DEF
DIGITAL EMPOWERMENT foundation

ACODE

ON THE BRINK OF OBLIVION

A LONE PERFROMER'S QUEST TO KEEP THE MAGIC ALIVE

DEF DIALOGUES

In conversation with Ishamuddin Khan

“Many of us have had international recognition. But right now, we are at the brink of losing our artforms to poverty” said Ishamuddin Khan in an article published by CNN in 2020. During an interview for the DEF Dialogue series, Khan tells us that the situation of street performers continues to remain bleak and also reveals historic, parliamentary decisions that have contributed to such conditions.

For generations, Indian peripatetics have enthralled their viewers by walking on tightropes, materialising pigeons out of cane baskets and making bears stand on their hind legs. There are seven performing tribes in India – jugglers, acrobats, magicians, snake charmers, animal trainers, impersonators and street singers – and all are similarly disenfranchised. These tribes pass down the knowledge of their art to their successors who, the former hope, will carry it forward. None of them, however, are recognised as artists even though they are practitioners of an age-old artform that is unique to our culture.

Khan is a street magician and can depict the history of the universe, starting right from the Big Bang, through this performance. Explaining to us the difference between illusionists (such as the renowned P.C Sarkar) and street magicians, he clarifies that the latter do not necessarily learn the art of magic but instead come from a tribe of street magicians, imbibing generational knowledge of their craft. Over the years, Khan has performed world-wide and his performance of the Great Indian Rope Trick (formerly known as “The Hindu Rope trick”) was ranked 20th on the British Channel 4’s “50 Greatest Magic Tricks”. However, he adds, “...I am praised if I perform in international auditoriums but if I perform the same art on the streets of India, I will be a criminal”.

Here, Khan was alluding to the various laws in India that either directly or indirectly prohibit street performances. In an article for Scroll, published in 2017, Swati Janu writes that such prohibitions can be traced back to “1876 when the British Raj implemented the Dramatic Performances Act, to police public performances used as forms of protest by Indians against the colonial rule”. She also added that “while West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Delhi have now repealed the archaic law, whether a public performance is deemed objectionable, and hence qualifies for a licence or not, is left to the discretion of local police. Unsurprisingly, this often leads to class or caste-based discrimination against the performers”. The 1959 Bombay Prevention of Beggary Act banned all such street performances, effectively demeaning an artform to a piece of begging machinery. This association has further depleted the status of street performers in India. “We are not beggars”, refuted Ishamuddin Khan in a 2014 Hindustan Times article written by Neha Pushkaran, “we perform art handed down to us through generations. But the government doesn’t recognise us as more than just a backward caste in its records”. Belonging at the intersection of two marginalised communities renders them doubly disadvantaged and they do not find voices that echo their struggles in powerful, political spheres.

Khan laments that the dwindling of the trade is pushing younger street performs to look for more financially viable as well as societally “respectable” jobs – recently, on a visit to a snake charmer’s village, Khan thought he would assemble the youth and motivate them to pursue their ancestral craft but the youth’s collective sentiment was “teach me guitar, I don’t want to learn the been (a wind instrument akin to a bagpipe used by snake charmers)”. He also points out that some practitioners have turned away from performing tricks and instead turned to selling trinkets and amulets with the claim of having healing powers. “If they perform and pass the hat around, they might get a hundred rupees, but selling even one amulet will bring in much more”.

Citing all of these reasons, Khan says that it is imperative that attention be paid to his community of street performers so that they as well as the art they carry in their blood can continue to survive. He wants to institutionalise these artforms to make sure that they can be modelled, replicated and passed on. And, even more importantly, so that the performers can receive the support, recognition and monetary compensation that they deserve. With this aim, he founded the **Indian Street Performers’ Association Trust (ISPAT)** in 2013.

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> A-CODE WANTS TO ADVOCATE FOR THE RIGHTS OF ARTISTS AND MARGINALISED ARTISAN COMMUNITIES WHO HAVE BEEN ON THE RECEIVING END OF NEGLECT. THROUGH THE MANY CHANNELS THAT THE ORGANISATION IS ATTEMPTING TO CREATE; STORIES OF ARTISTS SUCH AS ISHAMUDDIN KHAN, AS WELL AS THEIR COMMUNITIES, CAN BE BROUGHT TO THE FORE.

Over the years, the trust has been able to group together about 500 to 700 street performers who reside in the Delhi NCR region. Khan has also chalked an elaborate plan, the execution of which is sure to immensely, positively impact street performers in India. Through ISPAT, Khan encourages the formation of unions so that the rates of street performers can be standardised and so that they are not taken advantage of by larger corporations, especially by luxury hotels and wedding venues that hire performers and pay them nothing more than just food and lodging for a brief duration. By approaching the tourism departments of different states, he wants to help members of his organisation map their travels for assured income.

The renowned street magician also wants to digitise his artform and raise awareness about it through the many avenues that the internet provides. This is where initiatives such as DEF's A-CODE can prove instrumental. A-CODE wants to advocate for the rights of artists and marginalised artisan communities who have been on the receiving end of neglect. Through the many channels that the organisation is attempting to create; stories of artists such as Ishamuddin Khan, as well as their communities, can be brought to the fore. This can also help start conversations about the freedom of artistic expression that many like him are denied because of a lack of recognition by the government and an absence of programmes that support such traditional artists.

A-CODE also wants to identify areas of digital entrepreneurship among the communities and the artists that it is tirelessly advocating for. Being a vertical of the Digital Empowerment Foundation, A-CODE recognises the potential that digitization has for them and is working towards up-skilling these creators from marginalised communities to embrace the digital. During the interview, Ishamuddin Khan also shared this vision and agreed that turning towards the digital world is one of the most effective ways in helping dying, unrecognised and underrepresented artforms (like his) survive. He wants to encourage street performers to put up their performances online and modify their acts, adopting the latest trends to appeal to the larger population. To successfully realise such a shift, for any community of artists, A-CODE's resources will prove invaluable.

Khan's ultimate vision is to (lease land from the government) amass 20 to 100 practising magicians and then expand from there to form a village where visitors can see magic performances as well as their lives beyond the stage. In this village will be an amphitheatre where the magicians can have regular performances, discussions and training, a knowledge centre such as a museum, a handicraft shop to sell the artefacts that the women make, a school for academic as well as vocational training for the children so that they learn both their ancestral knowledge as well as academics to be able to make informed choices for their future. The latter part of the plan was inspired by his observations of Brazil, Argentina and China where the government has facilitated schools for those belonging to circus tribes. Therefore, he hopes to approach Chief Ministers of different states to get land on lease. And, he has also encouraged the current members of the organisation to collect money so that even if nobody grants them land, they can still dream of creating such a village for themselves. "We are all living and existing, why not do it together", Khan says. Through training, Khan wants street magicians to become polished performers, adept at using multimedia so that they can "polish their skill, manage it, sell it".

Khan has already started something similar in his native village in Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh. In an old unauthorised colony of street musicians, Khan has begun making arrangements for open air performances. And, if it receives adequate support and footfall, he is positive about being able to expand it to benefit more street performers.

Salman Rushdie brilliantly described Delhi's vivacious Katputli colony in Midnight's Children. But its destruction acutely foreshadowed the (recent) razing of the colony to the ground for redevelopment projects. Our selective amnesia about parts of our creative heritage can lead to more such erasures and displacements. We hope that interactions with people such as Ishamuddin Khan can remind us of the variety of artforms we have and make us aware of the neglect that some of them are facing so that we can collectively contribute to their preservation.

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A-CODE'S MISSION IS TO EMPOWER, UP-SKILL AND ADVOCATE FOR ARTISTS FROM THE MANY COMMUNITIES THAT STRUGGLE TO FIND A PLACE IN INDIA'S CONVENTIONAL CULTURAL LEXICON. THE ORGANISATION ALSO WANTS TO CREATE NUMEROUS CHANNELS TO GIVE THESE ARTISTS THE SUPPORT, RECOGNITION AND ENCOURAGEMENT THEY DESERVE.

ISHAMUDDIN KHAN IS ONE SUCH ARTIST. HE HAS BEEN CONSISTENTLY FIGHTING AGAINST MANY ODDS TO HELP HIS COMMUNITY OF STREET MAGICIANS AND HIS LARGER COMMUNITY OF INDIAN STREET PERFORMERS. THROUGH THE A-CODE PROGRAMME, WE HOPE TO EMPOWER HIS DREAM AND HELP HIM ACHIEVE IT.

DEBALEENA BAGCHI, A-CODE FELLOW