MONOGRAPH

YEAR 3. VOL. 2

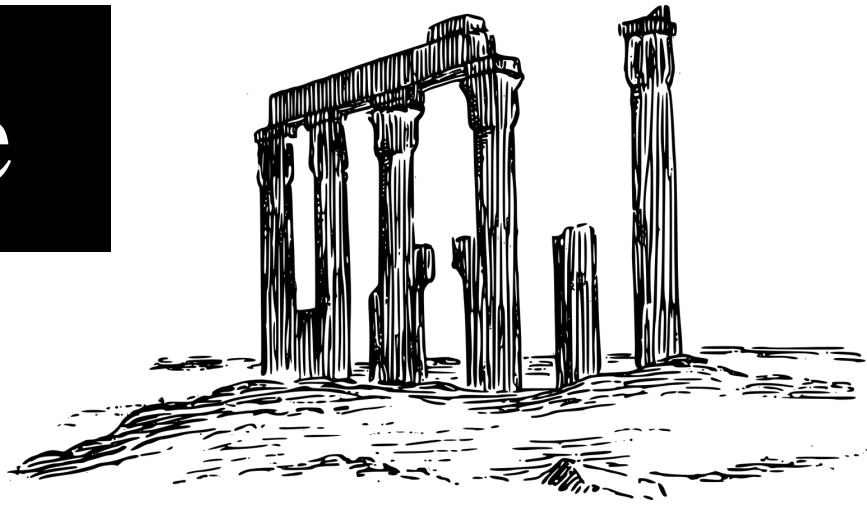
Parekh & Singh

A STUDENT LED MAGAZINE FOR THE ARTS

MONOGRAPH

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Editor's Note



I'd like to take a moment to thank all our readers in this note. Had it not been for your support, Monograph would have never survived. While we are still in our infancy, all of you have had a role to play in our journey. As the wispy drums of Autumn draw to an end, and winter, slowly but surely, sets in, Monograph wishes you the best in the only way it knows how- a curated series of poems and stories.

Anuraag Das Sarma
Editor-in-Chief
Monograph

Editorial: Tracing Modern Art

Rushali Mukherjee

The sphere of art as we know it, is dynamic, thus ever changing with the times. Both modern art and contemporary art, despite being two distinct art movements coming from two different time periods, falls under the common umbrella of departing from the traditional art forms. Modern art can be considered a product of the Industrial Revolution, the rapid technological and social advancements allowing artists to make use of the new developments to steer away from the conventional norms. As contemporary art was a relatively later establishment, it is safe to say that modern art formed the basis of contemporary art by breaking down the rigidity of traditional artistic methods. Contemporary art, largely derived from its predecessor, took the ideology of modern art and took it a step further, focusing more on the intentionality and conceptualisation of the subject rather than the finished work of art.

However, It is difficult to procure a clear cut definition for contemporary art as although it simply refers to art of the present times, contrary to its definition, it draws greatly from past art movements, thus having a rather long and illustrious history. The art may be set in the here and now but derives its style and tendencies from earlier art styles.

Creating art that defies viewers' expectations and artistic conventions is a distinctly modern concept1, and contemporary art, much like modern art, executes exactly that. Artists had freedom over their own space and could break out from the bindings of traditional art or what was considered the norm as per the viewers, while making what they believed was significant in a way they wanted.

Contemporary art is the epitome of the flexible characteristic of art, moulding itself to the cultural composition and technological advancement of the time it is set in. It is diverse in the themes that it chooses to dabble in and range of mediums it uses. Artists make use of the intermingling of various forms to create their art. This art form also tends to be immersive in nature, calling for an open mind from the viewer as the context shapes the experientiality of the viewer.

Additionally, contemporary art is often synonymous with the political and social conditions of the era it comes out of not only in the manner of how the art is made but also why the art is made- focusing on the ideation of the artist. Artists could highlight various perspectives of that age through the work by raising important questions, be it social or political, and bringing to the fore their own experiences and emotions, while remaining grounded in their times.

Both modern art and contemporary art have a wide array of categories under it- cubism being one of the major branches of modern art, while installation art, conceptualisation, street art are a few popular categories under contemporary art. All these categories make interesting uses of colour, material and space to deliver their artistic ideas. Photographic technology has existed for nearly two centuries, and fueled by technological developments in the 20th century, has now cemented itself as a major form of contemporary art. Artificial Intelligence however, a strictly 21st century invention, seems to be vying for the mantle of nouveau-art, being used as an experimental medium in unforeseeable ways.

Contemporary art, as derived from modern art, is all about moving away from the norm, and that pertains to the conventional way of how space is used by artists as well. Art and the particular space it inhabits are inexplicably linked to each other, and it is by using this relation between the two that site-specific art can truly take on its complete form.

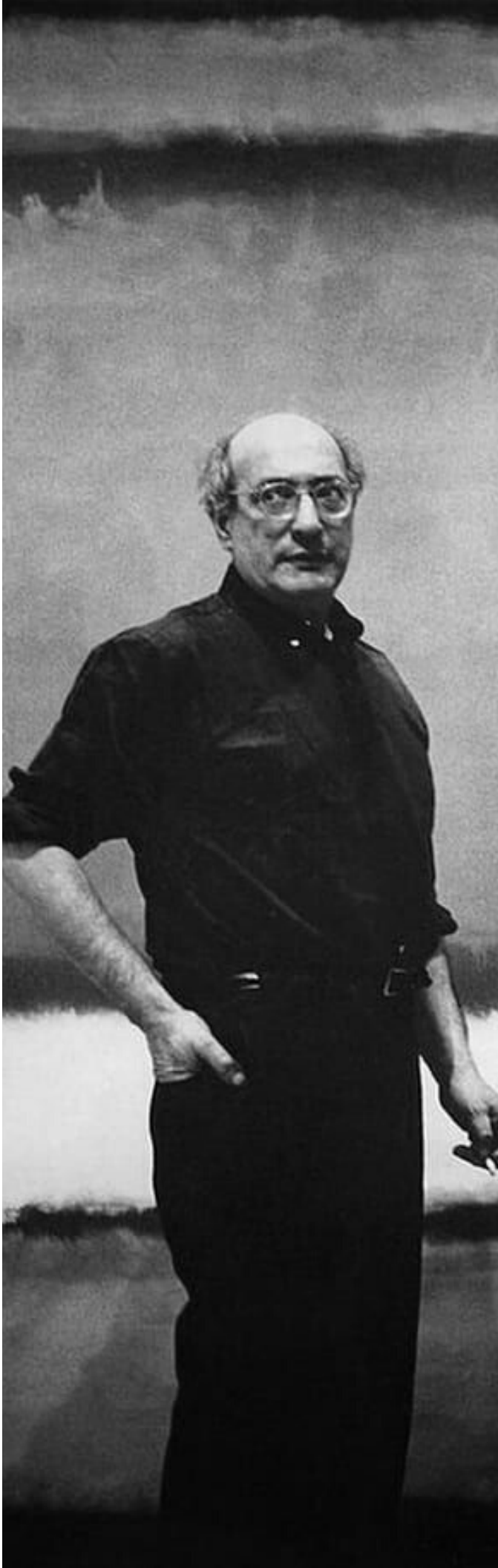
It uses spatial aspects to bond the art and its environs and when that linkage is shifted, the art loses its meaning. Be it a natural or artificial environment, site specific art is a byproduct of the symbiotic relationship between the habitat (the space) and the inhabitant (art). One of my favourite examples of installation artwork of this kind is Antony Gromley's "Another Place." This large scale piece, situated on Crosby Beach on Sefton, England is according to the artist himself, "the poetic response to the individual and universal sentiments associated with emigration – sadness at leaving, but the hope of a new future in Another Place." At the site, where the intermingling of art and nature took place, thousands of spectators who came to witness Gromley's work, saw themselves in the iron sculptures, irrespective of the fact that they were nearly identical copies of the artist himself- further consolidating the fact that art has the power to move people. It shows how not only does the intention of the artist matter, but the interaction and immersion of the viewers with work, shapes their perception of what they see in the piece.

Another such artist that drew heavily from the use of mediums in modern art was Alexander Calder. He methodically used motion and space, and strategically made the use of colour in his abstract sculptures. His work is very well known for being extremely visually appealing and coming across as almost philosophical in nature, without actually following the traditional aesthetic.

A derivative branch of modern art, cubism, has a foot in both modernist and postmodernist worlds. While heavily focused on form, cubism also requires the artist to put to the medium their own interpretations of the space they inhabit. Pioneered in the western world by Picasso, he used cubism to further his own flawed notions of the world by portraying women as vulnerable and weak in distinct “cubist” form, as seen in the “Minotaur Caressing a Sleeping Woman”. In the South East, Bhupen Khakkar, alongside Gaganendranath Tagore and M.F. Hussain emerged as a major voice of the cubist movement. One of the most popular paintings of the post-independent artist, Bhupen Khakkar, “Man with a Bouquet of Plastic Flowers”, tackled fragility, unfamiliarity, and loneliness, thus representing his own personal trials and tribulations as a homosexual in a deeply conservative world.

Abstract expressionism seems to be the perfect middle ground between modern and contemporary art. Comparatively more liberal in its outlook, it often breaks out of structure, letting intention take the front seat. Almost performative in its approach, gestural expressionism demands the whole body and mind of the artist, giving them complete control over each and every aspect for it. Jackson Pollock’s inimitable drip technique is a wonderful example of abstract expressionism, that utilises the fluidity of colours to create a unified overall pattern that brings with it a sense of completion.

If we were to delve deeper into the realm of street art, a form that uses space and medium to express strong and important themes, Jean-Michel Basquiat was one of the first people to not only draw recognition to it but also monetize immensely off of it. His work is considered to fall under abstract expressionism as he championed the upliftment of the black community and portrayed their contribution to different spheres of society, mainly pop culture through his exhibitions, shown in works such as Hollywood Africans and All Coloured Casts Parts I and II. Complementing the concepts of his art, the messy and raw nature of his work, is in a way, a rebellion against the clean and clear cut usage of mediums of traditional art styles. Another branch of contemporary art which is deeply embedded with the very essence of making art for its intentionality rather than the end product, is conceptualism. Yves Klein, a titan of conceptualist art, heavily occupied himself with the intricacies of colour, patenting a shade of ultramarine blue. Klein revelled in the beauty of colour, and felt truly liberated by it.



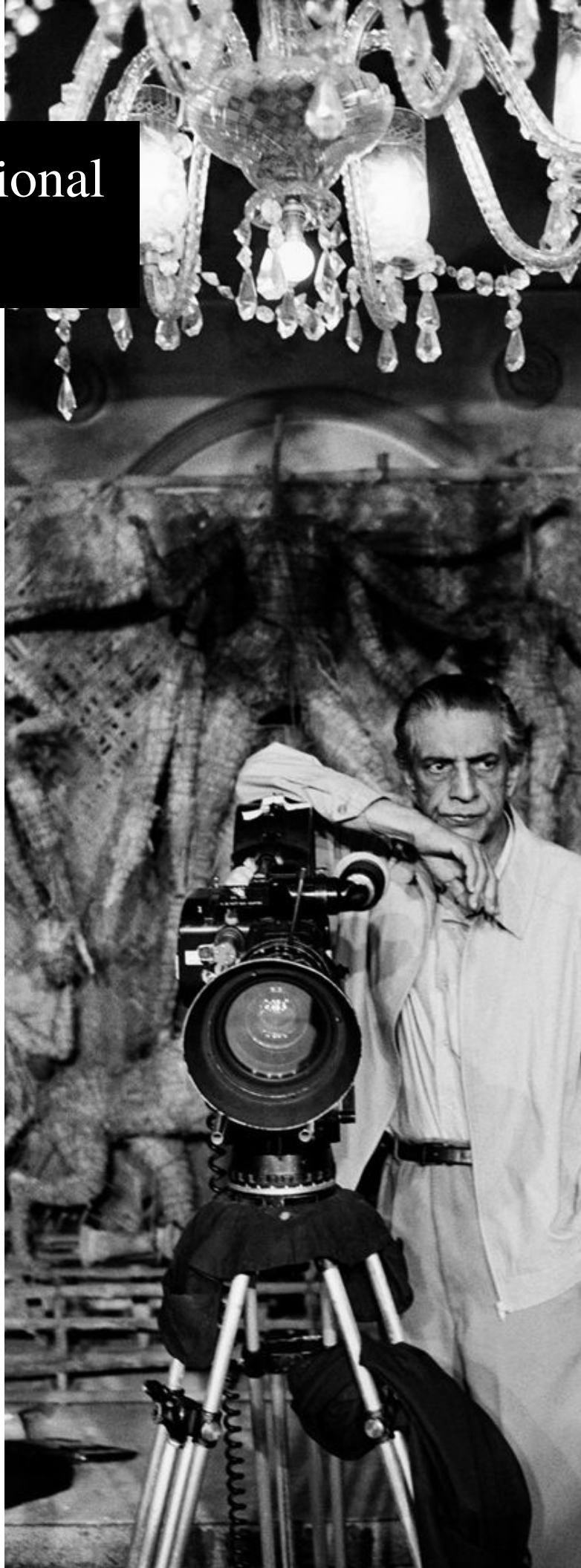
He later championed, alongside Pierre Restany, La Nouveau Réalisme (New Realism) - an art movement that aimed to fuse life with art, thus bringing about a new sense of awareness, returning the viewer to reality. The Anthropométries series, an exemplar of New Realism, where he used the controversial medium of nude women as “living brushes” which questioned our perception of realism, not only through Klein’s use of the colour blue but also his chromatic approaches.

Judging by my own artwork, and having come to the realisation behind my usage of the artistic medium, I truly believe that my art derives heavily from modern art, steering away from the bindings of conservative realism prevalent in traditional art. It is also heavily inspired by contemporary art as my work has a distinct style and I often create work that brings out the portrayal of the subject as seen through my eyes, as opposed to what the viewer or a third person expects to see out of my artwork. The utilisation of space, colour, and lines, done according to my taste, are central to my art and forms the very structure on which my artistic expression lies. Undoubtedly, my own positionality as well influences how I see the world and what I end up shaping my artwork into.

To leave it where I started off, art is dynamic, and ever changing and to conservatively stick to form and structure instead of opening up to experimentation would ultimately render art stale. A conservative view towards modern art seems to gain traction as several modernist and contemporary works are vandalised across the world.4Modern art was born in the later half of the nineteenth century and was the amalgamation of several different artistic forms- from the eastern schools of art to Japanese Printmaking and traditional European art inspired by the Renaissance. It was the next evolutionary step as the world slowly globalised and opened up to differing nations. As cubism, fauvism, futurism, and expressionism came to the fore in the early half of the twentieth century, there was another shift in artistic ideas. Art went from being "structure-specific" to "intention-specific". As artists gave up the grand and elaborate techniques of the past, shifting from their rigid forms to an effectively post-structural rejection of all that came before, art mutated again, or rather evolved. Hence, modernism proved to be a stepping stone for what was to come. While modernism rejected several notions of traditional art in the 19th and early-20th centuries, postmodern (or rather contemporary) art seemed to do away with every last rule laid down by the old masters. Art now, more than ever, belongs to the artist and one could argue that the artist is as much a medium of art as the canvas or the paper is. As we see modern developments in AI, videography, and even photography, one cannot help but wonder what comes next. First there was traditionalism, then modernism, and now in the contemporary post-modern, post-structural era, we cannot even fathom where the limits of art lie.

Satyajit Ray: The Traditional & The Modern

Rajeshwari Tagore



Lyrical auteur Satyajit Ray envisages his films with such minute detail, that the expressions of a character's eyes, or the faint trembling of a hand is not missed.

Ray himself maintained that the "best technique of filmmaking was one that was not noticeable." He was of the opinion that cinema should not draw so much attention to style that the content itself is lost.

In keeping with this, his films follow a continuous line of storytelling, maintaining the 180* line of action between characters as far as possible. One is aware of the placing of one character in relation to another.

However, at a time when the world was enveloped by the Hollywood studio system of filmmaking, Ray dared to shoot his films outdoors. His debut film Pather Panchali is an everlasting tribute, not just to cinema itself, but to cinematography, film technique, and storytelling.

Ray's exploration of the modern and the traditional is explored in this essay, alongside the techniques he uses in his films.

Jalshaghar and Devi are heart-wrenching narrations of the tragedy that unfolds, when the old refuse to let go of the past, and make way for the new. Biswambhar Roy (Chhabi Biswas) in Jalshaghar is a zamindar – the last of his line, who neglects his crumbling estate, ignoring the ruination of wealth, and the looming danger of the approaching river that gradually swallows up his land, family and life. His only love is music – grand soirees he organises in his music room, which allows him to hold onto his image of a glorious past.

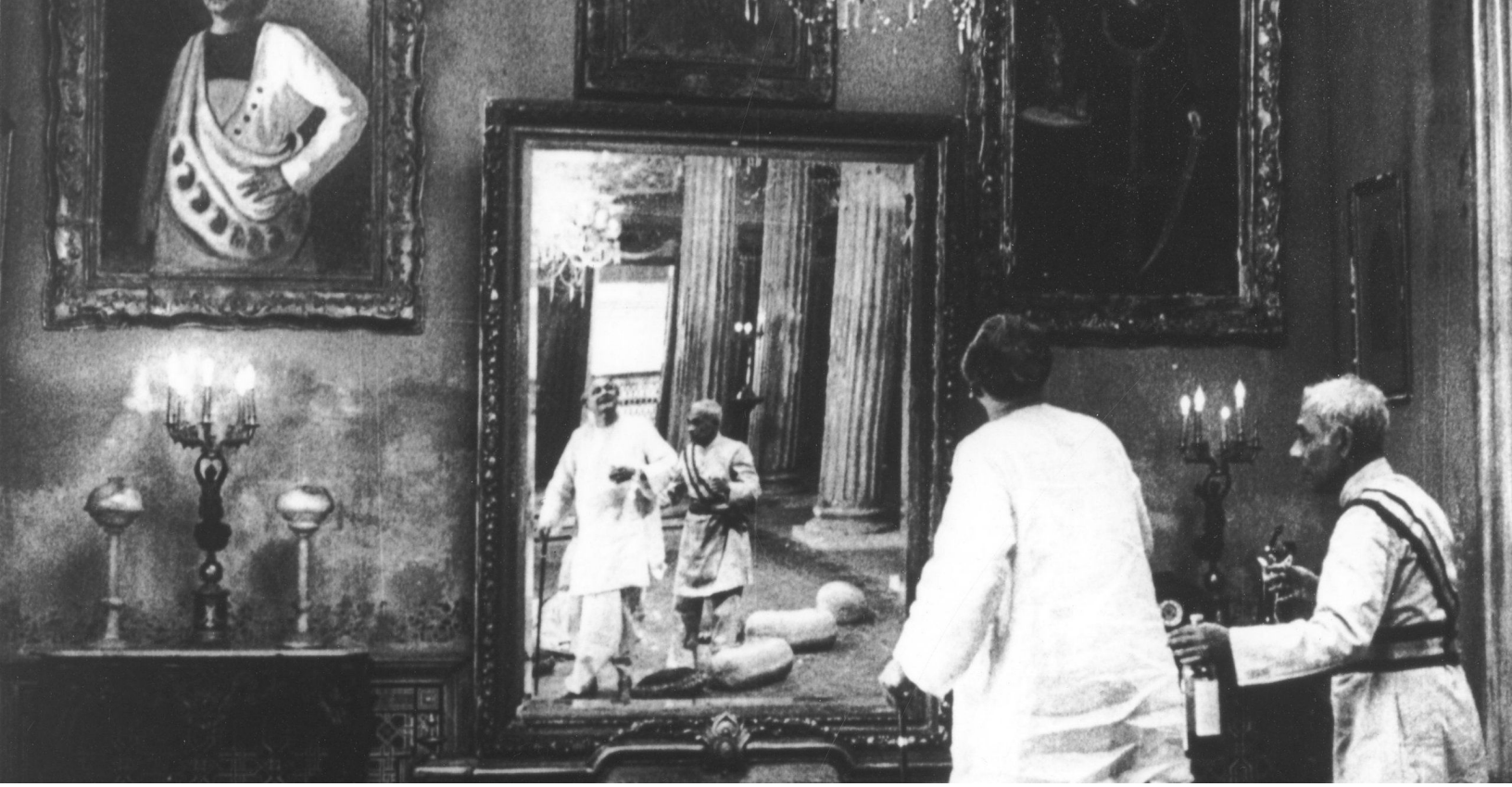
In Devi, Kalikinkar (also played by Chhabi Biswas) is a devotee of the Goddess Kali. Hailing from an affluent zamindar family, he is convinced that his 17-year old daughter-in-law, Dayamoyee, is a living goddess, after a dream in which the Goddess's face merges to become that of Dayamoyee. He literally places his "bouma" on a pedestal, to be worshipped as the living incarnation of the goddess.

His son Umaprasad, educated in Kolkata, is sceptical of his father's fanatical blind faith, and he tries to convince Daya to run away to Kolkata with him. Across the river, they can begin a new life free of such madness. However, when a poor man places his sick dying son at Daya's feet, to be cured by the "Goddess", miraculously the child does recover, convincing both Kalikinkar and Daya that there is a deeper power at play.
But Kalikinkar's blind faith only leads to unparalleled tragedy as the film progresses.

In both Jalshaghar and Devi, Ray chooses to leave the audience with a specific image that is relevant to the film. He opens Jalshaghar with the image of a swaying chandelier – an essential part of the grand music room of Bishwambhar Roy, and a recurring image throughout the film. His closing scene also entails the swaying chandelier, fading into darkness.

Similarly in Devi, the credits open with the image of an incomplete idol of Goddess Durga, which becomes a complete idol as the opening credits continue to roll. The end credits also close with an image of the same, incomplete idol of Goddess Durga. There is a full circle effect that is thereby produced, leaving the audience with the most important significant image or object of the film.

Mahanagar is a film in a different vein. Considered one of Ray's most feminist films, it portrays Arati (Madhabi Mukherjee), who has always been the ideal housewife, never stepping out of the house, or having her head uncovered in front of her in-laws. However, she transgresses when economic concerns convince her that she too must find a job to be able to support her husband, and she takes up a job with a firm as a salesgirl, going door-to-door to sell a product. Here, the patriarch of the house, Priyogopal, feels it unbecoming for the "bouma" of the house to step out and work. While he battles with his traditional views while also trying to not restrict the new generation, the husband Subrata is in a dilemma. He was initially in support of his wife's independence, but he also finds himself battling ego and jealousy on the way. This film explores the stereotypes and fears of the "bhodrolok", while also exploring how a homely middle class "angel in the house" can be independent, and transgressive, without being outrageous.



Mahanagar opens with the image of the wire of a tramline – a symbol of modernity and progress in Calcutta of the 1960s.

In all three films discussed, Ray makes extensive use of the slow camera pan, and tracking shots. He also slowly zooms his camera, usually always moving inwards towards his characters. In Jalshaghar particularly, closeups are made use of, focusing on the harried, worried face of the loyal servant, and the face of Bishwambhar Roy – swallowed by the love for music and extravagance.

In Jalshaghar, the camera stays with the image of the vast zamindari house, the chandelier, of drinks being served in ornate goblets, and of the portraits of Roy's ancestors, which adorn the house.

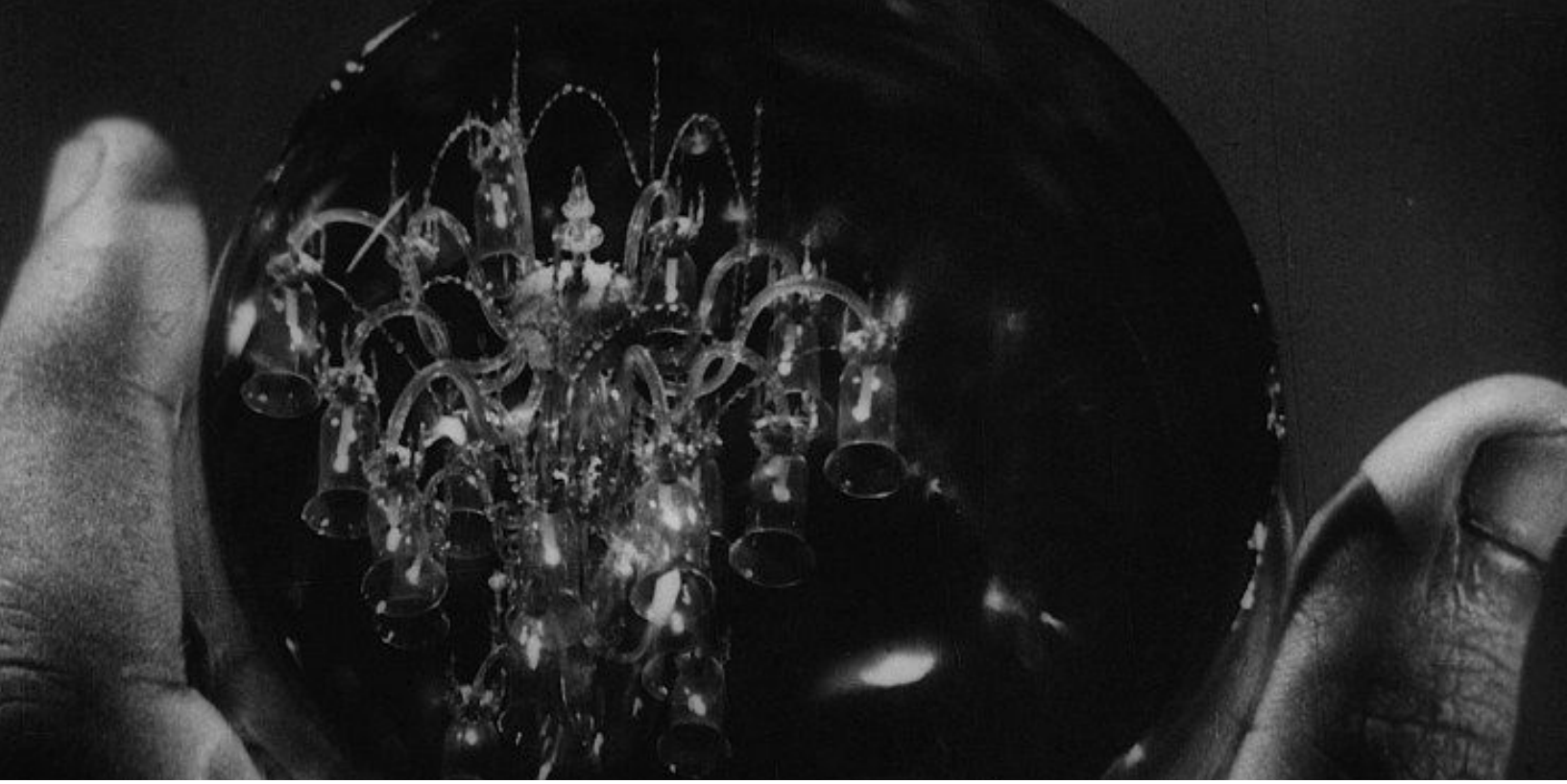
The camera also focuses on hands and feet – when the zamindar is fumbling through the last of his savings to throw one last grand event, or when the Kathak dancer invited to perform throws the onlookers into a trance with her movements. Extensive scenes in the movie focus on music and dance.

Devi too focuses on the hands of characters, and the camera takes time to take in the expressions on the faces of characters. This could perhaps be symbolically interpreted. Hands are connected with the idea of holiness – a person would bless you with their hands, or somebody would touch the feet of a revered person with their hands. The very Indian image of praying, or asking for blessings, is directly tied up with the movement of hands – which could be coming through in the film.

Ray also understands and employs the movement of poetry in his films. He sets up scenes keeping the play of light and shadow in mind. He uses soft music in scenes of loving exchanges between characters, such as the initial interactions between husband and wife in Devi. In Mahanagar, interactions between Subrata and Arati aren't shy and soft as in Devi, but are more matter of fact and practical. This is in keeping with the modernity that Mahanagar has to offer, where the homely woman steps out of the veil that otherwise threatens to limit and suffocate her.

In one of the most recognisable scenes from Mahanagar, Arati hesitantly applies lipstick for the first time, with her Anglo-Indian co-worker Edith encouraging her. This scene is powerful in its simple act of breaking what the Bengali bhodrolok would consider an immobile custom. Although Arati immediately wipes off the lipstick, she does look at herself in the mirror, and she keeps the lipstick that Edith offers her.

When he wants to foreshadow tragedy, or depict loss, shadows are cast on the characters. In Devi, when Umaprasad is talking to his wife, asking her if she really believes that she is a Goddess, and Dayamoyee remains silent, leading to an increasing fear and impatience in her husband, Ray sets up the scene so that both the faces are in shadows, Umaprasad's face is only silhouetted, while Daya's face is darkened but visible.



In Jalshaghar, lightning flashes outside, and the chandelier in the jalshaghar sways ominously, while Bishwambhar Roy organises a musical event on the night he loses his wife and child. In one poignant scene in Jalshaghar, Bishwambhar Roy is lovingly looking at Moti, his elephant – symbol of his pride and aristocracy. But his rival – the nouveau riche neighbour Moheen Ganguli drives past in his newly acquired vehicle, which leaves a trail of dust behind, hiding Moti from view. But what does remain in view are the words painted on the car – Ganguli and Co. The zamindar and his faithful servant Ananta watch in silence, as their uncouth but rich neighbour drives past. Moheen's acquisition of a car, and his bringing of electricity into the house (symbols of progress and modernity) are in contrast with Bishwambhar clinging onto the image of past glory- where his house is lit by candles and chandeliers, and he holds on to Moti and Toofan – his elephant and his beloved horse.

In such scenes, Ray makes use of the mise en scene to tell a story more effectively, leaving the viewers to anticipate what is to come next.

Ray is deeply humanistic in his storytelling. He makes us empathise with characters, even when we are aware that their behaviour or idiosyncrasies are rooted in hypocrisy or clear folly.
His films delve into realism, but at the same time provide an experience which is almost transcendental, provided mainly through his carefully chosen music, or set design.

Ray's films never employed the Bollywood trope style of melodrama and extensive dance and music. But for the art connoisseur, Jalshaghar offers both these elements with great elan. Ray's extensive knowledge of both Western as well as classical music make the film all the more memorable, with its thumris, music composed by the sitar maestro Vilayat Khan, Begum Akhtar's voice, and Kathak recitals with eye-catching abhinaya.

Besides his obvious eye for aesthetic detail in the films he made, Ray was also a social and political filmmaker, and his legacy comes alive through the stories he chooses to bring to life.

Ajji's Claypot

Naresh Kumar

As always, Ajji's eyes opened long before dawn. She looked at the clock above the room's door; its small hand had barely touched four. Outside her room's grilled window, crickets chirped still, asking her why she was up so early.

Ajji ignored the crickets, rubbed her eyes and sat up. The ground beneath her coir mat hurt her hips. I've grown old, she thought. She looked at the bed on her side, and her husband on it, snoring softly. Her hand reached for the gold in the thaali tied around her neck.

She got up slowly – her limbs ached as she did this – and tucked her sari's pallu at her waist. She then quietly folded her mat, slid it under the bed and checked the flask that sat on the table beside her husband's bed for water before stepping out of the room.

Outside her room, the square veranda in the middle of her house gleamed with the last of the moon's silver. As did the tall tulsi plant that stood in the veranda's middle. She folded her hands to both the plant and the moon before her eyes turned to the door next to her bedroom.

The door was shut. She thought of taking a peek inside but then decided otherwise. What if they wake up? Instead she turned around the corner and headed on to freshen up. After a bath and a cup of hot coffee, she picked up a packet of biscuits and a clay pot that sat on a short, four-legged step and headed out.
The street outside her house was quiet. It was always quiet at this hour. The sky above was dark too, though the first signs of dawn had started to mellow the black.

The street was empty too, except for the pack of stray dogs that stood outside her house, waiting for her. The dogs rushed towards her as soon as they saw her, panting, wagging their tails. A couple even tried to jump at her playfully. “Calm down, silly fellows,” she said and chuckled. “I know you have all been waiting for me.” She opened the packet of biscuits, sat it on the ground and watched the dogs dig into it. She patted a pup that was half as tall as the others, remembering how small he had been only a month ago. The pup looked at her briefly before returning to the biscuits. Ajji too sat her clay pot on her hip and started walking down the street.

The houses along the streets all looked similar to each other. They stood one next to the other with wide-set walls, wooden doors, concrete porches and tiled roofs. Even the steps that led to their doors looked the same. Only the houses on this street were all smaller than hers. And hers was the only one with a car parked in its front. She gave the car a quick glance as she turned the corner. That was where she found Savi waiting for her.

The two friends smiled quietly at each other and started walking down the street.

"So?" Savi said excitedly. "Did you hear about the snake?"

"Snake?" Ajji asked, startled

.

"Yes!" Savi nodded. "A snake found its way into the postman's house yesterday."

"When was this?"

"In the afternoon," Savi answered, her voice laced with a hint of disbelief that Ajji had not heard the news. "It was the postman's wife who saw it. Apparently it was sitting on her bed when she went in to take a nap."

"Oh, Siva!" Ajji exclaimed.

"The missus was terrified. Luckily the postman was not far away. He came back quickly and got with him one of those… people to take it out." This time, her voice was laced with distaste.

"Oh," Ajji whispered uneasily, mimicking Savi's distaste.

“The wife spent the rest of the day cleaning her house.”

“Well, at least the snake is gone.” Ajji kissed her fingertips and looked to the gods living in the sky for a quick prayer. “How do you know about these things?”

“I mingle with people, Ajji. Not like you. Cooped up in your house like some caged bird.”

“I was busy yesterday,” Ajji said defensively.

“Oh! Of course!” Savi slapped her forehead gently. “Your son came back yesterday, isn’t it? With his entire family?”

Ajji smiled. “Yes. He did.”

“So? How was it? It must be good to have your son and his family at home.”
“The house feels alive,” Ajji replied, smiling still. “His children are such a racket. Always jumping around. Always making chaos. Just like their father.”

Savi smiled. “Did you make your world-famous payasam for them?”
Ajji chuckled. “I did. And the kids loved it. They ate four cups of it each.”

“Everybody loves your payasam, Ajji,” Savi replied. “Even my children prefer your payasam over mine.”

For a while after that, they walked in silence; the chirps of the night’s last crickets and the calls of the dawn’s first birds fought to fill their quiet. As they turned another corner into a street that led to the riverbank, Savi said, “I thought your daughter-in-law would come with us. I was hoping to meet her.”

Ajji smiled and shook her head. “They were all so tired after their journey yesterday. I thought it best to let them sleep.”

Savi nodded. “Of course. The journey must’ve been tiring.” Then, hesitantly, she asked, “Is it true? Does she really work at a bank?”

“She does,” Ajji answered proudly. “She’s a manager there. A whole branch works under her.”

Savi’s brows jumped. “That sounds like a lot of responsibility.”

“It is,” Ajji said. “Both she and my son are doing so well in the city. He’s now a senior eksek… a senior officer in this company. They even gave him a car.”
“Oh!” Savi’s eyes grew wide. “That sounds incredible.”

“It is!” Ajji smiled earnestly. “He was so excited when he got the car. He even showed us pictures of it. Oh, Savi, it looks so beautiful. He said he will take us around in the car when we go to the city to see him.”

“But when will you go, Ajji?” Savi teased. “You never leave this village. Besides, if you do go there, I wonder who will take care of you. With both of them working, I wonder who takes care of the home and the children right now.”

Ajji knew a barb when she heard one. But she refused to let it mellow her joy. “They have so many facilities in the city,” she said. “The children are well taken care of.”

“Big cities do have the best of everything,” Savi said and nodded. “Not like our little villages where we have to go out to the river to fetch water every day.”

“That is true,” Ajji replied. “But my daughter-in-law also does a great job with the children. They both are top students in their classes.”

Savi gave a soft, sad chuckle. “Your daughter-in-law sounds like some devi’s avatar, Ajji. I could never find myself a daughter-in-law who could do it all.”

“Bah!” Ajji groaned. “You’re getting old, Savi. The world is changing. All the women in the cities are working now. Working and taking care of their homes. Pretty soon all the women here will also want to work. You just wait and watch.”

“Go out for work?” Savi said incredulously and chuckled. “Ajji, you are speaking madness. Why would we ever want to go out to work? Don’t we do enough work at home?”

“I’m telling you, Savi, it will happen,” Ajji insisted. “Everything first starts in the big cities and then finds its way into our little villages. That is how things change.”

Savi rolled her eyes. “What I will give to have things remain as they are.”
“If you sit still in one spot long enough, ants will cover you with little hills.”

“Great Sages were born this way, Ajji. They gained great wisdom in their stillness.”

“But you will only gain ants, Savi,” Ajji replied. “Besides, only Siva knows how you will sit still in one place with all the mingling you do. All the ants will be terrified if their hill keeps moving around constantly.”

For the rest of their way to the riverbank, Ajji talked about her plans for the coming week. She talked about a special puja for her son and his family she was going to perform on the temple atop the village hill and a feast after that for the entire village. Her husband had initially objected to the feast, calling it a waste of money, but she had managed to bring him around. She was especially proud of it.

The riverbank was a flight of narrow stone steps that climbed down to the river’s flowing water. Ajji had walked those steps for nearly every day of her life. She knew those steps like one knows their own hands. She and Savi were always the first here; the two would watch the day’s first light turn the sky purple. Today, the sky was cloudless and the purple had started to turn into blue.

Today, there was someone who had come to the riverbank before them. A boy, no older than ten, sat near the bottom of the steps with his arms wrapped around his legs, watching the sky and the birds that filled it with their songs.

Ajji stopped at the top of the steps and tensed at the boy’s sight. She looked at Savi; her friend’s mouth had already twisted into a scowl. She knew what the boy was.

“Hey!” Savi screamed.

The boy turned around and looked at the two women standing at the top of the bank’s steps. Seeing them, he stood up.

“What are you doing here?” Savi demanded and charged down the steps towards the boy. Ajji followed her quietly.

The boy stood frozen, watching the two women, his eyes wide with horror.

Ajji and Savi stopped before the boy and watched him searchingly. The boy was dark and smelled foul. His hair, unwashed in days, looked like a mess. His clothes were no better; his shirt had a half-torn pocket folded inwards and shorts looked a size too large for him. His feet were bare. And dry. At least he had not dipped them in the river water.

Savi loomed over the boy like a mountain. “Don’t you know you’re not supposed to be here?”

The boy took a step back. He swallowed a lump.

“Leave! Now!”

Ajji watched the boy run up the steps. Her eyes followed him until he disappeared into the woods behind the bank.

“Filthy fool,” Savi spat. “Oh Siva! Why do we have to see their kind this early in the day?”

Ajji once again looked towards the woods to see if she could see the boy. She could not, and a part of her was relieved for it.

“Don’t they know they are not supposed to be here?” Savi said hotly. “What’s the point of allowing them a separate part of the river downstream if they were going to sully our place here?” She went on a rant about how they had tried something like this in the past and how they should be stopped before they dare try such a thing again. She told Ajji that she would complain about this to the village head and make sure they are punished for it.

The two women then sat their clay pots on the bank’s stone step and took a dip in the river to cleanse themselves of the boy’s vileness.

After the dip, they grabbed her clay pots and filled them with the clean, cool river water. When the pots were full, they set them back on the stone steps and started to climb out. Ajji put her right foot on the stone step, pressed her palms over her knee, and pushed herself upwards.

But her foot on the stone step slipped.

Ajji yelped as she fell into the water. In the water, she struggled to find her footing; her hands reached for the floor beneath her, but her grasp kept sliding off the wet stones. Flowing water only made it worse. And through it all, Ajji screamed, gulped down mouthfuls of water and gasped for air.

It was when Savi grabbed Ajji by her arm that her chaos disappeared and calm returned to her; she helped Ajji out of the water and settled her on the riverbank's steps. The river, meanwhile, flowed about quietly, smirking at her.

That was when Ajji first felt the pain in her ankle. The pain sprang through her all at once, making her body cold and her leg shiver furiously. It sopped her head in sweat. It made her mouth dry. Her hands shivering, she reached for her ankle.

"Are you alright, Ajji?" Savi asked.

"Aaaaaaah!" Ajji screamed in response.

"Oh, no!" Savi gasped. "Your ankle is starting to swell."

Oh, Siva! Ajji saw it too. Why? Why today when there is so much work to do.
"Ajji, I'll go get some help," Savi said.

"No, no." Ajji shook her head. "I don't need help."

"But, Ajji, how will you walk back like this?"

"I'll be fine. I just need a minute." But when Ajji tried to put some weight upon that ankle, pain returned like a wave in a stormy sea, drowning all of her at once. She sat down again, huffing, trying to swallow her pain. She looked up at Savi, sweat now starting to hurry down her forehead in a rush. "I need to get back home. I promised my grandchildren that I'll make them sweets today."

Savi mellowed when she saw the anguish on Ajji's face. "But how will you walk, Ajji? You can barely stand."

"I can help," a voice answered.

The two women looked behind them and saw the boy standing there, his eyes low and his hands behind him.

Savi frowned immediately. "Why are you back here?" she barked. "Get out of here."

But the boy stayed this time. He looked at Ajji. "I can help you walk back," he offered.

"You think she will lay her hands on you?" Savi's words were acidic. "Run away before I break your legs, boy."

Ajji looked at the boy. He was waiting for her to answer. "Maybe he can carry the pots, Savi," she said softly. "And you can help me walk back home."

Savi's eyes grew wide at that. She looked at Ajji as if she had said something blasphemous. But Ajji had said something blasphemous, hadn't she? Letting the boy touch the clay pots and the waters in it was madness. "But, Ajji, I –"

I can carry the pots on my head," the boy offered. "I do it for my mother all the time."

Ajji took Savi's hand. "I need to get back home, Savi. I need to be there now."

Savi watched Ajji and the boy for a while. She then sighed and nodded.

"Do not touch the water in the pots, boy," Savi warned as she sat one pot on the boy's head and the other on his hip. "If you do that, I will first break these pots and then I'll break you." She then helped Ajji to her feet and the three slowly climbed up the bank's steps.

The three walked the road back to the village in silence. Ajji winced with her every step; the shock returned to her suspended ankle, reminding her of its pain. The road, to make the journey worse, had seemingly become ten times its length. Its uneven floor and the pebbles that lay scattered were no help either. The boy beside them walked carefully, making sure that no water spilled from the pots.
A while later, Savi stopped. "You cannot keep walking like this, Ajji," she said. "Let me go back and find some help." In truth, it was Savi who couldn't carry Ajji anymore.

"No," Ajji said and shook her head furiously. "That will take forever."

"It won't be any slower than this," Savi argued.

"But –"

"No, Ajji," Savi said firmly. "Look how much pain you are in. It is foolish to make it worse. Just stay here. I'll go back and get help." Before Ajji could say something, she pointed to a large rock. "Sit there. I'll be back in no time."

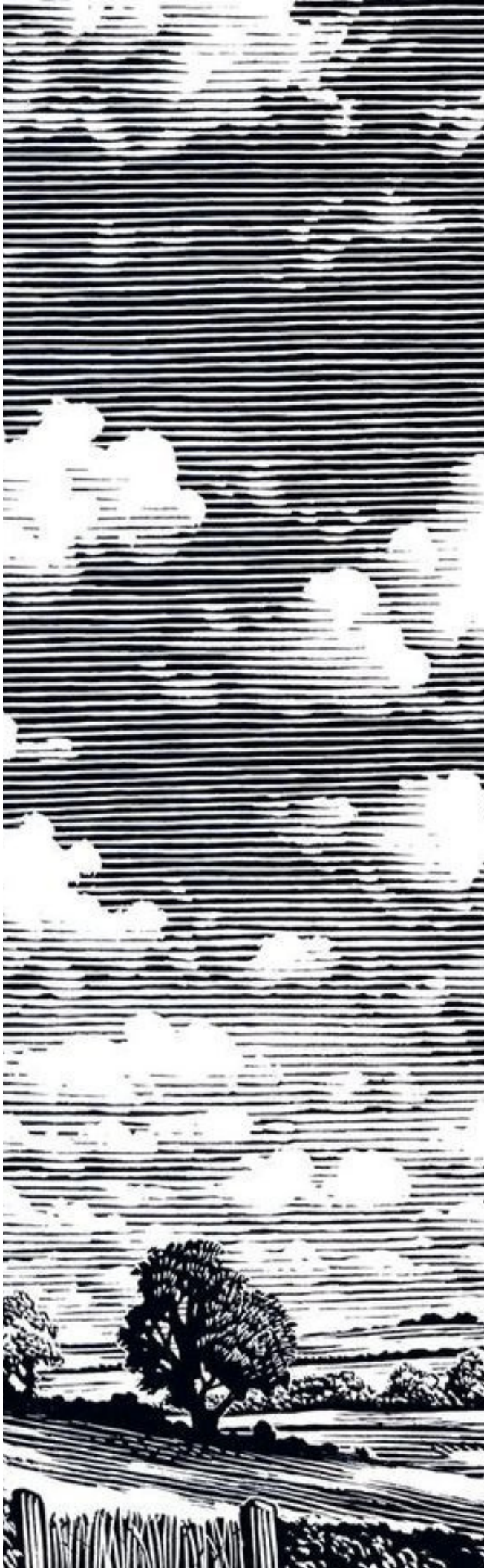
After Savi had settled Ajji on the rock, she took the pots from the boy – carefully so as to not touch him – and sat them on the ground beside Ajji. She then looked at Ajji's ankle. "It looks worse. You should have stayed at the riverbank."

"It's alright," Ajji lied. "Go to my home. My son can bring our car to pick me up."

"You." Savi snapped her fingers towards the boy. "Sit here quietly and help Ajji if she needs anything. But don't you dare trouble her."

"Savi," Ajji said chidingly. She looked at the boy. His shirt was drenched in sweat. His hair too. The day's heat and the labour had worn him. "The boy has helped us. Don't be rude to him."

"You shouldn't be so generous to their kind, Ajji," Savi replied and gave the boy a stiff glare before she hurried towards the village.
After Savi disappeared behind a turn, the boy squatted down and grabbed his knees. Ajji watched the boy for a while, wondering if the boy was expecting some reward. But she did not dare ask. She and the boy sat in silence for a long while after that.



Pain came to Ajji in soft but constant waves now. It tickled her ankle, reminding her constantly of it. But she had suffered worse, hadn't she? Yes, she thought. This will soon pass. And I will be able to do my chores. She thought of her grandchildren, wondering what they would think of her. Thinking of disappointing them was certainly more painful than a swollen ankle. It made her wince.

"Does it still hurt?" the boy asked suddenly.

Ajji frowned at the boy but said nothing.

The boy's eyes lowered, but only briefly. "You live in the big house, don't you?"

Ajji sighed. "Yes."

"Is the car outside yours?"

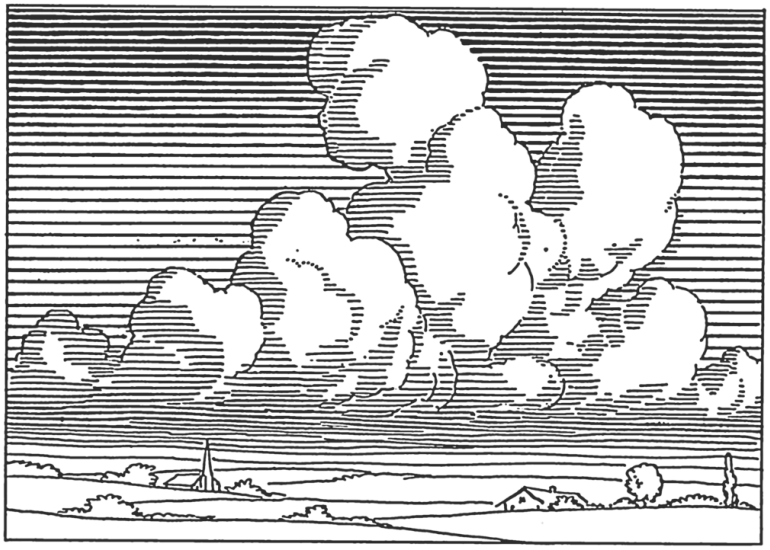
"Yes."

"It's the only car I've ever seen. Except for in pictures."

Ajji said nothing to that.

"Why do you come to collect water so early? No one else comes at this hour."

"You ask too many questions."



Sorry.” The boy’s head dropped again, but not for long. “Can I ask you something?”

“What?” Ajji asked irritably.

“Why am I not supposed to sit at the riverbank?”

The question took Ajji by surprise. Do you not know?

“I like looking at the sunrise sometimes,” the boy went on. “You know, on days when there aren’t many clouds in the sky. I wake up early for it and go to the riverbank. The sunrise looks the most beautiful there. The river turns golden and the sky is filled with so many birds.” He looked back in the direction of the riverbank. “My mother tells me not to go there. She never tells me why. I think she doesn’t know why. Do you?”

Ajji searched the boy’s face for mockery. She didn’t find any. Something about him said his question was innocent. “You’re not supposed to be there because you are… different.”

The boy’s head tilted to the side. “Different?”

“You’re smaller than us.”

“But I’ve seen children my age playing at the riverbank.”

“I’m not talking about your age. I’m talking about…” Why had his parents not told him about this? “Be quiet. There’s enough pain in my ankle. I don’t want to double it with your constant jabbering.”

“Sorry,” the boy said and shrank in his place. His eyes then went to the clay pots.
Ajji was glad for his silence. But why was he looking at the pots? “What is it?” she asked. “Are the pots leaking?”

The boy looked up at Ajji. He pursed his lips and swallowed a lump. “I’m thirsty.”

Ajji looked at the boy and the clay pots brimming with water. The boy had carried the pots this far. He was drenched in sweat. The day’s growing heat was no respite either. Just then, she heard a faint rumble. The rumble was getting louder.

The car, Ajji realised. The boy stood up and looked towards the rumble’s direction. The car appeared not long after. Ajji saw the boy’s eyes beam excitedly. Ajji saw his son behind the steering wheel and Savi sitting beside him, a similar excitement on her face too. The car stopped in front of Ajji and the boy. Savi got down and hurried over to Ajji. “How are you feeling now?” But before Ajji could reply, she turned to the boy. “Go on, boy,” she said stiffly. “Just make sure you’re not heading to the riverbank again. I better not see you or your kind there.”

Ajji watched the boy looking at her and then at the water in the clay pots. Her son came for her then; she leaned into him and hobbled over to the car. After she had settled in the car’s back seat, she looked back for the boy. She saw him walking away, and wondered if he would go to the riverbank to quench his thirst.

The Pyre And The Grave

Ayaan Halder

When I died, they burned my body;
They put me on a pyre and bathed me in oil,
And stuffed cotton up my nostrils so I couldn't smell the rancidity of my burning flesh
And that, they said, was the path to salvation that my God had prescribed.

When I died, my mother stood still; her eyes sans tears; her lips sans a quiver.
She stood still as the holy men on the banks of the Brahmaputra cracked my restless bones so that I could burn quicker.
For she had spent the years after she had birthed me cowering before the shadow of this very day, and the very crackle of these flames.
And now that it had arrived, nothing; And I mean nothing, could conquer her.

Not too far along these banks,
Or perhaps on the very other side of the world stood my brave and silly lover,
Who had lost her mind at the sight of my lifeless body, tearing off clumps of her thick, wavy hair;
And with them, the bits of her flesh that used to keep me warm.

"It isn't goodbye", she had told my quiet mother,
As the two had parted ways at the threshold of my life and death;
One refusing to watch me turn to ash;
The other smearing her face with it.

And she wasn't quite wrong, I suppose,
For there still remained a bit of my flesh under her painted fingernails
That had pierced into my skin the last time we made love,
And so, clenching her fists, she had run away; running as fast as she could from the burning pyre that was now my home.

When I died, my lover ran; letting the wind cut through the flakes of her quickly drying lips;
Running until her feet had battered the ground beneath her, turning it into soft, bluing loam,
And by the time she stopped, the smoke that had risen from the pores of my burning flesh
Had long been consumed by a hungry sky.

And yet, I remained;
Tucked beneath the washed away paint of her marble fingernails;
Whose edges she kissed with her bludgeoned lips; Her sweating fists still clenching me;
Still impenetrable through the waning moments before it is inevitably loosened by Death's bottomless hunger.

And then she picked up a shovel, and dug me a grave; A flaccid crunch echoing around her each time the blade hit the earth.
She dug until the sun was out of sight, digging deeper than the craters on the moon that had now risen; shallower than a puddle on a rainy day.
And then, in a lingering, thick moment, she knelt within this resting place and kissed me one last time;
Sprinkling me across its fertile width as our quivering lips parted;

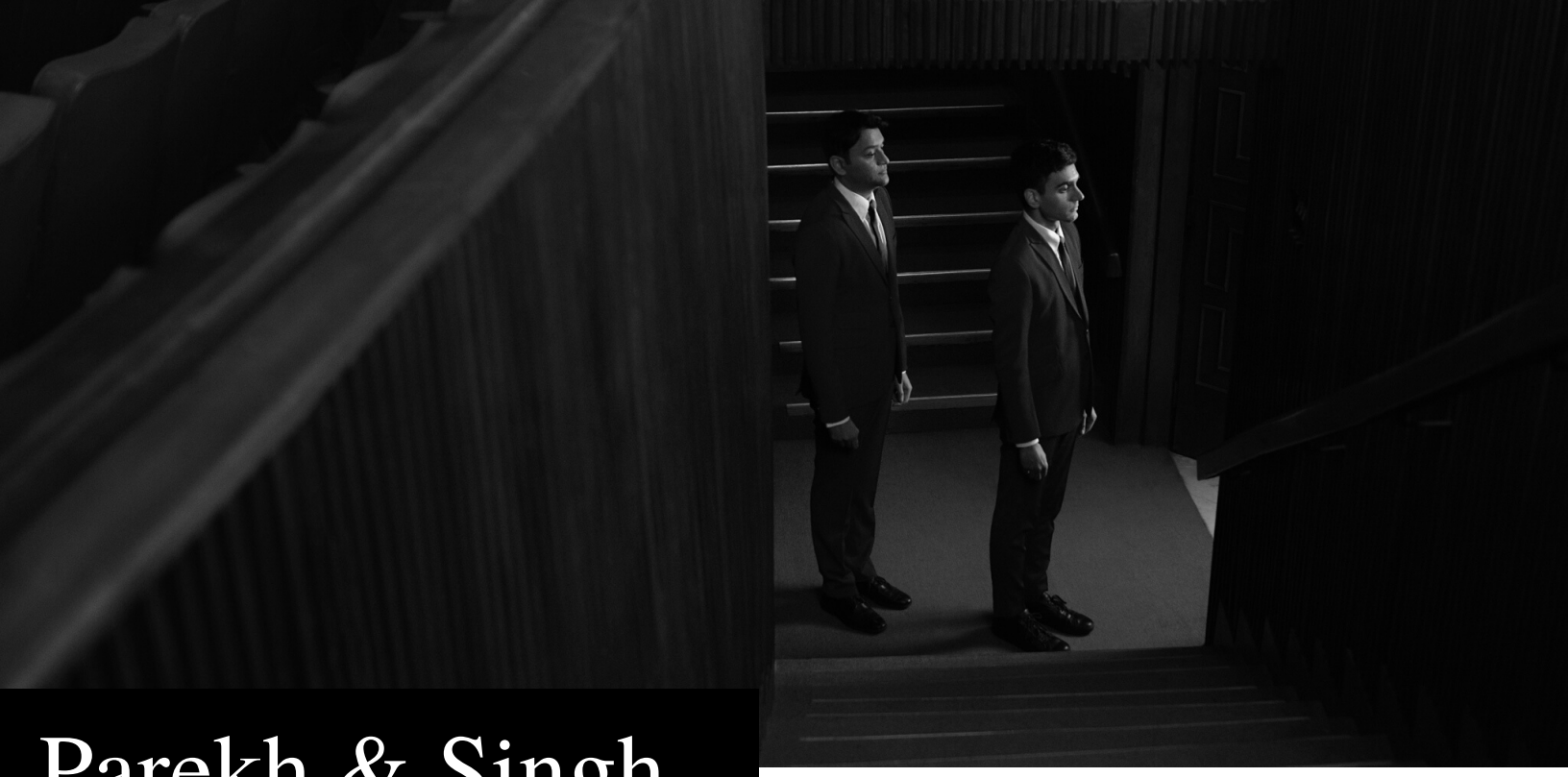
Flinging upon me blanket after blanket of warm, chocolaty dirt;
While I let out a breathless sigh, and closed my eyes, giving in to sweet, seamless slumber;
Ready to be awakened by my lover's call.
Knowing that she could always dig me up again.

Monograph Interviews: Parekh & Singh

The dream-pop duo, Parekh and Singh, recently released their third studio album- The Night Is Clear to much fanfare.

Currently on tour across India, Monograph managed to sit down with Nischay Parekh and Jivraj Singh for an interview.

Conducted a few days after their Calcutta show at the intimate Skinny Mo's Jazz Club, the duo gave us a look inside their creative process, and musical beliefs.



Parekh & Singh

Anuraag (A) - Today we are joined by the people behind Parekh & Singh, Parekh and Singh. Their new album 'The Night Is Clear' is out on all major streaming platforms and has been a personal favourite of mine, so thank you so much for having us. My first question [to you] would be, how did Parekh & Singh come to be? I was of the opinion that you guys met at school and it started out like that, but did it?

Parekh (P) - No, we were in the same school but at different times, different points in time. We actually met at a common friend's birthday party which was at a store in Calcutta, Weaver's Studio. I was actually playing a little acoustic set at that event or at that party. A friend of ours who owned the studio wanted me to meet Jivraj and another prominent musician of the city at the time. He just sort of introduced us and that's how we met.

A - And how did the duo come to be?

***Jivraj (J)* -** Over time through friendship I think and I think there was probably about a five year period of getting to know each other and starting to work. [At] first kind of casually and without much direction and over time with more of a sense of purpose and structure and intention.

***A* -** One thing that I've always been curious about is the creative process that artists have, so how does a song go from your personal private rooms to the recording studio?

***P* -** Through technology mainly. I think that the space between our rooms and the studio, or a streaming service or the public is getting smaller and smaller for artists all over the world. It's just the process of sort of producing a song is, I think, our primary sort of activity as a duo or just fans of production and the journey that a piece of music can take from something very nascent to something, somewhat developed and actualized and that goes through, you know, various processes of collaboration, mixing, mastering, recording, arrangement, rearrangement, editing and they don't necessarily happen in any specific order. Sometimes they can, you know, one thing can come after the next and sometimes they are all together and I think over the years, both me and Jivraj have divided our roles quite fluidly, like whatever I don't do he does or whatever he doesn't do I do and it has got to a point where we don't really need to, you know, actively assign those roles. It's become quite intuitive and yeah, I don't know if that answered your question.

A - Yeah it did, but you know when you talk about this entire process of arrangement, rearrangement and even when you have specific roles at the end of the day both of you are private individuals right, with musical differences are bound to arise. How do you tackle such a situation?

J - I think the differences are useful, creatively and we try to synthesize the tension between our view points if they are different and I think even if on some creative points we may have different tastes there is still some way to achieve harmony and fuse two conflicting direction; actually I don't even think there's conflict, there's contrast which is helpful for the work. You want there to be contrast.

A - And let's talk about the new album, 'The Night Is Clear'. In my personal opinion, there was a marked difference compared to your previous albums. It was a lot more intimate as a listener. I remember when I attended your concert, Totti (Bassist for Murphy's Paradox) and I were talking about it and he mentioned how, even to him, it felt more stripped down, lesser layers. What was your thinking behind going in that direction, musically speaking?

P - I think it's a fair observation to say that there were definitely less layers as compared to our earlier work. We weren't using a lot of synthesizers, specifically in terms of like, production. We weren't using a lot of electronic elements or as many as we may have used in the past. I think also me and Jivraj just had more clarity in our approach and that lead to it being quite bare, some of the arrangements and some of the songs. At the same time we wanted the songs to sort of speak for themselves and not block them out with too much production, etc. Produce only, you know, as much as we needed to on the album. And we also used a lot of, sort of, natural organic elements like live strings and live wood winds with real players which we hadn't ever done previously. Previously it was all, you know, computer generated synthesizers or sequences whatever but this time it was nice to have a lot of that 'humanness; in our music and I think that might have lead also to the intimacy that you may have felt.

A - Thank you. How do you think the response to the album has been?

J - I think it's been good. I only know what people have told me personally so like, friends and my grandmother but everyone has quite substantial and meaningful positive feedback which is nice[er] than just like casual feedback which sometimes doesn't mean anything and is just [a lot of] platitudes. Now it seems like people actually have some solid response to the music and the work which is great.

P - And also I find it interesting that everyone or rather our fans on social media seem to have different favourite songs on the album, there is not one single song on the album that everyone has gravitated towards or is sort of the central point in the album. Everybody has a different favourite which is kind of what I've always wanted to achieve at least as a songwriter producing an album. I wanted, you know, different songs to speak to different people and different perspectives. So that's been [a] very sort of gratifying thing for me as a songwriter as well.

A - When you mention these, you know, different favourites that fans have, to me the reason seems to be because they are different songs and they seem to draw their influences from different artists. So to that regard, who would you consider your biggest influences, artistically speaking?

P - That's a tough choice. I think we've always been very chameleon-like as a band. Sometimes it feels like, oh, many different bands in one specifically when we produce, like if you look at album one, two and three, if you take them out of context, they could arguably be different projects altogether. The only common link may have been my voice or whatever and our names on it but other than that musically we've yo-yoed a lot between different styles and different approaches, different forms. So, like you said, since each of the songs are different, each of the songs may have different influences as they're quite wide ranging you know from, I would say, anything from like Chopin to like, I don't know, Travis Scott or something. It's quite wide so it's hard to pin down a specific range even. I think the general emotion or the general approach that me and Jivraj have is that we are very egalitarian as listeners. We listen to everything and I, we both enjoy listening to everything. There's not like a specific form of music that we're put off by or don't find something valid in. So everything sort of has inspired this album. All music ever recorded and/or consumed by us probably.

S - Lots of music, lots of cinema, lots of books, travel, conversations. I think we just like to absorb a lot of different stimuli and then whatever comes out, comes out.

A - That's very interesting and is a wonderful way to go about it, to be like a sponge and let everything sort of influence you. Now you (to Singh) come from a very musical background, your parents formed the crux of Skinny Alley, one of the most pivotal bands and I remember a cursory glance at your Wikipedia article that you were turned on to music by your mother, pop music.

P - Yeah!

A - So, did your musical background help in your journey?

P - I would say so, yeah. I think more than anything, both my parents in fact, are huge fans of music so I got that from them. I sort of appreciated and understood how important consuming music or listening to music is in one's life and how much respect and importance they gave to just the act of, you know, enjoying music, and making music was not natural to me. It was something I had to learn and develop over the years and I've also obviously picked up a lot from Jivraj and his family but I think, yeah, just that its easy sometimes as makers of music to forget how to enjoy music for just what it is, without all the paraphernalia of, you know like, fandom or status or, you know, how many followers someone has. Just putting music on and enjoying it for what it is that's something I got from my parents, that's for sure.

A – I do know that it's a wonderful contrast that you (to Singh) didn't go to music college but you (to Parekh) did. What are the differences that arise as a result of that?

P – I don't think there's much difference, especially the more that we play together and the more time that passes. It just feels like that was just something I personally had to do, or needed actually - because there was a lot of musical development that I needed that was offered by institutionalised music education. But I don't think that that's a deal-breaker or a necessity for anyone seeking that information. You can get it through other forms, like Jivraj has, like practice or self-study.

A – This is a fun question. What is your fondest memory playing live?

S – I can't really pick any one memory, there's just a lot of good memories. But I think the ones that are particularly enjoyable are the ones where there's a mix of things happening. Like when something is kind of going wrong or on the edge of going wrong and then humour is the way to save the situation. That moment has occurred a number of times for me and that's always quite pleasurable and memorable; something unstable and then humour just making it okay. That moment is always good.

P – Yeah the same for me. Also we tend to have a lot of things going on when we're on stage, there's a lot of room for error, the margins are very slim. So invariably there's always something that does go wrong. But, like Jivraj said, we usually just use humour to diffuse that or the audience is with us on it, they understand, it's not so much of an illusion like the performer is perfect or anything. But, I think, the overall feeling I've gotten from a good show is that the audience takes away something personal from it, you know, they carry a bit of it back home. I think sometimes you can feel it and sometimes you can't. The second night in Calcutta specifically is a recent memorable one.

A – What do you think of the current musical scene in Calcutta and even India at large?

S – I think it's good (laughs). . . I'm feeling positive about it. Yeah it does go in waves but overall I think the energy is quite good at this point.

P – Yeah, I think, finally there's some sense of an industry for independent music and non-Bollywood music in India. Artists are managing to carve their own maps which is nice, you know. There aren't any fixed parameters like you need to do these specific steps or follow a specific path. You can be a YouTube sensation or be famous on Instagram or not even have a big social media presence and still have a strong fan-following. As far as the work goes, I think it's definitely developed and musicianship is going the right way.

A – On the topic of musicianship, other than Parekh & Singh are there any solo projects you are working on?

P – I started a little side project where I was trying to make some music in Hindi. I still have some aspirations there so I might do that on my time off, just more as an exercise or an experiment. But no, I would say that Parekh & Singh is kind of my central focus as an artist that I actively dedicate most of my time to.

S – Yeah, Parekh and Singh is the only outward-facing project for me as well. All the other experimental stuff isn't publicised at all, I don't put the word out at all, it's just stuff I do on the side for my own enjoyment.

A – Finally, is there anything you'd like to tell budding musicians who'll be reading and watching this interview?

S – Take risks.

A – Is it difficult to survive as a musician?

P – Yeah, but I think it's difficult to survive, period (laughs). If you compare it to other professions, I think it's getting easier. There's definitely more than a fair amount of hope just from a basic standard of living sense. But I think it's the job of musicians to keep pushing the envelope in terms of creativity and craft and just do shit (smiles).

A – And has the standard of living (for musicians) been improving in India at all?

P – I think so! I would say so.

S – Yeah in a big way.

A – What's the big change you've noticed?

P – I think we've been privileged enough to not have to actively engage in the economic struggle that a lot of musicians have had to go through. But we've had friends who previously couldn't even afford basic rent or a decent standard of life in Banglore, Bombay or Delhi. But now they can even by doing what they were doing before. They're getting more shows which is generating more income or they're doing film or production work on the side or just from their streaming royalties they're making enough money to sustain themselves.

A – But didn't the pandemic shake things up? How was it for you guys?

S – It didn't shake things up for us as far as the process is concerned because we've been working for the longest time, from home or online or not playing live a lot. So it fit into the structure of our creative lives. And I think sometimes a shakeup is a good thing, not necessarily a bad thing. It's been a good shakeup overall even though there were a lot of struggles for a lot of people. But I think it's resulted in a new clarity for a lot of people I've spoken to. And I think there is a sort of new enthusiasm now about going out to consume and create culture. And going back to what you'd asked about being a musician in India, I think, culturally it's being a little more accepted to be something other than a classical musician or somebody who'd get into film music. Now the generations above us are also open to being a creative practitioner in whatever field, so I think that's important.

A – A common sentiment I've heard repeated is that it isn't how it used to be; that people don't support artists how they used to. Do you think that's true?

P- From my perspective I think the opposite is true. I think there's more support if you just look at Instagram or YouTube. I don't think numbers are always necessarily a true indicator of what's happening specifically for each artist. Qualitatively there are more people engaged with independent music in India, younger people definitely. That variance that people previously had, that oh Coldplay is my favourite band from outside India and so and so is my favourite band from India, that variance is changing. People just like music, whether they're an Indian band or a band from outside of India. If an artist produces work that they resonate with, that's their favourite artist which is resulting in a more sustainable form of support for artists in India.

Our Staff.

Editor in Chief: Anuraag Das Sarma

Senior Editors: Ayush Chakraborty & Amrisha Banerjee

Art Directors: Rushali Mukherjee & Aindrila Ray

Copy Editors: Atri Deb Chowdhury

Visual Editor: Payal Sapui

Digital Editors: Aishik Roy & Mukund Daga

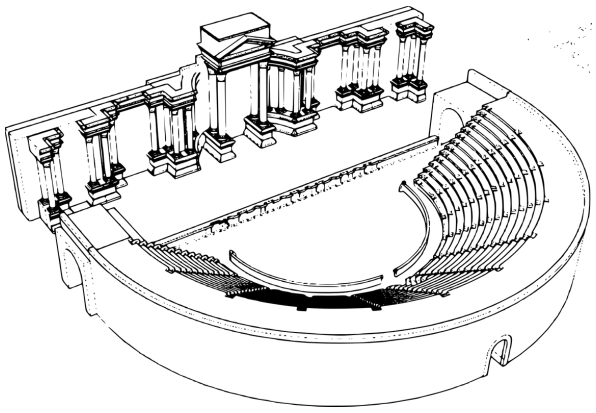
Media Head: Aryaman Manna

Social Media Head: Adrija Dutta

Curator of Newsletter: Sushen Mitra

Opinions Editor: Caiityya Pillai

Writers: Rajeshwari Tagore, Naresh Kumar, Ayaan Halder



MONOGRAPH