they numbered in the hundreds), which performed at the invitation of *panchayats* (councils that perform administrative functions) of the village and, less often, cities.

During my fieldwork in 2015–2023, I found out that the tradition of passing on Bhavai as a skill and job within families is gradually disappearing: the younger generation of the Nayaks and Vyas is mostly choosing other areas of activity. It is difficult for traditional artists to compete with the torrents of information and entertainment industry widespread today via many devices. Bhojaks hardly perform nowadays. Nevertheless, there are still people of the middle and elder generation who have excellent skills in this art and can explain the meaning of all artifacts (among which the main one is the Bungal, a kind of trumpet, wind musical instrument), and some progressive theater directors are finding a way to introduce Bhavai into the repertoire of professional troupes. The traditional songs of Bhavai are known by a few professionally trained artists, who perform them on specific occasions.

Today, in 2024, James Brandon's statement continues to be true that "recently there have been no fundamental changes that would pave the way for the revival of Bhavai; the remaining performers continue to struggle for their existence" (*Brandon* 1993: 83). The number of the traditional troupes (*mandalis*) diminished considerably, due to the crucial social and economic changes. Yet, there is a certain interest in Bhavai, expressed by professional theatrical directors and several NGOs. Studying Targala and several other artistic communities in India inspired me to organize a broad discussion on the situation of various performing groups worldwide.

Talking on the artistic communities: Panel's experience

Various aspects of contemporary artistic and performing communities became the subject of the Panel entitled "Artistic Communities Today: Identity, Uncertainty, Hope for Future", organized by me at the World Anthropological Congress in New Delhi, in October 2023. It went very successfully and brought together more than 30 participants and discussants. Here I am going to analyze the common points of the presentations, that contribute to the study of the artistic communities. The references to the papers' materials mentioned below are from the presentation abstracts (unfortunately, only short versions were published in the Collection of Abstracts, which is not easily accessible), and from my notes, made while listening to the presentations and the rich discussion.

Despite the great variety of traditional artistic communities worldwide, several aspects unite most of them. First, it is the **dual social status**, quite often typical for artists of all genres. It is very evident in the case of Targala; although they claim themselves to be Brahmins (they trace their origin to Asaita Thakkar, an Audichya Brahmin of the 14th century, wear *janeo*, a sacred threat, and follow some typical Brahmin customs), there is a certain resistance from the other communities to accept it. The members of some other neighboring Brahmin groups do not consider them to be equal and claim Targala to be of "low" social origin. Yet, the artists believe, they are of Brahmin origin and perform not only the theater but also several ritual duties for the villagers (FM 2016–2018, Gujarat).

Social duality is visible in another institution I studied (*Ryzhakova* 2024: 232–249) — tradi-

Fig. 3. Bhavai artist on stage. 1990-s.
Photo from the personal archive of Bharatbhai Vyas

Fig. 4. Bhavai artists on a trip. 1970-s.
Photo from the personal archive of Bharatbhai Vyas

Fig. 5. Bhavai performance on the outskirts of Ahmedabad. 2015.
Photo by Svetlana Ryzhakova

tional ritualistic performers of Tulunadu area (South Karnataka and North Kerala, India) from such castes as Parava, Nalike, Pambada, and others, who identify themselves both as embodiments of the local gods and goddesses worshipped during the ritual and as people from traditionally dispossessed and marginalized castes during the rest of the time. It is different from Targala's duality: performers of Tulu deities' rituals never claim themselves to be Brahmins. They are "vehicles" and speakers of the local gods and goddesses in ritual contexts, but for the rest of the time, they are under strict caste norms and sometimes suffer from the unfriendly attitudes of the upper castes. Their speeches given at the ritual contain certain social criticism. Interestingly, some traditional performers belong to the Communist Party, especially in that part of Tulunadu area, which belongs to Kerala, where this party is very active.

Dual social status, although of a different nature, is typical for the Kalavant community in several parts of India. Ms. Sneha Ghadi (University of Goa) in her paper "The Kalavant Community of Goa: Past and Present" focused on the ritual activities of Kalavantas and the certain social stigma associated with them in the Goan society and religion. The community had a special place in the rituals and festivities of the temple they were attached to. The women from artistic families became *devadasis*, girls dedicated to the various gods and goddesses, and the men became Kalavants, artists who played musical instruments and accompanied the *devadasis* in their performances. The Portuguese colonial rule of Goa banished the practice of dedication of girls to *devadasis* (to prevent the social evils related to the usage of those girls as prostitutes), and this led to the outmigration of the Kalavant families. These artists later moved to various cities, mostly to Bombay, where they received patronage and gained fame for the art they produced. Some became singers in various musical schools, and some gained fame in acting. The social circumstances of

the Kalavant community also changed by this time, and the practice of *devadasi* declined. The community willingly gave up the traditional art forms as Goa's liberation opened new employment pathways. Just like Targala in Gujarat, the community of Kalavants in Goa today is no longer exclusively a community of artists but its members are employed in various fields. The reasons may lie in the ever-changing lifestyle, education, and social stigma attached to the community. Both the Kalavant community and the practice of *devadasi*, banned by the government since long ago, are vanishing. Interestingly, another stock of Kalavant community, based in Rajasthan, is socially different: they were not related much to *devadasis*, but engaged in the music playing in various princely courts. Their status was the highest among various artistic communities, and sometimes more "lower status" musicians Mirasis tried to adopt their identity and become Kalavants; see the historical background here (*Butler Schofield* 2023).

The second distinctive feature of traditional artistic communities lies in their multiple activities, which is related to the split of identity mentioned above. Very often traditional artists **fulfill several social functions,** and play diverse roles; entertainment is just one among them. The others could be ritual, educational, or related to some craft skills. For example, as my study shows, Bhavai theater itself played several functions, both ritual and secular, such as information, entertainment, ceremonial, and didactic; it was a tool for social integration and social criticism. The performers of Bhavai, men of Nayak and Vyas communities, conduct several village ceremonies and perform domestic rites for their patrons — such as name-giving for the infants. Nalike, impersonators of the local deities of Tulu-speaking area of Karnataka and Kerala and performers of *kola*, who perform rituals dedicated to those deities, according to my studies, are engaged as well in the weaving and construction businesses (FM 2014: Mangaluru = fieldwork in Mangaluru district, Karnataka, India. The informants: Saigeeta, Dayanada G. Kattalsar. FM 2014: Udupi = fieldwork in Udupi district, Karnataka, India. The informants: Ashok Alwa, Sanjeeva Suvarna, B. Nambyar). As I observed in rural Bengal, puppeteers, as well as performers of today's traditions *Raibansi* (which could be roughly identified as a kind of play or sport) were traditionally palanquin bearers (FM 2018: Daulatabad, West Bengal).

The third characteristic of today's transformation of the artistic communities is that the traditional format is vanishing, but performers are **looking for new venues** and **possibilities to perform**. Sometimes these are professional theaters, urban artistic circles, and in other cases rural development projects, conducted by government bodies and other institutions, that express an interest in rural art and/or will to help the practitioners. For example, Bhavai still exists today, although it is one of the vanishing art forms of India. The number of the traditional troupes (often called *mandalis*) diminished considerably, due to the crucial social and economic changes. Yet, there is a certain interest in Bhavai, expressed by professional theater directors in Ahmedabad and Vadodara, and several NGOs are working to improve the lives of rural citizens, including the performers.

Apart from musicians, dancers, and actors, many other people are involved in performances, such as mask makers. Mr. Rajdeep Das (Department of Anthropology, West Bengal State University) in his paper "Mask Makers of Chhau in Purulia, West Bengal: Survival and Revival, An Ethnographic Study" draws attention to the social situation of the artisans, who started making masks as souvenir production, apart from the manufacturing masks for the performers (FM 2016: Purulia, West Bengal. Informant: Sunil Mahato).

One of the best examples of coming traditional singing practice stage is Qawwali: a Sufi

religious vocal genre that originated in the Indian subcontinent. Originally performed in Sufi shrines or tombs throughout South Asia, the Qawwali genre gained widespread popularity and an international audience in the late 20th century. Here the traditional format has not vanished, yet the new venues, professional stage, and various festivals were discovered and actively explored by the practitioners. Ms. Anastasiya Kinyaeva (Centre of Asian and Pacific Studies, Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of Russian Academy of Sciences) in her paper "Qawwal Community: Between Tradition and Modernity" explores this shift and studies the ways the community of Qawwali performers deals with the challenges of modernity. The ritual-associated art form of Qawwali is known to have existed on the subcontinent since the 13th century and is associated with the name of Amir Khusrao (1253–1325 AD). Traditional Qawwalis are still performed in Sufi tombs (*dargahs*) across India and Pakistan with the original line of Qawwals residing in the heart of the old Delhi, the tomb of Nizamuddin Auliya. At the same time, in the modern music scene, Qawwali is widely known as one of the flagman genres of the so-called "Muslim spiritual music" or "Sufi music" and is a go-to genre for the Bollywood film-makers, pop artists, and cultural festivals organizers. The rapid social changes and technological development of mass media that took place at that time significantly changed consumption patterns, the religious sphere was no exception. The use of a new generation of media, allowing for diversity in both production and consumption, did nothing but strengthen the aura of sacredness of certain religious practices and popularize them. At the present moment, ritual and so-called secular Qawwali coexist throughout the land of South Asia and in its media, putting the community of Qawwals on the edge of tradition meeting modernity.

The **reconfiguration of the ritualistic performance** and its emancipation from the traditional contexts and venues is very clearly visible in the transformation of the artistic tradition of the celibate monks, *bhakats* of *sattras* in Assam. The *sattras*, a specific religious institution of Shankardeva's reformist tradition of Assam, has a rich history of performing art tradition for more than 500 years. Ms. Sumpee Borah (from Jawaharlal Nehru University) did the study aimed at understanding the perpetuation or mediation of *sattras* with the outside world, the influence of state patronage, and also the dilemma faced by the monks to assert their identity over the changing conditions of *sattras* in Majuli, an island in Brahmaputra river and one of the major sites of *sattras* — residential monasteries with a traditional education system where the preceptor lives with his disciples devoting their lives in the monotheistic tenets of the Neo-Vaishnavism. The monks who belong mostly to Hindu upper castes have been seen to lead a life of bhakti immersed in prayer, the practice of devotional songs, *borgeet*, dance, *sattriya-nrittya*, drama, *ankiya-bhaona* and vocal and instrumental music, *gayan-bayan*, all based on mythological narratives. The physical training process and the ritual performance practices have been continued by the monk community from one generation to another through the oral tradition of knowledge transmission. Sumpee Borah observes the nostalgic narrative accounts of the elderly monks which are cases of reference wherein they lamented about the generational differences they perceive in the performances of the monks of different generations. As their inability to keep the tradition and space sacred keeps culminating into a major crisis in their ritually defined universe, they feel lost and dissatisfied and dissatisfaction while many questions emerge about the ongoing changes within the cultural institution. In this regard, the researcher's effort would be to articulate the monks' perspective in experiencing a dilemma between maintaining their sacred vow to live a life of a celibate monk renouncing worldly desires and earning a living, and creating individual identity where the knowledge and mastery of the performances becomes their capital. Today

we observe the transition of the Sattriya dances from devotion to profession (FM 2014, 2016, 2018, Assam. Informants: L. Das, S. Saikia, M. Kandali, B. Borbayan): the professionalization infused an awareness among the monks of their value of labor in terms of their time and effort they invest in re-enacting the Hindu mythology.

Yet in many cases, artistic skills are **abandoned and forgotten**, due to the social and economic changes. Ms. Renu Chauhan (from Informal Sector and Labour Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University) conducted a study among rural Sapera, a contemporary semi-nomadic community in Haryana state. Sapera do snake charming, cure snake bites, and today they also engage in folk dance for their livelihood. In Rajasthan, the Kalbelia community is the main among the Sapera caste; they have become well-known in the tourist industry. In Haryana state, the Sapera community is much different than that in Rajasthan; they are engaged in other occupations for their survival. In the past time, people relied on the Sapera community for the treatment of snake bites, but nowadays hospital facilities are available in villages, so the demand for the Sapera's help has become quite minimal. Modernization has changed their lives in many ways. They were a community mostly engaged in entertainment, traditionally hired for marriages and fairs. But nowadays the fair's tradition in the village has changed, and the Sapera have lost this source of income. Snake charming is also risky nowadays due to the government law on wildlife protection. It is still not very clear, whether the Sapera of Haryana will be able to maintain their performing traditions, or they will abandon them and focus on other jobs for a living.

In the case of the ritual practitioners, everything depends on the **demand for their services today**. Gita Jayaraj (Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT-Madras/ Chennai) studied Teyyam performers (*teyyakkars*) in North Malabar, who come from families where this art is hereditary and get their right to perform, *avakasam* (hereditary, *cherujenman*, birth rights) as their privilege and duty. Teyyam became famous during the last few decades; this institute is very similar to the performance of daivaradhane of the Tulunadu mentioned above. The majority of men from *teyyakkars* communities today fulfill their caste obligations and perform at specific shrines of the local deities, *kavus*, or in the yards of the patrons' houses, *taravads*. Framed as an exchange system between patrons and clients, strict rules continue to exist about who has the right to perform, in which spaces, and how this performance should be remunerated. This results in Teyyam being a highly uncertain source of income and necessitating other forms of employment for *teyyakkars* and their families to make ends meet. Around the turn of the 20th century, with the decline of the wealth of the *taravads* due to colonial and post-independence legislation, and the rise of socialist and communist politics, Teyyam began to be interpreted both as a form of resistance and protest against caste and as an artistic practice as opposed to ritual worship. Nowadays, with the increasing tourism and globalization, as well as the growth of Malayali diasporas, Teyyam traverses national and transnational borders and is seen as a carrier of local, state, and national culture depending on where it is performed.

In the modern context, many traditional arts face an **existential crisis** due to a lack of enthusiasm and economic changes. Mr. Sreehari K.R. (Ph.D. Research Scholar from the Department of Tribal Studies, Art, Culture and Folk Literature, Indira Gandhi National Tribal University, Amarkantak) presented the paper titled "Performance of Koothu: An Ethnographic Account of the Diminishing Art Form of Irulas of South India". He explored the traditional storytelling and drama among the Irulas, indigenous communities, one of the scheduled tribes residing in the Attappadi area of Kerala's Palakkad district, South

India (although the majority of the Irula population lives in Tamil Nadu and they are considered a particularly vulnerable tribal group, PVTG category). Several forms of Koothu are very widespread in Kerala and Tamil Nadu states and are a part of Irula's culture, mostly due to their Tamil heritage. Irulas perform Koothu on important occasions such as temple festivals and rites after death, on the occasion of death anniversary, and the annual feast. Ramarkoothu (existing today), Harischandrakoothu, and Sirithundankoothu (rarely found and almost vanished) are the three main forms of Koothu performed by Irulas. Ramarkoothu is based on the stories from Ramayana. Koothu performance consists of songs, the narration of the oral stories, percussion music, dance, and acting. Today, as Sreehari says, this art form faces an existential crisis: its primary cause is a lack of enthusiasm and interest among the young generation, as well as the extensive set-up necessary to perform this act. Another key cause is the impact of modernization.

The fourth feature is that performing art fulfills the function of an important **device to maintain cultural and social memory.** Especially interesting are the cases of refugees' communities all over the world, where artistic skills, traditionally attached to particular groups, could traverse the social borders and become the common ethnocultural heritage, maintained and practiced by the whole community. One example is the preservation of cultural heritage among the Tibetan diaspora in India. Mrs. Maria Shcherbak (Centre of Asian and Pacific Studies, Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of Russian Academy of Sciences) focused on this topic. After the Chinese annexing of Tibet, thousands of Tibetans left their country for India. The Tibetan diaspora in India is the biggest one among other Tibetan refugee communities. Their life was complicated by the need to rebuild the community with its traditional forms of management, religion, traditions, and customs. In these conditions the preservation of Tibetan language and specific Tibetan culture was crucial. For this purpose, The Tibetan Administration in India provides educational programs in traditional arts and crafts. One of the key problems is the lack of teachers, the low interest of young people in the topic, the preference for more modern professions, and the exodus of the population to big cities. Realizing the need to preserve the cultural heritage as the basis of the Tibetan identity, the Tibetan Administration implements a number of programs to preserve traditional dance techniques and sponsor young performers. One of the most famous traditional Tibetan performance arts is dance. Traditional Tibetan dance art includes both folk patterns and stage versions of the temple performances such as the Tsam mystery. To date, there are some programs in the Tibetan diaspora in India aimed at preserving the techniques of classical dance and passing them on to the younger generation. The importance of preserving cultural heritage, including performing arts, is due to the multiple processes in which the Tibetan ethno-cultural identity is being eroded.

Another interesting example of memory and perception studies in performance is a challenge faced by the Muslim dancers of classical Indian dance. Mr. Al Ameen J., a Ph.D. scholar from the Department of Sociology, University of Hyderabad, proposed an interesting and innovative approach — he created a choreography based on the life worlds of Muslim classical dancers in South Asia. Being a classical dance practitioner, the author tries to choreograph the life experiences of Muslim classical dancers based on the data collected from various practitioners and institutions through inquiry, in-depth interviews, etc. He says that classical dancers in India, who belong to the Muslim communities, undergo a lot of challenges due to the nature and structure of the classical dance art form as such. Classical dance forms in India are considered to be one of the artistic cultural expressions in performance tradition which are recognized and supported by several official bodies such as Sangeet Na-

tak Akademy and the Ministry of Culture, Government of India. Apart from recognition, classical dance forms become the epitome of cultural expression in India. Dance has become an expressive symbol of deep cultural nationalism and heritage policy. As Al Ameen J. says, historically these forms adapt the Hindu cultural framework in the content, presentation, practice, and performance, thus systematically excluding non-Hindu communities of this art. There are also restrictions for Muslim communities in various locations, where male members are discouraged to study and perform classical dance forms. These complex social realities make the life experience of Muslim classical dancers vulnerable.

Finally, the fifth aspect of the social outlook of the artistic communities is the **flexible border** and **easy emergence of new groups**. A good example is contemporary dance shows, where practitioners gradually form peculiar communities. Ms. Alexandra Glazovskaya (Center for European Studies, Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, Russian Academy of Science) studies the ethnography of the world-known show *Riverdanc*e: she analyzes what happens before and after the shows, after the career of a dancer is over, how their identities are being constructed, and how the dancers earn their money. Glazovskaya's study focuses on a group of professional Irish dancers, who are currently touring (or used to tour) with *Riverdance*. The show itself grew out of a short production at the 1994 Eurovision Song Contest and became a representation of the whole Irish nation seeing overwhelming success overseas and at home. Irish dance through this very show became a trademark of Ireland, stepping into the line of the export goods of the country, thus also creating job opportunities for the dancers. However, one can see the further codification of Irish dance as an art form through this artistic manifestation in the show. The dance form, as well as the individual life strategies of the dancers, are reshaped by the demands of the show. The same trend is being explored by the Chinese researcher Jiang Yan-rong among the community of young entertainers of Wa ethnic group of Yunnan province, and by the dancer-cum-explorer from Argentina, Grit Kirstin Koeltzsch, on female artist-ethnographers in the 20th century. The papers of these scholars we publish in this issue.

The study of the mechanism of emergence of the artistic communities could provide us with anthropological information about the current situation, insights into their social and artistic potential, and a possible scenario of the future of the art forms.

Uncertainty is one of the most common challenges of most traditional artistic communities whose social profile was formed long back, in a different historical epoch. Some of them still exist today in several — however, not all countries of the world, although quite often they belong to the vanishing art forms, even in such a country as India. Yet, hope for future is another important feature of all artists of the world.

Sources

FM — Fieldwork material collected by the author; fieldwork data (observations, talks, and interviews) are fixed in the dairies.

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