

The Tropic Trapeze: Circus in Colonial India

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Last but not the least; I declare that all errors in this thesis are mine. The arguments and views expressed in this thesis are solely mine.

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INTRODUCTION

In this dissertation, an attempt is made to historically understand the circus within a colonial landscape and how it affected human attitudes towards ideas of performance and entertainment in general. For the sake of logistics, a temporal period of 1880 to 1940 is fixed, keeping in mind that origin stories and distinct breaks are but narrative devices of control. This introduction will touch on several aspects of the circus and circus histories before expanding them on a larger scale in the subsequent chapters.

The obsession of the nineteenth century was History, ‘with its themes of development and of suspension, of crisis and cycle, themes of the ever-accumulating past, with its great preponderance of dead men and the menacing glaciation of the world’¹. The hierarchy of time over space ceases when, as Foucault prophesizes, that ‘the present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side by side, of the dispersed’². The reality and comprehensibility of a space is structured and Heidegger’s thesis reveals the transformation of the perceptual world into a sensible framework or unit, where a picture is a matrix of coordinates represented by the mathematical system of linearity and perspective and is explained as a scientific and mathematical mode.³ The map excels over time in its disciplinary and capillary manifestations of power. Space assumes an important marker of categorization and knowledge production; within this framework the discussion of the circus, as a spatial phenomenon, is very important. The circus invented a new space, a space of dissent as well as a site of construction of new identities and the reproduction of old ones. The circus space was a bounded yet extremely malleable space. From disembodied and fluid spaces of entertainment (namely plays, vaudeville, burlesque and other nineteenth century theatrical works) circus emerged into a space, which was named and mapped. Even when the circus moved on its route from one place to the other it had a specific place to inhabit. For the audience, experiencing and understanding the circus space was completely different from their daily ‘crossings’ and ‘movements’ in different zones within the urban landscape.

‘Spectators are confronted by an unusual density of thresholds as if it were, *mutatis mutandis*, a private home. Access and paths are regulated, as is the time at

¹ Michel Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces’, *Diacritics*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Spring, 1986): 22.

² *Ibid.*

³ Martin Heidegger, ‘The Age of the World Picture’, in *The Question concerning technology and other essays*, Trans. William Lovitt (New York, London: Garland Publishing Inc, 1977), 116.

which some gates can be crossed under specified conditions. The spectators navigate a new geography through corridors bordered by forbidden zones.’⁴

The circus transformed a daily, ‘everyday’, ‘comprehensible’ pedestrian space into a complex site full of alien signs and mysterious alleys. The original space, that was easily navigable, was now strewn with metaphors and real signs that precluded easy movement. And when the audience is seated in case of a houseful intimate spaces are destabilized among audience members. The audience is bound in a binary bind with the circus players.

To return to the reified space of the circus, the performative acts of the circus created a periphery. In pre-colonial/religious/pre-industrial times Performance as entertainment was connected within a socio-religious framework and the regime of work and play was not strictly separated; the performers also did not serve as periphery markers within the societal fabric.

The circus acts, denoted as rituals, consolidated the creation of boundaries; by performing these rituals the performers were separated and alienated from the rest of the societal imagination. The spatial feature of the circus consolidates and appropriates performances which were/are disembodied and scattered by concentrating them within a single site, geographically strict and ‘really’ comprehensible, the act of performance and the performer himself/herself gets deified within a specific zone. And the acts symbolized leisure and play or rather defined that their ‘work’ was play for the audience. Therefore, suggesting the division of work and play within a societal structure be strictly separated; implying further that the labour of the circus performers was in the consumption regimes of the ‘working’, ‘paying’ audience. By rendering the labour of the circus performer into a commodity the society sought to manipulate and represent the circus according to their wishes. The circus was a market of objects that worked according to the desired ‘demand’ of the customer. This in turn erased the violence that went into providing for the ‘supply’ to that demand.⁵

The zones from where the circus operated were reflective of the dichotomous nature of the circus’ existence within the societal imagination. Away from the ‘normative’ daily

⁴ Paul Bouissac, *Semiotics at the Circus: Semiotics, Communication and Cognition* (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter Mouton, 2010), 15.

⁵ When Marx exclaimed about the quixotic nature of the commodity (here the circus performer), he was referring to its existence within the form of exchange, and this distinct phenomenon is articulated by the advertisements of a particular commodity (because, according to Marx, the exchange value of the commodity assumes an independent existence and hence more manipulability). Moreover the visual attributes and other markers of a particular commodity enhanced the formalistic nature of that commodity and the productive realities of that commodity are ignored.

lives of the city dwellers, circuses in most parts of the world inhabited fringes of the city—an in-between zone, neither urban, nor rural, neither policed, nor completely lacking in surveillance. It was a zone that also coincided within the moral economy of the city. The city needed to discard its refuse (both organic and otherwise) but also required the fringes to sustain its moral, financial and cultural economy.

The location of the circus tents in the colonial spaces, either in the major presidencies or in the suburbs seemed to inhabit the ‘grey’ areas of the city, removed from the centers of commerce or residence (primarily, the white residential areas). These areas also supplied the service men and women for the white town. Their spatial ordering and placement stemmed from the ideas of hygiene and morality, evident within the colonies of Victorian England.⁶ The margins of the city coincided with the margins of the performative world of the late 19th century. Around this time, a general spatialization of sexuality was already happening through the Contagious Diseases Acts, which sought to restrict certain areas of the city as ‘red light’ areas and banned these for ‘regular’ women. Along with this spatialization came up lock hospitals which sought to ‘normalize’ mad women and prostitutes through incarceration. This spatial restructuring was required to create identities of the new colonial subject free from the chains of ‘moral’ and ‘traditional’ evil.

The question of modernity seems to be intertwined within the establishment of circus as an entertainment institution from its earlier traveling formations. In Europe ‘Circuses—taking up the example of shows in the big cities—grew out of the traveling fair and its menageries. Others traveled alongside the fair or used the fair event as a context for their own performances’.⁷ Sanger (the great showman of Victorian England) remarks, quite pertinently about the shift of performance within a world which considered visual and physical trickery coupled with animal tricks as magical and religious, that ‘the changes he saw were for the better, and could be symbolized perhaps, by changing illumination’.⁸ The traveling circus did not go out of existence and simultaneously operated with settled

⁶ This ordering of circus tents outside the city or the suburbia was happening from the late 18th century when the circus was formalized in England. Circuses at that point of time were considered as spreading disease and immorality.

⁷ Yoram S. Carmeli, ‘Lion on Display: Culture, Nature, and Totality in a Circus Performance’, in *Poetics Today*, Vol 24, No: 1 (2003): 72.

⁸ John Lukens, *The Sanger Story, Being George Sanger Coleman’s story of his life with his Grandfather ‘Lord’ George Sanger* (London: Hodder-Stoughton, 1956), 68.

tent circuses, however, the circus as modern event worked along new regimes of work and play, set by industrial capitalism⁹.

Within the changing world of illumination, circus got tuned to new regimes of work and leisure. The Victorian circus folk, as Brenda Assael remarks, ‘were caught between traditions of vagabondage arising from itinerancy and the fair circuits and modernization occasioned by a considerably expanded, regulated, and commercialized leisure sector’¹⁰. She ascertains that the origin of British circuses were, around the 1760s, from Philip Astley’s equestrian display. During this period and in subsequent years, modernity coupled with industrial capitalism created a situation where traditional entertainment acts were slowly being disbanded; however circus was also having problems from the play (as discussed earlier in the late Gregorian context). Moreover within this changing social framework of England, late Gregorian aldermen and magistrates stamped out village wakes, town centre bull runs, and similar allegedly ‘disorderly’ and ‘offensive’ traditions; this left a vacuum in the people’s calendar until 1850 where statutes regarding the naturalization of circus were passed and the circus became one of the primary entertainment events suitably linked to the changed regime of work and play attuned to industrial capitalism. Popular attention was gradually shifting from ‘traditional usages’ of theatre, text based performances to more carnivalesque staging towards the late nineteenth century. The public attention craved for ‘curiosities’ in the performance arena. This is also reflective of the broader political changes that were happening after 1850. Colonial ventures created networks of mobility and through them more and more performing wonders were coming to Europe. The British press lamenting on this change writes, ‘Writing in the after-part of the Easter festival, we have only to deal with whatever has proved permanently attractive of the theatrical novelties of the season. But, in fact, the custom seems almost to have gone out, of providing new pieces at Easter. Managers appear to imitate the practices of the Italian carnival rather than regard too attentively the old usages of the British theatre. Appropriating the verse of Lord Byron, slightly altered: ‘there are dresses splendid, but fanastical (sic), Masks of all times and nations, Turks and Jews, And harlequins and clowns, with feats gymnastical, Vaulters and jugglers—Japanese, Hindoos!’..... More attention has been paid during the past month to the

⁹ Ibid. According to Sanger, rather than depending for their timing on holy days, like the fair, the circuses followed their own course and calendar whole days; like the fair, they performed twice an evening, in the public’s leisure time, after work.

¹⁰ Brenda Assael, *The Circus and Victorian Society* (Charlottesville, London: University of Virginia Press, 2005), 14.

Oriental troupe of Contortionists at the New Holborn Amphitheatre, and the Japanese Tumblers at the Lyceum than to anything else....They appear to be famous with the public whenever they appear'.¹¹

Equestrian shows formed one of the major acts of earlier circus establishments. The shows continued when circus became more established including more animals and of multiple kinds. However, all the animals were fitted within the archetypes of empire building or contemporary tropes of masculinity. Now, this may sound a bit tenuous and stretched, but I would like to talk these 'beasts' in terms of their appropriation and dignity. Daniel Roche writes, 'The staging of major spectacles by courts and cities, carousels and cavalcades, parades and March-pasts, peasant races and aristocratic competitions helped to promote passion for man's 'first conquest''¹². The circus utilized the equestrian show in the same way with acts concerning fine-bred stallions bearing the insignia of the British Empire and militarism conquering and overpowering native soldiers and 'miscreants'¹³.

Every performative act is culturally coded and historically contingent. The Colonial Empire, as it moved along its path of imperial expansions, needed cultural formations to legitimize its act of cultural and political aggression as well as disseminate the benevolence of its colonial successes. And the people who also needed convincing were the people of the metropolis so that they reproduce the cultural and racial ethics of colonialism within their lives and work. Apart from the question of the Empire and its social legitimization, the circus also had a political and social role which was distinct from the conventional modes of theatrical entertainment.

Marius Kwint remarks regarding the role of circus in the mid eighteenth century when it occupied a mediating role within the English political framework, 'Because of its hybrid nature, neither fully dramatic nor entirely the stuff of the fairground, it inhabited a grey area of the laws that defined and controlled public

¹¹ E.H. Malcolm, 'Theatres and Places of Public Amusement', in *Sharpe's London Magazine of Entertainment and Instruction*, Nr. 32 (Jan 1868), 271.

¹² Daniel Roche, 'Equestrian Culture in France from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century', *Past & Present*, Vol. 199, Issue 1 (2008): 145.

¹³ See the company paintings and the descriptions of the images from 1876-95, Victoria Memorial Archive, Kolkata, West Bengal.

entertainment¹⁴, circus managers maintained a respectable public face, cultivated an influential audience and appealed above the magistrate's powers. Its definitions within the political governance of the country were not well laid out and often it rallied with the powerful and the influential. However this may have stemmed from the undefined nature of the circus groups. In practice they were mostly tolerated, but the law left them vulnerable to hostile initiatives, either motivated by social paranoia or malicious competition. Although within the development of statute laws in the 19th century their position became better and the law no longer enjoyed full indiscretions with the circus groups.

Helen Burke speaks about Philip Astley's circus constructing concrete identities for the British Empire.¹⁵ This particular circus used several motifs of English supremacy through circus acts like fireworks for celebrating an English victory or used an Irish identity marker like the St. Patrick's Day to achieve its aim of appeasing the English masters who controlled the parliament and rolled out statutes against cultural objects. However, the Irish 'mob' reacted quite amusingly to this form of propagandist circus by occasional modes of disruption during the circus acts or hampering the act itself. The circus of Astley, which was used to mobilize the Irish masses for England, became a site of resistance, where the 'united Irishmen' subverted this propagandist performance¹⁶.

Circus in both the colony and the metropolis disseminated the legitimacy of the Empire and the cultural and masculine supremacy of Europe and the white man. Consider the lions act and the fire eaters; they symbolize the iconic representation of the Empire and the exotic respectively. Moreover the circus imagery, which flowed in the newspapers and the labels around the globe, created racial and gendered stereotypes, which were seemingly becoming natural attributes for the marginal, the native and the woman. Circus posters over the years, in newspapers and painted as woodcuts, reveal a picture which shows how different construction of sexualities took place, to borrow from Anne McClintock, the 'pornotropics'¹⁷ of the tropics morphed itself within multiple visual representations which fed on colonial morality and indigenous sexuality, coupled with the allure of the dark and the pornographic exotic. Male fantasies driven through

¹⁴ Marius Kwint, 'The Legitimization of the Circus in Late Gregorian England', *Past & Present*, Vol. 174, Issue 1 (2002): 74.

¹⁵ Helen Burke, 'Jacobin Revolutionary Theatre and the Early Circus: Astley's Dublin Amphitheatre in the 1790s', in *Theatre Research International*, Vol. 31, Issue 1 (2006):1-16.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Anne McClintock *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York, London: Routledge, 1995), 21-24. McClintock quite deftly defines how through visual representation African women were transformed as women having abnormal sexual appetite and men having large phalluses. She uses the trope of the *pornotropics* to define how the voyagers from the *liminal* position of fear and apprehension constructed this picture.

'*hunterwallis*' (female performers with whips, taming the lions) found voice in these posters and paintings which depicted the strong and ambiguous women of the east, are visible through these posters. The uncontrollably sexual eastern woman (as iconized by European travelers and intellectuals) comes pretty close to the women inhabiting the posters which sold commodities in the colony through the metaphors of stereotyping the physical and cultural attributes and practices of the colonized.

The beginning is written in the end. This reverted Confucian prophecy reflects the tales I am about to tell in the following lines of this chapter. How does one become a circus performer? Or rather, why one becomes a circus performer? Histories of circus performers are riddled with the stories of escape and new beginnings. Their visibility within the circus tent, in front of the roaring or heckling audience, becomes their identity. This identity seemingly becomes the only archive through which the performer is placed within the societal imagination. The spectacle of the performance becomes the smokescreen through which his/her past and present are constructed, disseminated and legitimized within the memory of the public.

Do times differ when we decide to run away¹⁸? The narratives of circus are always riddled with these stories of movement and escape; the apparent running away from 'normal' families, careers, community boundaries.

The letters sent by Colonel Suresh to his uncle speak of a continuous denial of his life and community history in the native land; he spoke of 'tackling white wrestlers and doing great feats never achieved by the lazy Brahmins in his village'¹⁹. Through his transition from a meek Bengali boy raised in a well to do family in Bengal to a great circus performer and zoo-keeper, his tales speak of a distancing from the subjugated position his countrymen were in. He sought to tackle his colonial masters through the creation of a new history of himself by subverting the stereotypes of effeminacy which was imposed on the Bengali community. This attempt at a new history creates a political position strengthened by his performative acts, which were real and tangibly masculine. The doubts about the authenticity of his career serve no important point, even if his feats are proved false; the sheer imagination and extent to which his stories circulated within Bengali texts from late 19th century/early 20th century to school books in post colonial

¹⁸ The point being the quote mentioned in the beginning of the section is from the contemporary times.

¹⁹ 'Bongonibasi' Sompadok Shri Upendrakrishna Sonkolito, '*leftenant Suresh Biswas*' (*sachitra oloukik ghotonapurno ottyashchorjyo jibonkahini* (Kolkata : Grey Street Publishing, 1900), 47.

Bengal of India constructed Colonel Suresh Biswas as an iconic figure who subverted colonial stereotyping of the Bengali community through his physical acts of prowess.

The question remains though, why circus? The construction of Suresh Biswas could have also happened through indigenous traditions of the gymnasium culture which was highly popular at his time. A matter of boundaries defined the event of the circus performance. Circus is at once chaotic and organized, peripheral and central to the societal imagination and cosmology. This seemingly contradictory nature of circus performance and its relationship to the society can be defined by

‘The circus display of both animals and humans as exemplifications of their own kind erases their ‘realness,’ turning them into images in the public's perception. However, a totalization of the performance and of the display of circus traveling reifies the animal and human images and the circus image, with the effect of placing them out of social time and relations. On the margin of the fragmented modern order, the reified traveling circus thus embodies transcendence of culture/nature categories and implies its own ontological apartness. For its nostalgic spectators, it thereby illusorily resurrects a totality of order—from which the circus itself is apart’²⁰.

This establishment of societal order in the seemingly distraught and disconnected performance acts also poses a different story. The circus from its very inception served to create a space which gave shelter to the ‘rejects’ of the society; the disfigured, the prostitute and more than often the ‘abnormal’. It is quite interesting to note that a late 19th century theatre journal *Natyamnadir* in colonial Bengal published a series on a circus troupe of Prof Basu that at length talks about its performers coming from various backgrounds, which either have become defunct occupationally or were proscribed²¹.

Narratives of escape regarding are numerous from colonial times to the contemporary. The idea of escape seems a metaphor through which a new history of the Bengali community was constructed. Within the colonial drudgery and humiliation about its emasculation at the hand of the British it only seemed plausible that a narrative of masculinity should be written distanced from anything that was touched by colonial value systems. Satyajit Ray writing his detective short story ‘*Chinnamastar Abhishap*’ (The Curse of the Headless) in the 1960s sought to create the figure of a circus performer

²⁰ Yoram S. Carmeli, ‘Lion on display: Culture, Nature and Totality in a Circus Performance’, in *Poetics Today*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (2003): 65.

²¹ Prof Abanindrakrishna Basu, *Circus e Bhut er Upodrob* (Kolkata: Pub Unknown, 1910), 32.

whose physical appearance resembled a masculine and tough performer who was primarily a Bengali but had run away and created this image. It also seems that a 'feminine' Bengali name would only create obstacle for the lion performer to excel in his profession along with his Bengali past. This short story written within the emerging nation state of India clearly resembles the concept, that to prove your masculinity, it is needed that one should distance and disguise the identity of the 'ever lazy' Macaulian Bengali.

The Australian circus historian Mark St Leon writes about Con Colleano, an Aboriginal tight-wire performer who made a name for himself in America after cutting his teeth in traveling Australian shows. Colleano was of Irish and West Indian as well as Aboriginal ancestry, and he assumed a brindled array of identities throughout his career. He was taught 'Arab tumbling' by a New York-born Jewish acrobat, and at one stage was required to masquerade as Arab by one of his Australian employers. In America, he wore a Spanish toreador costume on the tight-wire and one of his sisters performed in circuses as 'Senorita Sanchez'²².

Wendy Holland in her article on aboriginal circus performers tells a similar story about her great-grandfather, Harry Dunn, an Aboriginal man with Irish/Sierra Leone heritage, who as a boy was picked up (read abducted) by the Fitzgerald circus operators on Queensland's Paroo River. In the late 1880s, the Fitzgeralds gave him the name Cardella and assigned him a Spanish identity, presumably to make him more palatable to white audiences than he would have been as an Aboriginal performer. Aboriginal people had long been a resource to circus operators in Australia, but they were just as often billed as South American or 'Wild Indian', given names like Senorita Sanchez and Master Antonio²³.

The fascinating postscript to Holland's story is that she learnt that her great grandfather had an African heritage as well as an Aboriginal one by reading a stray comment in St Leon's book. So masked by multiple exotic identities she and her family had not known about that actual complexity to his history.

²² Mark St Leon, *Wizard of the Wire: The Story of Con Colleano* (Canberra, Aboriginal Studies Press, 1993), 52-53.

²³ Wendy Holland, 'Reimagining Aboriginality in the Circus Space', in *Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 33, 1 (1999): 91-104.

These fluid identities created multiple webs of patronage within and outside the circus tent'. One story recounted by a descendant of Prof. Basu²⁴ says that around 1910 when Prof Basu's Circus was at its peak the manger often used to receive offers for their chief trapeze artist, a 'Spaniard' girl from some of the wealthy Calcuttans for a meeting with this exotic performer. The truth was that this performer came from one of the much maligned, poor suburbs of Calcutta; only her tanned skin and thin body gave her a 'Spaniard' look along with the publicity.

One of the fascinating stories about the identity and the social positioning of a circus performer involve the famous early 19th century strongman Belzoni who was also an eminent archaeologist! His brief stay in Scotland reflected his early acts of prowess and gymnastics. From 1803 Belzoni started his performances which involved lifting enormous weights and gymnastic acts of great agility. It was at Edinburgh that he met Henry Salt, the famous painter and procurer of Egyptian antiquities.

His performance attracted the attention of Henry Salt and he introduced Belzoni to Philip Astley, who is considered as the father of the modern circus. Belzoni's great strength and height, (which stood at six foot six inches) was properly utilized in Philip Astley's Circus. Belzoni and his wife were recruited in Astley's Circus to perform an act called 'The Twelve Laborers of Hercules' at a modest salary. Belzoni carried twelve men on stage while his wife dressed as a cupid waved a flag at the top. This was only the beginning of his circus career. Belzoni performed at the musical theatre of Sadler's wells in London. He appeared there as 'Patagonian Samson'. His act was to carry eleven men in a human pyramid strapped to an iron fitting on his chest across the stage. His extraordinary feats of strength earned him the title of Great Belzoni. However, his twelve-year circus career came to an end around 1916 when he undertook a voyage of explorations in Egypt²⁵.

Time serves as a narrative to comprehend the past. The question remains how can one seeks to represent a past, which is enmeshed in fictions and no 'true' and frozen archival remembrances? The colonial encounter(s) of the circus initiated multiple narratives of subservience and resistance to the colonial intervention within the public and the private spheres of the native country. At one hand it sought to secularize entertainment in the

²⁴ Mr. Jiten Dutta, interview taken on 29th Jan, 2009, Bk Pal Avenue, 2/5, Calcutta.

²⁵ Stanley Mayes, *The Great Belzoni: The Circus Strongman Who Discovered Egypt's Ancient Treasures* (London, New York: Tauris-Parke, 2008), 10.

Indian colony (which was predominantly tuned to ritual time regimes of religious festivals) and on the other hand it created the very element of ‘performance’ as something autonomous in itself moved from ritual spaces. In its unearthing we find multiple stories surrounding its colonial origins; however, the predominant theme is one of escape from established societal ‘normal’ families and the beginning of new histories. These histories speak of a struggle to create a new identity or an origin that was distanced from the colonial stereotypes in the form of masculinity and effeminacy. The quintessential native circus performer sought to create an origin myth, which inverted his colonial construction. The fictions, which emerge from these circus encounters, tell stories which seek to represent the colonial self through a temporality that is not imposed by the new colonial cultural idiom. These stories sought to create national ideas of male prowess that was posed against the colonial stereotyping of the effeminate native and these stories also move away from the idea of the complicit native collaborating with the colonial. Most importantly these sites of public/cultural memory reveal how the traditional written archive with its all pervasive truth/objectivity claim fails to recount the histories of these sites. These encounters of the circus in the colony recount the ‘reciprocally overlapping, the quasi-historical moment of fiction changing places with the quasi-fictive moment of history’²⁶.

From its very inception, the whole performative event of the circus has become an icon of chaos. The apparent disorderliness of the circus made itself a metaphor for everything chaotic, from an erratic behavior of an individual or a societal event to children going crazy with their toys. To begin with this idea, there remains an example from the 1890s of a poem from a children’s magazine in Bengal when the very idea of the circus was fairly new to the natives of the three presidencies of colonial India; termed as *Khokababur* circus, it somewhat resembles a ‘domestic’ topsy turvy circus performance²⁷. More than often in Calcutta newspapers and journals of late 19th century there are reports comparing theatrical productions gone awry to the chaotic circus performance; one critic writes, ‘ I went to see the theatre, saw elephants dancing, then I thought that I have come to see the theatre or the circus?’²⁸. Why was the circus, which came into the colony fairly late touted against theatre? Many reasons can be pointed out, the first being that the circus

²⁶ Paul Ricoeur, ‘The Interweaving of History and Fiction’ in *Time and Narrative, Vol 3*, Trans. Kathleen Blamey, David Pellauer (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 259.

²⁷ Kalidas Ray B.A, ‘Khokababur Circus’, *Shishu*, Vol 3 (1899): 35.

²⁸ Lalitmohan Chattopadhyay, ‘Theatre Bidwesh’, *Natyamandir*, Vol 8/1, (Phalgun 1317): 23. Translation mine.

never claimed any reformist role (apart from its nationalist manifestations) like the theatre in salvaging prostitutes from their occupation. Tomes were written and debated for and against the notion that placed theatre as a space of so-called salvation and emancipation for the prostitutes throughout the second half of 19th century Bengal. Circus assumed no such roles, giving jobs to people from all walks of life, dedicated to entertain as a commercial venture. Moreover the circus proposed this chaotic space where multiple performative acts were happening one after the other, more often than not; some of the acts were borrowed from traditional fairground and religious performances like the *charak* and the *gajan*²⁹ and were placed within a secular space which worked according to the holidays prescribed by the colonial calendar working on linear time. This area of secular space removed the religiosity and superstition, which came with the performances earlier, they were only considered as ‘performance’ as entertainment in/and leisure. Traditional sorcery was also roped in within the circus repertoire, where the spectacle nature of magic was emphasized and not its religious and transmogrifying attribute. Prof Basu’s Circus advertised about its magic shows which had ‘supernatural, ghostly tricks’³⁰. The emphasis and realization of the magic trick as a performative act, which revealed no ‘divine truth’ and cured no ailment sought to establish the Circus as a secular event within the public sphere whose sole aim was to earn profit through entertainment and not healing or any kind of salvation. Another reason for the origin of the circus as something essentially chaotic can be traced to the fact that public in the late 19th century Bengal were used to see the theatre as the primary secular performance, mimicking western techniques of acting, adaptation and space. The Theatre served as a marker of culture, which was ‘civilized’ and regulated by the colonial state through its statute (*Dramatis Personae Act*) in the 1870s. Therefore, norms of good performance were already dictated by the theatre which the circus sought to reorient towards its profit and marketability.

Within this whirlwind world of disorder in Circus, this new event, the circus was also patronized by a lot of famous individuals in colonial Bengal. The saint of *Dakhineswar*, a temple town on the other side of the river Ganges in Calcutta, Ramkrishna, praised the circus with all its apparent spectacle and myriad acts. Ramakrishna in the public imagination of Calcutta was the antithesis of colonial clock time, imposed on the natives

²⁹ Images from early woodcuts show this similarity of new performance acts of the circus with the *charak* and *Gajan* performances of bed of nails, piercing and many more.

³⁰ Abanindrakrishna Basu, *Bangalir Sarkas* (Kolkata: Gangcheel, 2013), 63.

by the British through the temporal and spatial ordering of the office space. The emergent native clerk population of Calcutta and also the intelligentsia sought the legitimacy of their public acts from Ramakrishna and his approval of the circus accorded it a legitimate space within the public sphere. It is said that Ramakrishna praised the variety and unorganized nature of the circus acts, calling it a ‘wonder and madness’³¹. The approval of Ramakrishna of this seemingly haywire performative event was a religious stamp on the secular aspect of the circus, giving it acceptability within the public. It should be noted here that Ramakrishna was the same person who legitimized prostitute actresses like Nati Binodini in the 19th century where the whole act of prostitutes as theatre actresses was viewed in suspicion. From his Gospel text we can recount:

‘The devotees took the Master to a high gallery, and they all sat on a bench. He said joyfully: ‘Ha! This is a good place. I can see the show well from here.’ There were exhibitions of various feats. A horse raced around a circular track over which large iron rings were hung at intervals. The circus rider, an Englishwoman, stood on one foot on the horse's back, and as the horse passed under the rings, she jumped through them, always alighting on one foot on the horse's back. The horse raced around the entire circle, and the woman never missed the horse or lost her balance’.³²

The ensuing lines of the following chapter then make an allegory of the circus with the life of an individual; Ramakrishna says,

‘Did you see how the Englishwoman stood on one foot on her horse, while it ran like lightning? How difficult a feat that must be! She must have practiced a long time. The slightest carelessness and she would break her arms or legs; she might even be killed. One faces the same difficulty leading the life of a householder. A few succeed in it through the grace of God and as a result of their spiritual practice. But most people fail. Entering the world, they become more and more involved in it; they drown in worldliness and suffer the agonies of death. A few only, like Janaka, have succeeded, through the power of their austerity, in leading the spiritual life as householders. Therefore spiritual practice is extremely necessary; otherwise one cannot rightly live in the world.’³³

³¹ Shri Ramkrishna Paramhansa, *Ramakrishna kathamrita*, (Kolkata: Ramkrishna Mission Society, 1990), 27.

³² *Ibid.*, 34

³³ *Ibid.*, 79.

The presence of Ramakrishna in the circus was as publicized as his presence in Nati Binodini's plays. The sense, which we can assume from this particular event, is that the circus was already established as a societal event that could serve as a metaphor for a society. That is the presence of the circus was already ingrained in the psyche of Bengal and was being considered as something new but something which is 'there to stay like the theatre. This inclusion of a colonial artifact within the public imagination of Bengal sought to create a way that was modern yet legitimized by a tradition, which was Ramakrishna's way. Modernity seemed to move out of its Eurocentric ideal of the secular and moved into a colonial paradigm that appropriated it and gave it a new habitation.

The visitor from the colony, enthralled by his own representation in the great exhibitions of Europe exclaimed an apprehension about being 'stared at'. They complained that the westerners had a strange way of 'looking', little did they know that through this particular gaze, the idea of how the 'orient' and its 'people' were, was being framed and disseminated within the large masses of London, Paris and other cities. The exhibition space provided the western 'lay' audience with a comprehensible idea of a 'real' geographic space and the cultures of that geographic domain³⁴. The colony as represented in these festivals of spectacle claimed to show the 'true' version of the colony and its cultural artifacts, in other ways; the representations of the native portrayed the multiple ways of seeing the native through which the colonizer understood, stereotyped and ruled the colony. In this exhibition, the east emerged as the effeminate, noble, savage, despotic and sexual icon. The seeds of stereotyping were not only visual but were articulated through administrator's textbooks, anthropologist's field notes and general newspaper reporting. The colonial administrator Thomas Babington Macaulay is quoted as saying:

'...The physical organization of the Bengali is feeble even to effeminacy. He lives in a constant vapour-bath. His pursuits are sedentary, his limbs delicate, his movements languid. During many ages he has been trampled upon by men of bolder and more hardy breeds. Courage, independence, veracity, are qualities to which his constitution and his situation are equally unfavourable. His mind bears a singular analogy to his body. It is weak even to helplessness for purposes of manly resistance'.³⁵

³⁴ Installations from Egyptian pyramids, Indian *Nautch* girls to the sweltering green forests of the French Indo-China were among the few examples in these places.

³⁵ Thomas Babington Macaulay, 'Essay on "Warren Hastings"', in *Edinburgh Review*, LXXIV (October 1841): 14.

The exhibitions were the precursors of a visualization of India as a colony, whose identity relied on its scale of spectacles, exotic flora and fauna and the land of splendor, Hagenbeck, a famous impresario from Germany excelled in his performative displays of the colonized from the various parts of the colonial world; his shows were primarily circus events where people and animals performed in huge scale. The exhibitions and these performances sought to create 'wholeness' of a comprehensible geographical domain of the colonized other made accessible through the Circus show, as something which could be consumed visually, the slave trade complemented/supplemented by the performance, a staging of power where the very acts of exotica instilled difference and assumed civility for the European metropole inhabitant. The theatrical deployment of these exhibitions and their subsequent shows made sure that the native world becomes a product to be handled by the civilizing entrepreneurs and adventurers of the west.

Circus as a performative event gradually established itself within the performing world of the late 19th century Bengal. From sideshows, equestrian shows attached to theatrical performances, circus emerged as an autonomous performance in the mid 1870's. The emerging public sphere at that time saw both local circus groups as well as circus companies from America, Australia and England. Apart from companies there was always an instance of an indigenous performer who performed in the European cities; a good example again is of Suresh Biswas whose iconic status in Bengal was also reflected in his antics in London. *The Era* in 1881 reports about the agricultural fair in London where, in the 'The Great Continental Menagerie', 'among the beasts are three lions, which leap and perform other acts at the bidding of their keeper, Suresh Biswas, who enters their cage. This exhibition which takes place frequently, attracts great attention, and this daring young Hindoo master of the king of beasts is loudly applauded for his display of temerity'³⁶. The circus shows in Europe needed the representations and presence of the colonized native in order to pursue the growing popularity of exhibitions, circus shows and variety shows featuring the colonial world.

³⁶ Staff Report, "The Fair at the Agricultural Hall", *The Era* (London, England), Saturday, December 31, 1881 Issue 2258, 10.

One of the first Circus performances that happened in Calcutta³⁷ was called the Great Bengal Circus³⁸, the manager being one Sarkar Babu. It was a minimalist affair, with sick ponies mimicking Bedouin horses and an ageing body-builder posing as the great and fiery ringmaster to a dying Asiatic lion. Most of the circuses like the Great Bengal Circus, Hippodrome Circus, Prof Basu's Circus, Cooke's Circus became hugely successful in their shows, traveling all over India. The repertoire of the Circus companies, especially the performers, came from varied backgrounds; since there was no circus academy as such in Bengal and almost all the performers came from a pre-existing performative tradition, be it theatre, gymnastics (performed in *charak*, *gajan*), *bhanumotir khel* (wandering magic shows) or from the vast repository of *lathials*. Their acts revealed their past connections more often than not; Prof Basu refers in 'Circus e Bhut er upodrob' how the native women performers were 'theatrically' hysteric in their antics both within and outside tents. Abanindrakrishna Basu mentions ex-gymnasts like Birendranath and ex lathials like Mushtaq Mian, 'Mian got enrolled into the circus from the Zamindari of Tinkori Majumdar because of his inhuman abilities to punch holes into thick brick and mortar walls'³⁹, *Bangalir Circus*. Most importantly, the element of the supernatural (associated previously with the Shiite traditions of *Gajan* and occasionally with *Bhanumotir Khel*) never left the secular space of the circus, where '*Bhoutik Kriras*' (spectral acts, trans mine) were always a special attraction.

The women⁴⁰ in the indigenous circus companies also had a role, which made them participate in various exhibitions as artefacts and not performers. Prof Basu advertises about one of his women performer's: he advertises, 'Shreemati Sushila Sundari doing play (most probably a clownish skit) in Basu's Grand Circus, presently belonging to the Allahabad Exhibition'⁴¹.

Apart from the performers doing gymnastic feats and other acts, both the indigenous and the foreign circus companies also kept a vast number of exotic animals.

The foreign circus companies from all over the world were coming to India from the 1840s and their routes took them to numerous places in India where they displayed their

³⁷ In the outskirts of the 'white town', to be later named as 'Park Circus', inhabited by the marginal sections of both the colonizer and the colonized ironically, like the exiled and castigated performers of the circus, most of the circus sites were also places where the marginal population inhabited.

³⁸ Abanindrakrishna Basu, *Banagalir Sarkas* (Kolkata: Gangcheel, 2013), 100.

³⁹ Kamalprasad Singha, *Sarkaser itikatha*, (Lucknow: Aryasamaj Pub, 1889), 5.

⁴⁰ Almost all the women came from various prostitution quarters. See, Prof Abanindrakrishna Basu, *Circus e Bhut er Upodrob* (Kolkata: Pub Unknown, 1910), 59.

⁴¹ Prof. Abanindrakrishna Basu, *Circus e Bhut er Upodro*, 71. Translation mine.

performances, as early as 1861 we have the Cork Brothers from Australia, who ‘astonished the Hindus and Mohamedans not a little with their representations of the sports and pastimes of the Ethiopian race in the United States of America’⁴², they traveled a wide lot ‘From Delhi to Umbala, Loodiankah, Anarkulle and Lahore, all in the Punjab, thence to Cashmere, where Dave was presented by the Rajah with a beautiful cashmere shawl. From Cashmere our traveler took his company to Simla in the Himalayan Mountains, a beautiful sanitarium, situated at about a height of 8,000 feet above the level of the sea’⁴³. At another level, the western circus companies had their colonial connections through the imports of indigenous animals as far back as 1830. one advertisement in America by the circus company Purdy, Welch, Finch & Wright, Ed Finch exclaims, ‘Asian lion, Asian lioness, elephant, two llamas, Bengal tiger, zebra, alpacha, black wolf, two macaws, Arabian camel, crested porcupine, fisher, two ichneumons, two North American panthers’⁴⁴.

A new audience was also brought in by the circus companies, which were the children. The circus companies were the first to advertise about bringing children to their shows. This was the earliest marketing marvel that produced a lot of revenues. The circus also had separate seating arrangements for ‘purdah’ women, (indigenous veiled women, both Hindu and Muslim) a constituency in the ‘east’ who were denied places in entertainment venues in different cities of South Asia.

‘This order of appearance is *the order of all appearance*, the very process of appearing in general. It is the order of truth’.

Jacques Derrida, ‘The double session’⁴⁵.

Presence of an exotic individual (sometimes not even doing tricks) and theatricalisation (through spatial technique of a display) were very important for the circus companies to popularize their shows. However, this act has an important anthropological history of

⁴² ‘Carson and Brown’ in *Circus Historical Society* (Copyright © 2005 by William L. Slout), <<http://www.circushistory.org/Cork/BurntCork3.htm>>. Accessed February 25th, 2012.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Stuart Thayer, ‘Some Distinctions in Early Circus Audience’ in *Circus Historical Society*(Copyright © 2005 by Stuart Thayer and William L. Slout). <<http://www.circushistory.org/Thayer/Thayer1c.htm>> Accessed July 4th, 2012

⁴⁵ Timothy Mitchell, introduction to *Colonizing Egypt* (California: University of California Press, 1988), 1.

intervention and is not a whim. The visibility of the colonized male within a public site ensured that the conquest and salvatory excursion of the colonizer was successful. The accessibility of that individual within the exhibition space (read caged) to the masses of the west represents the western power of representing the other through its own spatial architecture. In the sense, the method of producing knowledge could only be possible and accessible by the west. The single individual or even an object from the colony sought to create a frame of reference through which the other could be comprehended and more importantly accessed, which the other side, as in the object of display was not granted. The circus companies, the European ones and the indigenous ones, kept visible signs of the colony, from elephants, royal Bengal tigers to human beings and made profit on these displays.

In one of these exhibitions, we find a curious figure lurking between shadows of subservience and subversion. This individual, Colonel Suresh Biswas⁴⁶, emerges as an archive in himself, whose life story could define and decipher the colonializing investment of the exhibition space and also its subsequent points of transgressions. Colonel Suresh Biswas was born into a wealthy family of landlords in the suburbs of Calcutta in Bengal presidency. His future career choices as a circus wrestler, ringmaster and finally the zookeeper of the royal family of Brazil, finally dying on the side of the democrats in the civil war, had lasting impressions on the Bengali imagination.

His life story runs parallel with the history of circus in colonial Bengal, from scarce remembered memories to heightened Bengali masculine pride. One of the most important factor which runs through this performer's life can be distinguished from a 1900 published biography of lieutenant Suresh Biswas, named '*leftenant Suresh Biswas*' (*sachitra oloukik ghotonapurno ottyashchorjyo jibonkahini*), the English translation (mine) would speak a lot, 'Lieutenant Suresh Biswas, a biography illustrated with wondrous and supernatural events'. This particular biography, defines how the colonial construction of Bengali femininity was overcome through masculine acts of taming wild, dangerous African beasts: 'the popularity of Suresh is not because he is a wrestler or a gymnast, he is famous for taming untameable and cruel beasts'⁴⁷. This particular figure remains one of the most important circus figure in Bengali imagination, emerging as allusions in short stories, textbooks and even as a by lane in Kolkata. From bypassing feudal ancestry to fighting the white man in his own country, Colonel Biswas was

⁴⁶ 'Bongonibasi' Sompadok Shri Upendrakrishna Sonkolito, '*leftenant Suresh Biswas*' (*sachitra oloukik ghotonapurno ottyashchorjyo jibonkahini*) (Kolkata : Grey Street Publishing, 1900), 66.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 69 .(trans mine).

reconfigured in the history of Bengali masculine glory, time and again. His fame speaks of a very interesting way to deal with performance. Through his prowess he sought to delegitimize the very notions that subjugated him; however his history can be related more to his iconic persona than his performances as such.

The contortion of the body being the prevalent language of the Circus happening at that point, the various gymnastic acts, the triple bar, the handle bar, the double jump and carrying enormous weights gained huge popularity.

Circus served as a site where acts of physical prowess served to deny the historicist deployment of the Bengali race as the ‘not yet’ masters of their own male destiny. As mentioned before through administrators and anthropologists the native (especially the Bengali) body was construed as effeminate and far beyond the progressive European white male, not ready to be in equal terms with the culture of the colonizer country.

Through acts ranging from ‘taming wild beasts of Africa’ to the native criminal tribe, the Bengali male performer asserted his masculinity in the public space. The circus body within the social reformist atmosphere of the late 19th century was not considered as either legitimate (like the theatre performers) or salvatory (like prostitutes performing religious roles ‘which would salvage them from the murk of the society’⁴⁸). More importantly, the much choreographed circus performance was considered chaotic in essence, a wide variety of literature, ranging from children’s poetry to theatre journals compared the circus body as chaotic and not ‘performative enough’⁴⁹; from ‘*khokababu circus khela*’⁵⁰ to ‘*bhabilam theatre dekhite esechi , dekhilam circus* (I thought I had come to see the theatre but it is nothing but a circus)’⁵¹. Interviewing the great-grandson of the famous circus manager professor Basu, the repeated narrative which comes to the forefront is the Circus performers’ visuality in the public sphere was only conceptualized through his/ her idiom of performance. It was, as if performances like Hatir Naach (Elephant Dance), Babu Jump, Mongolian trapeze, pole jumping, iron man had no apriori beginning. Within the performative space, the performance becomes the act from which the history of that performer begins and ends. More importantly, the circus performers and the contemporary socio-political scene also utilized this cultural vision of the circus performer.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 75.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 73.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 77.

⁵¹ Ibid., 80. A lot of criticisms at that point of time sought to compare the chaotic nature of the circus with that of the theatre.

Talking about the masculine/physical prowess of the circus space, we can see Cooke's circus advertising about the masculine/physical prowess of the circus space, like performers fighting with 'fresh Royal Bengal tigers' and educated ponies were highly publicized in the English newspapers. One of the most striking acts at that point of time was the *dhuti* jump⁵². This particular act had an interesting visual impact, since it showed a Bengali lean male performer wearing a dhoti like the people from the audience wore while doing feats of great physical agility. The public representation of the Bengali clerical class, overburdened due to the new disciplinary regime of the clock time and 'modern' conjugal relations and the subsequent vilification of the woman/wife as the oppressor⁵³, looks back at the colonial state through his own stereotype image and sought to appropriate it in its own terms. This particular act withdraws the Bengali sense of resistance and self from the 'waiting room' of history to that of the now. The assertion of native physical prowess in the Circus tent was highly appreciated and we find the maharaja of Benares saying 'what the natives of this country, even the Bengalis, can do'⁵⁴.

The circus is an institution, which spills over, outside its spatial constraints. The freak body which receives nothing but stigma and is identified with an abnormality; the circus becomes a space for their regeneration. The identity of freak bodies is concentrated on the physical deformity or its 'abnormality'. However, the circus provides a space where this identity can be utilized in its negative connotations to achieve mobility and material mobility. Jan Bondeson⁵⁵ speaks about the 'dog-faced' marvel boy called Jo-Jo and his feats in the circus circuit. The apparent abnormality gave him a kind of agency, which would not be conferred onto him within a normalized societal institution. His origin myth was animistic, in the sense; he never seemed to be borne out of natural birth. His story was published where his animal identity was emphasized. Thus separating him from the human world, his identity as 'abnormal' was considered as primary. The circus used exactly this trope to publicize him and his feats. Although legitimizing and appropriating the normative structures of the society, circus gave Jo-Jo an opportunity to utilize his

⁵² Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, 'Bangalir Bahubal', in *Bankim Rachanabali*, Vol 1, 1998, 73.

⁵³ Consider the kalighat *pats* representations of the wife neglecting and nagging the husband.

⁵⁴ Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, *Bangalir bahubal*, 77.

⁵⁵ Jan Bondeson, *The Two-headed Boy, and Other Medical Marvels* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 2004), 1-39.

negative and abnormal identity and thus operate with an agency, which was impossible outside the circus tent.⁵⁶

The question of the freak body within the colony was significantly rested on the use of midgets⁵⁷ as the primary ‘freaks’, along with the occasional Sadhu who sat on pins and nails. Professor Basu in his memoirs⁵⁸ talks about them as parts of performance which were marginal, yet, very important to the whole performance. The ‘freak’ elements of the circus sought to connect the disparate acts in the performance. Clownish skits, jokes and coordinating with the audience were their primary work. What is very important is that the contemporary circus⁵⁹ in India, use the same logic. The ‘midgets’ do not have an act of their own, what they seek to do is streamline the rough edges within the performance; the gaps between the ‘exotic’ shows, the ‘fun’ poked at the animals and joking with the audience. The freak body within colonial and contemporary circus although had more material stability than the other performers, their position as performers was down below. Their work entailed errands and other works outside the circus repertoire. Again the framing of colonialism arises, which turned the freak bodies from religiously sanctioned (and hence legitimized) performers to only performers and hence more alienated from the societal fabric⁶⁰.

The female circus performer and her accompanying enigma, sexuality and agency come with a suitable oppressive reference. We get the instance of Madame Rosiere, who was a ringmaster, a trapeze artist and a contortionist. Her story within the press always came with high overtones of her sexuality, which frequently fed on her being married three times. However, it seemed from Mme Rosiere’s life that the average circus woman performer enjoyed great deal of her freedom for the same reasons she was castigated by the society. Her image was that of the quintessential female performer, visualized and

⁵⁶ Ibid., 32.

⁵⁷ The representation of the exotic had multiple manifestations and layers, the colonized through the dissemination of colonial anthropological/urban ideas sought to create other natives as ‘other’ of their selves, in the sense, the Indian natives visualized the African pygmy as their other, the savage who is below them in the line of progress. More importantly, we have instances where Africans (bought by the British and Portuguese sailors to India) known as *habshis* created fear and awe among the natives regarding their world.

⁵⁸ Interview with Jiten Dutta and private papers, Calcutta, February 2010.

⁵⁹ Ajanta Circus documentation, Feb 2010, Kannur, Kerala.

⁶⁰ Like the Foucauldian mad man/mendicant in the medieval world was tolerated before the production of the mad men happened through confinement, the indigenous freak body was enmeshed with the religious ritual (or thought of as sacred stigma) before colonialism, the advent of the ‘freak’ coincided with his confinement and development of knowledge of the freak as a separate category from the normal.

displayed in the public sphere, cajoling and threatening in simultaneity, the male voyeur audience.

During the late 19th century the female performer in both the colony and the metropolis assumed an unstable societal position. She reflected an image that evoked both infatuation and fear. The reason:

‘That despite her autonomous artistry, self-discipline and or self-marketing, and the hierarchies of performance, she was just a publicly visible woman in an age when the domestic female was prioritized, and one whose autonomy, costume and the physicality of her *métier* led (men) to view her as the archetypal Accessible Woman, a blank cipher onto which could be projected (depending on the details of the performance and the spectator’s particular needs) a range of desires and fantasies, centered primarily around female abasement or fear of/desire for female domination’⁶¹.

The debates and sarcasms generated around the introduction of prostitutes in Bengali proscenium theatre in the late 19th c resemble the same logic. From private consumption the woman appeared at a site which was a public site of consumption without the physical touch. This blurring of the private and the public led to a kind of tension within the patriarchal fabric. Since earlier the theatre was a homo-erotic space where men played the role of women and therefore there was a societal stability within the patriarchal order. The introduction of women in the public sphere created a destabilization of the household, the disruption of patriarchal roles. These led to a tension which was based on the destruction of the community life through new roles which were also erotic and hence considered vulgar and threatening to the male societal fabric.

History traversed its truth through rigorous anthropological intervention within the space of the colony. Therefore, the history of colonial performances needs to be posited within the epistemic constructions and violence of colonial anthropology. Since performance is always self-serving, in the sense it produces a code which is not isolated from the societal field of knowledge; the code is the reference which draws from the contemporary ideas of human behavior and action. The code however also reveals the nature of the performer and his/her reaction to the social impositions pressing onto him/her. The performer

⁶¹ Nichola A Haxell, “‘Ces Dames du Cirque’: A Taxonomy of Male Desire in Nineteenth-Century French Literature and Art”, in *MLN*, 115.4 (2000): 800.

through his performance can seek to reject or appropriate or do both the things at the same point of time. His/her history of performing can be reconstructed through textual memory of the archive, but it will be incomplete, if we miss out on the anthropological investments made around the performer to comprehend his/her self(s).

The colonized body was an empty tablet, where a colonial notion of progress was inscribed. From cranio-anthropological⁶² writings on indigenous tribes to reifying socio-organizational customs⁶³ into rigid ones, anthropology created new regimes of systematizing human behavior and knowledge in the colony. The colonized and their bodies became sites of knowledge, through particular investigations of the body (the medical experiments on convicts and prostitutes as a culmination of which generalized cultural ideas regarding the native was created. The general cultural ideas sought to create varied exotic/threatening/complicit images of the colonized.

Colonial Indian sites of investigating the indigenous were not constricted to exotic habits of distinct races (like the ‘criminal tribes’) but extended to the site of performance and even in a distinct colonial import, the circus. The indigenous body was used as a trope of subjugation (the knowledge already gleaned from the knowledge production sites), symbolized through the iconic act of the tribal wrestler beaten and trained like a dog by a white ringmaster or the simulation/advertisement of the African *habshi*⁶⁴ having enormous lion like phallus⁶⁵.

Compared to other theatrical genres, the amount of academic work on South Asian circus histories is miniscule. The scarcity of intellectual work on South Asian circuses is primarily due to the lack of archival sources within different South Asian countries. Even if sociological and ethnographic work has been done on circus elements in the twentieth century, historical work was primarily done in the early twentieth century. Those texts were talking about circuses at that time majorly from a journalistic or a memoir point of view. A lot of these texts also sought to construct circus and other theatrical genres along

⁶² The anthropologist, Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909) popularized how human behavior and progress defined through the size of the skull

⁶³ Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002). His overall argument throughout the book conceptualizes the reification of caste through the introduction and the implementation of the colonial census.

⁶⁴ A Bengali (pejorative) colloquial term for a North African black slave.

⁶⁵ These were common stories that circulated in late 19th century Calcutta, appearing in both English gazettes and Bengali newspapers and also in *nakshas*, pasquin like literature based on humor and satire. For details see, Abanindrakrishno Basu, *Bangalir Sarkas*, 46-47.

lines of ideological movements thus making them very difficult to read as primary texts, in the traditional sense of the term.

There is a catch, however, to this particular situation. If one gets the privilege and the daunting task to find out about circus archives, one would be astonished about the huge number of texts written by, in search for a better word, fans/lovers of the circus. This serves as a horizon for possibilities and also temptations. These texts are striking because they can be analyzed both as primary and secondary material. Most of them are memoirs of circuses they visited, some are brief histories of circus (without references in most cases) and a lot of them are eulogies to favorite circus performers. Representational strategies aside, circus historians/chroniclers in South Asia (and outside) are quite often extreme insiders of the circus world. The scarcity of traditional primary sources of scripted records was lamented by one of the earliest historian of the circus, Sir Anthony Hippisley Coxe.

‘The exaggerations of circus publicity are more irksome to the historian than anyone else. There are so few ways in which statements made a hundred years or so ago can be checked. When the circus moves on, what does it leave behind apart from its own rain-washed posters and a few crumple throw-aways? Newspaper reports, perhaps, but of doubtful accuracy; and impression left in the minds of the spectators, impressions which have become faded by forgetfulness or distorted by much re-telling’.⁶⁶

The fractured archival world of circus, however, is not a doomed world. If one digs deeper through archives which are not directly linked to the circus, one can find immense material. More importantly, a great amount of nineteenth century images can serve as the bedrock for an academic intervention into South Asian circus history. Also this fractured archival world of the circus promotes an epistemic empowerment in analysis in contemporary analysis of culture. The circus as an historical event cannot be examined but as a performative ‘occurrence’ is valuable in analyzing the moments of historical change, rather than long movements. The performative turn in history writing, quite astutely, has changed our ways of evaluating and comprehending what culture is. Culture as performance is not an entirely new dimension but derives from older ideas of the society as a theatre. The performative turn, however, diverges from this earlier idea and complicates it further. From the Foucauldian ‘theatre of terror’ and Certeau’s ‘spectacle’ to Schechner’s ethnographic Ramleela moment the performative turn in history seeks to

⁶⁶ Antony Hippisley Coxe, ‘Overtures’, in *A Seat at the Circus* (London: Evans Bros., 1951), 15. The Victoria and Albert Museum in London houses the major part of Hippisley Coxe’s Circus ephemera collection.

highlight both 'events', ones which are theatrical in nature and also the seemingly ordinary occurrences that constructs as only through a 'staging' of itself. As discrete moments create an event, through the scattered nature of the circus, we can destabilize the questions of modernity, knowledge and power restrictions posed by models of continuity.

Chapter One: The Early Circuses of Colonial India

This chapter delineates the early empirical narratives of both Indian circus companies as well as the foreign ventures, which influenced the circuses in India. Questions of identity relating to indigenous and foreign performers, their struggles against the overwhelming cultural impositions of the Colonial state and the indigenous elite, logistics of circus operations and their entangled transnational networks are the central themes of this chapter.

The backdrop

Colonial India after 1850 was a world where the horizons of possibilities were expanding in various directions for the British Empire. After the brutal but short Mutiny of 1857, the Colonial state was gradually shifting its attitudes and policies towards the colonized. British rule over India moved from the hands of the East India Company to the British crown in 1858. Rule of law, expansion of territories and new cultural policies sought to re-orient Indian socio-political landscapes. Law, which was earlier relegated to customary and traditional precedence, now took a new deified form after the Indian Penal Code was written and enacted in 1860. India was gradually being incorporated within a mathematically definable boundary in terms of legalities and geography. Resentment against the British voiced through cultural expressions resulted in the Dramatic Performances Act of 1876. The Act curtailed and censored both Bengali and English play texts which protested against different laws and oppressions of the Colonial administration⁶⁷.

⁶⁷ The role of printing by this time had achieved enormous proportions where play texts were read in far reaches of Bengal, Bombay and Madras Presidencies. A lot of these vernacular texts not only criticized British policies but also took up local socio-cultural issues dealing with the new changes ushered in by the British and the voices of the indigenous cultural elite. For details see Tanika Sarkar, *Rebels, Wives, Saints: Designing Selves and Nations in Colonial Times* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2009). Tanika Sarkar explains how the Indian woman emerged as a symbol that was manipulated in dual terms as women as the prostitute and as the Goddess. The context of this debate becomes quite complicated within the circus because the women performers who came from the same backgrounds, families and areas as their prostitute sisters (who were debated within the site of the theatre) remained outside the moral purview of the local elite and the press to a substantial extent. This is not to say that their bodies within a visual public space was not consumed and/or exploited by the public male but to say that circus provided these women more space of negotiation and articulations of their self than the female theatre performers who for the longest time had the stigma of only being prostitutes in need of salvation from their societal positions.

Alongside the shifting bases of the Colonial administration, the indigenous populace was also embarking on new paths of nationalism. An agitated and censored public sphere and a rethinking of traditional values and histories within the rhetoric of revivalism of primarily ancient Hindu customs and law were gaining a stronghold. Print culture after 1850s reached far corners of India and news of new forms of entertainment or novelties of the city reached the villages even though physical access to these entertainment sites were impossible most of the time. The emergence of the circus was a phenomenon that was difficult to comprehend, thus, reluctant to be managed/known by the public or government. Whereas play texts, which invoked sedition, could easily be snatched and dumped into colonial archives, circus being a non textual performative site provided few clues about sedition or other important political matters. The visual plethora also initiated a leveling of sorts; whereas text based vernacular theatre eluded people from the Indian suburbs, circus was successful in bringing together a cross section of people, a lot of whom were literate only in the marginal sense of the term. The circus also reflected the situation created by the print industry, which produced enormous amounts of pulp, depicting visually, social scandals, moral evils and sexual escapades. The public was already accustomed to the explosion of images through these visual heavy texts and the circus only multiplied the ‘the hunger to know and the desire to gape....visual demonstration acted as a great social leveler, uniting unskilled workers, working class tradesmen, and elites who were attracted to the circus ring and other democratic spaces’.⁶⁸

The circus tent resembled the pre-colonial fairground spectacle (minus the religious ritual) that could easily be managed by the authorities through allocation of dedicated spaces and police presence. What the colonial government and the vernacular elite failed to notice was that whereas other entertainments like the theatre or the variety show or even the age old courtesan music and dance had social identities, stigmas and popularity along clearly defined lines, the circus was a spatio-temporal event that by its very nature eluded strict notions of identification and hence surveillance. Within the fabric of these developments one has to locate the histories of circus in colonial India.

⁶⁸ Brenda Assael, *The Circus and Victorian Society* (Charlottesville, London: University of Virginia Press, 2005), 63.

The Texts

Before embarking on a detailed narrative on the early circus pilgrims reaching new worlds, there is a need to dissect the texts, which speak about them. There are four texts in India which attempt to detail with early Indian circuses, Abanindrakrishna Basu's *Bangalir Circus*, Satya Dev Narayan's (Government commissioned) *Circus ka Anokha Sansar*, Suresh Biswas's biography and collection of letters collected in an anthology by his uncle and Professor Priyanath Basu's own travel memoir. The history of Indian circus would falter without these texts (keeping newspaper records, governmental directives and journals aside), however, these are problematic texts. Like most of early writings on circus history in the world, citational authenticity is scarce and in some cases non-existent. They read like paeans most of the time and in some cases are publicity material in themselves. All hope, nonetheless, is not lost. Each of these texts reflect the governing ideas of late nineteenth century India which shaped circus beginnings and ideals. In claiming history for their communities, they constantly denied others. All the texts reveal that even if they were talking about an Indian sense of performance and entertainment, the authors remained biased to their communitarian identities thus giving this community more exposure and empowerment within the text.

'The book is a striking indication of how the range of Bengali publications is rapidly widening in recent years. It is a brief history of circuses, owned and organized by the Bengalees, and as such is a record of the race in the field of physical prowess and feats of skill and strength....The Bengalee is supposed to be deficient in physical vigor and stamina, to be home sick and unadventurous, shy of stirring out of his hearth and home in search of an avocation.....The facts borne out by this book will go far to refute these charges, never very well-founded, against the most gifted race in India'.⁶⁹

The texts mentioned on Bengali circus history incessantly harp on the ideas of masculinity as the driving force behind the beginning of the Bengali circus ventures. The effeminate stereotype of the Bengali male (strengthened after decades of service to the British empire as only men of letters and reinforced by collaboration with the British against the native sepoys in the mutiny) was in question here and the Bengali texts deals

⁶⁹ William Lovitt, 'Circus at the gates', *The Advance*, 9th August, 1936, 11. Private Collection of Mr. Jiten Datta.

with it through the prisms of community motivation and national vigor. The circus site became such an important a site for entertainment and prowess that women performers were congratulated for being daring and bold within a public space. This is a striking note because at the time when circus was gaining wide popularity as an entertainment event, theatre was also germinating under different indigenous elites and there the debates around the body of the woman were unwaveringly waged. Whereas the questions of the theatre site as either salvaging the moral character of the actresses (almost all of them came from the red light districts of Calcutta, Agra and Lucknow) or degrading them more were hot topics, the circus female performers received, one must say, unparalleled praise for their daring tricks with wild animals and acrobatic sportsmanship. This is not to say that female circus performers were outside the public debates of morality but this seems the strategy of the text which seeks to orient the circus as the only site of reviving the body image of the Bengalis through acts overcoming *nature*, since they were already emasculated in that of the culture (which sought to be the public space). So by overcoming the private sphere within a public site, the Bengali sought to control his body. The other texts like the Hindi one or the travel memoir sought to create new histories for a subject who remained outside the fully free world of free trade and mobility. They denoted the semblance of an idea that given the perfect opportunities, the native could rise to the occasion. These texts show how a secular performance attuned to the clock time of the changing colonial world reverted ultimately to its pre-colonial motifs but used colonial elements to change the course of entertainment.

The circus texts detailed above narrate the multiple circus histories of Colonial India. Some texts not speaking directly about the Circus are also of immense interest when Colonial Indian circus industry is debated. Writing around 1899, before the nineteenth century wrapped itself up, a Sanskrit scholar named Amulyacharan Tarkalankar wrote a series of commentaries on Sanskrit grammar but here his other text is important. The text, aptly named for its time, ‘Somoyer Poriborton o Chintadhara’, henceforth SPC (Changing times and thought) deals with the new evils that were brought by the entertainment industry in Calcutta.

The reading of *SPC* takes into account history that sought to create new forms of entertainment in Calcutta. Amulyacharan creates an almost apocalyptic world of pleasure in his book, at once voyeur-ish and critical of the times. The text recounts, ‘I was walking through the theatre district one evening, when I encountered a ragged Sahib (an epithet for an Englishman) asking for alms. Taken aback I asked him, how he came to this

situation. The Sahib after much reluctance narrated the story of how he fell in love with a prostitute (also a theatre actress) in Calcutta and after being rejected he decided to stay here to woo her. He was so much infatuated with her that he lost his job as a low ranking policeman in the British force and ended up on the streets'.⁷⁰ Amulyacharan hearing this tragic story then proceeds at length to describe theatre, variety shows, circus and other forms as corroding the basic structures of the society. Dissolving categories of caste, gender and race, according to Amulyacharan, the theatre sought to create an '*ulotpuran*' (a topsy-turvy) world where there is no respect for social boundaries and most importantly of social positions that were pristine before the British arrived in India. Was Amulyacharan talking about his idea of Modernity? Or was he simply distraught about traditional categories of differences being redrawn gradually over new lines of discrimination. The author further laments the loss of identity in his text, when he says, 'not before some years, everybody knew who they were, the cobbler mended shoes, the ironsmith his iron and the untouchable tended to the morning waste'⁷¹. His unchanging world was getting threatened within the entertainment spaces, where caste solidarities operated, but not over commercial profit. Lower caste members of the society, different races and genders worked in this site of creating profit through performance. It is not to say that it was a completely empowering, non-conflictual space but it is to say that towards the late nineteenth century performance spaces democratized spaces for different marginal groups to a substantial extent. Amulyacharan's text visualizes these fissures within the society that was brought by new forms of performance emboldened and made accessible by the development of the print culture. Amulyacharan also mentions how through pulp fiction generated in the streets maligned the characters of respectable figures of the society. Gouriprasad Mukhujje, a businessman in Awadh, wrote another text of similar grain. His text, '*Ei shomoyer bipotti*' (The danger of these times) written in 1925 has a similar argument but with a different marker. His argument against theatre and other forms of entertainment was that these sites were not useful sites of producing the nation. The national image gets ruined in places of frivolity like the circus and the theatre. He also mentions how pleasure from these entertainments is driving people away from the call of the Motherland and nationalist movements.

⁷⁰ Amulyacharan Tarkalankar, *Somoyer Poriborton o Chintadhara*, (Model Press: Calcutta, 1900), 65.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 76.

Questions about beginnings

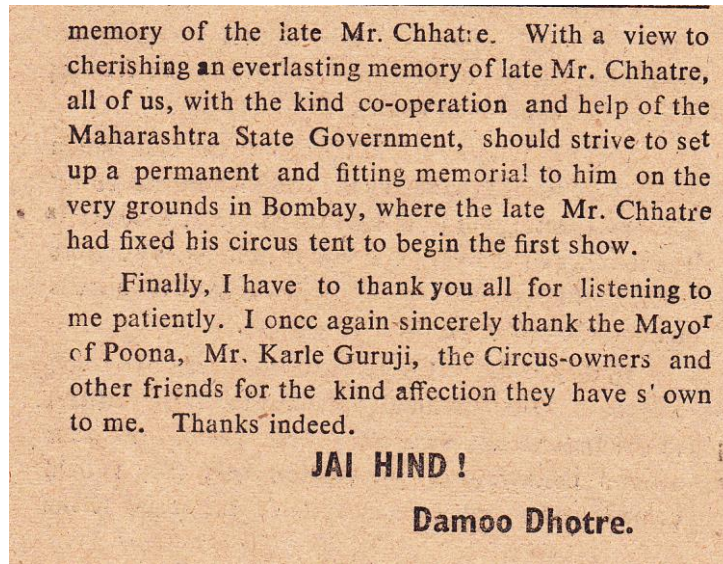


Figure 1

Damoo Dhotre's letter to a Circus Society acknowledging the contribution of Chatre, 1930.

The origins of Colonial Indian circuses are besieged with claims and counter claims. Writing around the early years of twentieth century, Abanindrakrishna Basu⁷², mentions only fleetingly, the existence of indigenous circus companies and performers in parts of the then Bombay Presidency and the Malabar coast while considering circus troupes and performers in Calcutta as the only ones important at that point of time. His book on Bengali circuses traces the rise and fall of several circus ventures started by the Bengalis in Calcutta around the 1880s and ending around the late 1930s, Professor Priyanath Basu's *The Great Bengal Circus Company*, being the greatest among them. What is interesting in this particular context is that, in the second edition of his book on Bengali circuses (published not very long after the first edition), he laments the appropriation of the circus tents, industry and the market by Marathi and Malabari performers. On the other hand, a booklet published by the Indian Government in 1984 on Indian circus and its history mentions a Maharashtrian Circus company started by Vishnupant Chatre as the

⁷² Abanindrakrishna Basu, *Banagalir Sarkas* (Kolkata: Gangcheel, 2013), 1-23. It should be noted here that Abanindrakrishna Basu was the son of Priyanath Basu and this book was a part memoir and part biography of his father. This is not to discredit the merit of this book, which contains important historical material on the history of early circuses, but to throw light on the book's position, which leans heavily on Priyanath Basu and his exploits.

first Circus troupe of the subcontinent, Chatre's circus that merged later into the Karlekar Circus troupe⁷³. Contemporary circus enthusiasts, writers and artists in their blogs, memoirs and other published material more or less consider Chatre as the 'father' of Indian Circus⁷⁴. Along with him we get the name Keeleri Kunhikannan⁷⁵ from a small town in North Kerala called Thalassery as one of the pioneers of Indian run circus troupes and events. Keeleri and most early circus gurus started from gymnastic training, received mainly from different British or European missionary schools all over India. From humble beginnings these circuses travelled to different corners of Europe, Asia and Africa. Their routes were, however, most of the times influenced by the contours of the British Empire. Most of these early circus companies knew about and constantly poached performers and animals from each other. Their rivalries and collaborations produced some of the best performers and acts of early circuses in India. Like Sir Philip Astley who brought together different fairgrounds acts under a single canopy and started the modern circus, these circus companies drew extensively from existing performing arts and ritual traditions of Charak, Gajan, *Nautch*⁷⁶, proscenium theatre and wandering performers and medicine men⁷⁷.

The common denominator (as mentioned above) among these early entrepreneurs was the idea of the 'chance' encounter and an accidental origin of their circuses. Most of it is true, however, a lot of these fantastic stories also served as publicity material to popularize this entertainment business. In the following pages I would like to depict these early beginnings and the different relations among these first circus companies.

⁷³, SatyaDev Narayan Sinha, *Circus ka Anokha Sansar* ((Lucknow: Ministry of Culture, India, 1984). 56.

⁷⁴ One of the foremost bloggers on the history of Indian circus is Sreedharan Champad; his blog 'Big Top' details a linear history of circus in India. Champad's book *An Album of Indian Big Tops: History of Indian Circus* (Texas: Strategic Book Publishing and Rights Co., 2013) covers the history of Indian circus between 1880 and 2010.

⁷⁵ Both Sinha and Basu mention Keeleri Kunhikannan in their books.

⁷⁶ *Nautch* was a blanket term given by the British to the court dancers of India, especially the North Indian courtesans employed at different noble courts of Awadh, Lucknow and Delhi.

⁷⁷ The medicine men often performed magic tricks for the paying public.

The Pioneers:



Figure 2

Vishnupant Moreswar Chatre, earliest Indian owner and manager of an Indian Circus.

GRAND CHANGE OF PROGRAMME
 GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY FOR LAST FIVE DAYS
SPECIAL ATTRACTION! **SPECIAL ATTRACTION!**
 THE WORLD CHAMPION AERIALIST™

ZIKINS 3 FLYING DEVIIS
 (LADIES & GENTS)
 World's Wonder Flying Act ever brought to this Country is itself a big
 Circus and many other Thrillings
 Can't be condured unless seen
 IN

FR. SHANUCERRAO'S
KARLEKAR
GRAND CIRCUS

Loc:—People's Park, near Patharwala Kuan, DELHI.

Matinee	{	DAILY	{	Night at
At 5 p.m.	{	TWO SHOWS	{	9-30 p.m.
(S.I. T.)	{		{	(S.I. T.)

TO AVOID DISAPPOINTMENT BOOK YOUR SEATS EARLY
 To Miss this Show --- To Lose the Golden opportunity
 Performing up to MONDAY, the 18th November Company will proceed
 to Allahabad.

■ An ad for the Karlekar Grand Circus, which arrived in Delhi amid much fanfare in 1929.

Figure 2

Advertisement of Karlekar Circus in 1929, reprinted by Times of India in 1940.

Vishnupant Moreswar Chatre

Chatre was a stableman working at the courtly stables of the Raja of Kurundwad, in the district of Kolhapur. His *chance* of a new beginning under the big top arrived when he went to visit the travelling circus group of the Italian showman, Giuseppe Chiarini⁷⁸ around late 1870s in Bombay. After watching several thrilling equestrian shows of this circus, Chatre came across an interesting proposition that was thrown to the audience by English equestrian, named William Chirney (sic)⁷⁹. The Englishman offered a reward for anybody who could tackle a horse the way he did. Chatre rose up to this occasion and was allegedly successful⁸⁰ in doing so. Chatre's employer, the Raja of Kurundwad, was so impressed that he gave money to Chatre to start a show business along the lines of a circus. The 'Chatre Grand Circus' founded in 1878 (after a collection of money from the women of his house added to the Maharaja's grant⁸¹) went on to tour several parts in Europe and North America, Srilanka (then Ceylon), Java, Sumatra, Philippines, China, Indochina. Chatre's circus company was later merged into his cousin's company, known as the Karlekar Grand Circus, which was in business till 1935. Chatre's wife Avda Bai was one of the first and foremost female equestriennes in India. After joining hands with the Karlekars the circus company emerged as a formidable one.

“Karlekar Grand Circus consisted of twenty five elephants, sixty horses, twelve camels, six Australian kangaroos, three Gorillas, six Zebras, one sea horse, twenty five great dane dogs and six bears. Apart from that the circus had forty cages, five hundred people working among which twenty-five were Europeans and the rest were Chinese, Japanese, Malabari, Telugu, Nepali, Punjabi and Bengalis. Among these people, there were approximately one hundred and fifty Marathis. The one-hundred-foot high tent, which accompanied the circus group, was huge and around ten thousand people could sit inside. All this was transported with a leased thirty-six wagon train”⁸².

⁷⁸ He was one of the earliest foreigners to arrive with a circus in India and travel to the far reaches of Japan.

⁷⁹ Satyadevnanarayan Sinha, *Circus ka Anokha Sansar* ((Lucknow: Ministry of Culture, India, 1984), 48.

⁸⁰ Allegedly because some writings mention that he was successful at the first time and others suggest he tried multiple times and only became successful after he trained with his own horse at the courtly stable. For these contradictions see Satyadevnanarayan Sinha, *Circus ka Anokha Sansar*, 43.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 47

⁸² *Ibid.*, 52.

Keeleri Kunhikannan



Figure 3

Gymnastics teacher of the first Circus School in Kerala around 1899, Keeleri Kunhikannan

Keeleri Kunhikannan was a gymnastics teacher at the Basel Evangelical Missionary School in Kerala that was established around the early 1860s. Kunhikannan received his physical training in Horizontal Bars, Iron Ball, Parallel Bar and Roman Wings from the military barracks of Cannanore (now Kannur, North Kerala). Since the 1880s, the Education Department of government of Madras had issued a directive to high schools making physical training compulsory, which Kunhikannan thoroughly utilized. Kunhikannan always wanted to teach and in 1901 he started his own gymnastics school in his courtyard, drawing students from high schools and also from underprivileged families looking for a profitable career (it can also be said that the arrival of Chatre's circus in 1887 in Thalassery fuelled Kunhikannan's initiative). Kunhikannan's earliest disciples, with the help of matured gymnasts from the Kunhikannan back yard, started a circus called the Periyali's Malabar Grand Circus Company. This was owned and managed by three Malabaris, Periyali Kannan, MK Raman and MK Krishnan. Periyali's encounter with the circus had been as an entertainer with a bioscope company, performing at its sideshow business as a strongman and a gymnast. This particular outfit can be termed as the first circus from Kerala and from the south of India. Keeleri was more famous as a

mentor to circus gymnasts and performers than as an entrepreneur and his teaching skills were utilized by almost all the great circus companies of the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth century.

On a divergent note SatyaDev Narayan Sinha in his book, *Circus ka Anokha Sansar* gives credit to a Bengali Marwari businessman Jagubabu, living in Bhowanipore, Calcutta around the turn of the century, to have properly utilized and consolidated the wrestling skills of the Malabari fishermen into a small circus venture. He mentions, ‘Due to the fact that Jagubabu mentored these fishermen wrestlers into performers that Malabarists have monopolized the circus business’.⁸³

Priyanath Basu and the Great Bengal Circus

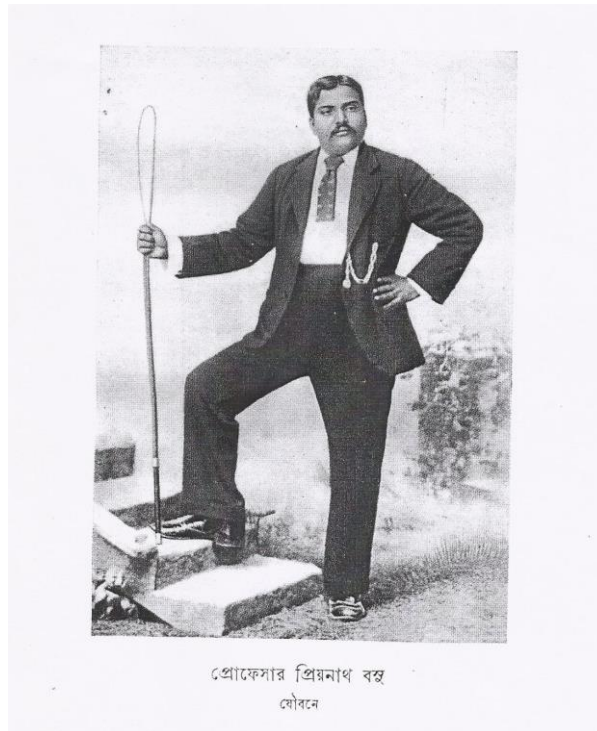


Figure 4

Professor Priyanath Bose, owner and manager of the first Bengali owned circus company, The Great Bengal Circus Company

⁸³ Ibid., 57. Translation mine.

The early stages of physical culture in Bengal were centered on the sport of wrestling. For the financially indigenous elite it was fostered alongside different Hindu rituals and opulent feasts. The nascent stages of Hindu revivalism, giving rise to ideas of Indian nationalism, also recognized wrestling and other forms of martial arts as vehicles for strengthening and masculinizing the 'effeminate' Bengali body. Wrestling served as the breeding ground of circus performers and managers of Bengal, who around the late 19th century went on to run the largest circus companies. Wrestling and these other forms were part of the fairground site, which was increasingly becoming religious (as opposed to the slow decline of fairground entertainment in England where it was becoming more attuned to the industrial clock time providing holidays as against the traditional Christian holidays). In Bengal, the initiatives that influenced the circus company formations unlike any other establishment were the beginning of the 'Hindu Mela' (Hindu fair) and the 'Jatiyo sabha' (something along the lines of a proto-nationalist commune/meeting). These were politico-religious gatherings, which fostered wrestling and other physical acts for the national and physical betterment of the Hindu community in Bengal.

Abanindrakrishna Ghosh in his pioneering book on Bengali circuses mentions these two institutions as the primary reason behind the origin of Priyanath Basu's Great Bengal Circus.⁸⁴ Priyanath belonged to the group of indigenous and upper caste elite, which sought to instill ideas of masculinity among the so-called timid youth of Bengal. Through these ventures he sought to gather pupils for his gymnastics school and also propagate nationalist values, or rather in his case, the transformations of the 'cowardly' Bengali. The first attempt at a Bengali circus venture was extremely modest. It started "with a couple of 'rickety old tigers'.⁸⁵ This meager beginning culminated in Prof Basu's grandiose Great Bengal Circus Company. It is not a coincidence or a historical continuity that the physical and moral regime of the wrestling schools produced the most flamboyant circus managers or the highly skilled performer.

Prof Basu was not only a skilled performer; he was highly persuasive. One of the rules in his gymnasiums stated that nobody could enroll without the permission of his parents; in case the parents preclude permission, more often than not, Prof Basu used to go their homes to persuade the unwilling parents.

⁸⁴ Abanindrakrishna Basu, *Bangalir Sarkas*, 12.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 15. This translation comes closest to the original adjective given to these horses, *morakheko* which means close to dying.

Like a good, almost universal story of a chance encounter of a future great circus manager, Prof Basu's encounter was also not different than that of Suresh Biswas (an enigmatic circus and adventure figure who has made a lasting impression on Bengali fiction and cinema). Priyanath Basu was residing in Calcutta, when the Wilson's Great World Circus, Chiarini's Circus and other famed European circuses were touring South Asia and stopped at the capital of British India. Abanindrakrishna describes Basu's thought bubble succinctly, after watching several shows and getting thoroughly mesmerized with them, "Prof Basu was determined to start a circus company like these, with indigenous, Bengali folk, 'If they try, he said the Bengalis could also perform these tricks with deft and determination. Then the cowardice allegation leveled towards the Bengali would be erased'"⁸⁶. Sometimes Prof Basu would sketch out different parts of the show (the mechanics and the poses) that interested him. Professor Basu's intervention in Circus techniques also stemmed from the fact that he was a keen businessman and had a keen eye for technology. Towards the end of his circus days, he experimented with electricity and provided different lighting fixtures to embellish different acts of the show.

A lone horse meets a driven ranger (?). Prof Basu's gymnastic students found an old horse roaming near their school. According to Prof Basu his students chased the horse like there was no tomorrow and finally stabled it in their gymnasium. Then they decided to teach the old horse some new tricks. The funds for this venture were secretly collected from the women of the house and in 1887, it was born- the first and the greatest Bengali run circus called the Great Bengali Circus. A couple of other ventures alongside Prof Basu's circus also germinated alongside. Nabogopal Mitra (one of the founding members of the proto-nationalist wrestling commune) with few of his gymnasium students opened the 'National Circus'; this, however, was neither a profitable nor an exciting venture⁸⁷. The National Circus with its horses and performers were subsequently bought by Prof Basu and was merged with the Great Bengal Circus.

Intermingling, offshoots from the main circuses and other ventures.

Employing foreign circus performers not only increased the prestige of these native circus managers but also obtained for them new tricks through which they could compete with

⁸⁶ Abanindrakrishna Basu, *Bangalir Sarkas*, 25.

⁸⁷ Abanindrakrishna hails it as a mockery.

each other. One of these early foreigners was S. O Abel, an American animal trainer who moved from one Circus Company to the other. S. O Abel at the time of Basu's circus had already left the famous Wilsons Circus in Calcutta and was earning a living by showing acrobatic tricks with couple of other European performers in different theatres and variety shows in Calcutta. His expertise was sought after by the local managers and alongside Basu's circus we see the Great Indian Circus under his tutelage with the help of local baboos like Rajendralal Sinha, Shyamaprasad Ghosh, Dinanath Ghosh and others. This circus was started in the Rajabazar area of Calcutta. The indigenous elite was fascinated with this new form of entertainment and around the end years of 19th century and the beginning of 20th century we see people like Harimohon Ray, the grandson of Raja Rammohun Roy, buying out the Great Indian Circus and placing it in his huge stable alongside his mansion in Amherst street.

After working for sometime in the Great Indian circus, Abel left for Chittagong with a fellow European performer, a German named Olman. He went on to create the Abel Klaer (sic) Olmann Circus⁸⁸ and roamed almost the whole of Middle East. Before leaving Calcutta, Abel also took (read poached) some Bengali performers with him to Chittagong, namely, Krishnalal Basak, Khagendralal Singha and Bhutnath Basu of Professor Basu's circus. Khagendralal was so skilled in his horsemanship that when Abel's circus went on to tour in Australia, the ringmaster Abel challenged audiences all over Australia to outshine Khagendralal in his skill. The end result was that not a single Australian could defeat him⁸⁹.

The enormous shadow of Professor Priyanath Basu was uncomfortable for a certain talented gymnast called Krishnalal Basak. A product of S. O Abel's training and a person who had performed and earned fame in the Paris expositions, he sought to create a circus group called the Hippodrome Circus around the early 1900s. Following the touring traditions, this successful company toured diverse parts of south Asia, namely Vietnam, Cambodia, the Malaccan peninsula, Java, Sumatra, China and Japan. It was in Japan that Krishnalal Basak faced all sorts of adventures. It should be noted here, that Krishnalal Basak was also an avid writer, his memoir *Bichitro Bhraman* encapsulated different elements of traveling with the circus company to different parts of the world.

If we take a closer look at the Japan tours of the Hippodrome a very interesting and unique economic picture emerges. The economic transactions in Japan were quite different from the usual circus business. A Japanese person was given the contract for the

⁸⁸ Abanindrakrishna Basu, *Bangalir Sarkas*, 28.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

foreign circus company, which is supposed to perform there. This Japanese contact would then distribute shares among the local public. Only when enough local interest was connected to the foreign business it was feasible and profitable for the circus to operate. Krishnalal Basak mentions this as an annoying feature where most companies were strong-armed by the Japanese to operate at lower costs for them and higher profits for the Japanese. This method was so successfully implemented that even if there was a sizeable curious crowd in front of the circus tent, the crowd neither bought tickets nor allowed anyone who was willing to buy the ticket. The Japanese tours of the Hippodrome Circus provide important information about circus venues and customs of the Japanese people at that point of time. The interior of a circus tent in Japan had no galleries for seating, instead there was a low level seating arrangement of small cushions woven with a bamboo net. The circus company only arranged the space and the seats had to be rented by the audience next to the shoe booth where they kept their outdoor shoes and rented wooden clogs for the circus event. The refreshment business resembled the *Geisha* household etiquettes where a woman who sold tea to them accompanied patrons to their seats and different Japanese delicacies like fried seaweed and sushi/sashimi were served. The refreshment sellers also carried a small wooden coal burner that was utilized for pipe smoking⁹⁰. The Japanese tours talk about a specific performance venue known as the *kofugikoan*(sic) which was a self standing dome building that could seat almost 10000 people and was designed with ornate structures. The rent for that place was 200 dollars⁹¹.

Transnational contexts of Indian themes

Before one embarks on the workings and tours of the first circus companies in the colony owned and managed solely by Indians, it has to be noted that the Indian exotica world was making the rounds in Europe and America through different impresarios and missionaries (later to be pioneered by the Italian showman and circus manager Chiarini in the 1850s) as early as the 1820s. Long before British circus companies started to arrive on Indian shores, there were couple of South Asian performers who shined in the theatrical circuits of England, especially in London. Thomas Frost, a circus historian writing as early as 1881, mentions the famous Indian Juggler, Ramoo Samee, working around the late 1820s in London. Ramoo Samee's tricks did not go unnoticed and he performed in

⁹⁰ Ibid., 218.

⁹¹ Ibid., 220.

places like the Adelphi Theatre⁹². The Indian rope trick, one of the quintessential stereotypes of the Indian performing world (the others being the ubiquitous snake charming and the nautch girls) is recounted by Frost: “Long before the pretended spiritual phenomenon was ever heard of, the rope trick was in the repertoire of the famous Hindu juggler, Ramoo Samee, who presented at the Adelphi and the Victoria some years ago”⁹³. Samee as a juggler was so famous and loved that after his death when his widow was finding it difficult to sustain herself, a letter arrived at the editor’s desk of *Bells Life* in London. It read:

“The late Ramoo Samee and his widow

To the editor of bells life in London,

Sir,

Your early insertion of the widow’s appeal, under the above head, in last weeks paper, reflects the highest credit on you, and in remembrance of the pleasure experienced in early days at his performance, I beg to hand you 10s from ten friends, collected in the neighborhood of High Holborn, towards alleviating the sufferings of the poor widow and family, and should be rejoiced to hear if some 40 or 50 from amongst your numerous readers, who, in an hour or two, within their own circle of friends, could no doubt with little exertion do the same and scarcely miss it, thereby proving that the widow’s appeal in the hour of need to a generous public has not been in vain- Apologising for thus troubling you, I beg to subscribe myself, most respectfully, a widow’s well wisher. Aug 28th 1850. sd (H.W)”⁹⁴.

Ramoo Samee’s popularity was enormous. He was said to have performed at Earl’s Court quite regularly. One of the earliest Circus historians, Thomas Frost, speaks about Sadi Jalma right after he mentions Ramoo Samee in his book *Circus life and Celebrities*, an Oriental performer who might have been Indian. However, within early circus participations, the performer’s identity was more difficult to assess than the later ones. Thomas Frost writes, ‘After him we had Sadi Jalma, ‘the serpent of the desert’ for a time, and very serpent like his contortions are, he can wriggle in and out the rounds of a ladder or a chair like an eel. He is like the acrobats that I once heard a couple of small boys holding a discussion about, one maintaining that they had no bones, and the other

⁹² Thomas Frost, *Circus Life and Circus Celebrities* (London: Chatto and Windus, Picadilly 1881), 170.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 67.

that their bones were made of gutta percha. he calls himself a Persian prince, but I don't believe he is any relative to the shah. he may be a Persian, for there are Arab, Hindoo, Chinese, and Japanese acrobats and jugglers knocking about over England, as well as Frenchmen, Germans and Italians, but nationalities are as often assumed as names, and he maybe no more Persian than I am a Spaniard'.⁹⁵



Figure 5

Poster for a musical comedy to be performed at the Albert Hall, Globe theatre and other venues, 1899, London.

The British stage from the mid nineteenth century was already producing performances based on Indian themes. Reflecting ideological images of the Empire and its many annexations in India, London saw productions, which portrayed the eastern defeat and the winnings of the west as inevitable notions. Spectacles of Oriental nature sought to incorporate wars, victories and casualties faced by the British in their ventures in India. This latter phenomenon sought to inculcate the idioms of eastern savagery for the British public thus legitimizing the role of the British in bringing salvation to the colonies. Controversial points in British colonial history, like the alleged cause of Sepoy Mutiny,

⁹⁵ Ibid., 208.

the introduction of pork and beef fat greased cartridges within the ranks of British Indian soldiers (blasphemous for both the Hindus and the Muslims) and the ‘Black hole tragedy’ were enacted in British circuses to drive home the binary point of a civilised British Empire and a cruel East. These narratives staged in the circus ultimately ended with ‘a glorious victory of civilisation over Barbarians’⁹⁶.

Although North America did not have direct interests in the subcontinent, the American circuses frequently staged acts based on India. Janet M Davis mentions,

‘Missionaries from the United States returned home with spectacular, circuslike representations of animal gods, royal ‘Hindoo’ ceremonies atop elephants, ferocious animals, and body-contorting sadhus. Showmen soon transmogrified these startling reports into live performances’⁹⁷.

Like their British counterparts, American circuses sought to incorporate the same narrative strategies in their circus, the binaries of the savage east and the civilized west. Most of the circus animals came from South Asia, primarily, the Royal Bengal Tiger and the Elephant from India. Animals were conferred the names of South Asian and Eastern rulers who were vanquished by the British and different European nations. Janet M Davis mentions,

‘Arriving in America in 1821, the ship *Bengal* brought the ‘fighting’ elephant ‘Tippoo Sultan’—named after Tipu Sultan, a courageous potentate in southern India who attempted unsuccessfully to stop British expansion into southern India during the late 18th c. Elephants were also occasionally named ‘Mameluke’, an Arabic word for a military slave who was a member of the Turkish-speaking cavalry ruling Egypt and Syria as part of the Mamluk dynasty during the 12th and 13th centuries’.⁹⁸

The reason behind this show of solidarity by Americans was due to the fact that South Asia was more of a moral frontier than a political one for the Americans. As America sought to consolidate its regional empire towards the late nineteenth century, the British invested a lot more in American business ventures. Ties based on ‘Anglo Saxonism’ were

⁹⁶ Brenda Assael, *The Circus and Victorian Society*, 75.

⁹⁷ Janet M Davis, *The Circus Age: Culture and Society under the American Big Top* (Chapel Hill, London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 215.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 215.

based on ‘the racial ideology of Anglo-Saxonism was founded upon nineteenth-century Teutonic germ theory, which posited that the seeds of democracy traveled westward with the Teutonic to Britain, and then North America’.⁹⁹ More importantly, circus entrepreneurs by legitimizing the British Empire in their shows, sought to legitimize the fledgling American Empire. The American circuses ‘depicted colonized India as a ‘queer’, ‘heathen’ culture, in need of ‘guidance’ from mature, industrial England. Such representations had long roots. In 1858 four American circuses reenacted scenes from the Sepoy Rebellion of the preceding year, an indigenous South Asian revolt against British colonial authority. All circus renderings transformed this South Asian challenge to British rule into a harmless, ceremonial feast of colorful costumes and athletic feats atop horses and elephants that concluded with an affirmation of British colonial authority’.¹⁰⁰

First Contacts



Figure 6
Italian Circus entrepreneur Giuseppe Chiarini (1823-1897)

The first contacts with prominent foreign circus companies in India happened through the Italian showman Giuseppe Chiarini. He travelled extensively through the length and

⁹⁹ Ibid., 215.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 216.

breadth of Asia (and if this memoir is to be trusted, quite quixotically) spanning “.... Calcutta, Allahabad, Benares, Campore, Agra, Lucknow, Jehor, he crossed India to Jeipore (sic), Amadahat (sic), Agimic (sic), Brasca and Carachi on the gulf of Persia and later to Bombay, Pondicherry, Madras, Hidrabad, later to Ahiab (sic), Rangoon, Mulonin(sic) in Burma, Penang, Straits of Malacca, Siam, Cochinchina and all of the Philippine Islands, later to Hongkong, Sivakovo, Emoy, Fuchow, Formosa, Shanghai, Tientsin and Wu Hu in the northern part of china. Later to Japan, visiting Nagasaki, kobe, osaka, kioto (sic), Bewa, Fujiyama, and all great centres of immense population”¹⁰¹. Professor Basu, Keeler and Chatre all came under the influence of Chiarini.

Chiarini’s troupes travelling the length and breadth of India introduced acts which became quite famous and set precedence and standards for the later circus companies. Chiarini was one of the first circus managers to introduce female players daring their lives with lions and tigers. Priyanath Basu would mention this fact in his memoir and say, ‘Chiarini’s circus had foreign women playing with ferocious beasts and to make our circus successful we have to introduce similar daring feats and others’¹⁰² Chiarini was also famous for emphasizing the transnational nature of the circus industry as the most important ingredient for commercial profit. His acts often had European performers dressed up as different Asian races to perform tricks.

¹⁰¹ James V. Chloupek, “Chiarini”, in *The Circus Scrap Book*, No.16 (Oct., 1932): 11

¹⁰² Abanindrakrishna Basu, *Bangalir Sarkas*, 14.

Lone wolves in transitional spaces: Indian performers outside India.



Figure 7

Colonel Suresh Biswas.

A circus individual who never performed in India but left an indelible mark on the cultural psyche of the Bengalis is Colonel Suresh Biswas. From countless children literature pieces of the early nineteenth century mentioning him to a Kolkata street named after him, his adventures outside the geographical realm of South Asia sought to reorient ideas of the colonizer writing and in his context fighting back to the Empire.

“It was not, however, as a gymnast or acrobat that Suresh succeeded in making a name for himself. He first came prominently before the public as a tamer of wild animals, his reputation in this profession being undimmed even by his later achievements in the field of battle, at the mouth of the cannon or in the wild tribes of America”¹⁰³.

A man on a mission, a figure permanently etched within the annals of Bengali adventure and escape stories, Suresh Biswas is a striking character. His exploits ranged from being a stowaway in a British ship (and then starting his career as a circus wrestler in Kent) to being the Royal zookeeper of Brazil. His journeys exemplify to what extent mobility

¹⁰³ H Dutt, *Lieut. Suresh Biswas: His Life and Adventures*, (Calcutta: P.C Dass, 1899), 34.

stretched itself in nineteenth century and made possible encounters among people who would have probably never have met without the advent of the steamship. It is also a story of creating new stories and negotiating with identities that were imposed on the natives by the colonial state.

Born into a wealthy family in Bengal in the 1860s, Suresh was sent to Calcutta (the then capital of British India) to study with the Jesuit missionaries for an opportunity to familiarize himself with the new ways of British raj, where learning English was becoming a sure way to middle class success. He learnt acrobatics and gymnastics under them instead. At the age of 14 he hid himself in a boat going to England from Calcutta and managed to reach London. He earned his living in London by working in the docks. Little did he know that this life was about take a sharp turn. Like most circus stories about beginners who did not belong to any circus family, his initiation into the circus arena was also that of chance, courage and coincidence. On a visit to the county of Kent, Suresh came in contact with a travelling circus troupe in the public room of a village inn. When Suresh entered into a conversation with the circus people at the inn, he realized ‘so much so that if Suresh’s own life had not been altogether free from adventures, theirs were full of romantic incidents, hairbreadth escapes uncomfortable situations etc’¹⁰⁴.

What happened was that the next morning, the first thing he did after his morning meal was to arrive at the circus tent and seek out the manager. When Suresh offered his services as a gymnast and a weight lifter, the manager gave a sly smile and thought that there was no way this slim figured individual could perform feats of strength. Undaunted by the manager’s response, he asked for a trial. This trial would mark him for the rest of his life. The manager summoned the best wrestler in his troupe and a space was cleared for Suresh and the wrestler to compete. The wrestler from the troupe “soon found that he was no match for the cool nimbleness of the Indian. In a few rounds Suresh’s superior skill was manifest both to the manager and the members of the troupe who happened to be present”.¹⁰⁵ Thus began the circus career of Suresh Biswas and he was soon to travel to far off lands after satisfying the audiences all around England.

The Era in 1881 reports: “among the beasts are three lions, which leap and perform other acts at the bidding of their keeper, Suresh Biswas, who enters their cage. This exhibition,

¹⁰⁴ H Dutt, *Lieut. Suresh Biswas: His Life and Adventures*, 114.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 115.

which takes place frequently, attracts great attention, and this daring young Hindoo master of the king of beasts is loudly applauded for his display of temerity”.

His stint with the circus troupes of England happened primarily through his renown as a fierce tamer and trainer of wild beasts. At the outset of his circus career he came into contact with a British animal trainer named Professor Jamrach, who according to Suresh’s biography was a “well known tamer who had paid several visits to the sunny east and had passed some time in India, attracted by the number, beauty and ferocity of the denizens of its trackless jungles”¹⁰⁶. Without racial prejudices the biography mentions that Jamrach took Suresh under his wing and “soon proved to his master that he would do no discredit to him”¹⁰⁷. The circus worlds of Suresh Biswas were entangled with other members of the same community and one of whom is synonymous with circus animals in the late nineteenth century. The figure in question is Carl Hagenbeck from Hamburg. During his travels all over Europe, Suresh came in contact with Hagenbeck and “took a great fancy to our hero and offered him appointment on his own large establishment in Hamburg on a higher salary”¹⁰⁸. Suresh Biswas worked with Hagenbeck in circus ventures as well as an animal trainer at his zoological establishment. Suresh Biswas’s imagery was properly utilized in the latter part of the twentieth century when he served as inspirations for many circus oriented literary works in Bengal.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 112.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 116.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 118.



Figure 8

Damoo Dhotre, ringmaster with the Ringling Brothers, 1920



Figure 9

Damoo Dhotre in a stunt scene for the movie, 'The wild Game', 1930

Following his precursor's path of moving outside India for better fortunes (albeit in a different way and from a different background) we would now talk about Damoo Dhotre. His circus adventures happened around the mid twentieth century towards the end of the scope of this dissertation. Unlike Suresh Biswas Damoo belonged to a circus family of the Shellars from Maharashtra and was trained by his uncle, the Shellar of the Shellar

Circus Company. His introduction to the American circus world happened, when his application to the famous animal trainer Alfred Court was accepted. He writes in his memoir,

‘January 11, Calcutta, 1939

Then one day my greatest dream came true. I had a letter, friendly but non-committal from Alfred Court, probably the greatest animal trainer in the world. He asked questions about me and I answered him as follows’¹⁰⁹.

1. Name: Damoo Gangaram Dhotre
2. Father’s name: Gangaram Ramji Dhotre
3. Profession: Wild animal trainer and circus artist
4. Place of birth: 1220 Kasaba Pith, Poona City, Bombay Province, India
4. Date of Birth: August 31, 1902
5. Nationality: Indian, British India
6. Religion: Hindu
7. Height: 5 feet 3 inches
8. Body weight: 148 pounds
9. Chest: 40 inches
10. Neck: 16 inches
11. Biceps: 4.5 inches.”¹¹⁰

His introduction to the transnational world of circuses marked the culmination of circus networks in the twentieth century. The circus industry through the press, tours and by word of mouth came to know about prospective circus artists who could earn profit in the arena.

‘Alfred Court checked on me by talking to one of the great Indian circus artists who was then in Paris, and finally wrote to me to take a boat to Marseilles and a train directly to Paris’.¹¹¹

Damoo’s first job was with the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus. His performance would eventually take him to different parts of the world and land him up with lucrative job as a stunt person in Hollywood. Damoo Dhotre could be considered as one of the first Indian individuals to have worked in Hollywood.

¹⁰⁹ Damoo Dhotre (as told to Richard Taplinger), *Wild Animal Man: internationally famous trainer of wild animals* (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1961), 72.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 72.

The crucial importance of introducing Damoo in this section is related to his memoirs. His memoirs, like those of his predecessors, describe circus matters incessantly, however, certain points are very interesting. Talking about contemporary transport, he recounts, ‘Uncle Shellar’s circus was the only one in India which travelled by railroad and from one city to another...Traveling from the railroad siding to the circus grounds in town, we formed a procession, and I always rode at the front on the head of one of the elephants. This is considered no more dangerous in India than riding a horse or a pony is anywhere else. Elephants were used as workers in many parts of the forest and jungle. In the circus they hauled wagons as well as performed and were trained so carefully in this work that there was little danger in riding them.’¹¹²

Certain points show the dichotomy of public perceptions of circus worlds of India around the early twentieth century. The Indian landscape full of dangerous and wild beasts as portrayed in both indigenous and foreign circus ceases to operate smoothly when Damoo mentions, ‘But in Indian towns in those days few people had ever seen an Elephant: When our procession came winding down the road with me on the head of the Elephant, you can imagine the screams and the astonished faces of all the townspeople. They would start to run in terror, but at the same time look up at me with such respect and admiration in their eyes that it made me feel like a very important person’.¹¹³

Was he playing to the American crowd in his memoir? Or trying to universalize the Circus spectacle experience? Without moving into counterfactual questions it must be admitted that snippets like these create fissures through which a particular event looks substantially different.

Damoo was quite the celebrated figure in American circus. His visualization was that of the Hindu Maharajah taming wild beasts. Following the Hagenbeck tradition of taming the animals with love and care, Damoo’s antics inside the circus were always portrayed as the benevolent master seeking to lovingly admonish his slave. How does a single man control 11 savage animals? Damoo’s answer is disarming in its simplicity, kindness and love. Nothing else. He seldom has to whip his animals’.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Ibid., 75.

¹¹³ Damoo Dhotre (as told to Richard Taplinger), *Wild Animal Man: internationally famous trainer of*, 87.

¹¹⁴ Ralph Major, ‘Circus Master of the Big Cats’, in *Back Yard*, Vol. V, Issue 85 (February 15 2000) <<http://www.circushistory.org/Backyard/Backyard15Feb2000.pdf>. Accessed on 25th April, 2013.

Individual native performers and famous tricks



BORN LESS ACTING PRABHA

Figure 10
Prabha, a contortionist of Kamala Circus, 1940.



Figure 11

Performers at the Karlekar Grand Circus, 1920

Like the event itself its members were also nomadic and easily given to switching loyalties. Performers from indigenous circus companies were poached by the foreign circus companies and vice versa. The constant change in their identities makes historical traces almost impossible. However this following section tries to bring into focus the best acts and actors from the early circus companies performing in India.

The Hindu reports on 27.4.1938,

"The show of the night ended with the usual burial of Sushila. Such a feat is, of course, not unheard of to any Indian as skilled Hathayogis have done this feat over the ages and are still doing it. But Sushila was no yogi; as far as I know, she was just a common woman, but strong of body and very courageous, for she tamed and played with Bengal tigers, which show, like her burial, used to be her principal acts in the circus. She was also a horsewoman of great ability".

Sushila Sundari was probably the greatest female performer in Basu's repertoire. Apart from single handedly straddling tigers and riding bareback she also posed as statues in

colonial exhibitions. Having said that it must be reiterated again that the indigenous female body working in the circus was that of the virtuous body (a body coded with social moralities) as described by the press and the managers at that point of time. The debates around the female circus performer's body will be described in detail in the next chapter.

Eminent European clowns like Lou Roma and Rococo performed in indigenous circus companies. Professor Basu in his Great Bengal Circus Company employed Roma for four hundred rupees per month, which was a considerable amount of money at that time. Rococco was employed by the Hippodrome circus for eight hundred rupees per month. Their acts rivaled each other. Where Roma's acts were silent with facial gestures inciting laughter, Rococo's speech was a curious blend of Bengali with smatterings of different European languages. Whereas European performers as clowns only sought to play the clown's part, Indian clowns had to be skilled at a number of other acts. One of the earliest Bengali clowns, Birendranath, in Professor Basu's circus was proficient in bareback riding, monkey training and a curiously named act called Chopstick clowning¹¹⁵ Birendranath and his brother Hirendranath joined American circuses around 1916, namely the Willison's Circus and later the Fillis' Circus. They were also involved with other prominent Indian circuses like the Chatre Circus and the Shellars Circus. Influenced from Houdini's different and daring escape tricks, Basu's circus devised the act of *Basudeber Karagar* (Basudeb's prison) which derived from a Hindu mythological story of baby Krishna being imprisoned by his maternal uncle and then being saved by a fellow prisoner called Basudeb. The act was that, Ganapati, the famous gymnast would be disguised as Basudeb, with a baby Krishna inside a rectangular structure made of iron bars. He would be chained with multiple locks, chains and handcuffs to the prison bars. Once that is done a curtain would be lowered down over the cage and dancers would emerge singing a version of a mythological song imploring Basudeb to save Krishna immediately. After the song is over, the curtain is raised up and the audience would see that the iron cage is empty. The audience would be further spellbound when they would see Basudeb and Krishna emerging from one side of the tent and then walking among the audience reach the center of the playground. This act was so famous that its song was translated into Malay and circulated in Malaya and Java and enthralled audiences there. Then there was Kannan Bombay, a product of Kunhikannan's School. Bombayo went on

¹¹⁵ An interview with a veteran circus performer from Chennai reveals that the chopstick act consisted of juggling with chopsticks and then aiming the chopsticks at thrown objects.

to perform with the Ringling Brothers and the Barnum and Bailey. Bombay became famous both as a trick rider and a gymnast. Hagenbeck's Indian village exhibitions also featured him prominently. The famous performing troupes, which circulated among different circuses in India, were the Nabibux Troupe, Shibaji Troupe, Kunyambar Group, Kunhikannan Troupe, and the 'Srilankan Demon' Lakshmanmurti. A lot of these acts bore motifs from performances that occurred in the ritual spaces of Hindu festivals. The iconic oriental fakir sleeping blissfully on a bed of nails or swords had fascinated the European eye for ages, this lasting symbol of oriental magic and spiritualism was replicated within the indigenous circus tent, which drew inspiration from the Hindu occasion of the *Charak* fair. The native circus manager was clever in his manipulation of this particular image. On the one hand this evoked oriental fantasies among the foreign audiences, on the other hand the natives were reminded of the scene from the epic *Mahabharata* where the wise grandfather Bhisma laying on a bed of swords. The Nabibux troupe had perfected this much-duplicated trick. Nabibux, a famous performer from Lucknow would be lying on a table with his feet up, Birendranath the clown would be on top of them, at a distance a bed of swords would be laid out. Nabibux after juggling Birendranath for some time would throw him towards the bed of swords. Birendranath would fall on them but would remain unharmed. Another performer who stood out among the crowd was Sharif Alam of Allahabad. Sharif was trained in Sword play and performed with Rukmabai's Grand Circus Company in different parts of North India. Sharif was not the quintessential sword-swallower; he created extraordinary techniques in his performance. His swords were sculpted with small copper human like heads along its blade. So when Sharif swallowed then, his throat looked 'it was a home of many faces'. This creepy looking, yet, extremely popular Alam's act was finally purchased by the Cooke's circus from Australia. Another performer who excelled in the Indian circus arena was Badalchand, the Ferocious:

'This company's closing act on several nights was the alarming one by Mr. Bir Badal who entered the den of a very huge and fierce tiger and goaded it into further ill temper by kicking it about, pulling its tail and ears and forcing its jaws open which the brute only submits to under a constant protest of angry growls and fearful roars. When Mr. Badal comes out of the den a sense of relief is felt by the spectators'.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ Abanindrakrishna Basu, *Bangalir Sarkas*, 210.

Abanindrakrishna extols the virtues of this performer as one who has effaced the line between a man and an animal. Daring feats turned into a laughing riot for this performer. The animal would transform itself into a play thing, even a kind of lover for Badalchand. A kind of bestial affinity is reflected from Badal's construction as an animal trainer and acrobat, 'barely clothed, Badalchand would lay upon the tiger's chest and repeatedly hugged and kissed the tiger'¹¹⁷.

When Badal entered his head inside a lion's mouth it resembled a fusion of different selves, two performers becoming one.

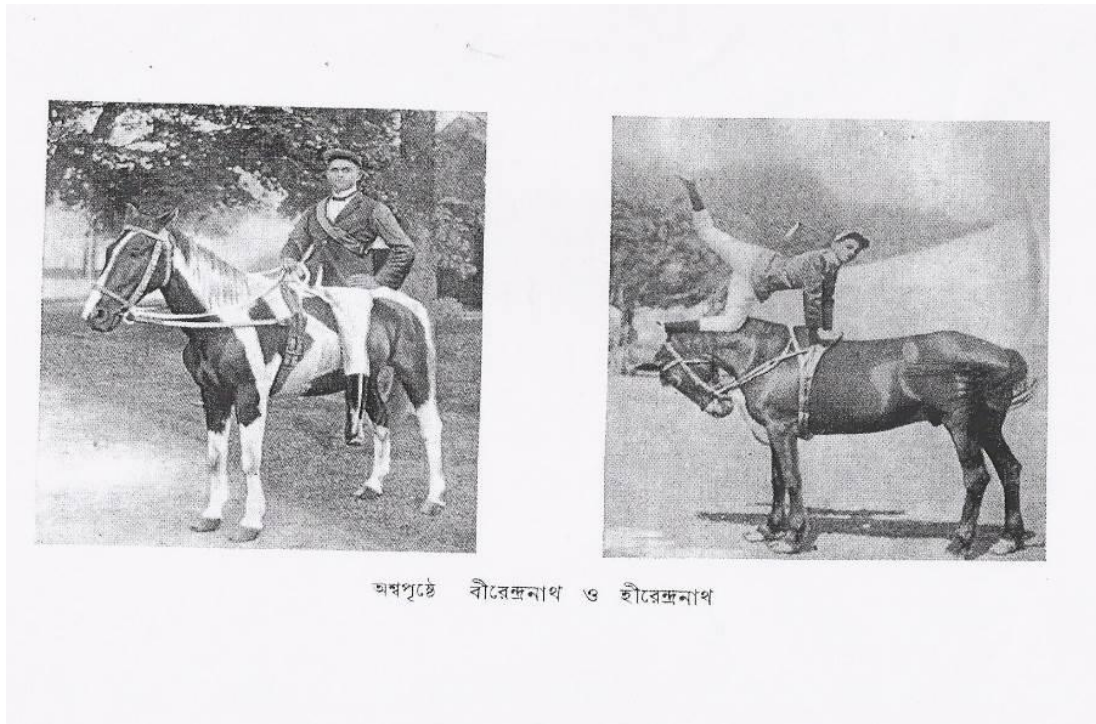


Figure 12

Birendranath and Hirendranath (brothers), Great Bengal Circus Compnay, 1920s, Calcutta

¹¹⁷ Abanindrakrishna Basu, *Bangalir Sarkas*, 123.

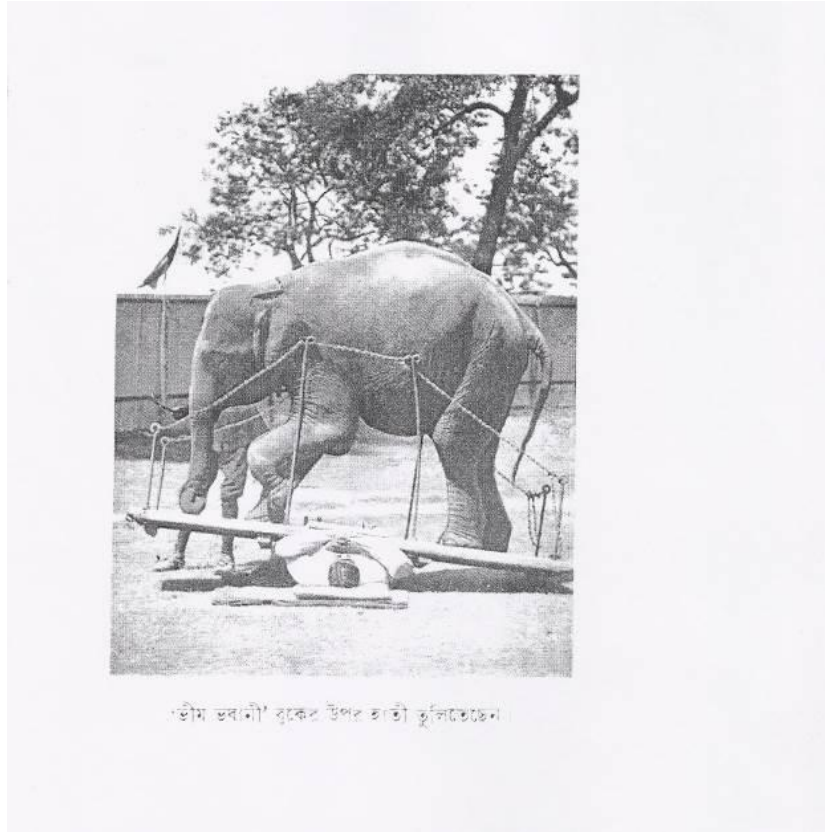


Figure 13

Bhim Bhavani performing the elephant act (this was a general act prevalent in nineteenth century Indian circuses among the strongmen).

Among the strongmen tradition in circus, the performer Lakshman Murti stands out. Rivalling the Strongman (and dubious entrepreneur) Ramamurti from Andhra, Murti was a Punjabi who travelled far from his cultural homeland to Sri Lanka and became a strongman and a sideshow marvel who could ingest anything. His repertoire included walking on burning coal and lifting stones, elephants, stopping cars, snapping iron chains and breaking glass with his teeth. *The Hindu* in 1911 reports, 'A zinc trough about twenty feet long containing almost to the brim a merry charcoal fire was brought into the arena by the circus attendants and we were informed that Lachman Murti would not only walk on the fire but take in his company any one from the spectators desirous for a merry walk in the trough. In almost every show I attended I always counted myself in the first group of volunteers to help in the teats (sic) but I recoiled in this as playing with fire did not suit either my temperament or my stock of courage. Lachman Murti appeared in the arena and discarding his wooden sandals strolled about leisurely on the fire as if he was taking a constitutional walk in an attractive park'.¹¹⁸ Around 1911, Ramamurti, the Telugu Strongman, stopped at Calcutta to display his feats of strength and a troupe of wrestlers.

¹¹⁸ Abanindrakrishna Basu, *Bangalir Sarka*, 116.

His show was surrounded with a lot of hype at that point of time. The Bengali circus industry was eager to have him in Calcutta and train their wrestlers. His appearance, however, ruffled a lot of feathers within the Bengali circus performers. K D Shil, a prominent wrestler and strongman from Calcutta, for a long time wanted to work with Ramamurti's troupe. He was taken under Ramamurti's wing to be trained but he left that troupe because of a fallout with the legendary strongman. Ramamurti apparently had been very racist towards the Bengali race in his comments.¹¹⁹ When Ramamurti visited Calcutta in 1911, K D Shil challenged Ramamurti in all their common acts of strength, especially, lifting an elephant upon one's chest, being run over by a bullock cart, stopping a moving car and breaking iron chains and etc.¹²⁰ Ramamurti reacted to this challenge as, 'first challenge my disciple Tikara Singh and then challenge me, first fight against a goat and then the ox'¹²¹. Shil responded to this statement as 'I am the Royal Bengal Tiger, first I would kill the Ox and if my appetite is not satisfied then I would go for the goat'. The challenge was never decided because Ramamurti never responded to it in the arena. When in 1918, eminent Bengalis from Calcutta, like Raja Manindrachandra Singha and Hirendranath Dutta, were planning to bestow upon Ramamurti, the title of 'Indian Champion of Physical feats', K D Shil criticized the act saying, 'if in Bengal itself, the wrestler is not accepting a Bengali's challenge and competition, then why would a trophy be given to him from Bengal?'¹²². Following the footsteps of Lachman Murti, K D Shil and others, another Strongman who was famous in Calcutta (with the Great Bengal Circus) was Bhim Bhavani. Bhim Bhavani, although a North Indian, was born and brought up in Calcutta and was mentored by Professor Priyanath Basu. He toured with different circuses during his lifetime and was best known for lifting elephants on his chest. He also followed the strongman challenge in the Circus arena, where a member of the audience would be called to showcase his strength against the Strongman. Bhim Bhavani's life story was publicized through the circus in a very interesting manner. He was said to weigh only thirty kilograms when he was seventeen years old. Through perseverance and Professor Basu's training, 'this faint hearted Bengali stood against all odds and became the Mighty Hercules'.¹²³ This construction of Bhim reflects the contemporary trend of using the circus trope to revive the physical weakness of the Bengali populace. Whereas an Englishman overcoming nature (through hunting or taming

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 169.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 170.

¹²¹ Ibid., 171.

¹²² Ibid., 172.

¹²³ Ibid., 187.

a wild beast) sought to control the colonial natural landscape, the indigenous overcoming the nature, symbolized the rise of the native to the same physical status of the English hunter or the animal trainer.



Figure 14

Strongman Ramamurti Naidu, wrestler and circus entrepreneur from Karnataka, 1899

Ramamurti, although famous throughout India for his feats, was a shadowy figure when it came to international tours; the details of this are in the third chapter.

Around the time George the fifth visited India in 1911 Bengali circus companies had already gained a strong foothold in the circus industry. They were preparing their performers to come up with acts that suited the historic moment of the British monarch's visit to the Jewel in the Crown. While the Karlekar's came up with the idea of recreating the controversial 1857 Sepoy Mutiny theme in their shows the Great Bengal Circus sought create a hunting themed show. North Indian Circuses like Rukmabai Circus and Grand Circus of Lucknow sought to transform their show entirely into a rampaging act where animal trainers stood against a horde of different animals menacingly marching towards them. All these themes reflect how different legitimacies were sought after by the circuses at that point of time. Circus needed both the colonial state and the indigenous

population to survive and work smoothly. By visualizing the spectacle in strategic ways they could achieve both. When the Karlekar Circus staged the Great Mutiny, the show ended as a dance and animal show trivializing yet retaining the essence of the rebellion. The Bengali Circus depicted animals being hunted by two hunters in unison, one brown and the other white and the North Indian circuses presented their rampage act by placing Indian hunters and white hunters facing animals which were unknown in the subcontinent.¹²⁴

An interesting rumor was circulated in the wee hours of the morning of twelfth November 1901 around the villages near where the Shellar Circus Company had pitched its tent. The Lord Viceroy was apparently going to perform in the Circus show in the evening. There was a heavy police presence at the Parade grounds where the show was supposed to happen. When the appointed arrived, the audience was anxious to see the Lord Viceroy with his 'shining horse, Ruby'. As the show went on, there was no sign of the Lord and when the grumbling impatience of the crowd reached its height, the Ringmaster in his Royal garb announced, 'Now ladies and gentleman, we present before you, Choturam, the titular head of Indiapur, here with us to grace us with his presence'¹²⁵. The public was confused at this announcement but soon realized that the alleged Lord Viceroy act was only a publicity stunt. The circus however, delivered their promise, they did showcase the Lord Viceroy, but he was only the head of Indiapur, a fictive (a proto-nationalist gesturing perhaps!) city in North India. The crowd though displeased was not disappointed. Choturam in his regalia strutted and mocked the then Lord Viceroy of real 'India' and even showed the audience that 'despite his busy schedule taming the native beasts he could do a marvelous split'.¹²⁶ The crowd apparently went ballistic at this display of an almost punitive seditious act. This direct mockery of the highest British official was only possible in the circus. The emphasis on visuality marred the lines of seditions. Also, when the public was convinced about the real Lord Viceroy's presence, it was indicative of the fact that the circus was standing at a certain location in the history of performances and entertainment, when the public believed circus could deliver wonders after wonders, no matter how implausible it might have seemed. The Shellars also crafted the publicity strategy very well, before the announcement they requested the local police station for more security because they feared that the crowd number might increase. The presence of so many policemen convinced the audience further that the Viceroy was

¹²⁴ Rakhaldas Ghosh, *Shohorer itikatha*, (Calcutta: Gurumoshai Pub, 1930), 112-117.

¹²⁵ Anecdotes gathered from interviewing Circus blogger and journalist, Shreedharan Champad on 27th October, 2011.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

really making an appearance and putting up a show for the village folks of Satara, Bombay Presidency.

Foreign troupes traveling in India



Figure 15

Clarke Brothers, (featured in most prominent British circus troupes) rehearsing at the Calcutta Maidan

The Woodyear Circus troupe was an Australian troupe which travelled at length in India around the 1880s. They were massively successful in their ventures and one of the founder members died in Calcutta. “By early 1891, the Woodyears had reached Singapore from where it proceeded to India. India was a favorite territory for showmen but in Calcutta in 1890, William Woodyear died not long after arriving. An eyewitness was on hand to record the details of his funeral service: ‘...there was not a dry eye among the ladies and gentlemen of the troupe who stood around his grave. I hope that I have at my funeral as sincere mourners as the clowns, athletes, trick riders, and ringmen who stood with tearful faces and bowed heads that December afternoon, while the clergymen read the burial services over the remains of poor woodyear....’ *The Englishman* of 24

December 1890 reported: 'owing to the sudden death of the proprietor, there will be no performance at the circus till Friday, the 26th instant'. What became of the remnants of the Woodyear's circus is not known. Certainly the company did not return to Australia, at least not as a single organization¹²⁷.

Gus Burns was an important animal trainer who helped Indian circus managers with his experience in animal training. As Hagenbeck had revolutionized animal training in Germany with his idea of conditioning rather than threatening the animals, Burns trained many Indian animal trainers to use this method. Abanindrakrishna Basu notes how "terrible, untameable beasts were like suckling pigs to these White European"¹²⁸

The non-white performers were subjects of a different kind for the British Empire. Although they were citizens, subjects of the Queen, their racial and gender identities kept them outside the egalitarian purview of the white colonial state. They overcame this difficulty by simply subscribing to identities and professions which were volatile. Within the circus tent racial rigidity was not profitable rather its ambivalence was. Also at times by being mere objects for the colonizer they could arrest agency in their ways. By playing into the stereotypes they could negotiate a space that was bewildering for the state or the audience but extremely empowering for those who could master it.

The Hagenbeck empire of animal trading and performer exchange also had a strong circus business. They had massive shows in different parts of South Asia. The younger Hagenbeck, Lorenz mentions in his memoir:

'After three weeks' voyage our original Noah's Ark thus brought the circus up the Ganges, and when we gave our first Indian performance all that stood for anything in Calcutta by name or rank was present. Among the audience was to be seen Lady Willingdon, wife of the British Viceroy. But most heads in the audience were turbaned. Our seating attendants were many a time driven to despair; there were so many cases of people who would not sit next to, or immediately under, or immediately above certain others, even though they might have paid the same price to get in each considered the other to be un- clean. For India's castes were still strictly observed, even determining where one should sit at a circus show.'¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Mark St. Leon, *Circus in Australia: Its Origins and Developments to 1856* (Penhurst, NSW: Mark St. Leon & Associates, 2011), 76.

¹²⁸ Abanindrakrishna Basu, *Bangalir Sarkas*, 213.

¹²⁹ Lorenz Hagenbeck, *Animals are my life* [Originally published as 'Den Tiern gehört mein Herz'. Hoffman & Kamp, 1955]. Trans. Alec Brown.(London: The Bodley Head, 1956),191.

The vast network of the Hagenbeck firm saw them coming back to India again and again. What is important is that their shows were primarily private shows in front of dignitaries of state and other important officials. They seldom performed bigger shows for the general public. The reasons behind this, one assumes is that the Hagenbecks' already had several official outposts in different parts of India, which dealt with animal trading and performer exchanges, so to maintain the operations in India well-oiled they chose to make the higher mortals happy. Lorenz Hagenbeck further recounts valorizing circus discipline with military precision:¹³⁰

‘During the interval I took my British guests to see the menagerie. The harness hanging down the gangways past the stables was gleaming bright, and there was clean straw in all the boxes. When a certain cavalry general spotted the cleanings of the curry combs always looked at by the officer in charge of Army stables to see how well the horses have been cleaned down he cried enthusiastically: ‘I shall send some of my dragoons round here tomorrow to learn the real meaning of cleanliness and speed’.

His memoir is full of Eastern opulence or complete penury (he mentions abject poverty and hardship as against princely fortunes). In one of rare public circus shows organized by the Hagenbeck Company in Calcutta, a strange incident happened. A gentleman walked up to the ticket counter before an hour of the show and enquired how much it costs to buy all the seats. ‘The inquirer was the private secretary of the Maharaja of Patiala, and yes, he repeated, he did wish to hire the whole seating for one show, and making out a cheque for the total sum he handed it across my desk, requiring of me an assurance that the whole programme would be shown, with no cuts, to one party only: his employer the Maharaja and the Maharaja's party. ‘Very well, sir, it shall be done,’ we said, and decided on the day.’¹³¹

Lorenz Hagenbeck’s Ceylonese and Indian performers were shown to the Kaiser and he describes the event as

‘The conjurer brought the house down when he asked for a ring, and threw it into the air where it vanished then pointed to his ‘magic bag* and asked the Kaiser to take out any one of the oranges in it and hand it to him. Demonstrating to everybody that the peel of the

¹³⁰ Ibid., 193.

¹³¹ Ibid., 192.

selected orange was untouched, he split it open with nimble fingers, to reveal the ring stuck in the heart of it. I never saw the Kaiser more happy than he was at that moment'.¹³²

Ethnographic Exhibition and other spaces



Figure 16

Indian performers at Hagenbeck's ethnographic exhibition in Berlin

The circus performers were not only confined within the tent but also travelled as part of exhibitions. The Paris Expositions of 1855, 1900 and 1937 featured not only Indian performers but also Hagenbeck style arrangements where different sections of different communities were placed together for a full effect of the exotic. Motilal Nehru, one of the foremost nationalist leaders (and the father of India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru) organized with the help of other Indians in Paris for Indian entertainers to be featured in the Paris Colonial Exhibitions (Exposition Universelle) of 1900. Prominent circus managers as well as other entertainers went on to show their skills in Paris. The group consisted of sixty individuals; among them there were three Bengali wrestlers and two magicians. The famous north Indian wrestlers Golam, Kallu and Romani went on to perform in different parts of Europe. Apart from these, there were two Veena players, two courtesans, a tabla player, a hookah seller, a sarangi player, a sweetmeat maker, a mason, a sculptor, an ivory maker, clothes merchants of famous Benarasi silk and other

¹³² Ibid., 81.

businessmen. This exhibition has featured prominently in Krishnalal Basak's travel memoir *Bichitro Bhraman*. Following the Hagenbeck model, the Indian pavilion was built like the Parisian model where participants could enjoy a fortress where circus tricks were being performed as well as eat in the different stalls set around that pavilion. The pavilion also followed certain general rules of circus tent acts; for example there was a Frenchman who would challenge a French civilian on behalf of the Indian wrestling team to fight one of the Indian wrestlers. This act was so famous that renowned European wrestler Eugene Sandow came to the tent to meet the Indian wrestlers. Sushila Sundari of Professor Basu's repertoire enjoyed a special privilege in these exhibitions¹³³.

A lot of Indian performers slipped out from these exhibitions and vanished within the crowds and moved to different parts of Europe. Some were successful in carving out a better life for themselves within different European circuses and sideshows and some got stranded and had to be retrieved by different British Consuls.

Circuses operating throughout the nineteenth century constantly shifted within different modes. Architectural transitions meant that the circus could operate its charm even if it was advertised as an 'exhibition', as an 'oriental display' of conquests or an ethnographic knowledge production site. The circus space, being a heterotopic one sought to transit into one another or transforms itself into the other. What was the circus? This would have been a difficult thing to address in the nineteenth century apart from the simple definition of different acts and visual displays under a single tent. The problem arises from the temporal and political juncture where circus located itself. Questions of racial superiority, colonial knowledge production, simple money making and exploitation of labour were the governing factors which overlapped in the colonial circuses or even in foreign circuses which sought to depict the Eastern or the Arabic 'other'. The performers also played along this malleable site, constantly changing identities to arrest agency for themselves or their agencies being denied for the profit of the circus company. Whereas racial discrimination in play texts sought to portray racial stereotypes, one dimensionally (from Shakespeare's *Othello* performed in Blackface to Chinese devils and African monsters in the British stage), circus complicated this performance of race to a completely new level. Race and gender role-playing was perfected in the circus. Circus performances created landscapes of terror and penury for the East and they sought to justify the Empire's civilizing and warring missions. Landscape formed an important spatial framework where the colonized was placed under the cartographic ordering of the

¹³³ Abanindrakrishna Basu, *Bangalir Sarkas*, 177.

colonial state. By visualizing the native the native was mapped and hence control was exercised. Also absence of a distinct landscape disembodied the colonized and the colonized emerged out of his/her context and was categorized through colonial/western frameworks. Consider this example around 1846, 'The Rajah of Nagpore, or the sacred Elephant of the pagoda, a production that ran for six weeks at Astley's in 1846 and coincided with British efforts to annex the Punjab, made this point. In the opening scene the people of the city literally kneel, not before a British ruler, but before a real elephant that will appoint the next king'.¹³⁴ There is no hint of a background in this particular spectacle; there are instead mythical symbols and acts depicting the Orient. The Orient in Orientalist and colonial discourses has always emerged as something, which is signified through spectacle and exoticism and not through *normal* categories. The Orient and the east were always (re)presented within a chimera of spectacle and wonder. This may stem from the continuous 'othering' of the non-west as categories of fear and apprehension, so as to generate legitimacy of control among the western masses. Later towards the end of nineteenth century, these spectacles multiplied their sizes, 'at Astley's in 1878, when two hundred auxiliaries were used to play sepoys, British troops, and Hindu servants in Relief of Lucknow; or, Jessie Brown, although a version of this had been produced on a smaller scale during Cooke's provincial tour in 1858 and at Drury Lane in 1862, indicating that public interest had increased by the seventies. More impressive still was Imre Kiralfy's *India* two decades later at Earl's Court. With a cast of a thousand, it covered almost a thousand years of Indian history and offered a justification of the British Raj'.¹³⁵

¹³⁴ Brenda Assael, *The Circus and Victorian Society*, 76.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 67.

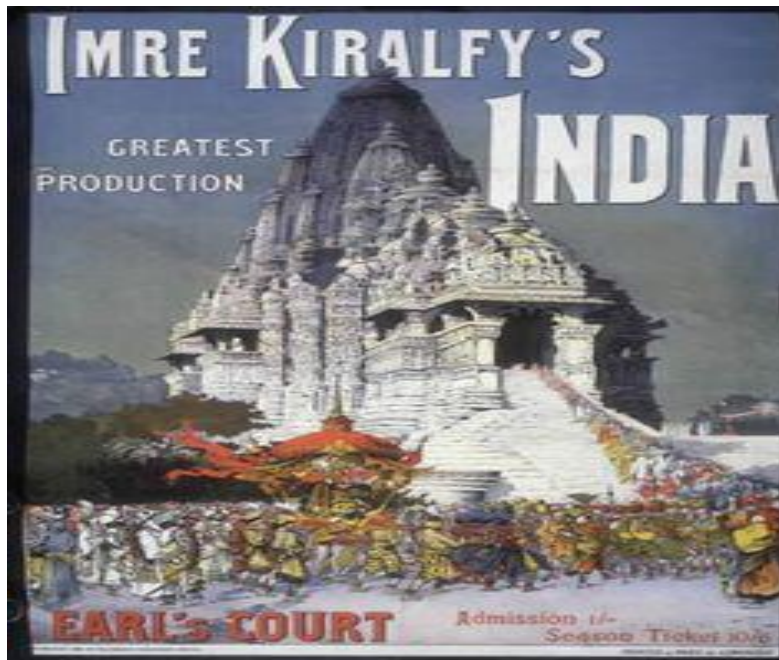


Figure 17

:Ethnographic exhibition by Imre Kiralfy, based on India, 1894

Patrons of the circus

The princely states in India (the ones not usurped by the British) were a huge benefactor of different circus troupes in India¹³⁶. A lot of these princely estates had an impressive collection of animals which were becoming expensive to maintain. Circus as an entertainment event came to them at an important time where a circus performance could also be commissioned for public viewing and if the royalty was pleased, animals from the menagerie were given as gifts to the troupe. The circus received expensive gifts from the estate but was not dependent entirely on the Local landlord/princely court for sustainability and profit. Another important factor was that the indigenous circus company site could be utilized for the nascent national interests of the mid and late 19th century.

¹³⁶ The princely states were gradually losing their moral and military authority towards the end of the nineteenth century when the British annexed most of them either because they supported the 1857 mutiny or failed to pay taxes due to destruction of revenues and agricultural infrastructure. The moral sanctity of these rulers were lost on the public who viewed them as opulent rulers having no idea of nationalism or the general welfare of their subject and spending huge amounts of money on feasts and court performers, especially courtesans. For an insightful take on the declining princely estate and the *zamindari*, refer to Satyajit Ray's *Shatranj Ke Khiladi* (The Chess Players), 1977 and *Jalshaghar* (The Music Room), 1958 respectively.

Apart from the animals being gifted to the circus companies they were sites of important networking where the circus manager could meet important local British dignitaries who could issue the much-needed permits during hazards of the tour. The spectacle of the circus was complementing, if not completely replacing the grandiose feasts and nautches of the declining nobility. By supporting the circus the nobility could maintain the idea of the spectacular festival and still remain within a moral circle to its subjects. Professor Basu recounts his tour being commissioned for the coronation of the Crown Prince of Tipperah in 1909, “The first two days were only reserved for the Governor, the Higher Magistrates and their families. The third day was reserved entirely for the king of Tripura and nobody else. Our performance and trickery was much appreciated by the King who at the end of our stay gifted us an Elephant, named after the state, Tipperah”¹³⁷. Numerous testimonies from local rulers show both the interests of the nobility regarding the circus as well as the publicity technique of Professor Basu in utilizing these testimonials, for example, “Professor Basu’s Circus was visited by H.H. the Maharaja and his staff last night. His Highness gave his patronage for the performance and was highly pleased with the equestrian and gymnastic feats specially wrestling with 2 tigers which was quite wonderful and one of the kind ever seen.”¹³⁸ As related to using the circus as a site of nascent nationalism and an answer to colonial stereotypes the Raja of Burdwan announced the beginning of Professor Basu’s show in his estate by urging everybody to sing *Vandemataram*.¹³⁹

Tent spaces and networking

The spaces¹⁴⁰ that the circus companies utilized in Calcutta were based at the big sprawling grounds of *Maidan*¹⁴¹, a leafy field controlled by the British army regiment posted in Calcutta. Earliest circus companies, which performed in Calcutta apart from the military controlled park, also set up tents in different areas of the city, primarily around the barren areas of Tala water tank (a water reservoir built by the British around 1909). The Tala areas, which hosted the circus, were different from that of the Fort William controlled *Maidan*- it was far away from the bustling city but had huge spaces to contain

¹³⁷ Abanindrakrishna Basu, *Bangalir Sarkas*, 201.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹³⁹ *Vandemataram* was a nationalist song penned by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay.

¹⁴⁰ These entertainment grounds were not new sites of public gatherings. Before the coming of the Circus, these were massive fairground sites in the city which even villagers also knew about from their occasional visits to Calcutta.

¹⁴¹ *Maidan* in Bengali means a large barren ground.

the circus tents. Another area that served as an important Venue was the Park Circus ground. This particular neighborhood is an important historical site because it occurred between the White town and the beginnings of the residential houses of the Bengali elite and then stretching into the suburbs. Around the 1900s, the Park Circus neighborhood was also an area which housed a large number of North Indian Muslim migrants who had come to Calcutta in search of jobs and were promptly employed by the British households as chefs and butlers who would not cringe at the sight of beef like the Hindu cooks (who were predominantly Brahmins fallen on hard times). A section of these Muslims joined the circus companies both as cooks as well as security guards (many of them were small time mercenaries employed by the local landlords in their hometown). More often than not the British accused circus touts of poaching their best cooks.

The proximity of the Calcutta Maidan to the Kidderpore docks and also to the zoo at Alipore facilitated animal exchanges between owners of these circus companies and the animal traders. The site was midway between the entrepreneurship of the circus businessman, the world exotica collector who stopped at the Kidderpore docks or the nearby smaller embankments of Ganga and the scientific acumen and validation (of animals and human beings of 'unknown' areas) of both the native and foreign naturalists who resided at the Alipore Zoo and the botanical gardens. The Alipore Zoo received animals from all over India (from princely states, huntsmen, hunting enthusiasts and British residents who had usurped any local landlords' power along with their menagerie) and the world and Ram Brahma Sanyal, one of the foremost naturalists of the Zoo was in contact with Carl Hagenbeck, supplying him with information as well as animals. In return Hagenbeck advised him on zoo-keeping methods which he had perfected in his Stellingen zoo. On the other hand Calcutta had a series of Agents dealing with exchange of animals.

Therefore housing the circus within the boundaries of the Maidan was not only profitable but also terribly convenient. The problematic aspect of this lucrative space was that at times the circus managers had to appease the occasional Police or Military chief. Permission to use the spaces was not always granted by the local authorities, no matter how connected the circus managers were and how big and popular their company was. However, the interpersonal relationship of the circus manager with the local officials proved highly useful. A tiger which came out of a circus in Satara in West India was hunted by the Local British Magistrate. Upon knowing that this is a circus animal, he

called the manager and asked him, 'is the tiger trained, if not, I will shoot it'.¹⁴² On a different note, when a magistrate's daughter was injured when she stuck her hand inside the tiger's cage, the court ruled in favor of the magistrate saying that if the royal Bengal tiger was so dangerous why there was no danger sign pasted outside the cage¹⁴³. There were occasional tiffs between smaller officials and higher officials in terms of securing tickets for the circus. Officials reprimanded their subordinates for this hankering for circus tickets. The Government of Travancore, Judicial section memo stated this incident, 'Under date 3-3-43 three peons went to see the circus conducted here on last Sunday with first class chair free passes. Two of them occupied the first class seats unknowingly. The third man was stopped at the gate and given a seat in the bench. Being dissatisfied with this he murmured that there were two also in the first class. The other two were accordingly traced and provided with seats in the bench. The question arises whether **officers are in the right in transferring the first class free passes given to them, to their peons?**'¹⁴⁴

The touring circus companies in India, apart from the city spaces sought to venture out open grounds outside the city limits. The dilemma was of crowd-control as much it was for the sheer volume of the circus repertoire. Professor Basu's touring accounts suggest for elaborate plans for space hunting. Two individuals were sent before the circus to the intended town. The circus advance agent was the most important person during tours. He was a fixer who smoothed out all the rough edges of touring the huge circus group. The circus manager performed this role more than often but in case he was busy, an important person of the circus group was appointed for the job. When a distant venue was fixed, he would go there in advance and sort out everything, from finding a suitable accommodation, which could house the performers. However this was not very easy. Although the performers' caste and religious identities never clashed within the tents, these identities virulently came out when it was time for their eating and sleeping arrangements. In terms of slumming it out the Malabaris did tremendously well with their group. Professor Basu sneeringly remarks (although a hint of suppressed admiration is there), 'When my Bengali performers eat, they seem to whine at the slightest over saltiness of the curry or the lack of fish and meat, the Malabaris seem to make do with darkened rice and some sort of a devilish gruel', he goes on to add 'these morons, my

¹⁴² Abanindrakrishna Basu, *Bangalir Sarkas*, 134.

¹⁴³ Abanindrakrishna Basu, *Bangalir Sarkas*, 198.

¹⁴⁴ No. D, 153/43/CS, dated 8/4/43, Kerala State Archives, Trivandrum, Kerala, emphasis mine.

bengalees, now behave like princes, when their childhood was spent with half a meal a day'.¹⁴⁵

Circus publicity

Circus publicity in the subcontinent followed closely the European and American models of circus promotions. A circus would have a grand parade couple of days before the circus started its shows. Print posters plastered the walls of the location and invited local dignitaries to the best seats in the arena. For the circus promotions that happened in far off villages, where a big procession with animals was not possible or profitable, people were hired to go house to house informing about the circus or a meeting was called in the village central point and the village chief would inform his subjects about the circus.

Apart from these endeavors the circus managers often relied on sensations, gimmicks and rumors for their publicity.

Charlie the Cha-cha¹⁴⁶ was an achondroplastic dwarf at the Minerva Circus in the 1940s. The Second World War coupled with the rising tide of Indian national movements crippled the circus industry of India. The Minerva Circus in Bombay operated mainly in the fringes of the seven islands due to the blackouts and the rationing in the city. Charlie's job was that of a happy faced clown in the troupe. The thing which was interesting is that Charlie did not exist. A purely marketing strategy to get audiences, this Minerva Circus plan was genius. Cash strapped Indian audiences needed an emotional push that Minerva provided. Circus pamphlets were circulated in the suburbs of Bombay which stated in Marathi, 'This poor little boy, make you laugh while his brother fight in London, his mother was killed because of starvation. come one, come all and witness this hero's funny acts, while he makes you laugh with a stone of sadness in his heart'.¹⁴⁷ Charlie's sadness apparently led to a lot of audience in Minerva's tents. Minerva's marketing strategy appeared at a time when there was much political furor and haywire and people responded to this strategy as a way off letting steam and also doing a good deed. And any dwarf in Minerva's tent could be shown off as Charlie. The story reflected the quick-witted nature of circus managers who managed to bank on images like that of the Charlie Chaplin which had already flooded the Indian market. Minerva Circus's proprietor's son,

¹⁴⁵ Abanindrakrishna Basu, *Bangalir Sarkas*, 197.

¹⁴⁶ *Chamcha* has a double meaning in Hindi, it means a spoon and also a suck-up.

¹⁴⁷ Minerva Circus Brochure, Mr Mukul Mhatre Circus Collection, Thane, Mumbai. Interviewed on 23rd August, 2011.

Mr. Mukul Mhatre says, 'it never mattered whether Charlie was real or not, his pain resonated with a lot of Indians who had similar stories or knew someone who had'¹⁴⁸

The circus managers often spread rumors about a tiger or a leopard that have escaped the cages and are astray in the town. There would be immense panic about the whereabouts of the animals only to be conveniently found and caged by circus officials. The posters and the pamphlets would then play up this incident further. The particular animal would be described as a 'fearless, untameable African lion from the wilderness, escaped twice from the cage but successfully caught twice by Badalchand the great animal trainer'¹⁴⁹. The hunt for the escaped animal piqued the interests of the townsfolk who now would come to see whether the beast has been tamed or not in the arena. Another tactic which was common within indigenous circus companies was to publicize the injuries faced by a specific performer, either performing at the trapeze or an animal trainer mauled his animals. The performer was paraded in the streets with 'fresh' injuries visible. One Englishwoman exclaims about this sight, 'the young lad was bloody red over and still standing'¹⁵⁰. A lot of these publicity stunts went out of control where police officials or real hunters were called in to save the day; even then the circus sought to maximize its publicity.

International Tours of Indian circus companies.

Travelling towards the beginning of the 1930s and in failing health, Tagore came across performances thrown by the Basu circus company in Java. The elderly bard had strangely never witnessed this famed Bengali circus company in action in his homeland. He was fascinated with all the antiques and a young Bengali born in Java and who was travelling with him recounts Tagore's awe. 'Gurudeb'¹⁵¹ was spellbound with the circus trapezists and the lions, he personally sought out the ringmaster and congratulated him on making Bengalees proud all over the world'.¹⁵² The world was opening up for the Indian performer in more ways than one. On the one hand the exotic Indian *nautch* girl or the fakir from their passive existence in the exhibitions as objects faded into the praises of agility showered over Indian gymnasts and animal trainers and on the other hand performance and entertainment moved away from circles of accusations of immorality

¹⁴⁸ Interview with Mr. Mukul Mhatre, Thane, Mumbai, August 4th, 2011.

¹⁴⁹ Abanindrakrishna Basu, *Banagalir Sarkas*, 71.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁵¹ Tagore was named Gurudeb by M K Gandhi.

¹⁵² Sunitikumar Chattopadhyay, *Rabindra Songome Shyam deep o Job desh* (Kolkata: Arya Prokashona, 1942), 34.

and vice to the realms of worldwide where they could negotiate spaces of dissent and exercise monetary agency over the draconian containment of the colonial state and the indigenous elites with forms of theatrical censorship and moral crusades.

On a cold November morning, a huge crowd gathered at the Seattle docks to witness the unloading of a Japanese liner, *Shinano Maru*. As elephants, lions, tigers and other exotic creatures (human beings included) were lowered down the wharf, the first accident happened. An elephant enraged by the noise and maybe the long sea voyage from India knocked down its keeper¹⁵³. The keeper, fortunately, received only minor injuries. Chatre's Circus had arrived in America. The liner and the circus it carried on its decks and hold was not very different in their elements. The *Shinano Maru* itself could be considered a menagerie in its own right, the public paying similar attention, if not money, to witness the passengers who came down the ship. The transnational worlds of late Nineteenth century extending to the twentieth century modes of long distance travel carried 'wonders' from far off corners of the world. Apart from circus animals emerging from the cargo hold, which were always a spectacle and many a cases they were as planned by their managers, public in port cities often went to the docks to see foreigners from other countries stepping into their soil.

The Seattle Star, reports on November 06, 1902:

SHINANO BRINGS A COSMOPOLITAN PASSENGER LIST,

"Chatre's Indian Circus and 61 men, four women and numerous trained birds and animals, arrived yesterday afternoon from the Orient on the Japanese liner *Shinano Maru*. The men are dressed in the sparse Hindoo costume, which leaves their limbs for the most part bare. Both the Indian and Japanese women, a half dozen passengers, were dressed in loose Oriental robes, which gave them a picturesque appearance. There was much excitement at the dock as the elephants and other wild beasts were swung from the ship's hold to the whar. One of the passengers of the *Shinano* was Dr. Ram Firth, M. A., for the past five years professor of hindoo philosophy in the Punjab university. Although he is a typical Hindoo in appearance and dress he speaks English well and is to begin a lecturing tour of America. He may deliver an address before the state university upon the Vedant religion, of which he is a priest. Rev. C.H. Bandy and wife are en route to Iowa. Re. Bandy has for the past eight years been conducting a theological

¹⁵³ 'Shinano Brings A Cosmopolitan Passenger List', *The Seattle Star*, (1899-1947), November 06, 1902, 4.

seminary, a high school and a boarding school in India. They have with them a 5 year old boy, Rajah whom they will probably adopt. Rajah is the illegitimate son of an Irish coffee planter and Tamalis woman. 'Rajah has the Hindoo countenance, says Mr. Bandy, but the Irish cheek'

Other passengers were C.de Azevado, a Portuguese doctor from China, and Dr. W. Horn, a naturalist who has been carrying on researches in China in the interest of German universities. The ship had 50 cabin passengers, 58 Indians, 86 Japanese and six Chinese. Her cargo amounted to 3, 200 tons''.

Chatre's tours in America were extraordinary; they travelled the whole length of the West Coast and met with profits as well as a considerable amount of challenges.

Reporting on November 25th, 1902, *The San Francisco Call* mentions

“ Chatre's new Indian circus, one of the most novel attractions on the road, arrived from Seattle yesterday and will open at Woodward's Pavilion on Wednesday night. The show will remain here for one week. Chatre's circus was lately organized in India and has shown all over the Orient. In the show there are fifty-six highly trained animals and seventy performers, both male and female, consisting of trapeze actors, Jugglers, contortionists and tumblers. The show did a big business in Seattle, and from all accounts will make a good impression here ”¹⁵⁴.

The tours met considerable difficulties also. In 1902 in Seattle the Chatre Circus tent was torn to pieces by a strong gale¹⁵⁵. Natural disasters aside, the circus company also faced the wrath of Animal Protection Society in Seattle which took away the hooks from Sinhalese Elephant trainers which they used to discipline the Elephants; an acrobatic dog wandered too close to the Lions den and was eaten by the Lion and child services institutions protested against the use of child acrobats in their shows. Then the circus company amassed huge local debts in speculations about profits regarding animal trading. On a different ocean side in Asia, *The Straits Times*, on 2nd of May, 1903 writes about Basu's circus group,

“Singapore has had many visitors in the way of circuses but rarely has a more clever show visited the town than that now performing on the Raffles Reclamation Ground. Last evening there was a good attendance and judging from the applause, the circus is likely to have a most prosperous season before it. The

¹⁵⁴ 'New Indian Circus Arrives', in *The San Francisco Call*, November 25, 1902, 5.

¹⁵⁵ 'Gale Sweeps Puget Sound', in *The San Francisco Call*, November 18 1902, 9.

special features of the performance are the wonderful agility of the acrobats and the performance with the tiger. These items were nearly all of them quite novel and their excellence was such as to draw forth strong encomiums of praise from a number of European circus and theatrical people who happened to be present...As a result the general verdict is that Professor Basu will meet with a big success. At any rate we can confidently recommend the entertainment provided".¹⁵⁶

The transnational mobility of the circus is peculiarly evident when we consider different English news bulletins from diverse parts of the British Empire writing about Indian circuses happening all over the world.

LAST CIRCUSES IN INDIA

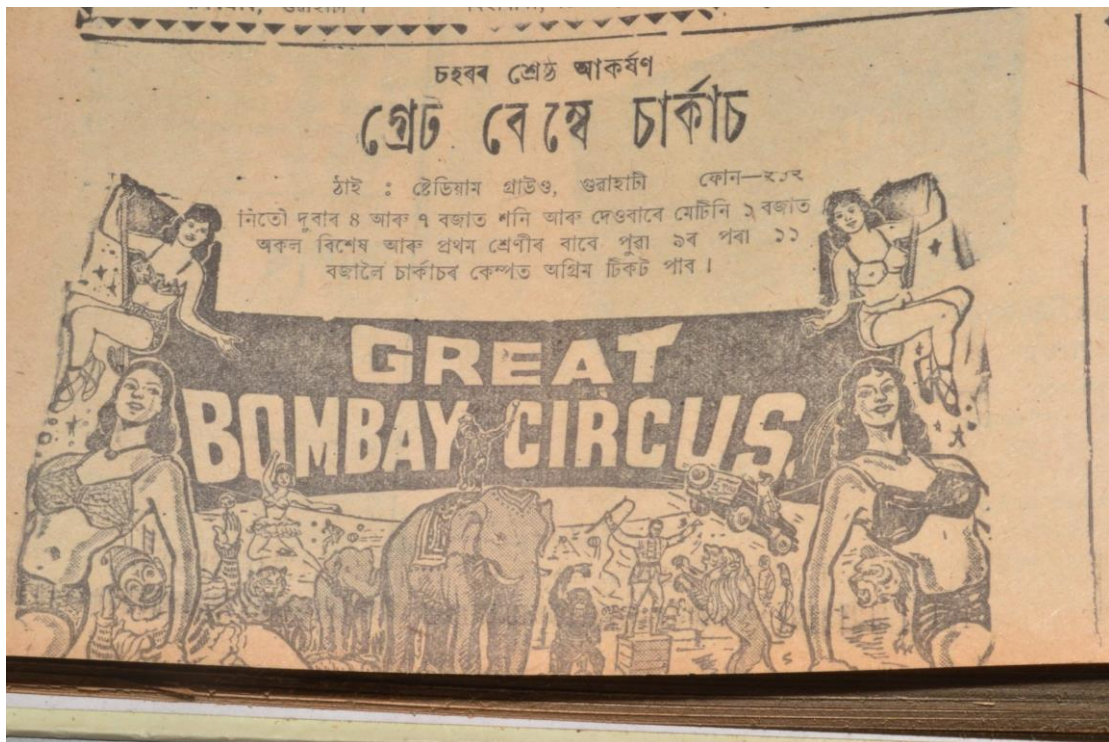


Figure 18

Circus poster from Assam India, 1940

Indian circuses suffered a blow towards the late 1930s due to the growing activities of anti-colonial nationalist movements all over India. The Second World War also disrupted

¹⁵⁶ 'Bose's Circus', in *The Straits Times*, May 2, 1903, 5.

circus proceedings by hindering its transnational exchanges. There were few circuses left after independence. Below are the circuses that were founded around early 1920s India and continued way into independent India. The Great Rayman Circus was established in 1920, by a disciple of Keeleri Kunhikannan named Kallan Gopalan. He went on to found different circus companies like the National Circus and the Bharat Circus. His last venture, Amar Circus, went out of business only in 2010. The reason behind Gopalan's success was tie-ups with the independent Indian government, seeking to establish diplomatic-cultural relations with other nations. An Indian ministry memo states:

“The Rayman Circus who had been giving performances in Delhi last year propose to tour the Middle East countries and Pakistan. They propose to visit Pakistan first, then Afghanistan, and thereafter the remaining countries.

From the cultural point of view, the tour will be welcome and create goodwill towards India. The circus authorities have only asked for passport facilities; the proposed tour will, therefore, contribute to India's popularity in the Middle East countries without any expenditure to the Government of India.

‘It will be an ideal arrangement if the tour is so arranged that the periods of stay in each country coincide with the festival seasons. After a stay of about two months in Pakistan the circus can move to Afghanistan in August and be there on the occasion of the “Jashan” celebrations. It is, perhaps, not necessary that the circus should be there beyond the middle of September and then they can move to Iran. Winter can be spent by the circus in Iran and Iraq, and then they can move to Egypt. They can be there during the months of February to April and then they can go to turkey. Summer can be spent by the circus in turkey and other adjoining countries. In September and October 1956, they can perform in Syria when the Annual Damascus fair will be held. They can also give performances in Lebanon’¹⁵⁷.

Kunhikannan's disciples were highly successful circus entrepreneurs. Baburao Kadam founded The Grand Bombay Circus in 1920. Touring extensively in undivided India, it sought to create a name for itself within the Indian circus audience. Keeleri's nephew K. M. Kunhikannan merged his companies, the Whiteway and the Great Lion Circus with

¹⁵⁷ File no f.26 (16)-AWT/55, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, National Archives of India, New Delhi.

the Great Bombay Circus in 1947. One of the last big circuses, the merged company featured three hundred employees and a menagerie of sixty animals. Their tours in Srilanka and South Africa are well documented. The first big circus to be founded after independence, The Gemini Circus was created in 1951, in Billimoria, a town in the State of Gujarat by circus businessman and acrobat Moorkoth Vangakandy Shankaran. His training with the military during the Second World War helped him to acquire a discipline that led him to Kunhikannan's Circus school in Thalassery, Kerala. Before embarking on the circus business Shankaran worked for a time with Kallan Gopalan's Great Rayman Circus. His circus opened its doors on August 15, 1951. Following the usage of Indian circuses as diplomatic ventures by the Indian Government, Shankaran led the first Indian circus delegation to an International Circus Festival held in the USSR, 1964. The Indian company performed in Moscow, Sochi, and Yalta. The most important feature about Gemini Circus was that it supplied circus material to Bollywood whenever a movie based on circus was in production. To name a few, Raj Kapoor's *Mera Naam Joker*, Mithun Chakraborty's *Shikari*, and Kamala Hassan's *Apoorva Sahodarangal*. Another circus which toured extensively in the Gulf region was The Rajkama Circus, established in 1958. Continuing till today it is one of the biggest circuses in India.

Post Script



Figure 19

Cinema poster of Raj Kapoor's *Mera Naam Joker*, 1970

A significant portion of Indian circuses was taken over by the Soviet Circuses after Independence. Indian circus companies had a long history with Soviet circus performers dating back to 1880s. Most of the Soviet circus performers came from the circus schools in Uzbekistan and Moscow, (the first circus school in the world opened in 1927 in Moscow). The British however were uneasy. From the early 1920s the British Colonial state in India kept extensive files on Soviet performers employed in the subcontinent. A number of these documents report police pursuits of Soviet performers like an espionage story. The stories emerging from these documents are quite varied but the most important theme that comes out from these documents is the constant intelligence investment of the police in these soviet performers.

A particular Bollywood/Soviet co-production *Mera Naam Joker* (My Name is Joker) premiered in India in 1970. This particular film failed to create its mark on the Indian box-office(however it travelled to the far reaches of USSR where Raj Kapoor was quite the name from before) yet, it left a lasting impression on Indian societal imagination about how and what Soviet circus is. The film was directed and starred by Raj Kapoor,

who at that point of time was almost Bollywood royalty. The film was a narrative of trials and tribulations of the hero which culminated with an unrequited love for the ethereal Russian ballerina working at the circus. What should be noted in this particular context is that the majority of Raj Kapoor's movies dealt with a penniless have-not as the central character fostering love and brotherhood throughout the corrupt and bourgeois society. Soviet circuses sought to guide the aesthetic nature of Indian circus images and publicity. More importantly after independence the influence of Soviet Circus was felt in Indian circuses through the compulsory inclusion of any 'Soviet/Russian' performer to ensure the profitability of the show. The colonial European performer's presence was replaced by the Soviet ballerina or acrobat.

Chapter Two: Race, Gender and cultural identity

Lost in the abysmal conditions of the red light district at Rambagan Nati Bindoini¹⁵⁸ wrote her autobiography. She managed to carve out a self at a time when women as human beings having selves was still a difficult idea and for prostitutes, even a punitive one. She was the first theatre actress who was instrumental in acquiring a theatre. Her autobiography described her tales of survival, betrayal and compromise. The following chapter will follow the many lives of circus performers of both male, female and of ambiguous gender along themes that resonated in Binodini's life. This chapter will recount survivors, victims as well as empowered negotiators, who tirelessly fought, manipulated and were oppressed by the colonial state. These performers also battled the ideological impositions of the native urban elite. The twin forces of the colonial state and the native elite quite often clamped down on mobility, freedom and self-expression of these performers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

1. The Woman's question: Appropriation and transgression

Transgression, then, is not related to the limit as black to white, the prohibited to the lawful, the outside to the inside, or as the open area of a building to its enclosed spaces. Rather, their relationship takes the form of a spiral which no simple infraction can exhaust. Perhaps it is like a flash of lightning in the night which, from the beginning of time, gives a dense and black intensity to the night it denies, which lights up the night from the inside, from top to bottom, and yet owes to the dark the stark clarity of its manifestations, its harrowing and poised singularity and becomes silent now that it has given a name to obscurity.—Michel Foucault.

1.1 Shabira, the powerful

Long before indigenous companies employed female performers in their ranks there was an itinerant performer who travelled within the fairground circuits of Bengal. Her name was Shabira. This female performer inhabited a space which was ritualistic as well as secular. Traveling with a Muslim Sufi sect Shabira was known to perform miracles with

¹⁵⁸ For details, read Binodini Dasi, *Binodini Dasi: My Story and My Life as an Actress*, Trans. & ed. Rimli Bhattacharya, (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998), 1-45. The Indian theatre director Amal Allana had produced a brilliant modern adaptation of Nati Binodini in 2009, which threw light on the world of Binodini and the constant terrors of compromise tormenting her. The word 'Nati' in Bengali means a theatre actress.

dangerous animals. Her sect was a philanthropic sect that propagated mysticism and a life away from traditional religion. She performed tricks with animals and also blessed those who were readied for ritual sacrifices (for communal food distribution). Much of Shabira's life in early nineteenth century is known, however, through chronicles depicting early songstresses and magicians in Bengal. We know her as 'the daughter of Allah, the cousin of Bhanumoti (a Hindu demi-goddess of magic) and the bringer of food'.¹⁵⁹

1.2 Sushila Sundari



Figure 20

Sushila with the Royal Bengal Tiger, Lakshmi. Image courtesy: National Library, Calcutta

'What impresses the observer most are the performances of Miss Sushila with the two Royal Bengal Tigers. Hindu women are notoriously most timid but in the person of Sushila, there is one who, with the utmost fearlessness, enters the den of two apparently savage beasts, without either whip or any kind of defensive appliance, and goes through

¹⁵⁹ Sushibhavan Bhaduri, *Unishshotoker Gramyo Kahini o nari samaj* (Calcutta: Porichoy, 1956), 75.

her performance with these animals with a nerve and fearlessness really startling to witness'.¹⁶⁰

The superwoman of the Indian circus tent was in reality the hapless sister of the fallen prostitute theatre actress of the late nineteenth century. Within the circus her metamorphoses into a sublime and powerful image rendered her both empowered and abused¹⁶¹. The first female performer we analyze is Sushila Sundari of The Great Bengal Circus, the daring performer who played with tigers and other carnivores. Sushila Sundari came from a similar background to that of theatre actresses, women subjected to prostitution, either because of their marginal low caste births, widows who did not commit *Sati*¹⁶² or brides who were abandoned by their husbands. There is very little known about Sushila's early life before her circus career. 'Discovered' by Professor Abanindrakrishna Basu of The Great Bengal Circus, Sushila went on to become one of the greatest circus artists of her time.

Her physical acts were locations, where battles of nationalism, masculinity and regional prowess were waged. As with her other circus colleagues, her story emerged as only the story forwarded by the circus company. Her acts became sites through which her male mentor forged himself as the person responsible for discovering and honing such a huge talent while her skills remained only as a wonderful by product of her training.¹⁶³

'Who ever could think before that a saree and slipper wearing timorous Bengali lady whose face is seldom seen outside the limits of the Zenana can make herself bold enough to coax and play with two large man-eaters like domestic dogs. Thanks to the skill of Professor Basu who has shown the world that smews(sic) of

¹⁶⁰ Abanindrakrishna Basu, *Bangalir Sarkas*, 139.

¹⁶¹ It should be noted here that the discursive construction of women (as heroines and goddesses) in nation-state categories renders women either as superwomen or as vulnerable victims of society and not as women who were mere mortals and equals.

¹⁶² *Sati* was the ritual act of self-immolation by Hindu wives at the funeral pyre of their husbands.

¹⁶³ The story introduced at the outset of this chapter was not mentioned without its merits. Various men depicted Binodini's whole life in the nineteenth century chronicles as a life that would be nothing if not for the mentoring of her career by Girish Ghosh, the famous playwright of Bengal (known as the Garrick of Bengali stage) at different points of her life. Girish was considered as the person who salvaged her from the dregs of prostitution and penury. Girish forced her to alter her autobiography (where he was to be inserted as the noble savior) and made a career that was substantially based on Binodini's acting and singing skills. For details read Rimli Bhattacharya's introduction to Binodini Dasi, *Binodini Dasi: My Story and My Life as an Actress*, Trans. & ed. Rimli Bhattacharya, (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998), 1-17.

the Bengali ladies who are known to be so delicate are capable of performing such wonderful feats as will unnerve the bravest of the brave'¹⁶⁴.

As argued in the first chapter, it can be said that the circus women largely remained outside the moral purview of the community which constantly debated about the prostitute theatre actress¹⁶⁵, however, the appropriation of her actions by leading men (both public and the private) happened in all spheres¹⁶⁶. Was she, however, therefore, was completely without agency?

Neither colonial texts nor subjects were anodyne, passive and un-dialectical. Then how do we define the negotiating power of Sushila and consider her a subject controlling her historical location? There are no easy answers to this. This is where the scandals of the entertainment worlds of the late nineteenth century come in. These were malleable points of/for transgressions¹⁶⁷ where established social hierarchies of power were destabilized. At the height of Sushila's circus career she was approached by an European impresario who wanted to give her a special place in his travelling company, serving dually as a performer as well as a sideshow exhibit as a "virginal, beautiful, yet an enchanting temptress of the East, who had fallen on bad luck"¹⁶⁸.

Professor Basu objected to this offer and ordered her to stay with the circus. Sushila managed to extricate all her savings from the manager of the circus and eloped with the impresario. Her luck faltered when the impresario left India for Europe and managed to usurp all her savings. She was forced to come back to circus and a scandal ensued (which

¹⁶⁴ 'Behind the doe eyed women of Bengal', *Moslem Chronicle*, January 4 1902, 12.

¹⁶⁵ The reformist agenda which operated behind the debates on the recruitment of prostitutes as theatre actresses can be exemplified through this statement published in a 19th century newspaper: 'a lot of people protest on the use of prostitutes as theatre actresses and this has caused a lot of bad mouthing for theatre. We admit this view. Yet, until and unless we get domestic, respectable women from good households, there is no other way...[And] we must admit that there are no women in worse conditions than the prostitutes and..... though religious acting their life will be cleansed'. Kalicharan Bandopadhyay, 'Women and their upliftment', *Bongosomaj*, 1904, Vol 3, 17.

¹⁶⁶ This appropriation of women's issues by the patriarchal society from the so called Bengal renaissance of the early and mid-nineteenth century to Gandhi have been deftly described by the subaltern studies scholar, Partha Chatterjee. See Partha Chatterjee 'Colonialism, Nationalism and Colonialized Women: The contest in India', in *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (Nov. 1989): 622-633.

¹⁶⁷ The circus publicists used the very method of scandal mongering as well, city walls were sometimes plastered with stories of dalliances between high officials and circus performers. A major scandal which rocked Calcutta during Lord Lytton's Governor-Generalship was how a 'particular circus performer received a medal with a British royal inscription from the Lord himself 'for her dexterities in and outside the circus arena', Anon, *Kalimoy Kolikata*, (Kolikata: Taratala Press, 1876), 25. The translation is mine.

¹⁶⁸ James Ivory Huntington, 'My world of marvelous travels', in *The Wonders of the East*, (New York: Huntington Books, 1899), 129.

in other cases would have been good negative publicity for the circus company but Sushila's public image was that of a pure woman, like the Hindu goddess Durga who had surpassed all evil temptations and compelled the mighty beast of the jungle to be her transport!), therefore after much begging she was allowed to rejoin the circus but was paid less than before. Sushila's decision, no matter its result, can be construed as an important historical moment, where she defied all societal and patriarchal injunctions to move to a better place of her own choice. Without emphasizing a counterfactual argument, it could be said that Sushila's escape, if it was successful, could exemplify the very empowering nature of the circus, the idea of escape from a history, which had been imposed and not chosen. The vernacular texts of Indian circuses as well as other traditional performative genres spoke about the revered relationship of the teacher, i.e. the Guru with the disciple, the *shikshya*, it was a divine bond not to be breached by any misconduct. Any kind of disobedience would result in harsh punishment. Although the male circus managers and trainers sought to incorporate this within their trainees, the social origins of the performers (predominantly underprivileged and with scarce access to basic rights of livelihood) compelled the performers to visualize the space of the circus as space where racial, cultural and sexual barriers were more lax than other spaces. The historical moment when circus arrived and consolidated itself within the subcontinent was a fragile one where established notions of power relations were being questioned and modernity was conferring novel subject positions to the otherwise confined and traditional native performer.

New social perceptions of what a performance constituted was being shaped within the public attitude in the context of the performer. Within a ritual space any performative act/self-expression in the pre-colonial era was sanctified by either a religious custom/tradition or vetoed by the local authority (either the priest or the landed elite) as legitimate. Within this ritual space there were enclaves of agency which women could inhabit and contest patriarchal systems of oppression¹⁶⁹.

When performers moved into the secular space of entertainment which was the theatre or the circus tricks which moved away from 'normal' abilities could only be considered either fantastical or something which defied the normative ideals of the society. The

¹⁶⁹ Certain Hindu religious ceremonies included customs which were primarily controlled by women or the ambiguously gendered, *Hijra* (a eunuch). For example the annual worship of the Vellamma cult in Karnataka, where the only people who could enter the sanctum sanctorum were either the eunuchs or men dressed as women. The esoteric *Krishna* worshipping cult of the *Vaishnavas* was a movement that considered women as equal partners in their journey and worship to god. The indigenous elite overwhelmed by Victorian notions of morality tended to construct these *Vaishnava* women, who performed religious song and dance as 'fallen', 'sexualized' women not fitting properly to idealized picture of the mothers of the emerging Indian nation and nationalism

colonized male was already ‘ordered’ and ‘normalized’ under Colonial cultural management, so when the women (who were doubly marginalized by the colonizer and the native patriarchal structures) performed, her ability was appropriated as stemming from the powerful male under which she was trained. Otherwise, she disturbed the colonizers’ idea of the oriental woman as either chattel or a creature born of the supernatural (thus being able to chastise jungle beasts and do ‘abnormal’ feats in the arena)

1.3 Mrinmoyee

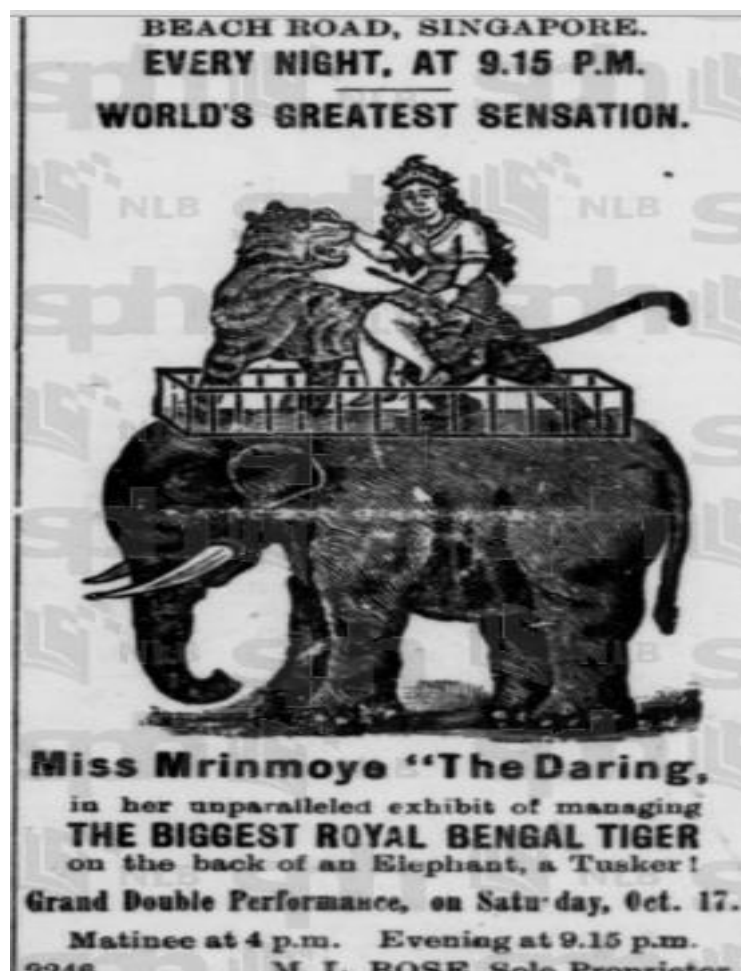


Figure 21

Circus poster in Singapore featuring Indian circus act with Mrinmoyee being the central feature, 1912

‘Mother as map of the nation also served to suggest a loyal political citizenry devoted in the service of the nation. The children of the nation attained greater existence, personhood

and identity via their location within sacred boundaries. These dutiful children were male Hindu sons of the nation, shown as constituting real Indians'.¹⁷⁰

The inner world (private sphere) of the colonized was the space where articulations about his self could be powerfully negotiated. The native in the public sphere lacked control over social decisions that guided his 'nation' or the idea of it. The indigenous male tried to control the inner sphere by exercising power over the women of the household. By enacting or pushing forward laws, which enabled him his religious freedom (the Age of Consent Bill or the Widow Remarriage act) he sought to control the body, mobility and the selfhood of his women¹⁷¹. The circus arena was a difficult area to engage in this particular context. On the one hand the female performers were praised for their powerful acts (symbolized as pure, powerful women furthering the cause of the Hindu community, these praises mirrored the rhetoric about pure, strong and domestic(ated) mothers giving birth to sons who would further strengthen the religious faith and the development of the race), on the other hand, these same women represented the dangers of uncontrollable female sexuality, discomfoting gender attributes and degradation of societal moral codes

Mrinmoyee, a performer from the Great Bengal Circus, was coded with a goddess image (which was quite literal, she was publicized in circus posters as the Mother Goddess riding the lion) and was the star performer of the show. She was publicized as the 'mother who is no longer in chains but the free 'Mother India' controlling beasts as her destiny and power has ordained her'¹⁷². Mrinmoyee's public image was quite opposite to the circus reality she lived. As a performer she was accommodated with the worst wagon and when her husband died she was forced to perform her dietary and social regulations as a Hindu widow, although on the circus front she remained the eternal powerful mother. Charu Gupta remarks, 'Female icons, particularly of the mother as a national symbol, have been shown to coexist uneasily within masculinist ideologies of the nation, so that women occupy an unstable position within the imagined community'¹⁷³. The imagined community (read the public sphere of nascent nationalism of the late nineteenth century) of the paying audience was served a glorious Mrinmoyee to maintain profit but at the

¹⁷⁰ Charu Gupta, *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims, and the Hindu Pubic in Colonial India* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), 202.

¹⁷¹ By marking women as community boundary markers because of their reproductive power and deifying them as 'protectors' of the race or the community, the native male claimed a sphere which remained largely outside the purview of the colonial state in terms of legality and morality.

¹⁷² Anon, *The Hindu Patriot*, 19th June, 1904, 5.

¹⁷³ Charu Gupta, *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims, and the Hindu Pubic in Colonial India*, 9.

same time her ability to follow the rules of a widow made sure that no scandal ensued from wavering of any kind. At this juncture it should be noted here that the Indian circus managers often imbued their performances or their public deeds with moral and ethical issues which were popular at that point of time. Their blatant violation of public morality and spaces were garbed behind these reformatory ventures. For example, Shyamakanto, a contemporary of Professor Basu and a future spiritualist, always made donations to charitable organization working on female welfare, wherever his circus took him to. His texts prescribe, 'he was convinced that if a woman is not healthy then her child could not be a proper *human being*'¹⁷⁴. It is a completely different story, one guesses, when the same Shyamakanto was involved in a major scandal with young boys working at his circus.

1.4 Rukmabai

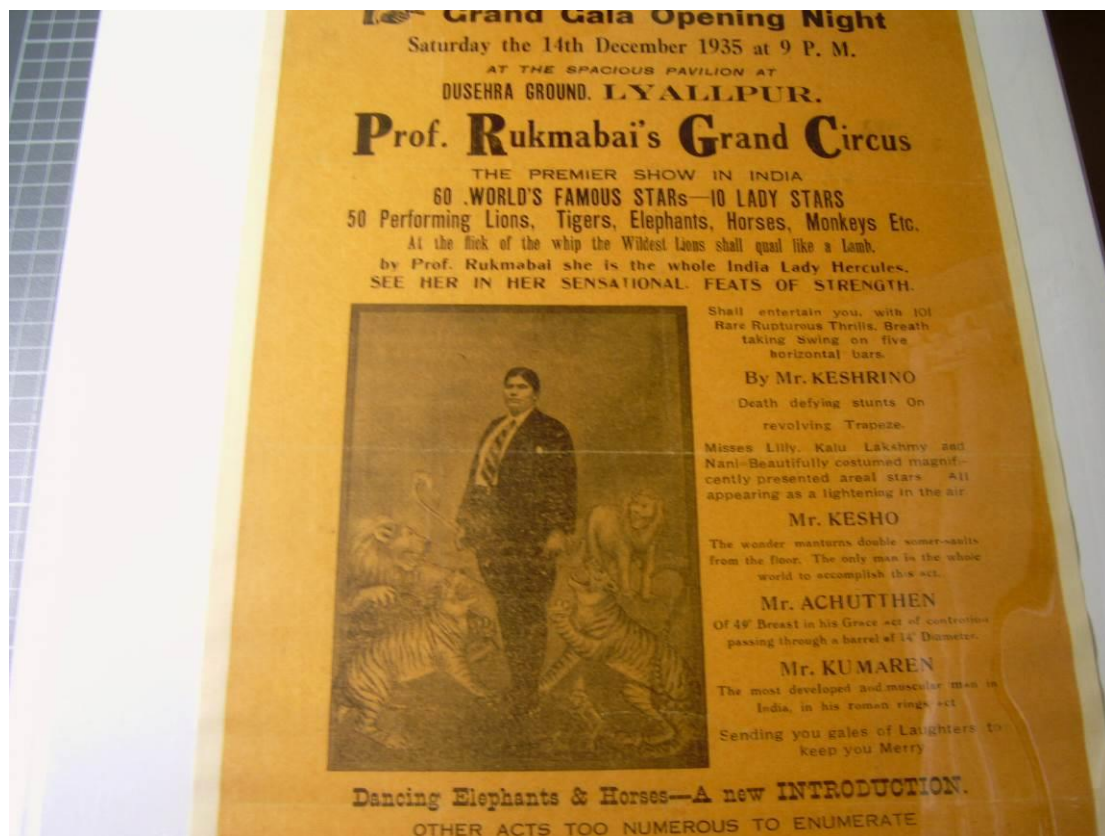


Figure 22

Poster of Rukmabai's Grand Circus, 1935

Working towards the second half of the 1930s, in parts of soon to be Pakistan, Rukmabai emerged as one of the greatest circus managers and animal trainers. Her circus troupe,

¹⁷⁴ Abanindrakrishna Basu, *Bangalir Sarkas*, 191.

Rukmabai's Grand Circus, was one of the few circuses that faced the onslaught of anti-colonial, nationalist movements, which were gathering momentum at that point of time. Rukmabai earned the circus title of a 'Professor', which for a long time was reserved for men. She managed to gather a group of profitable circus performers from all over India and successfully ran the company for at least four years. The construction of Rukmabai within public imagination was riddled with contradictions. In a pamphlet issued by a Hindu revivalist organization of Uttar Pradesh, titled 'Native women and their Regeneration'¹⁷⁵, in 1935, she is taunted (the person hinted in this pamphlet point towards none other than Rukmabai herself) as 'Not everyone can be the Queen of Jhansi'¹⁷⁶, wielding swords atop horses. Today's women need to show their fighting husbands by being devoted housewives protecting the hearth. She who tumbles and falls and plays with animals in theatre and all as such, they bring nothing but shame to the Hindu women and our great Bharat'. On a different note, the vernacular press leaning towards the moderate views of 'progressive' women of the modern nation, praises her as the 'Queen of Jhansi who also runs a tight ship'¹⁷⁷, regarding her business. Apart from these sources, Rukmabai's position is known from her poster, where she is publicized as the 'whole India (sic) lady Hercules'¹⁷⁸. Caught within the cultural and political change of the subcontinent, Rukmabai's gender identity was constructed from multiple locations. Like Mrinmoyee or Sushila or with the general instrumentalization of the woman's question, Rukmabai's image was constructed only through the prism of national construction. Her ventures in the circus, however, were quite profitable. Two stories emerge in this context.¹⁷⁹ During the early years of her career Rukmabai was engaged with the circus industry as a cleaner of the stables. Her physical strength was noticed by a provincial circus manager and she was asked whether she would like to work as a strong (wo)man or not. When she was introduced into the arena, her massive physical gait was visualized as that of a man and she managed to enthrall the audience with her feats of physical strength. The second story that deserves mention was that of a mistaken identity gone completely right. Lack of capital was preventing Rukmabai from operating her troupe in a proper fashion and some local moneylenders were refusing to grant her a loan because she was a woman. She approached a European named Wallace. When Wallace met her, he thought that Rukmabai had sent her secretary (whom he exclaimed, 'was quite the big fellow').

¹⁷⁵ Pamphlet from Chetna Arya Society, 1935, Uttar Pradesh, India, 2. The translation is mine.

¹⁷⁶ A queen of a North Indian princely state who fought against the British at the Battlefield.

¹⁷⁷ Pamphlet from Navjagaran Society for Hindu and Mohammedan Women, 1935, Uttar Pradesh, India. Translation mine.

¹⁷⁸ Sir Anthony Hippisley Coxe Circus Collection, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

¹⁷⁹ Satyadev narayan Sinha, *Sarkas ka Anokha Sansar*, 76.

Impressed by the secretary's knowledge of the circus industry so much he agreed to become a partner in Rukmabai's circus. Surprised he was when he met the owner and circus manager herself. The first story echoes the almost global circus phenomenon about discovery and challenge (like Suresh, Priyanath Basu, Sushila and many others), the second that of prevalent gender stereotypes. The inclusion of these stories is meant to bring into the light, again and again, the fluid nature of the circus space and industry, which made possibilities for margins to manipulate their way into centers and locations of power. By playing up to the stereotypes (and not always subverting them) individuals like Rukmabai made the circus space a, transgressional and ambiguous landscape.

1.5 Shantibala

Born into a brothel like Mrinmoyee, Sushila or the legendary theatre actress Basantakumari, Shantibala rose to prominence as a female magician in National Circus around the 1900s. Her most significant act consisted of a cage where she resembled a 'female savage', writhing in pain and anger to come out of her chains. Shantibala inside the cage was portrayed as a 'tribal witch from the shores of Andaman and Nicobar islands where cannibals feast on human flesh'¹⁸⁰. After she is exorcised by a Hindu priest with holy water and other things, Shantibala emerges from the cage as a transformed woman, now garbed in Royal regalia. She then invites audiences to come inside the ring and makes them vanish one after the other. After an eye dazzling flash, the audiences appear to have been imprisoned in the same cage, which housed Shantibala two hours back. This particular track becomes quite significant within the landscape of indigenous performers being displayed all over Europe. Within a colonized space this particular act seeks to focus the public's gaze and appreciation for the 'exotic' and the 'unknown'.

1.6 Chatre's wife: The first femme fatale of Indian Circus.

Beginning at the originary moments of Indian circus, this performer is rarely mentioned like her husband, 'the father of Indian Circus'. Performing complicated equestrian tricks, helping her husband with capital collection and general logistics of the circus, she was responsible in consolidating the first circus company in India. Her name, however, in most circus text written in India is misleading. Some name her Adya Bai and others simply do not mention her. Through fissures within the text she emerges in parts. In some texts, she was a bareback rider and in some a trapezist. This silence is reflective of the

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 99.

texts which recount the histories of circus in Colonial India and also of general times then. Women in all public spaces, events and narratives were either overshadowed or consumed by their men.

2. The X-(wo)men of Colonial Circus: Race and Gender

2.1 The 'not quite' whites

Ann Laura Stoler remarks, 'Colonial authority was constructed on two powerful, but false, premises. The first was the notion that Europeans in the colonies made up an easily identifiable and discrete social entity---a 'natural' community of common class interests, racial attributes, political affinities and superior culture. The second was the related notion that the boundaries separating colonizer from the colonized were thus self-evident and easily drawn'¹⁸¹.

The 'Eurasian Whore'¹⁸² and the Anglo-Indian constantly destabilized the boundaries of the colonizer and the colonized. And when the circus rode into town, this racial quandary was further complicated. The British Colonial State was divided in its opinion about Eurasian and the Anglo-Indian. The visible breaches of racial impurity, these two racial categories were often subjected to whimsical policies and moral codes. The circus emerged as one of the key occupational sites for the Eurasians where they could play their identity to their profit.

Around late 1929 in Calcutta, a conjurer from Grand Circus¹⁸³, rose to prominence in the circus arena. Her name was Nausheen Kamalabai Jones. This particular performer hailed

¹⁸¹ Ann Laura Stoler, 'Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in Twentieth-Century Colonial Cultures', in Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti and Ella Shohat ed., *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation and Postcolonial Perspectives* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 345.

¹⁸² Dolores Chew, 'The Search for Kathleen McNally and Other Chimerical Women: Colonial and Post-Colonial Gender Representations of Eurasians', in Brinda Bose and Anjana Sharma ed., *Translating Desire: The Politics of Gender and Culture in India*, (New Delhi: Katha, 2002), 23.

¹⁸³ A small time circus company that operated from North Calcutta owned by Ramdulal Mitra around the early twentieth century.

from the fringes of the white settlement in the city and was born of an alleged union¹⁸⁴ of a British soldier and a Muslim mother. She was famous for doing magic tricks of ill repute. Namely, one of her acts was to give private magic shows after the circus performance and many men complained that ‘while they were gazing at her deep blue eyes’¹⁸⁵ their wallets went missing. Another allegation associated with her was that she went on impersonating British women on circus stages and other variety shows. These impersonations were not very respectable where she mimicked the ‘prudish British wives, their nannies and their secret *kaala aadmi*¹⁸⁶ lovers’¹⁸⁷. Her actions did not go unnoticed by the British. A pamphlet in Bengali from some British residents of Calcutta stated, ‘this woman of scandalous misgivings should be punished and the public should be informed that her character does not reflect upon the lofty ideals of the British women of Calcutta, all of whom engage in manners with the utmost respect to the Empire, she is of impure breed and thus her behavior should be admonished’¹⁸⁸. Here was a figure that not only flouted racial boundaries but also caused much irritation among the colonial residents who strove to maintain a pure, visually racial community. The Anglo-Indian/Eurasian was always viewed with suspicions and irritation. In missionary schools they were closely followed and kept under strict discipline. Elizabeth Buettner explains that ‘Maintaining female sexual respectability by policing girls’ social interactions with boys was fundamental to preserving a European identity, particularly as mixed-race women were popularly perceived as morally disreputable by many Europeans’¹⁸⁹. These mixed race performers, especially the female ones, sought to form romantic relationships with native men and caused much uproar between both the societies. Many stories emerged towards the early 20th century where respectable Babus eloped with circus performers. One Bengali journal mourns how the ‘blue eyed but brown skinned devils made the educated Babus mad in their hearts and loins with desire’¹⁹⁰. These relationships, if one stretches the argument a bit further, exemplifies the fact that transnational connections created opportunities and enclaves for people in marginal spaces to form alliances that assured

¹⁸⁴ Alleged because there were many versions of who Nausheen’s parents were, but all speak about a ‘white’ European and a ‘brown’ native.

¹⁸⁵ Unknown, ‘Bongosomojer Kutsachoron’, in *Hashyomoy*, November 5, 1929, 41-43.

¹⁸⁶ A derogatory term for the Indian native used by the British, literal translation would mean a ‘black person.’

¹⁸⁷ Unknown, ‘Bongosomojer Kutsachoron’, in *Hashyomoy*, November 5, 1929, 51-52.

¹⁸⁸ Residents of Park Street, ‘Our race is in Peril’, in *Pamphlets from late Nineteenth and early twentieth century*, 1929, 79-82 [St. Xaviers College Archive, Kolkata].

¹⁸⁹ Elizabeth Buettner, ‘Problematic spaces, problematic races: Defining “Europeans” in late colonial India’, in *Women’s History Review*, 9:2 (2000), 290.

¹⁹⁰ Rakhaldas Ghosh, *Shohorer itikatha*, 38

them manifold satisfactions that a world with ossified borders could not. This is not to deny the oppressive regimes and violence that emerged from the same conditions of transnationalism but to emphasize transgressive acts that empowered these actors at a time of hopelessness.

There was another breed in between these two categories, the Asian performing with other races. Antonita was a Filipino acrobat employed with the Great Bengal Circus in Calcutta around the early years of the twentieth century. Her history is shrouded in mystery except for a few anecdotes, which make her an interesting subject. Antonita was bareback rider and a gymnast with the circus. She received little fame with these acts; however her other acts were more striking. After her daily routines were performed in the circus, Antonita was famous for portraying the ‘Great Chinese Sorcerer, Shen Shooi’ and the ‘incredible Japanese swordswoman, Nakota’. The circus utilized her ‘South-East Asian’ physical features to the hilt. Parading her as Chinese, Japanese and many other eastern nationalities, she sought to represent and stereotype the versions of ‘Chiney’ (Bengali derogatory term for a Chinese person). East Asian fantasies played out on a grand scale. Notwithstanding the racist implications because of its time, what the Bengali circus company did echoed the foreign circus companies in America and Europe. Through Antonita an immutable representation of Asia was created for the Bengali public, who were closer to the stereotypes their ‘masters’ propagated. The Chinese opium dens of Calcutta in the nineteenth century already provided the Calcuttans with a not so polished picture of China, plus Indian merchants had large investments in the supply chain of Opium from India to China. When the Circus visualized the ‘unchanging’ Chinese or the ‘Japanese’ the audience was more than happy to lap it up.¹⁹¹

Another performer who was similarly racially coded was the magician, ‘Maharajah the Mighty’ of National Circus in Calcutta around the late 1920s. Maharajah was a magician who was said to impersonate Houdini and was hailed as ‘Houdini back from the dead’. Maharajah’s act consisted of multiple escape tricks where his face would be painted white. His make up was so perfect and he resembled Houdini so closely that an Englishman exclaimed upon seeing Maharajah on stage as, ‘it seems that these magicians know no deaths, it is Houdini himself come to perform in Calcutta’¹⁹². Maharajah was quite popular among private audiences in Calcutta; big Indian businessmen invited him to play for their celebrations. For these businessmen hiring a magician who looked like an

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 67.

¹⁹² Ibid., 70.

European meant that their prestige increased among their communities where they could boast of having a ‘Sahib’ as a ‘normal jadukar (magician in Bengali/Hindi)’ at their house. Racial superiority among equals meant physical proximity to the White population of Park Street and through this magician they sought to make that happen. According to Rakhal Das there were hints of scandals also. Maharajah seemed to have to not only the merchants but also found inlets into their wives bedrooms.¹⁹³ Questions of fluid identity seem to have worked again within the context of the circus. Maharajah the Mighty in reality was a magician who had found his way out of poverty through the circus industry. Born of a community of magicians and indigenous doctors, who were becoming less and less successful in their works because of introduction of Western medical science, Maharajah utilized his inherited skill for the betterment of his future in a venture that was gradually reaching its zenith.

2.2 White performers and British respectability/responsibility: The ‘quite whites’

‘Sub- Restrictions on the grant of passports or certificates of identity to British circus troupes and travelling companies to visit Persia:

This restriction is of course a definite limitation of the liberty of movement of European theatre artistes. It has been necessitated that though the profits which these ladies can earn by the legitimate exercise of their profession in Persia, etc./ are considerable, **the comparative expensiveness of their European (and professional) was of living is apt to leave them destitute in entirely unfamiliar surroundings and climate, and thereby cause considerable embarrassment to the British representatives and expense to the Governments of the countries to which they belong. No such embarrassment has been experienced in the case of Anglo-Indian or Indian artistes,** and it would seem, without further material to go on, an infringement of their professional liberty to debar them from entering the countries in question, merely because their European sisters are apt to get stranded owing to their more expensive ways of living and lack of knowledge of eastern conditions¹⁹⁴. Indeed, the passing of such order might possibly give rise to strong protest, and it would be difficult to answer criticism in the Assembly and

¹⁹³ Ibid., 76.

¹⁹⁴ File no 123-n, 1928, Govt of India, Foreign and Political, ‘Near East’ Branch. National Archives of India, New Delhi. Emphasis mine.

elsewhere of what might be represented as an unnecessary infringement of the liberty of the individual'.¹⁹⁵

The Anglo-Indian circus performers with their mixed identity sought to do well in quarters outside European contexts and could mingle well with the audience. The stark 'white' female performers had to bear the brunt of their complexion. As Ann Laura Stoler states, the European women in the colonies operated within a dual structure. Firstly they were subservient in the colonial state's hierarchy and secondly, they were agents of the empire, perpetuating European standards of decency and respectability.

A memo dated 1927 was sent from the offices of His Majesty's Political Resident in the Persian Gulf and Consul- General for Fars, Khuzistan to the Foreign Secretary to the Government of India, Foreign and Political Department, Simla asking for a ban on issuing passports to 'white' British and Australian performers for a tour in the Middle East. The letter states the shameful acts the British performers committed while on tour there. Safety of the British woman in the foreign east was always a problematic topic for the British. The circus women (who were already morally lax because of their circus association) had to be protected from themselves and the Eastern men. More importantly, as the above quote suggests, the Anglo Indians and the Indians were the only people who could *understand* the East and live according to its codes, whereas the European performer was bound to get lost in the wilderness because of her lack of knowledge of the East (and the alleged sexual proclivities of Eastern savages). For the colonial empire the east was a geographical identity that was only legible to the people who were racially close to it. No amount of travel could make the East comprehensible to the European traveler. Like the early European travelers, the east around the mid 20th century was still an immutable landscape of debauchery that destabilized the patriarchal ideas of the British colonial regime. The fear of violation of British respectability and the loss of British prestige at the hands of its women is summed up in the letter as:

'British prestige suffers by scantily clad English women playing before Persians; while scandal has been caused by their being seen in the company of Persians whose reputation will not stand to close an inspection and indeed with women who are circus performers stranded for want of money what can be expected'¹⁹⁶.

¹⁹⁶ File no 123-n, 1928, Govt of India, Foreign and Political, 'Near East' Branch. National Archives of India, New Delhi.

Another scandal that was much publicized among the British press was related to the Viceroy of India, Lord Lytton. The story emerged when he allegedly conferred a medal (inscribed with the title, ‘empress of the arena’¹⁹⁷) to a trapeze artist from the Cooke’s circus company in Calcutta¹⁹⁸. A newspaper from Ireland reported this as a violation of the duties of an Englishman, the very representative of Her Majesty, to bestow a medal on a ‘buxom equestrienne’¹⁹⁹. The story centered around two points, firstly, that there was no medal as such and even if there was one, it neither bore the inscription nor was conferred by the Viceroy and secondly, the ‘shamelessness of the viceroy in dragging Her Majesty in front of the throng of Eurasians, Baboos and Englishmen and then claiming that he had no idea that such a medal existed.’²⁰⁰ The English, Anglo-Indian and the vernacular press waxed eloquent about fantastic and brilliant native circus performers. Circus managers advertised their performers’ achievements with written testimonials from high British officials. When the icon of respectability, the White/English woman when came under the circus limelight and was associated with the empire then the English press got seriously irked.

The circus performers (of all races) already had a societal role within the colonial states imagination that located them within an amoral fabric. The white performers (male and female) fell under two broad categories of supervision: firstly, they had to be morally contained to keep the racial image of the white European intact and secondly, they remained outside the infantilization by the British Empire of its colonized ‘citizens’. Late nineteenth century records of circus performers show that the colonial state, at one hand worried about its performing citizens from the colonies getting abandoned and on the other hand quite often turned a blind eye to the perils of the white performers²⁰¹. The India Office based in London received a letter from Mr. Brine, dated 22nd April, 1896²⁰². The letter explained the disappearance of his brother in India who was working at that point of time with an English circus touring India. The reply from the India office was a mere suggestion to Mr. Brine to check newspapers in India. On similar incidents but with natives being abandoned in Europe, the reactions from India Office and different other Consul Generals of Europe were vehement and garnered towards providing a safe passage back for the abandoned native in a foreign land. The Empire supervised on a body that could be termed as a fractured citizenry. The natives were infants and in need of

¹⁹⁷ Different records hint at Kumudini, a native circus performer.

¹⁹⁸ *Freeman's Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser* (Dublin, Ireland), Saturday, April 12, 1879, 21.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁰¹ For details regarding this phenomenon, see Chap 3 of this thesis.

²⁰² See India Office records, File num-J&P, , 656, 1896, British Library, London.

constant support from the Empire to save them from different ills; religious bigotry, racial inferiority and the perils of global travel. The white individual was left to his own devices (stemming from the ideological standpoint that the British men mastered their own destinies, guided by a sound political system) and was not the priority of the colonial state until that individual sought to challenge established notions of race, gender or legality.²⁰³

Fearless Nadia: The *Hunterwalli*



Figure 23

Cinema poster of *Hunterwalli*, featuring Mary Evans as Fearless Nadia, 1935

²⁰³ Maya Jasanoff points out the fact that, ‘The imperial ramifications of the liberal ideal were set out most clearly in a neo-roman vision of a British imperium that would embrace all subjects in a fold of “British” rights. This was the note so ringingly sounded in 1850 by Lord Palmerston, Britain’s Anglo-Irish, Scottish-educated, fluently multilingual, and outspokenly imperialist foreign secretary, when leaping to the defense of an abused British imperial subject, he proclaimed: “As the Roman, in days of old, held himself free from indignity, when he could say *Civis Romanus sum*; so also a British subject, in whatever land he may be, shall feel confident that the watchful eye and the strong arm of England will protect him against injustice and wrong”. Who was the British subject in question? Don David Pacifico, a Portuguese Jew, born in Gibraltar (and thus British) and living in Greece’’. See Maya Jasanoff, *Edge of Empire: Conquest and Collecting in the East 1750-1850*, (New York: Random House, 2006), 10-11.

‘Nadia leapt from windows, jumped off cliffs, swung from chandeliers, fought atop speeding trains, lived among wild lions and routinely lifted men and flung them like a wrestler. Above all, she acquired fame as a woman who cracked the whip. She did all this on her own, without any safety measures and health insurance. A messiah-like figure unfailingly coming to the rescue of the downtrodden and weak, Fearless Nadia was the female Robin Hood of her time’.²⁰⁴

The introduction and transformation of Mary Evans into Nadia is an amazing story. Born in Perth, Australia to a Scottish father and an Australian mother, Mary’s family shifted to Peshawar in the early 1920s. Looking for a suitable position for a job, Mary ended up being a performer with the Lady Astrova troupe that was performing in British Barracks all over India. She mastered several gymnastic acts during her time with the troupe and ended up joining the Zarko Circus Company, started by fellow colleagues from the Astrova Company. After she had left the circus, Mary was discovered by a famous Bollywood director, Homi Wadia, and was cast as a stuntwoman for his films. Her name change was apparently because she thought ‘Nadia’ sounded more exotic. Nadia’s introduction to Bollywood was extremely novel; as a heroine she defied two separate visualities. Firstly, her racial features were a ‘physical disconnect’ for the audience and secondly she emerged as the ‘fighting’ woman dominating the screen over men.²⁰⁵ Her first film, *Hunterwalli* (the woman with a whip) saw subsequent socialist themed movies where she championed the cause of the downtrodden against the evil forces of the society. One can make an argument that the fact that Nadia’s films were hits because of the long lasting maternal visualization of the ‘Just Queen’ of England, who was only unaware of the injustices perpetrated by her servants. More importantly, towards the end of 1930s, a lot of circus performers, who were also being featured in movies sought to authenticate stunt coordination based on their circus acumen and discipline. Her racial identity was not problematized by the British colonial state because by the time she was famous, she had already moved within the native imagination of a goddess heroine, her complexion notwithstanding.

‘On one hand she played an avenging Harijan in *Hurricane Hansa*, on the other she spread the message of communal harmony in *Lutaru Lalna*, whereas in *Punjab Mail*, she fought the class system’.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁴Shaikh Ayaz, ‘The Woman with a Whip’ in *The Open Magazine*, (November 24, 2012), Accessed on 18/11/2013. <<http://www.openthemagazine.com/article/cinema/the-woman-with-a-whip>>

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

Ruth Vernon Caldwell

Curiously enough, nobody doubted the authenticity of the race of this performer when she came to perform for Rukmabai's Circus in Karachi, Lahore and Rawalpindi (undivided India) in 1935. This performer was Ruth Vernon Caldwell, but the public came to know her as Shakti, the 'Demon destroyer' and Lion-Tamer²⁰⁷. Shakti, meaning power, performed the role of the Hindu Goddess of Power, Kali and Durga in the arena. Her main act was to ride a lion and chase a strongman from Ceylon (following the epic Ramayana, where evil demons resided in Srilanka) named Raavan (the ubiquitous villain in Ramayana). Shakti rose to prominence in context of this act and apparently elder members of the audience sought her blessings after the show. She spoke fluent Hindi, Urdu and Farsi and her native tongue, English. The circus manager casted her as Shakti because of her skills in animal taming and other acts but created an act for her which could only work (and not offend the fervent nationalism at that time) if she performed as a native. Shakti was not performing brown-face per se; her visuality was manipulated through saris and other jewellery. The penchant for Indian audiences in Aryan features of their gods and goddesses made Shakti work the crowd perfectly. She was so convincing in her role as the fierce Goddess of Power that her circus manager gave her an act whose symbolism destabilized the very nature of the British Empire. As curtains would go up, Shakti would be in chains and her lion would be writhing in pain, ambushed by a group of British soldiers. After a protracted struggle with the chains, Shakti would rise, (like the figurative Mother India) break her chains, revive her lion and ultimately kill the British soldiers. This act is of paramount importance, here was a British woman, acting as a Hindu Goddess and ultimately securing victory over her 'own' oppressive people. A solidarity of margins happened in this particular site, the joining of the colonized and the morally controlled.

2.3: Up in the air: The problematic aerialist

"Aerial action seemed to allow aerialists to 'rise above' social regulation, even with public campaigns about age, sexual propriety and safety. Female aerialists were publicly praised, even adored and called exemplars of womanhood as they demonstrated bodily control that defied all precepts of gender submissiveness. Even the addition of warlike symbolism to an act could be

²⁰⁷ Satyadev narayan Sinha, *Sarkas ka Anokha Sansar*, 26.

excused since it remained somewhat ambiguous²⁰⁸

How does one get m(tra)pped in midair? This is a heterotopic quandary. The aerialist was a difficult entity for mapping. Her place/space is juxtaposed. Around the circuits of colonial exhibitions, Hippodromes (especially the ones in Berlin, London and Tokyo) and circus events, Indian aerialists were part of a major attraction. Their death defying leaps encapsulated the audience and accorded them an image that was very popular, yet highly stereotypical. Steeped in Nineteenth century scientific beliefs about the ‘savagery’ and the ‘noble’ savagery of the colonized other, European public as well circus managers went on to create the non-white aerialist as ‘eastern gods’ and ‘African demons’ who were not rational individuals/mortals walking the same earth as them. In creating an ‘other’, what can be defined as the ultimate ‘untouchable’ other, the circus managers and the impresarios attempted to create a less low man who could only become a magical god in the air. Due to his/her untouchability quotient the performer could perform these tricks, which were outside the capabilities of a ‘normal’ human being.

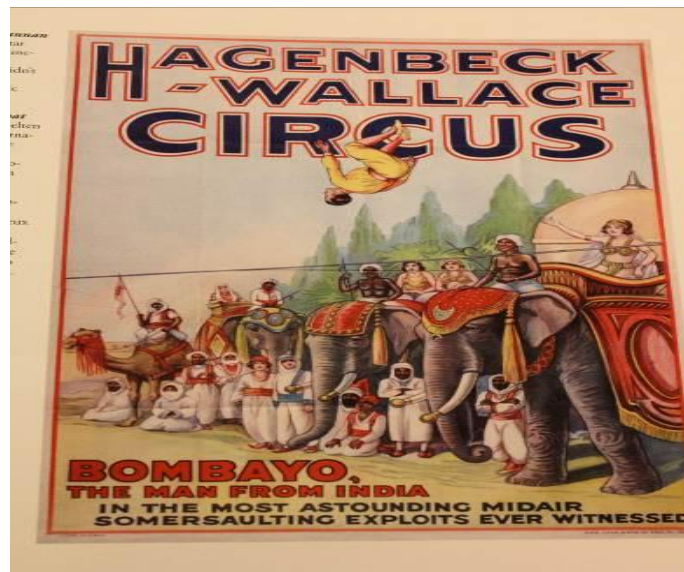


Figure 24

Circus poster from Hagenbeck-wallace Circus, featuring an Indian performer, Bombayo

²⁰⁸ Peta Tait, *Circus Bodies: Cultural identity in Aerial Performances* (Oxon, New York: Routledge, 2005), 40.



KANNAN BOMBAYO ON ROPE IN GERMINI

Figure 25

Photographic print of circus poster featuring Bomabayo, an Indian performer in Hagenbeck Circus, 1900,

Kannan Bombayo, one of the disciples of Kunhikannan, was visualized either as a graceful demi-god flying through the air or a devilish charmer who could not be comprehended because of the simple fact that his feet never touched the ground. Within the context of the Indian circuses, most of the aerialists were given the epithet of *Pakshiraj*, a figure resembling a flying horse. The performer was deified within a particular trope of visual identity that was neither natural nor unnatural but was imbued with a mytho-religious meaning. His body disappeared as soon as he appeared mid-air only never to become 'normal'. Kamala Sundari, a performer from Chatre's Grand Circus from Maharashtra was known as the 'Bird of Eden',²⁰⁹ hatched out of an egg (imagine Fevvers from Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*) she seemed to descend directly above the audiences' heads showering them with confetti. She was praised as the 'lakshmi',²¹⁰ of the arena and the bringer of joy. By according her these epithets the circus managers (as discussed before) were trying to claim agency on her behalf and also in reality were hiding the injustices faced by this performer. Kamala was thrown out of the circus at the age of forty-two because she had become too old to work the trapeze.

²⁰⁹ Abanindrakrishna Basu, *Bangalir Sarkas*, 211.

²¹⁰ The goddess of wealth in the Hindu pantheon.

3. Where the wild things were: Deconstructing the ‘abnormal’ and the ‘freak’



Figure 26

The Siamese twins, (the duo that set the trend of displaying) of parasitic bodies.

‘My boy, you seem to be interested in Indian lore. Do you know what they call the tents the Indians live in?’ “Oh, I know circus tents!”²¹¹

3.1 Authenticity of the ‘displayable body’

The circus or the exhibition ‘freak’ was no different from the ‘normal’ circus performer. Both possessed a visuality and identity, which was fluid and constantly contested. The allure of the abnormal or even the normal circus performer was ultimately that of an epistemological question mark. Marlene Tromp points out that,

²¹¹ Illustration, *The Day Book* from Chicago, November 17, 1914, Illinois, 8. <https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/77866175/>. Accessed 23rd December, 2016.

“Ambiguous bodies were not only commodified to produce a profit; they were a traffic in such ambiguous social meanings and controversy as well. Although promotional hype often proclaimed that the ‘original’, ‘authentic’, ‘biggest’, or ‘smallest’ was represented at the show, the goal of such advertising was not necessarily to persuade the public of the veracity of such claims to provoke *profitable* conjecture. Freak shows attracted audiences by inviting the public to engage in epistemological speculation. Was the Feejee Mermaid fake? Was the bearded lady really a man? Audiences paid for the opportunity to take a look and decide for themselves. Significantly, this interrogatory practice made freak shows volatile interpretive spaces that repeatedly called the boundary between the imaginary and the real into question, and by extension challenged the authority of discourses like medical science to name and explain the significance of the human body, as well as that of mainstream culture to determine all notions of normalcy” .

P T Barnum, the American circus mogul of 1840s, faced a lot of flak for his ‘discovery’ of the Feejee Mermaid. Reporters and members of the general public claimed that the mermaid was an ‘invention’. To refute this allegation, Barnum in his autobiography mentioned,

‘The ‘Feejee Mermaid’ was by many supposed to be a curiosity manufactured by myself, or made to my order. This is not the fact. I certainly had much to do in bringing it before the public, and as I am now in the confessional mood, I will ‘make a clean breast’ of the ways and means I adopted for that purpose’²¹².

²¹² P. T. Barnum, *Barnum’s own Story: the autobiography of P T Barnum* (New York: Dover, 1961), 234.

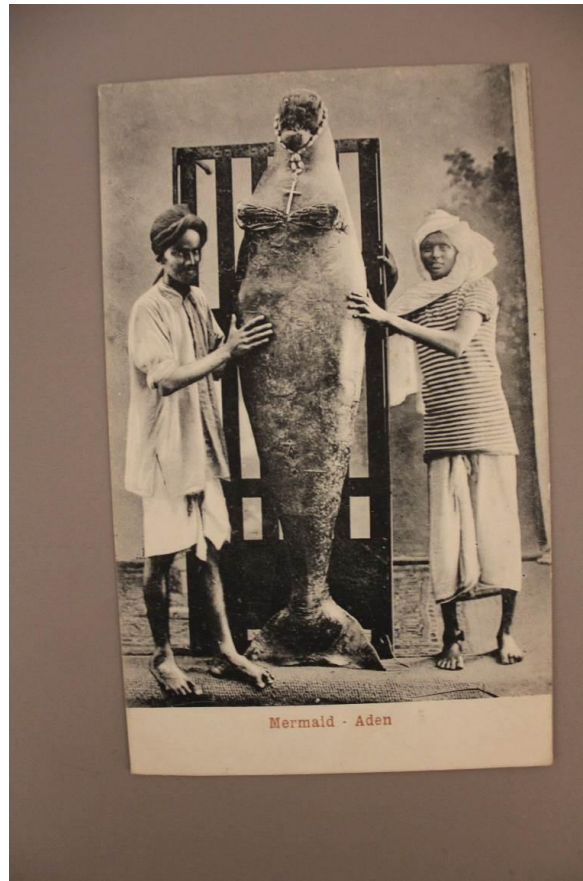


Figure 27

The Feejee Mermaid used by P T Barnum in his ethnographic displays.

Barnum then proceeded to explain how he procured the Feejee Mermaid. His description showed how transnational trade brought in exotic things from different parts of the world.

Authenticity emerged as a key question around the circus trade and its displayable possessions. Traders and sailors stationed in different parts of the globe had constant interactions among them and whenever they saw something that might fetch a value in the European or the American market of sideshows, they got hold of it. Circulating through different docks, animal traders and sailors, exotic things from varied parts of the world landed with circus entrepreneurs. The circus managers tended to publicize the ways in which these wondrous creatures were procured. This invested the end product (to be displayed) with a history of origins, thus making it more authentic as against things, which suddenly appeared in the circus or exhibition arena.

Post 1860s technological innovations and European powers securing colonies in different parts of Asia and Africa made sure that there was a steady supply of 'wonders' from different parts of the globe for the European public. Major animal trading firms like the Hagenbeck brought exotic animals and human beings from the farthest corners of the globe. The circus aesthetic

was gradually establishing scientific and rational claims on unknown objects, which in the past always met with allegations of artificiality. Janet. M. Davis remarks,

‘Concurrent technological developments like canals and railroads made exotic acts increasingly accessible throughout the world. As a result, turn-of-the-century showmen justly claimed that their programs were more authentic than ever before. One article, bluntly titled ‘Freak Hunting in India’, contended that foreign freaks were no longer ‘made’ but instead were ‘born’, because railroad lines and telegraph networks in colonized countries had given impresarios easy access to a real ‘Wild Man of Borneo’, whereas in the past, he would have been played---in the words of the press agent—by a ‘Virginia Darcy’ ’.²¹³

There was a global network of businessmen, who contributed to the expanding sideshow and circus ventures. As different European powers acquired territories in Asia and Africa, the indigenous ‘freak’ became more and more accessible. This report sums the forces at play in these procurements. The headline of the report was ‘Freak factories’. The report stated: ‘how do you manage to find new freaks and curiosities?’ was the question asked to the manager of a travelling show that pitched its tent in a London suburb. ‘Don’t have to find them’ was the laconic response. ‘they find us. the freak business is as regularly established as any other and has its whole sale and retail firms, traveling salesmen, brokers, price lists, factories’—‘factories?’²¹⁴ The reporter taken aback with this answer pressingly asks the manager about the details of this curious thing. The manager goes on to explain that the freak business is divided into three categories, foreign, domestic and fake. Collectors travel all over the world to find authentic and rare specimens. The best varieties, however, come from India and Malay Peninsula. There is a group of people in those countries who manufacture freaks by all kinds of ways. These people buy young children and animal and mutilate them while their bones are soft and brittle. In general cases collectors look for authentic, natural freaks. The headquarters of the freak business is in Singapore. Lastly, there remains hardly a day when some collector or the other does not receive a package containing illustrations or photographs of all kinds of freaks from some freak merchant or the other. The real, genuine freaks are always expensive to trade and they also personally travel all over the world for exhibiting themselves. Almost all of them work like theatre companies, with maps charted out by their advance agents. They also time

²¹³ Janet M Davis, *The Circus Age: Culture and Society under the American Big Top* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 195.

²¹⁴ London Mail, ‘Freak Factories: Showmen have no Trouble in Providing New Attractions’, *The Daily Hesperian* (Gainesville, Tex.), Vol. 18, No. 214, Ed. 1 Friday, August 14, 1896, 1.

their intervals in different places, so they never get stale and in some cases their popularity increases only with their second and third appearance on the stage.²¹⁵

This particular interview reflects two interesting themes, exploitation and in some cases agency. Like their 'normal' circus brethren, the freaks were also accorded some agency within the transnational world of circus displays. Their worth was measured substantially if not equally as that of an aerialist or a gymnast.

Named Hasmukh²¹⁶ after his birth with a cleft-lip and a large mouth, this circus clown became quite famous in the marginal towns of undivided Bengal around the 1900s. Performing in parts of Assam, he became popular as the sad clown who could elicit the most laughs from the audience. Hasmukh Gorbhain was born in a northern village of Assam, known as Patigram. His parents were ready to abandon him after his birth owing to his deformed face; however, a circus manager saw the potential of a future profit and 'bought' the baby from the couple. Hasmukh was raised in the Circus of Gopalan M Krishnan, a Southern Indian entrepreneur with a small troupe of performers. The troupe changed its name from town to town, but one of its common names was The Great Gopalan's Amazing European²¹⁷ Circus. Hasmukh's first show was in Guwahati, a sprawling town in Assam (now its capital) and the local gazette described him as 'Gopalan has yet again shown promise in his displays. Loving readers, you can come to Gopalan's show to see the tricks of human tragedy and laugh at it and ell (sic) because of Hasmukh, the sad clown. Parading his miserable life story on a bicycle while shooting tears at the audience, this sad yet mad performer bares all. Ladies, fear not, his tears are more than your daily kitchen mishaps. Hasmukh will set your happiness ablaze and make you laugh so hard that that your grandfather's teeth would fall out'.²¹⁸ Hasmukh along with the Gopalan circus went on to perform in several areas of Indo-China. As discussed in the second chapter in detail about the medicalization of the performer, Hasmukh's face was also a topic of conversation among the medical society. Travelling in Burma, Gopalan received a request from the Medical community there wishing to examine Hasmukh. Dr. William Archibald Jones, presumably a doctor, writes this letter to the manager of the Circus saying, 'we at the institute would like to examine Mr. Hasmukh regarding his unique facial deformity if you would give us the permission'²¹⁹. Gopalan, however, did not grant the permission, because 'he did not want Hasmukh's beautiful face marred by scientific needles'²²⁰. The story that emerges is here is that of the constant

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Hasmukh in Hindi means a smiling face.

²¹⁷ European was only an epithet it seems because the performer who came closest to an European was an Indian Armenian born in Calcutta.

²¹⁸ Abanindrakrishna Basu, *Bangalir Sarkas*, 206.

²¹⁹ Gopalan M Krishnan, *Sarkas* (Trivandrum : Model Publishing, 1912:), 46.

²²⁰ Ibid., 57.

collusion between the circus industry and the medical society, which sought to share the ownership of the body of the circus performer. Gopalan did not want Hasmukh's face to become normal because that might have hampered with the profit his acts generated. Again and again, the running theme, which binds these circus performers' stories, is that their fluid identity and visuality although 'abnormal' to work within everyday work situations, were perfect for circus. This however constructed their self only through the prism of the circus and they could not go beyond it most of the times.

Nadja Durbach remarks, 'While freaks were performing a role, they were also interacting with audience members as individuals. Exhibitions were often called 'levees', suggesting that freaks were receiving guests rather than merely showing their bodies to strangers. In fact, few freaks mutely and passively displayed their abnormalities on a stage removed from the spectators. Instead they conversed with their audience, often in more than one European language. Moved among them, and invited visitors to touch them, shake their hands, and even to kiss them. They usually performed songs, dances, or tricks to amuse the public, and at times encouraged audience participation in their acts'.²²¹

3.2 A first.

One of the first instances of a 'freak/abnormal' exhibition idea in colonial India originates from a village in Bengal around the mid 18th century. This display was not within a religious festival and could be considered as one of the first secular displays. Jan Bondeson speaks of the two-headed boy in Bengal.

"The Two-headed Boy was born in May 1783 in the village Mundul Gait in Bengal; his parents were poor farming people. Immediately after the child had been delivered, the midwife, who was greatly terrified by its strange appearance, tried to destroy the two-headed infant by throwing it into the fire; the boy was saved from the flames with burns to one eye and one ear on the upper head. The parents soon realized the possibility of earning money by exhibiting

²²¹ Nadja Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity: Freak Shows and Modern Britain* (Berkeley, Los Angelesm London: University of California Press, 2010), 9.

their child in Calcutta, where he attracted much attention. So large were the crowds which gathered to see the Two-Headed Boy that his parents had to cover him up between shows”²²².

It should be noted that from the very outset, the ‘abnormal’ body in the colony was at the disposal of European medical investigations. The case of the two-headed boy is interesting in this respect. After the parents refused two Swedish doctors to examine the corpse of the boy, the doctors exhumed the body secretly and managed to send a detailed report to medical institutions in Europe.

3.2.1 Subcontinent freak show: Indian and global probes.

In the subcontinent, the displaying of ‘abnormal’ and ‘freaks’ had a different history. Within ritual performances, ‘abnormal’ bodies often had a legitimate space within the society²²³ where they were displayed for profit (garbed as donations to be forwarded for a religious offering). Cows with two heads, elephants without a trunk, human babies with a distinctive mark on their foreheads (which resembled the third eye possessed by Shiva) and other animals with abnormal features were a regular feature both in fairgrounds and daily lives. With the coming of the circus in colonial India two major things happened First of all, these ‘abnormal’ beings were substantially moved away from the ritual space and secondly, they became objects of investigations for European scientists and hunters. Moving away from religious legitimacy the ‘freaks’ were considered beings that were outside the ‘natural’ and religious order of things. The second thing which happened was that these abnormal bodies became medical specimens to be investigated under the light of European and American scientific community. The emergence of colonial knowledge production and the circus space made sure that ‘freaks’ found a space which was secular and scientific. Fairgrounds and nomadic Hindus still displayed ‘abnormal’ bodies but the circus site emerged as a space where the ‘freak’ could be consumed without the moral and religious burden associated with it. Science made sure that the wonders displayed in the circus and the exhibition were no longer beings with supernatural births or ordained by a destiny guided by religious curses. The cases, which could be cited at this particular juncture, were that of Gholam Mustafa of Kamala Circus in North India and Patwari Ram of National Circus in Calcutta²²⁴. Gholam was both a strongman whose interesting feature

²²² Jan Bondeson, *The Two-Headed Boy, and Other Medical Marvels* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 2004), 2.

²²³ This stemmed from different aspects of the Hindu pantheon of gods and goddesses who were said to bestow boon or curse on a new born child if a particular worship went haywire.

²²⁴ Romendrakumar Sen, ‘Chhotoder Sarkas’, in *Sishu Jagat*, Vol 5, 1907, 12-17.

was that he had ‘four arms’ and Patwari’s specialty was that he was claimed to be the tallest man in India possessing a power that made him levitate. These two individuals could be hailed as ideal cases that stood at intersections of Colonial knowledge production, Hindu religiosity and the changing notions of ‘normalcy’ within the Indian context. Travelling through India extensively these two performers thrilled huge audiences with their special features and powers. Gholam sought to lift two men using his four arms and Patwari prophesized about the future while levitating. Their days of fame were, however, short lived when they were ‘found’ out by the ‘Anti-superstition leagues’ of regions where they were performing in 1906. Their actions were publicized as derived from a powers bestowed by different Hindu gods and goddesses (which for Gholam’s case was doubly puzzling because he was a Muslim). The *Shishu Jagat*, a children’s periodical describes Gholam as ‘as the god incarnate Vishnu roaming the earth to scare away all evils’ and Patwari as Krishna delivering lessons on how to live life according to the good book *Gita*²²⁵, for children could not become good men in future if they did not eat healthy and obey their parents, teachers and the nation’. Their visuality challenged the notions of scientific realizations that were being popularized among the indigenous natives around that time and we see the Magistrate and the District superintendent saying after they were caught as ‘fakes’ by the Anti-superstitious leagues. Gholam was caught using prosthetic limbs attached to his back and Patwari although he was really tall sought to only answer questions from people who were employed by the circus company to pose as audience members.

Named Hasmukh²²⁶ after his birth with a cleft-lip and a large mouth, this circus clown became quite famous in the marginal towns of undivided Bengal around the 1900s. Performing in parts of Assam, he became popular as the sad clown who could elicit the most laughs from the audience. Hasmukh Gorbohain was born in a northern village of Assam known as Patigram. His parents were ready to abandon him after his birth owing to his deformed face; however, a circus manager saw the potential of a future profit and ‘bought’ the baby from the couple. Hasmukh was raised in the Circus of Gopalan M Krishnan, a Southern Indian entrepreneur with a small troupe of performers. The troupe changed its name from town to town, but one of its common names was The Great Gopalan’s Amazing European²²⁷ Circus. Hasmukh’s first show was in Guwahati, a sprawling town in Assam (now its capital) and the local gazette described him as ‘Gopalan has yet again shown promise in his displays. Loving readers, you can come to Gopalan’s show to seen the tricks of human tragedy and laugh at it and ell (sic) because of

²²⁵ Gita is a Hindu religious set with moral and ethical guidelines.

²²⁶ Hasmukh in Hindi means a smiling face.

²²⁷ European was only an epithet it seems because the performer who came closest to a European was an Indian Armenian born in Calcutta.

Hasmukh, the sad clown. Parading his miserable life story on a bicycle while shooting tears at the audience, this sad yet mad performer bares all. Ladies, fear not, his tears are more than your daily kitchen mishaps. Hasmukh will set your happiness ablaze and make you laugh so hard that that your grandfather's teeth would fall out'.²²⁸ Hasmukh along with the Gopalan circus went on to perform in several areas of Indo-China. As discussed in the second chapter in detail about the medicalization of the performer, Hasmukh's face was also a topic of conversation among the medical society. Travelling in Burma, Gopalan received a request from the Medical community there wishing to examine Hashmukh. Dr. William Archibald Jones, presumably a doctor, writes this letter to the manager of the Circus saying, 'we at the institute would like to examine Mr. Husmookh regarding his unique facial deformity of you would give us the permission'²²⁹. The permission however was not granted by Gopalan because 'he did not want Hasmukh's beautiful face marred by scientific needles'²³⁰. The story that emerges is here is that of the constant collusion between the circus industry and the medical society, which sought to share the ownership of the body of the circus performer. Gopalan did not want Hasmukh's face to become normal because that might have hampered with the profit his acts generated. Again and again the running theme, which binds these circus performers' stories, is that their fluid identity and visuality although 'abnormal' to work within everyday work situations, were perfect for circus. This however constructed their self only through the prism of the circus and they could not go beyond it most of the times.

As the circus brought in one after the other 'freak' to be displayed, the European medical community jumped at these new arrivals. The circus 'freak' was a body that was used as a specimen under the medical eye. The indigenous body at the circus was a body, which could be used at will if it belonged to the circus. The circus freed the deformed body from its religious shackles and prepped it to enter the medical arena. The same community and the English press however, only considered 'natural born' abnormalities as testing grounds but wrote vehemently against certain practices of 'invented', 'unnatural' and 'forcefully made!' freaks

The Singapore Press reported this from India:

'The current number of the Indian Antiquary contains a pitiful story about of the chuhas, or rat children, which are an institution in the Punjab. They are microcephalus beings, devoid of all

²²⁸Gopalan M Krishnan, *Sarkas*, 86.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 87.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 89.

power of speech, idiots and unable to protect themselves from danger, of filthy habits, and entirely without sexual habits. The popular idea is that, these repulsive, unfortunate beings have been blessed by the Saint, Shah Daula, of Gujarat in the Punjab, and no contempt must be shown towards them, or the saint will make a similar being of the next child born to the offender...After Shah Daula's death the miracle continued in connection with his shrine, and the Shah Daula sect of fakirs now wander about the country exhibiting these poor freaks of nature, and, by working upon the people's superstitions and fears in regard to them, attain considerable success in their avocation of begging'.²³¹

The British press often reported about these 'unfortunate' incidents. The same reports doubted the authenticity of these 'repulsive' creatures, it resembled the doubtfulness of 'natural freaks' who were somewhat both acceptable as well as marvelous scientific examples but remained outside the purview of 'normalcy' as against beings who were 'made' artificially. The report goes on to mention, that the most horrible part of the story is that and from where a distinct ground for suspicion and doubt arises is that to ensure a continuous supply for these wretched creatures, these degenerates who manufacture freaks prey upon normal children after birth. The article ends by providing the august solutions of education for this barbaric cruelty emanating from extreme ignorance and superstition.²³² The rhetoric of the civilizing mission is very apparent here, only glossing over the fact that colonial knowledge production needed these freaks and different bodies that circus companies and exhibition managers were providing since the early nineteenth century.

The 'freak' bodies of the colonized other were gradually being interpreted through a medical language from the early 1850s, which moved away from earlier adjectives of supernatural, magical and spiritual. The native body was accessible to the public and the scientific community of Europe and North America for inspection and early years of 'curiosity' creatures were transformed and comprehended through a medicalised lens of inspection. A North American newspaper reports in 1891 about Laloo, an Indian circus 'freak' with an interesting headline "An Indian 'what is it'"²³³.

²³¹ 'Rat Children in the Punjab', *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* (1884-1942), Singapore, 10 July 1909, 9.

²³² *Ibid.* 10-11.

²³³ 'An Indian: What is it?', in *Evening Star*, Calcutta, Sep 8, 1891, 21.

Here one can make an argument about the colonized other as a commodity traveling all over the world as an object to be investigated by European rationalism and scientific innovation. The report is important in its description of the whole process. For example,

“The Metropolitan Hotel in New York was converted into a temporary museum yesterday for the purpose of exhibiting the extraordinary human freak from India. The audience was composed exclusively of physicians and newspaper men. The exhibition yesterday took place in a private parlor. Two men who were introduced as physicians, but who were strangers to the other medical men present, brought in ‘Laloo, the double-bodies boy’. ‘Laloo’ is a full-blooded hindu, and as brown as a berry. If he was a regular every-day sort of boy he would attract attention in a crowd, for he has singularly handsome face, a mass of shiny black curls, the cutest of mustaches and sparkling eyes. Viewed from behind he is as straight as an arrow. But when you pass around and get a front view of Laloo you wish you hadn’t, for Laloo is more than one boy. He is a boy and a half in the language of the scientific medical men he is an extraordinary example of parasitic growth growing out of Laloo’s well developed chest is another boy, which hangs down in front of him until its feet nearly touch the floor. The other boy has no head, but has two arms, part of a body, and from the waist down is in every respect like a fully developed boy.”²³⁴

Laloo was no different from that of the circus performer or the indigenous body which was at the west’s disposal for investigation. Within a sanitized and scientific space, the violation of the indigenous body could be legitimized within a medical language. The language gave it a sacred seal of rationality using which the doctors in New York, the circus managers in Europe and the Anthropologists in Bengal and Africa could maintain a tangible business network strongly grounded with the bedrock of ‘progress’.

²³⁴ Ibid., 25.

4. Characters marked for death: Love, longing and exile in Circus life



Figure 28

Postcard from the Hagenbeck archive used for promotional purposes. The postcard reads, 'Prinzess Nouma Hawa, (das lebende Tautropfchen), 17 Jahre alt, 62 cm gross.'



Figure 29

Postcard featuring a circus artist from the Hagenbeck archive used for promotional purposes. The postcard reads, 'Harold Pyott, 22 in height, 24 pounds in weight, 27 years old (illegible print)'.

Rana Kabbani in her monograph *Imperial Fictions* articulates the complex idea of love within the Oriental landscape as experienced by the European traveler. She follows the travels of Richard Burton, the orientalist in the east. Citing Burton, who says ‘ while thousands of European have cohabited for years with and have had families by native women, they are never loved by them—at least I have never heard of a single case’, Kabbani problematizes, ‘Burton attributed this lack of romantic attachment on the part of the native woman to the European’s clumsy sexual techniques. The westerner could not meet the demands imposed upon him by the native woman’s body (as Burton had calculated, with less than twenty minutes), and could therefore never win her affections. Perhaps it never occurred to Burton, at ease within the patriarchal values of the colonial enterprise, that the native woman might not have felt attachment for the European for different—and more complex—reasons than those he chose as an explanation. The European, after all, had occupied her land, oppressed her people, and imposed his personal will upon her. Her emotional detachment was her only defense—feeble as it was—against total victimization. He had the power to enslave her, but he could not make her love him’.²³⁵ Her take on these early orientalists is an interesting read and reflects a substantial idea of how interpersonal and sexual relationships were constructed within the colonizer and the colonized. The above conjecture is important when dealing with circus romantic affairs but it needs to be complicated. The coming together of different cultures within the circus tent introduced several individuals to each other who in normal circumstances would not have met. Their power relationship, however, was not always based on the ideas of the colonized/colonizer or the white/brown binary. These relationships happened along lines of performance identity, which overlapped constantly. Within the circus tent, hierarchy was based on performance capabilities, stardom and position among the ranks of performers and specific acts. For example, the love story between a clown and a ringmaster was a complete taboo. The instance of Shambharam Khotwale of Karlekar circus, who eloped with the clown Maharani in 1923, is a telling one (it gets more complex because female clowns were a rarity in the circus during the early and mid 20th century). This ill-fated couple was never allowed in a circus again and Shambharam’s career as a serious ringmaster, braving carnivores was forever tarnished because of his taboo relationship. A performer whose scandal ensured her publicity within the city audience of Calcutta was Emily Clarke Swindon. She was a low rung performer in National Circus in Calcutta, performing sporadically in the circus. She came under public limelight when she eloped with ‘supposed’ Maharajah of Gwalior in 1897. The story which ran among Circus circles, was that the circus was invited for a private performance at the Court of Gwalior where the Maharajah fell in love with her blue eyes and decided to elope. This scandal was soon

²³⁵ Rana Kabbani, *Imperial Fictions: Europe’s Myths of Orient* (London: Pandora Press, 2008), 48.

brought to truth when it was revealed that the Maharajah was no one but the Bengali, Nabakumar, who played the part of kings in different circus acts. She was chided by her mother in a letter which was ‘discovered’ in mail as, ‘Darling, why go do such no good things, you great woman of great race’.²³⁶ If one looks at the language of the letter, it is clear that this was part of circus publicity constructed to get as much profit when Emily performs in the ring. Even when the scandal was revealed people came in droves to see this performer, astounded about her elopement with an Indian Maharajah. The exotic love affair between two distinct races was a hot topic which the public seldom ignored. It was also reflective of the accessibility of the indigenous male, how far the native was permissible to come in proximity with a British woman. This trope was however quickly explained by the fact that ‘these things happen with circus women always’.²³⁷

A recurrent motif within numerous European and Indian circus stories was the tragedy of unrequited love among the performers. The circus, being quintessentially a transnational phenomenon, procured performers from all nationalities and races and these people forged professional relationships in the circus that surpassed rigid identities. These alliances however continued to be fatal when they bordered on the personal. Circus historians and more importantly circus managers, writing about the circus, constantly talked about unrequited love among different performers. It seems that the idea of love often faltered when racial boundaries were crossed. These tales also show the publicity acumen of circus publicists, who exoticized relationships among the circus performers to make their life more interesting and different from the normal public, who devoured these stories of love, longing and exile and developed a penchant to see the wronged performer or the estranged couple when they performed wonderfully during the shows. These tales served as contexts through which performers’ histories were further controlled and profited by the managers.

What can be said about these alliances that were so successful in the arena but faltered outside of it? Nineteenth century ideals of conjugality, friendship and racial boundaries could not work when the circus was in action. The variety and the exotic nature of difference was the main reason circuses prospered. A circus without at least ten different nationalities was considered an uninteresting thing²³⁸. While ambiguous identities were empowering for the performer (when in their colonies, communities and caste groups rigid social lines gave little or no mobility) the realities about racial and cultural differences ultimately prevailed outside the arena. Suresh

²³⁶ Abanindrakrishna Basu, *Circus e bhuter upodrob*, 96. Trans. Mine.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 98. Trans. Mine.

²³⁸ Abanindrakrishna Basu, *Bangalir Sarkas*, 14.

Biswas in one of his letters recounts about his relationship with a German trapeze artist who ultimately chose her parents rather than eloping with him²³⁹. He says, ‘It might have been my dream but when I was fighting the beasts on the ground I could see upthere(sic) my beautiful love swinging from one end of the circus to the other. It was the saddest day of my life when she chose to return to her motherland and left me here to spend my days like a nobody again’²⁴⁰. Circus managers profited hugely from these love affairs (visualizing couples from different races), through postcards, posters and tales. A series of postcards printed by the Hagenbeck firm and the Wilson Circus that shows couples who were visually different from each other. ‘Dwarf’ men with extremely tall women, African Nubians with ‘chalk white’ Nordic traders²⁴¹. Professor Basu’s memoir speaks about the ill-fated love stories of his performers (humans and animals!) who were racially different. Writing about Karlekar Grand Circus of the 1920s, Satyadev narayan Sinha mentions the Italian performer Lucille Giamatti who fell in love with the animal trainer and when they realized they could not be together they committed suicide together²⁴². The authenticity of this story is a bit vague apart from the owners of Karlekar Grand Circus publicizing this as the ‘Greatest lovers who were doomed to die’²⁴³ vigorously around the 1920s. Another twist in these tales was that this unrequited love stoking the skilled performer to become better in his skill and making him more of a ‘saint’ who has renounced everything apart from the austerity of his training.

²³⁹ H Dutt, *Lieutenant Suresh Biswas*, 201.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 205.

²⁴¹ Post card and letter collection, Hagenbeck Archiv, Hagenbeck Tierpark, Stellingen, Hamburg.

²⁴² Satyadev narayan Sinha, *Sarkas ka Anokha Sansar*, 173.

²⁴³ Interview with Shantaram Karlekar, Mumbai, 18th July, 2013.

Chapter Three

A. Escape from Europe: Abandonment, trafficking and mobility in Colonial circus networks.

B. The Animal Kingdom and its Masters.

The last chapter of this dissertation deals with two distinct themes, questions of travel in terms of indigenous performers from the colonies and animals and their representations in the circus. The emergence of animals in the circus tent happened around three sources, firstly, there was the exotic creature found by sailors/merchants and then donated or sold to the circus, animals exchanged or bought from zoos and lastly, hunting parties sent to gather specimens of known and unknown animals from different parts of the world. The first section will seek to analyze the logistics of travel and the problems associated with it.

A. Escape from Europe: Abandonment, trafficking and mobility in Colonial circus networks



Figure 30

Indian dancers in Hagenbeck's display. Image courtesy: Hagenbeck Archive, Hagenbeck Tierpark, Hamburg

Our emphasis throughout is on travel as a *voluntary* activity—however constrained by the parameters of a particular journey and the contexts in which it is undertaken. This definition necessarily excludes those movements of individuals or groups that might be better understood as enforced displacements, for, as Bell Hooks reminds us, “travel is not a word that can be

easily evoked to talk about the middle passage (or) the Trail of Tears” or, for that matter the forced relocations of indigenous peoples....²⁴⁴

Travelling in nineteenth century was a perilous affair for the uninitiated. While, legally, a British Indian subject could easily move within the length and breadth of the British Empire, his/her travels were curtailed by racism and discrimination. Without going into the forced migrations and travelling patterns of migrant laborers from India²⁴⁵ in the nineteenth century (or the expeditions of native intelligentsia and financial elite), the travel we are defining here was by and large voluntary. This does not mean that the traveler in question here had full agency in his/her travel. We are specifically talking about performers’ travels that began as voluntary but ultimately got mired down with problems that made him/her situation hopeless in a different land. The mobility of these performers was contained within business networks of impresarios and managing agents who sought to control the movement of their employees. Travel that started on a voluntary note frequently ended with the performer being stranded in distant shores of America or Europe. Indian performers, especially magicians had been travelling to Europe for entertainment purposes since the late seventeenth century. Their journeys however largely fell under the collection paranoia that gripped different European residents in different parts of India. Along with objects of great value they would bring these entertainers to England to be shown off as ‘eastern wonders’ at dinner parties. The western interest in Eastern occult practices also brought these magicians and spiritualists to Europe.²⁴⁶ In this section we are concentrating on performers who travelled to Europe towards the late nineteenth century to early twentieth century.

European travelers also found themselves abandoned, duped and left to their own devices in different parts of Asia and Africa. The British Empire, while it paid keen attention to the abandoned Indian performers and made amends to bring them back home, was quite uninterested with subjects who were racially close to it. Before embarking on an analysis of this particular dichotomy within the Empire, this section of this chapter will recount these stories of abandonment and try to locate them under the changing political scenario of the British Empire in India.

²⁴⁴ Helen Gilbert & Anna Johnson eds, *In Transit: Travel, Text, Empire* (New York: Peter Lang) 2002, 6.

²⁴⁵ Their travels also inhabited a grey zone of (in)voluntary travel.

²⁴⁶ The first Orientalist Congress happened in 1823 in Berlin, where there was much uproar about intellectual divisions between occultists, spiritualists and plain magicians from India, South East Asia and Japan.

A.1 The networks and details

How did the circus work in terms of trading performers? Who were responsible for arranging Indian performers to be showcased outside India? Details regarding transactions among performers are scarce. However, from some sources, the picture which emerges indicates that a local performer of some repute after garnering some profit from his displays or troupe would arrange for a manager who was preferably European/American. The native performer after collecting a number of performers would entrust them to this manager, who also acted as an impresario for European/American stages. The travelling performers would have a direct contract with the manager and rarely with the native who had arranged this meeting.²⁴⁷ The local performer along with his manager would travel with his performers occasionally for trips to America and Europe. Sometimes, as we would see in the case of Ramamurti, the strongman, the manager was only a front for a venture of travelling performers. The manager had a contract with the performers in terms of food, wages and accommodation. A 1911 document²⁴⁸ details the contract and wages of the performers:

An agreement dated the 28th of February whereby R B Benjamin resident of Lahore agrees to engage the services of the persons and their dependants mentioned in this agreement and that the said persons and their dependants agree to serve the above (hereafter called the employer) in the following terms:

- I- That the period of service shall begin from the date the persons and their dependants engaged i.e this day.....and terminate as stated on the reverse.
- II- That the services shall consist of wrestling matches and Exhibitions.
- III- That the remuneration to be paid for the said services shall be as stated on the reverse.
- IV- That the employer shall provide for the persons and their dependants engaged with suitable passage by railway, steamer or otherwise to and from Bombay and the places visited in Europe and America and shall further provide such persons with efficient maintenance during the journey.
- V- That the employer shall provide free board and lodging suitable to the persons and their dependants engaged together with free medical attendance during the period of service
- VI- That the persons and their dependants engaged herein agree to bind himself or herself to serve the employer diligently and faithfully in return of the remuneration as aforesaid, during the period of service.
- VII- Under any circumstances the persons and their dependants engaged must be sent back to Bombay by the Employer

Sd by- Robert B Benjamin (Manager)

Witness

²⁴⁷ The native performer would use his caste and religious solidarities along with circus connections to collect the motley group of performers from different parts of India.

²⁴⁸ Judicial and public department, File no J&P 4841 1911, India Office Records (IOR), British Library, London.

Inspector P.S
28/2/11

Before me
(sd) C. R . Watkins
28-2-11, Protector of Emigrants

The undersigned were the wrestlers with their wages stated²⁴⁹

Much of these performers' experience in Europe is unknown. What comes to light is that how stereotypes of different cultures enabled managers and impresarios to articulate the living conditions of these performers. The gradation operated on a level of knowledge gathered from hunters, Orientalists and travelers who had been to different exotic parts of the world. So for example the more known a race was the more comfortable, home like dwellings were made available to the performers by the managers. To explain it a bit further, the managers sought to equal their knowledge of human performers with that of the nature of the animal that came from the same geographical destination. The Indians were settled in sedentary, hotel-like structures, while Native Americans were placed in makeshift 'wild', 'jungle'-like structures on the roof.²⁵⁰ The Indian performer was known to be subservient because of his subjugation under the British yoke (and was gradually being civilized and brought to faith) whereas, the Native American was still at large, at times hunting people who wanted the best for them.²⁵¹

A.2 The rite of Passages

A letter from the British Consul General at Marseilles stated:²⁵²

From the Consul General at Marseille

To

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 4. The report further states the wages around the average of 40 rupees per two months.

²⁵⁰ Hagenbeck Archiv, Hagenbeck Tierpark, Stellingen, Hamburg. For details see the notes on animal behavior penned by Carl Hagenbeck and the posters depicting lifestyles of these performers in this collection.

²⁵¹ Roslyn Poignant throughout her book wonderfully captures the lives of displayed indigenous peoples of Australia in different parts of Europe and the subsequent return of indigenous items to their point of origins. See Roslyn Poignant, *Professional Savages: Captive Lives and Western Spectacle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

²⁵² Judicial and public department, File no J&P 4841 1911, Indian Office Records (IOR), British Library (BL), London.

His majesty's secretary of state for India
Dated October 23, 1911

Sub: Repatriation of distressed natives of India

Sir,

I have the honour to report that the following, who state that they are British Indians, viz: Panduth Biddu, of Lahore, nanik of Lahore, harkisha, of Lahore, ralna of madras, dakari Lingh(sic) of patna, are at present in distress at Marseille, and I request permission to send them to Bombay at the lowest possible cost.

Their papers are in the possession of Ramamurti, of Madras, who brought them to Europe as a performing troupe. They traveled in England and on the continent, and were left at Marseille by ramamurti, on September 23rd last. He paid their board and lodging in Marseille for a month, and left for Colombo, promising to send them money, which he has not done. They are now destitute, and on my hands.

I have the honour to request that a telegraphic reply may be sent to me.

I have the honour to be .

Sir,

Your most obedient,
humble servant

sd, m gurmey(sic)
Consul- General

Performers were increasingly getting stranded in Europe around 1910 to 1915. Government records point towards Ramamurti, a strong man from Andhra Pradesh, as the circus manager responsible. Multiple records show how wrestlers and other performers were engaged by Ramamurti and then abandoned in different parts of Europe, starting with Marseille. Kodi Ramamurti Naidu was a famous wrestler from India whose bodybuilding and strongman feats could be located within a national construction of masculinity through the circus. The exact conditions under which he abandoned his performers are shrouded in mystery. However, if one relies on Government records only, a grim picture emerges. It becomes doubly interesting when we see that the officials of British Empire engaged in different parts of Europe exchanging heated letters to solve the problems of these performers and provide solutions for their return to India. The government papers centered around 1911 and 1912, especially the correspondences of the Judicial and political department, reveal accusations against Ramamurti abandoning his performers after they have performed for some time Europe. Apart from the India Office

Records, a private secretary to Ramamurti also wrote a letter²⁵³ describing his own plight and that of the wrestlers:

58, Bloomsbury Street, WC
London, October 10th 1911

To,
Lt. Col. Sir James Dunlop Smith

Dear Sir,

Many thanks for your kind letter. The wrestlers have according to you advice seen captain Morris of the Strangers home for Asiatics.

Re the four Indian wrestlers I corresponded with your office, I learn that they belong to Prof. Rama Murti, a Hindu Athlete-who left Europe a short while ago. Mr. R B Benjamin whose name the contract with these wrestlers stand, was only Prof. Rama Murti's Manager, acting under his instructions according to a clear agreement made between them India. Hence I think that Mr. R B Benjamin is not directly to be blamed for the desertion of these men.

I was brought out from India by Strongman-Prof Rama Murti-as his private secretary. But the professor did not think it his duty to pay my salary for the time I was with him-nearly 7 months. He deserted me suddenly and left for India from Bordeaux(France). However, I manage to stand on my own legs by contributing articles to the press.

I desire to see you personally in this connection and shall deem it a high favor if you kindly let me know, when it will be convenient for you to spare a few minutes this week.

Thanking you in anticipation and begging to be excused for the trouble,

I am,
Yours truly,
S.S Raja

The British Indian performers, who were abandoned in different parts of Europe, were first sent to England and from there the India Office started the process of sending them back home. The abandoned Indian performers were housed in the Strangers Home for Asiatics,²⁵⁴ a temporary settlement for repatriation of sailors and persons to be deported. Started by English missionaries with a generous grant of £500.00 by Maharaja Duleep Singh in 1857, this house featured prominently in the lives of the Indian performers who were abandoned (and found) in Britain and different parts of Europe.

By 1911, transnational boundaries were wide open and the abandoned performers also received attention from Indians settled in different parts of Europe. An Indian, G L Sehgal from Surrey wrote to the undersecretary of India in 1911²⁵⁵, regarding the abandoned performers who were housed at the Strangers home.

²⁵³ Judicial and public department, File no J&P 4841 1911, IOR, BL, London.

²⁵⁴ <http://www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/makingbritain/content/strangers-home-asiatics-africans-and-south-sea-islanders>. Accessed on 23rd February, 2012.

²⁵⁵ Judicial and public department, File no J&P 4841 1911, IOR, BL, London.

To

The Undersecretary of India ,

“Sir,

I beg to refer to you the case of the four Indian wrestlers, regarding the passage, back to India, who you advised to see Captain Morris, Strangers Home for Asiatics. The wrestlers went there and the said captain promised them that they would be able to sail on 14th ins.;, but when the wrestlers went their again on last Monday, he told them to wait for at least 14 days but the poor wrestlers are short of money, so they cannot wait for more fourteen days, as they can not pay even the rent of the house, where they are living for next 2 weeks: will you be kind enough to write captain Morris, on their behalf, so that he should manage for their sailing as soon as possible. I beg to repeat it again, so that you will kindly favor me, to write Captain Morris, to manage for their sailing at your earliest convenience”

37, Conslow ‘Rd’
Richmond
Surrey

A complex, bureaucratic arrangement was needed to send these performers home and the Empire, although late, ultimately sent her subjects home. The funds required to send these performers home, ‘were paid out of the special fund which was granted to this Consulate, at the outbreak of the War, for the relief of distressed British subjects’.²⁵⁶

And while they stayed in foreign soil they were under surveillance. The confines of Strangers Home made sure that these foreign bodies were contained within four walls where they could be monitored before sending them off to their natural geographies. The fractured citizenship bestowed by Colonialism only meant certain privileges and accesses to mobility. As discussed in the last chapter, the colonial state paid more attention to its lesser subjects than to the ones who were racially close to it. The rhetoric of the civilizing mission and paternalism made sure that the native should be looked after like a child and thus meant rescuing it from dire circumstances. One can also forward the argument about the peril of immigration. When these performers were abandoned they were still British-Indian citizens and technically could live in any geographical location of the Empire. Their racial presence was a visual threat to the pristine cities of Europe, where large numbers of Asians, Africans and Indians could only be tolerated

²⁵⁶ L/P & J/6/1361, IOR, BL, London.

from the comfort of theatre seats, circus galleries and music halls. Only in rare cases performers stranded in Europe were allowed to move away from the final destination of reaching home (but this journey also meant away from Europe and not deep into it).

A.3 Diplomacy

The transnational travel/exchange of Indian performers was not always so fluid in terms of co-operation between the different governments of Europe and the circus industry. European political scenario and public opinion regarding the conditions of these performers created obstacles for different European managers, circus owners, and animal traders to work in tandem. Before the First World War, co-operation among different European circus businessmen was not hindered by their respective nationalities. After the war different European nations sought to police their colonies more effectively in terms of international exchanges and mobility. The suspicious climate of the post-war world located the Hagenbeck firm (one of the biggest animal trading and circus groups) whose operations included most of India, Ceylon and South East Asia in a watch list that lasted as late as 1928/29. One of the Hagenbeck brothers, John Hagenbeck, who resided in Ceylon and maintained the trading of exotic creatures in South Asia, was banned from entering India after the war. From the official correspondence among different political departments of the British Colonial State and other public sources, it seemed that the ban hinged on two allegations: John Hagenbeck and the family in general were embroiled in some kind of a scandal regarding the treatment of Indian performers in Germany and his politically ‘undesirable’ behavior in Ceylon itself where he lived for a long time. Before the ban was lifted in 1928/29, the Judicial and Political department had files on John Hagenbeck that stated:

‘It will be seen from F. 109/24 recorded in the Jails section that in 1924 Mr. John Hagenbeck applied direct to the Government of India for permission to visit India to enable him to purchase wild animals and to recruit natives of India for his circus troupe. Since he stated that he was a resident of Ceylon for 28 years we asked the Ceylon Govt whether his conduct during his residence in Ceylon was politically and generally unobjectionable. The Ceylon government reported that Mr. John Hagenbeck was an undesirable person; his conduct during his stay in the island was both politically and generally objectionable and that he was sent away from Ceylon at the outbreak of the war and had been refused permission to return to the island. In the circumstances the Govt of India refused to relax the orders against the entry of Germans into

India in Hagenbeck's favour. As stated in the preceding note those orders were rescinded by the issue of the press committee dated the 8th September 1925 and it is not clear what has influenced the Ceylon government in refusing him a visa for India especially when the embargo on the recruitment of Indians and Ceylonese for his circus has now been removed. Subject to the D.I.B's remarks we may agree to the issue of telegram which the F and P dept propose to issue'.²⁵⁷

Even towards the end of the 1920s, when the ban was lifted, a classified letter²⁵⁸ was sent to Downing Street, on 25th January 1928, with the following text that stated:

Sir,

With reference to my confidential/secret dispatch of the 13th January, I have the honour to state, for the information of His Majesty's Government in Canada

.....the commonwealth of Australia
New Zealand
the union of South Africa,
Newfoundland

your Ministers, that the Secretary of State for India has requested that the names of the undermentioned persons may be added to List B-Aliens to whom visas for India should not be granted without prior reference to the India Office or the Government of India:-

Schulze, Heinrich.....German citizen,repatriated in 1920
 Fritz, Carl.....".....born at Wurzburg on 2nd December, 1887
 Hagenbeck, John Heinrich August.....".....born at Hamburg on 15th October, 1866
 Hagenbeck, George.....".....born at Colombo on 17th February, 1900.
 Meyer, Alice, Mrs.....".....Born at Bonn on 9th December 1899

THE OFFICER ADMINISTERING
 THE GOVERNMENT

Apart from the Colonial government, Indians in different parts of Europe and America also objected to the Hagenbeck firm's policies and depictions of Indians. South Asians from America forwarded this pamphlet to the Indian government and different dignitaries before the Second World War.

²⁵⁷ File no 320-G/29, 1929; Govt of India, Foreign and Political Department, General Branch, National Archives of India (NAI), New Delhi.

²⁵⁸ L/PJ/7/1473: IOR, BL, London.

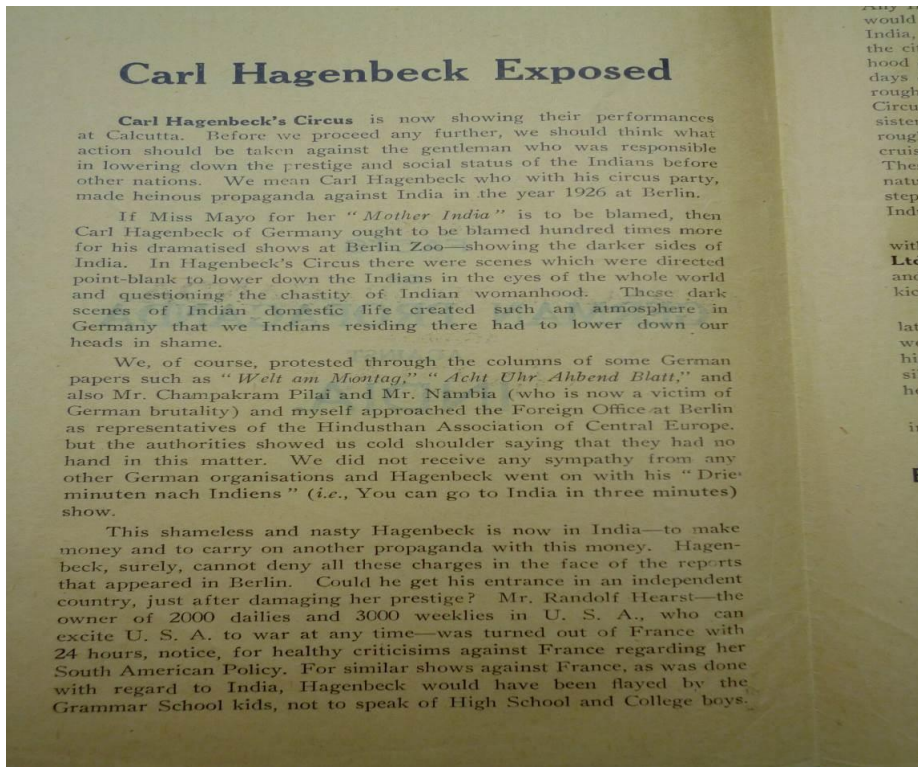


Figure 31

Pamphlet written by Indians living overseas about the exploitation of Indians at the hand of the Hagenbeck brothers .

A.4 Fresh off the boat and not quite so: Indians travelers' experience abroad:

Indians traveling to Europe in the nineteenth often wrote about the spectacles that featured Indian themes, performers and animals. Some of these travelers were students, some went along on circus business as managers organizing logistics and some were casual travelers (often newly rich with their lucrative businesses connected with the British Empire). These travel memoirs not only recount contemporary ideas about the displays of Indianness outside India but also the astonishment on the part of these travelers in finding that the Just Empire was not so just in her own soil. A lot of these travelers were wealthy men and had come to conclusions about ideas of progress and civilization that European culture had to offer. Their presence in foreign soil was framed within the gazes of the inhabitants there. Following the circus shows and advertisements, an Indian talking a walk in Covent Garden became a site of display himself for the English people. The gaze however was not one sided, colonial performers and travelers often returned the gaze back. More importantly, subjective questions about home and belonging could be gleaned from these travels.

These memoirs are fraught with tensions about the self and the other. Tied in a cultural bind, between a brown skin and a fairly intelligent English education, the traveler in England was quite exasperated. T N Mukharji, a high ranking Bengali engaged with the Indian Exhibition Commission (slated to plan for the Colonial and Indian Exhibition of 1886) winced when a little girl in a café in London equated his physical appearance to that of ‘Negroes and Mulattoes’. Although he was annoyed he played on with the little girl ‘allowing her sufficient means to brag about seeing and talking to a genuine blackie’²⁵⁹. Another traveler, writing in 1896, Rao Nadkarni, was frustrated about how the British believed that the Indians are no better than ‘Negroes’ and were a bunch of people who were consumed with barbarity. By writing about these experiences, these two travelers ceased to be objects of investigation and epistemic markings and raised themselves to a position where they could at least challenge the notions of racial inferiority, if not subvert it.²⁶⁰ An erudite Bengali named Shashibhushan Sarkar travelled to Europe around 1926; he was a rich banker from Calcutta who wanted to travel the world. Shashibhushan witnessed a show in Drury Lane depicting ‘The Daily lives of the Indian woman’. Much to his chagrin, the show represented Indian women as the most backward race of women. The women according to the show and what Shashibhushan recounts are ‘none like the women in my motherland who toil everyday to seek out a better life for their husbands and children. It is only in evil places like the theatre where everything is more than meets (sic) the eye, that truth is destroyed’²⁶¹. Shashibhushan even towards the last years of the 1920s was debating the role of women in theatre and other places of entertainment.

As mentioned briefly in the first chapter, one of the brightest performers of the Great Bengal Circus, Krishnalal Basak travelled all his life to different parts of the globe with different circuses. His memoir recounts how he received warm welcome from all parts of the world, especially from the non-white parts of the world. Whether going into stringent details about blatant racism, Basak muses about the idiosyncrasies of the British people who constantly asked him about the existence of rivers, mountains and lakes in his country. When Basak answered them that his country is similar like any country, they appeared to be quite astonished. This shows that although technological innovations had opened up the world towards the late nineteenth century, knowledge for the masses was being gathered primarily through tropes of Empire building. The circus and the theatre sought to construct India and other South Asian countries in all their exotic glory only, leaving the ordinary. By creating this spectacular identity for the other, the European ‘self’ was seeking to comprehend and control the new annexed lands of Asia and Africa. Through Krishnalal’s travel memoir it is also noticed how these circuses

²⁵⁹ Brenda Assael, *The Circus and Victorian Society*, 82.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 83.

²⁶¹ Shashibhushan Sarkar, *Europe Bhraman*, (Calcutta: Model house 1930), 54.

memoirs tended to conceptualize and comprehend the Global within a trope of the home. Krishnalal in his memoir writes, ‘different performers from different parts of the world come to the shrine of the circus, where they are all devotees to the god of truthfully seeking out a livelihood’²⁶².

The Eastern travelers in the circus shows of Britain blurred the lines of a spectator and a performer. The famed manager of Astley’s circus, Andrew Ducrow, called upon the audiences in 1835 to be awed at the presence of Oriental Subjects, ‘His Excellency Mulvie Mohammed, Ismael Khan, Ambassador To his Majesty the King of Oude, and his wife’. The box seats were positioned as such that these regal guests were also framed and consumed as a part of the show. Visiting the same show a year later, a friend of the royals, Najof Koolee Meerza, the Prince of Persia (seated somewhat in the same position) wrote about the hundreds of beautiful faces he could gaze from his seat.

‘Meerza’s two-way glance—directed toward both the audience and the Eastern Spectacle—as well as the audience’s gaze at him and the performance, raises interesting questions about this East-West encounter... moreover, by positioning East and West in the audience and on stage, Astley’s and other circuses like it provided a new experience whereby the “exotic orient” was allied with conspicuous (visual) consumption and metropolitan life in ways that anticipated the Great Exhibition of 1851 and other such displays’.²⁶³

This particular ocular history is very important when it came to the circus. Even when ‘freaks’ from South Asia were displayed in exhibitions or the circus, they constantly ‘looked back’ at the audience. They asked questions and in many cases, ‘prodded the audience with their slimy fingers’ to see what kind of human being or race were they.²⁶⁴ Roopmati (ironically named, Roopmati in Hindi means full of beauty) was a performer from Fairy Circus from Uttar Pradesh who was famous in the exhibition circuit as the ‘ugliest woman’ in the world²⁶⁵. When she was taken to the medical institution in Lucknow to be examined and displayed for the British residents there, she threw a huge angry tantrum and the officials were compelled to bring her back to the circus. This incident reiterates the fact that circus identity was a comfortable identity for many performers who felt threatened outside its confines. These momentary transformations from an object to a subject reveal the powerful potentials which ambiguous identities possessed in an oppressive world.

²⁶² Krishnalal Basak, *Bichitro Bhraman*, (Calcutta: unknown 1934), 65.

²⁶³ Brenda Assael, *The Circus and Victorian Society*, 80.

²⁶⁴ Satyadev narayan Sinha, *Sarkas ka Anokha Sansar*, 95-96.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 97.

B. The Animal Kingdom and its masters

B.1 Sources, stories and estimates of the animal world

Animals in South Asian circuses came largely from animal agents who were stationed in different docks of India; the major being the Hagenbeck firm after 1832, along with that of the traditional animal fairs of Sonpur and Pushkar were sources for indigenous circus managers to buy animals. Before 1832 much of the Indian menageries and European ones came from the animal trading exchange set up by the East India Company at the Cape of Good Hope. Individual shippers also brought animals to different parts of the globe. With the consolidation of zoological gardens in different parts of India, circus managers had occasional animals from these places in terms of exchange. Zoological gardens often imitated the grandeur of the Circus by putting up music shows and gala dinners to lure more audiences

Hagenebeck Firm was more than often the middle ground of exchange between the circus managers of both Indian and foreign origin and the zoos. Lorenz Hagenbeck's autobiography throws light on sites where animals were sold and how they were organized in the twentieth century. Like his father, with an eye for details Lorenz Hagenbeck describes a scene near in Sonpur, India (a massive animal fair still exists there):

‘There were soon literally hundreds of elephants up for sale. They were mainly tame animals, merely tethered by one fore and one hind leg between a couple of trees, but there were those which were still not broken in, and these were firmly lashed to really powerful trees with cables as thick as a man's arm. Day after day fresh herds of ten to fifteen elephants each came in. They all swam to the fairground across the Ganges, together with their mahouts. The young animals as far as’²⁶⁶

Pre-Colonial Itinerant performers who displayed bears, monkeys and snakes on Indian streets also became vendors for circus managers towards the late nineteenth century India. Private menageries kept by the native financial elite also supplied and gifted the circus with animals from their collection. The Marble Palace menagerie in Calcutta was one of the most famous private menageries in India. An estimated cost of animals needed to start a small circus venture was provided by a Circus enthusiast around the late nineteenth century: ‘If any of my readers have a spare 100,000\$ in greenbacks about them, they can get up a very respectable menagerie

²⁶⁶ Lorenz Hagenbeck, *Animals are my life*, 39.

on that capital. Here is an estimate of prices (in gold) for a very tolerable show with which to make a beginning:²⁶⁷

One Elephant—16,000\$

Lion and Lioness with cage—9,000\$

Sea cow, a rare animal—8,000\$

Pairs of very large leopards, and two smaller ditto—5,000\$

Australian Kangaroo—2,000\$

Australian Wombat—2,000\$

Ostrich—1,000\$

Royal Tiger—4,000\$

Sacred Camel—2,000\$

Rare birds, monkeys, and lesser animals, including those of American variety—20,000\$

Total: 60,000\$

Animals that created ripples within the circus industry in India were a few and no one had a following as big as Jumbo, the P T Barnum elephant. But a couple of incidents stand out. The first story is that of love, longing and despair. It seemed like their human brethren, animals were also doomed in love. Sultan and Multan were two star Royal Bengal tigers of the Great Bengal Circus Company. Sultan came from the backgarden menagerie of the Maharajah of Burdwan and Multan arrived from Lahore, from a Pathan landlord's collection of animals. Sultan and Multan were star performers in Bengal's show. They did multiple tricks like jumping through fiery rings, play acting with the animal trainer in a mock battle and many more. Tragedy struck when Multan was removed from the Calcutta Circus's care and sold at a higher price to the Woodyear Australian Circus touring in India. Sultan, his playmate since their introduction to the circus menagerie, stopped eating and kept on wailing for hours. No amount of cajoling or temptation could move Sultan from his place. The circus manager was worried so much that he invited all the famous animal trainers in the vicinity to take a look at Sultan. None of them came up with a solution. Finally everything was solved when at great cost Multan was re bought from the Woodyear Circus. The longing for his friend apparently made Sultan so sick that he expired soon after Multan returned to her cage. The circus publicized this great captions, 'Tiger and Tigress in love and sadness, watch the widowed Sultan play the tragic hero at tonight's show in Parade grounds, Esplanade Cacutta'.²⁶⁸ Shirimati ,the armadillo, had a colourful time in the

²⁶⁷ Warren Wood, 'About Menageries and Their Tenants' in Olive Logan, *Before the Footlights and Behind the Scenes: a Book about "the Show Business" in all its branches* (Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Middletown: Parolee & Co., 1870), 14.

²⁶⁸ Abanindrakrishna Basu, *Banagalir Sarkas*, 211.

circus. Out of the menagerie of the Maharajah of Burdwan and into the hands of Professor Basu, Shitimati was used as a headgear for the animal trainer Badalchand in the Great Bengal Circus. Serving as a live crown, Shirimati moved from one head to the other. Performers doing balancing acts would place Shirimati on their heads while doing their acts. Constructed as different accessories she was ultimately presented to the Police Commissioner of Calcutta.

One of the most interesting usages of pre-colonial image was the use of snakes in circus performances. Visually smaller than the other animals, snakes were used as props of magic shows and snake charming acts. The pre-colonial shamanic (ritual bound) snake charmer was now the magician in the arena. His acts were reinforced both by tradition of reverence for the snake goddess Manasa and also by technical forces at play in the circus. One of the acts of the Great Bengal Circus involved 'deadly cobras and African mambas'²⁶⁹ and a frail performer with a snake charming flute. The performer would enter a huge basket and then its lid would be closed. The audience would then suddenly hear screams coming from the inside of the wicker basket. After some minutes of deadly screaming, the performer would emerge from the basket in a swaying motion (mimicking the snake charmer) with a cobra on top of his head and the audience would see different types of snakes wriggling out of the basket, 'as if listening to the intoxicating tune of the flute'.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 56.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 59.

Circus managers also followed the Hagenbeck image of a ‘harmonious co-existence’ where animals (who would be staunch enemies in their natural habitat) would be staged in a scene that defied any aggression from the animals. They represented the final victory of culture over nature. The image below portrays this very interestingly:

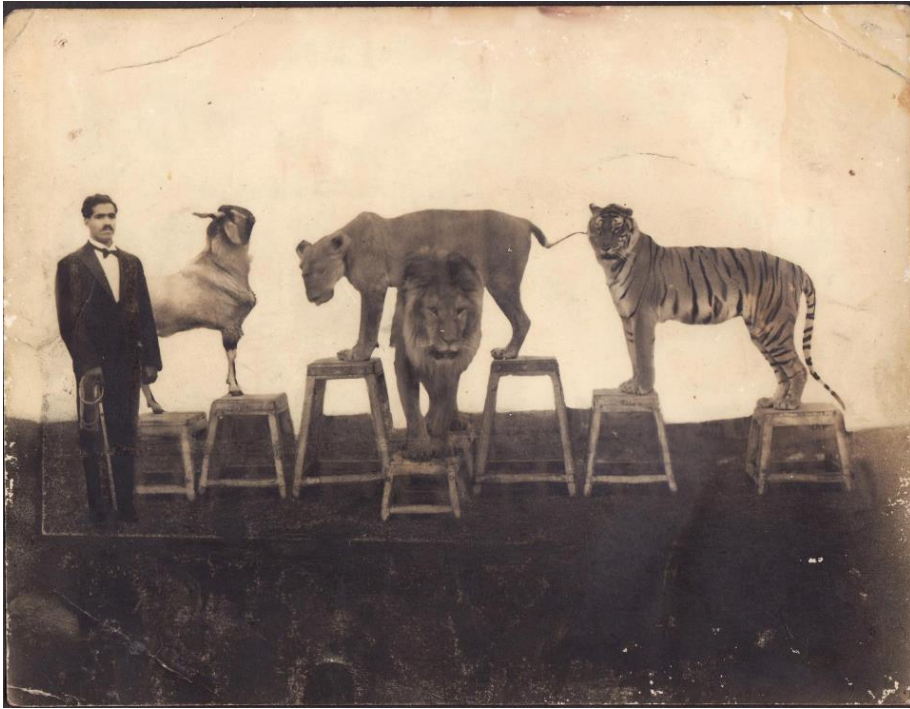


Figure 32

Circus poster featuring the act ‘Garden of Eden’ from 1889, most likely from Calcutta

Chotu,²⁷¹ the mad giraffe was a common feature in National Circus’s shows around the early twentieth century. Mad because he was prone to crane his neck into the gallery and steal candies from the children, who were both terrified and amused by this mischief. Chotu’s act like many other herbivore animals was relegated into acts which elicited laughter. The giraffe was trained to pick up ‘dwarves’ from the ground and dangle them in mid air. Chotu was also trained to behave like a horse and gallop along the arena while the person riding on his back complained about his narrow seat. Chotu was one of the most visible signs of National Circus in Calcutta around the turn of the century. Chotu’s head protruding out his railway carriage in Howrah Station signalled the arrival of National Circus in Calcutta.

Among the birds, one of the most famous was Great Bengal Circus’s Lakshmi, the Macao who could sing the *Vandemataram*, a national song of India, then a nationalist call of awakening. Lakshmi began and ended Bengal’s shows with her singing.

²⁷¹ A pejorative epithet used for someone who is shorter in height.

Apart from these performing animals, outside the circus tent there was the usual fare of three horned holy cows, extra headed goats and other lesser animal stars who were paraded along the surroundings of the circus tent and the audiences charged for blessings from them.

Animal cruelty incidents were rare, if the early Indian circus texts are believed, but the ones described were quite gruesome. Societies like the Annie Besant Society or the RSPCA in India although vocal on animal use in laboratories and other indigenous practices since the mid nineteenth century was quite silent on the Circus front. One of the incidents described this incident in the circus. A Royal Bengal tiger was being massaged with kerosene for extra glossy skin for the show caught fire when the oil lamp next to the tiger broke. The tiger had massive burns and perished with ‘a lot of groans’²⁷². The texts although constantly talk about compassion and love shown towards the animals by their trainers, their matter-of-fact description about animal injuries or deaths construct the circus animal as nothing but a replaceable object. In 1914, during a routine maneuver of downloading animal cargo from ships at the Calcutta dock, a camel got stuck in the ropes and died in a long struggle. The manager of the circus recovered his losses by stuffing this dead camel and ‘showing it to the public, who came with massive enthusiasm’²⁷³

When Shambhu, the giraffe of Great Bengal Circus, expired after forty shows due to exhaustion, Professor Basu sought to display him in the Calcutta Maidan for two annas²⁷⁴ an entry.²⁷⁵ There is also that incident when a pair of cockatoos (apparently famous for singing patriotic songs) from South East Asia ended up in a soup when a high-ranking British official in his province requested Karlekar Sr. politely.²⁷⁶

The standard procedures of animal training in India closely followed the Hagenbeck model, through careful doses of vocal threats and occasional treats to carefully crafted techniques of individual Indian animal trainers. Damoo Dhotre, Indian circus performer in America, famous for animal trainings stated,

‘I tried everything to make Stripe (a Malayan tiger) stand up... then I remembered that back in India when we had to travel from town to town our wagons were sometimes hauled by Oxen. Frequently, one of the Oxen would become stubborn and refuse to move. I recalled that the drivers had a patent cure for this ailment. They would leap off the cart, grab the animal’s tail

²⁷² Abanindrakrishna Basu, *Banagalir Sarkas*, 276.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 281.

²⁷⁴ A form of currency.

²⁷⁵ H Dutt, *Lieutenant Suresh Biswas*, 87

²⁷⁶ Mr Jiten Dutta, Interviewed on 1st July, 2011.

and bite as hard they could. Not very tasty, but it never failed to get results.....I grabbed the bushy end of his (tiger's) tail in one hand and bit so hard that I cut my lip. Stripe immediately leaped to his feat and swung around facing me. Once on his feet he responded to my orders and proved to be docile and trainable'²⁷⁷ He also went on to mention that if 'a trainer who stepped into a cage of lions and roared like a lion at them would create more confusion than understanding'.²⁷⁸ On a slightly different spectrum, Professor Basu of The Great Bengal Circus recounts, 'how only with love, show of no absolute no fear and courage one can tame the beasts' he further states that 'there are brutes who use the whip often and forget that some animas remember for a lifetime.'²⁷⁹ To drive this point home Professor Basu recounts the incident of Ali and his elephants. Ali was an animal trainer hailing from South of India. Ali without any provocation used to torture his elephants. After a new female elephant was introduced in his pen she also received the same treatment. According to Prof. Basu, another male elephant that had developed a crush over the new recruit witnessed this. So, when Ali walked up to the elephant after a couple of days the elephant brutally crushed him.²⁸⁰ Professor Basu was convinced of the 'feeling' capabilities of his animals; his biography is strewn with incidents about 'despairing horses', 'longing lions' and 'tragic elephants'²⁸¹. The exotic animals, which were part of circus acts and displays, were often imbued with stories of their conquests. Narratives of hunting sought to ensure that these animals bore interesting histories and origins. Circus publicity material as well circus biographies speak at length about these hunts or re-hunts (when an animal escapes from the circus). These narratives of human victory over the brute animals sought to legitimize the presence of these animals inside the tent. The violence and adventure rhetoric in these hunting stories sought to erase violent displacements or cruelties committed during the act of procuring these animals.

The animal world of the colonies for the colonizers posed as a dangerous realm, which needed to be managed and controlled through hunting, collection, naming and ultimately taming. The fierce and unknown beasts of African and Asian forests threatened to destabilize colonial conquering and its claim of being physically superior to the native. Writing about the image of the crocodile, two historians point out this element of fear, "Representing the cannibalistic, the greedy, the unresolved, the unpredictable, and the highly dangerous, the crocodile thus functioned as the quintessential signs of alterity. By extension, the reptile came to represent the

²⁷⁷ Damoo Dhotre, (as told to Richard Taplinger), *Wild Animal Man: internationally famous trainer of wild animals* (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1961), 88.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 95-96.

²⁷⁹ Abanindrakrishna Basu, *Banagalir Sarkas*, 248.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 252.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 250-253.

fear of colonial treachery, uprising, or sneak attack—something lurking, as it were, almost invisibly under the surface of the empire. And because the crocodile’s habitat crossed continents (Africa, India, Asia) and lines of colonial demarcation, it came to stand for general anxieties rather than those of one particular continent or colony”²⁸². The wild, exotic animal in the zoo was a mediated experience for the public but the circus gave the audience wild animals that were coded, redressed, personified and contested within a space which was in close proximity to the people paying for the show. The contests of the performer with the animals had multiple societal meanings. In some instance it signified the colonized other fighting the image of the Empire (The British lion versus the weak native), whereas in European sites it was imbued with ideas of overcoming class positions. The equestrian act for the Indian performer was an important step in establishing his might and superiority over the European performer. Horses considered symbols of royalty and racial superiority were accorded to British soldiers in battlefields where the Indian soldiers acted as footmen. Within the circus arena the symbolic gesture of mastering the horse meant challenging this very notion of class. Elsie B Michie points out, ‘The horse is a particular interesting figure in Victorian iconography because it stands at the juncture of a set of complex and resonant attributes that are both social and sexual. When Philip Hamerton describes England as “the last stronghold of noble equestrianism” he evokes the horse’s symbolic function as an emblem of class status and nationalism’.²⁸³

The animal performers, which became popular in the subcontinent, were mainly big game like the lion, the Royal Bengal Tiger and the elephant. Circus publicists and early circus historians gave them more footage than any other animal. Fighting these carnivores allowed the native to throw a symbolic challenge to the physical prowess of the colonial state and this is described and publicized at length. “We play with the tigers without care and then dance on their heads with absolutely no care”²⁸⁴ wrote a Bengali poet around 1905 describing the circus tricks of the Great Bengal Circus. To train and then fight the tigers and lions in the circus arena was a huge accomplishment for the native. The Bengali text describing early circus is dotted with references about the daring and novelty of these dangerous acts that were never performed before the Bengali circuses. Playing with the Royal Bengal tigers accorded them a confidence in their masculinity, which were earlier only applied to adventure stories of either the

²⁸²Mary Elizabeth Leighton & Lisa Surridge, ‘The Empire Bites Back: the Radicalized Crocodile of the Nineteenth Century’, in Deborah Dennenholz Morse & Martin A Danahay, eds., *Victorian Animal Dreams: Representation of Animals in Victorian Literature* (Hampshire, Burlington: Ashgate) 2007, 251.

²⁸³Elsie B Michie, ‘Horse and Sexual/Social Dominance’, in Deborah Dennenholz Morse & Martin A Danahay, eds., *Victorian Animal Dreams: Representation of Animals in Victorian Literature* (Hampshire, Burlington: Ashgate) 2007, 145.

²⁸⁴Abanindrakrishna Basu, *Bangalir Sarkas*, 37.

Englishmen or the ‘stronger’ communities of North India, the Punjabis and the hill tribes. Fighting the tiger and then conquering it was also a historical recovery of a particular defeat, which was still fresh within the mind of the native. Tipu Sultan, the ruler of the Kingdom of Mysore, was known as the Tiger of Mysore and a fierce opponent of the British presence in India. Through treachery, the British defeated and humiliated this early symbol of an anti colonial movement in 1799 and sent him to Calcutta in exile. The tiger symbolizing the conqueror and the vanquisher was appropriated by the British and by subjugating the animal, the native sought to symbolically gain victory over the British. The image of the Tiger and lion act made sure that “the lily livered Bengali” was no longer subjected to ‘wanton insults’ about his ability to do the most daring tricks.

Another aspect around the animals of Indian circuses was they were named after Hindu gods and goddesses, like Lakshmi-Narayan, Shumbho Nishumbho which made sure that the religious identity of the animal²⁸⁵ was not violated in the circus. The divide of nature and culture was thus comprehended. When the circus animal was named after a god or goddess of the Hindu pantheon, the animal moved into a sacred, moral and religious economy that turned the animal impervious to its identity for the spectators. As soon as the animal enters a performative arena with a religious symbolism, the animal is consumed within the act, the ‘tigerness’ or the ‘lionness’ is only perceived through a lens of mytho-religious history of animal consorts of famed hindu gods. The animal ceases to be a living being, with a mortal/natural history of origins and identity. This religious economy strips the histories of violence that went into introducing that particular animal and many more inside the arena.

From circus memoirs, may it be for promotional purposes or anything, many animal trainers sought to remove the thin line separating them from their animals. In doing so, they were erasing ontological grounds of differences but also ultimately closing up the histories of hunting and oppression through which that particular animal was acquired. A famous Indian performer, Damoo Dhotre, talking about his leopard and the act of waltzing together mentions, ‘The band played and we waltzed and I felt that oneness with an animal that a trainer, if he is lucky, sometimes experiences once in his entire life. I had that wonderful dream come true. This was the night I had dreamed of all my life, and, as the audiences’ frenzied applause burst in on the music, I wondered whether any man could be happier.’²⁸⁶

²⁸⁵ All Hindu gods and goddesses possess animal consorts and could change their appearance into different animal of their choosing.

²⁸⁶ Damoo Dhotre (as told to Richard taplinger), *Wild Animal Man: Internationally famous trainer of wild animals*, 28-31.

Around 1910, there was an interesting incident in the circus business of Calcutta. Gradually losing to their South Indian rivals, the Bengali circus companies sought to invent tricks that were never featured before. That was the birth of the human carnivore²⁸⁷, a teenage boy named Nandugopal. Nandu's trick was to consume live birds like chickens, fowl and even a fully-grown turkey! After him a lot of copy cats emerged who tried to eat their way through a lot of alive beings. Another incident the Australian press reports, stated something similar:

'This bowl of water, with half a dozen goldfish included, was only practice yesterday for India's human tank, Bharat Raj Moodaliar. He swallowed the lot in one go. Last night 31-years-old Bharati made his debut to Australian audiences at a Lismore performance by Bullen Bros. touring circus. Mr. Stafford Bullen said the Indian arrived in Lismore from Calcutta m Sunday night. His arrival has started an open season on frogs and goldfish. Yesterday youngsters, haunting the big bents after school, were soon started on a frog hunt to provide part of Bharat's unusual diet'.²⁸⁸

When a performer is dressed or staged as an animal or when he/she is visually represented as one (a man dressed up as a bear or the human carnivore eating live chickens) certain inalienable features of 'human' identity are erased. The performer crosses the line of being a human and thus ceases to subscribe to the ontological rights of the human; the animal habits which the performer performs also in simultaneity erases the animal he seeks to mimic. By inhabiting this mutant space, the performer emerges as belonging to a phantasmal realm, which can only be sustained within the confines of the circus. The performer is neither 'sub' nor 'in' human. This is a post-anthropomorphic leap for the performer and thus rendering him erased from his human or animalness, a disappearance in a magical appearance. Like a silhouette on a rainy evening transforming ordinary men into monsters lurking in the corners behind streetlamps, only to be brought into their quotidian image by the glow of the lamp.

A completely different story emerges when we look into how displaced indigenous people were represented as 'animals' or people with 'primal animal instincts' in the ethnographic and circus displays of Europe. Scholars like Barbara Kirshenblatt Gimblett have worked on these displays extensively but there still remains an immense scope for a thorough intellectual investigation.

In difference meaning is created. The dichotomous space between the spoken word and the inarticulate and the 'unthinking' constructs what we know as the Animal. Complications arise when the same animal is coded with 'human' attributes in the circus. So how does one define

²⁸⁷ This particular act is still prevalent in smaller circus companies of India touring the fringes of bigger cities.

²⁸⁸ Unknown, 'Goldfish, Frogs, All in Indian's diet', *Northern Star* (Lismore, NSW : 1876 - 1954) Tuesday 2 November 1948, 4.

that being which treads a grey line between what we know as the human and what we define as the animal? The answer to this trick question is that, we do not and that's what an ethical understanding of animal histories should point to. Anthropocentrism and speciesism push the importance of influence of animals on human attitudes to the margins. Erica Fudge writes, 'recognizing the centrality of the animal in our own understanding of ourselves as human forces us to reassess the place of the human. If we identify the human as neither a given nor a transcendent truth, then intellectual attitudes that leave unquestioned the result of these assumptions—dominion—must themselves be reviewed as not true, but created'.²⁸⁹

The cultural history of animals emphasizes the ideas of collection and ordering of animals for knowledge production. While historians like Harriet Ritvo point out the imperialistic desires of possession, domination and display behind the Victorian attitudes towards collecting wild animals²⁹⁰, others argue about attitudes towards animals as having from stemmed from bourgeois desires of controllable urban spaces and economic power. The idea of conquering the incomprehensible and the dangerous can be found in Nigel Rothfels' text where he mentions, how the bear emerged from a scary figure to a performing and comic element in the bear-pits of London²⁹¹.

²⁸⁹ Erica Fudge, 'A Left-Handed Blow: Writing the History of Animals', in Nigel Rothfels ed. *Representing Animals* (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002), 11.

²⁹⁰ Harriet Ritvo, *The Animal Estate: The English and other Creatures in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1987), 1-34.

²⁹¹ Nigel Rothfels, *Savages and Beasts: The Birth of the modern zoo*. (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002). 5-25.

B.2 The Hagenbeck Firm: Origin, Network and ideological insights



Figure 33

Carl Hagenbeck in his tierpark.

A history of the circus around the second half of 19th century cannot be written without mentioning the Hagenbeck family from Hamburg, especially Carl Hagenbeck Sr. He stood at the junctures of the modern zoological garden, the hunting and procuring/trading of animals through complicated and dangerous networks all over the world, as a manager for the Völkerschau and finally as a circus proprietor. His animal empire stretched from Lapplands to the banks of Ganges, traversing through Elephant hunting in Sudan and acquiring wild horses in Upper Mongolia. Most historians working on both cultural history of animals and the entertainment industry agree that any circus, after 1887, worth its salt, had business connections with the Hagenbeck Firm. It can be argued that the animal trade organized and superbly executed by the Hagenbecks' almost perfected the workings of a colonial state, procuring, controlling and finally ordering the indigenous to exist according to the will and power of the coloniser/intruder. The zoological society and the burgeoning Natural science institutions of the late 19th century contributed to this business and took active part in it. Alongside the scientific community German expansionism in South West Africa needed Hagenbeck's help; he recounts in his biography how "in 1906 I supplied no fewer than 2,000 dromedaries to South West Africa for the German Government"²⁹². His help was not forgotten and often German soldiers in different parts of Africa brought exotic animals at his disposal²⁹³. The introduction of the Hagenbeck Firm in this section points to the fact that the Hagenbeck standards of animal training, acquiring of animals and networks affected Indian circuses tremendously.

²⁹² Carl Hagenbeck, *Of Beasts and Men*, Trans. Hugh S Elliot, A.G Thacker (London, New York, Bombay, Calcutta: Longmans, Green and Co. 1912), 60.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 61-64.

Without the stories of the hunt for exotic animals it is impossible to recover the brutalities, which went into introducing animals in the circus. As colonial expansions gathered force towards the mid nineteenth century, vast expanses of wildernesses in Asia and Africa were left exposed for hunters to claim trophies and capture beasts to be sold in the sprawling entertainment markets of Europe and America. Hunting's aim was two-fold, firstly, to impose western supremacy over the natural landscape territories, rendering them controllable and secondly, to exploit natural resources for commercial benefit. Under these two ideological forces, all colonial hunting games should be looked at however, to maintain comprehension about the topic at hand, the following text would only look at hunting adventures which were sent mainly to procure circus animals.

The hunting expeditions sent to the far-reaching corners of Asian and Africa to acquire animals for the circus companies of the world were vehicles of massive cruelty. From Hagenbeck's autobiography, it is evident that the human cost for these expeditions was calculated with utmost negligence. Engaging native hunters, guides and tribesmen to do the major ground work for setting traps for big game, these European and American expeditions sought to exploit the knowledge of the native informants to the hilt. When the Mahdi rebellion halted the supply of animals from Africa, Hagenbeck's trade was heavily affected. The landscape, which he so used to, turned against him and he writes: 'For many years this animal paradise was closed, and the angel with the flaming sword who guarded the gate was Abdullahi kalifat el mahdi, the false follower of a false prophet. None of the animals inhabiting the country could be brought to Europe; and for this reason, that to meet with the Mahdi meant both for Europeans and for Egyptians almost certain death, or at the very least long captivity.'²⁹⁴

In his autobiography Hagenbeck mentions the 'two-pence' worth of native hunters. Almost ethnographic in detail, Hagenbeck in his autobiography describes:

'The most eminent of these castes is that of the sword-hunters or "Agaghir," who consider themselves the aristocracy of their profession ; and not without reason, for the method of hunting adopted by them, and which is almost peculiar to Taka, needs courage, activity and skill. The method of the sword-hunter is peculiar, and, with certain kinds of game, dangerous. In all cases the object of the huntsman is to sever the Achilles tendon of his quarry. Where giraffes, antelopes, ostriches or similar harmless creatures are concerned, the sport calls for no greater skill than is required to ride over uneven and treacherous ground. But where rhinoceros,

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 78.

lions or elephants are being pursued, the case is different; and it then often happens that the positions of hunter and hunted are reversed. The ponies used for this purpose are of Abyssinian breed ; and, like their riders, they are small, strong and fiery. On the whole, the most dangerous game to hunt with the sword are elephants. The chase is usually carried out by a band of four or five experienced men, united by so strong a bond of fellow-feeling that, when the life of any one is in danger, each of the others will unhesitatingly risk his own in attempting a rescue.²⁹⁵

The Hagenbeck firm had regular expeditions to different parts of Africa and Asia, his networks included European hunters like Menges and Casanova to African tribal chieftains and Indian Maharajahs. Lorenz Hagenbeck, son of Hagenbeck Sr. recounts a trip to Calcutta,

‘Arriving at Calcutta- Alipore, we camped near the local zoo, one of the few in the world which knows no coal bills. In the winter months, it is true, they do say the mornings strike a little cool, according to Indian standards. But their remedy for this is to hang some rush mats outside the animal stalls ! Once here, our tent was soon surrounded by native animal trainers, who all knew Johannsen. After we had loaded our animals aboard, I thought I was going to have the pleasure of going up the Brahmaputra with a native crocodile hunter, for we had a commission to fulfil for an American museum, which wanted two giant gavias specimens of a large sort of pointed-nosed crocodile which often reaches the length of thirty or more feet.’²⁹⁶

The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, and the lion shall eat straw like the bullock: and dust [shall be] the serpent's meat. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain, saith the LORD-- Isaiah 65:25

Hagenebeck’s zoological garden resembled a veritable Garden of Eden where everything worked out in perfect harmony, notwithstanding the fact of difference. Carl Hagenbeck’s fondly remarks:

‘whilst below in the green valley may be seen brahma-zebus from India, grazing side by side with shaggy yaks from Mongolia, guanacoes from South America, and woolly lamas from Peru. Here also is to be found the great dromedary and the conspicuously marked zebra. Various kinds of deer which come from distant lands mingle with their German congeners. Mighty

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 88.

²⁹⁶ Lorenz Hagenbeck, *Animals are my life* [Originally published as 'Den Tiern gehört mein Herz'. Hoffman & Kamp, 1955]. Trans. Alec Brown.(London: The Bodley Head, 1956), 25.

buffaloes and tiny dwarf goats graze peaceably together, and although all is peace and harmony, the scene presented is one of the incessant movement, the animals to enjoy complete liberty'.²⁹⁷

Erasing the violence and displacement Hagenbeck seeks to recreate the symbolism of Noah's Ark in his zoo. A firm believer in using non-violence in training the animals and standardizing techniques to tame the wild animals into subjugation Hagenbeck perfected the 'civilizing' mission. Under his tutelage, (like that of the Evangelical missionaries taming 'savages' in India's North East through less tougher measures of education, food and blankets)

Hagenbeck's experiments in his zoo removed any kind of threat to the paying audience. The violent unknown was now docile and ready to be petted if not assimilated. Nigel Rothfels writes,

'For many—perhaps even most—observers at the end of the nineteenth century, the zoo was clearly understood as a place of captivity, a place where animals were locked up. In response to the growing public discomfort with bars on cages, Hagenbeck eliminated the bars. But in so doing, he did more than simply that; indeed, Hagenbeck replaced the bars with narratives of "freedom" and "peace among the animals." Hagenbeck's exhibits, with their "contented people" and "free animals," answered the public's concerns about captivity with a gentle smile. At Hagenbeck's—and now at most modern zoos—the animals were not only not behind bars, they were safe and happy and long-lived'.²⁹⁸

Hagenbeck's networks were strewn all over the world. From the famed early menagerie (when Carl Hagenbeck was given two seals by his father captured by his fishermen) at the Exeter exchange to the organized Hagenbeck firm, animals from almost all corners of the globe were available for viewing, exhibiting, selling and consuming. The zoological society and the burgeoning Natural science institutions of the late 19th century contributed to this business and took active part in it. Alongside the scientific community, German expansionism in South West Africa needed Hagenbeck's help; he recounts in his biography how "in 1906 I supplied no fewer than 2,000 dromedaries to South West Africa for the German Government"²⁹⁹. His help

²⁹⁷ Carl Hagenbeck, *Of Beasts and men*, 233.

²⁹⁸ Nigel Rothfels, 'Immersed with Animals', in Nigel Rothfels ed. *Representing Animals* (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002), 216.

²⁹⁹ Carl Hagenbeck, *Of Beasts and men*, 233.

was not forgotten and quite often German soldiers in different parts of Africa brought exotic animals at his disposal³⁰⁰. Animals were not only thing he acquired, indigenous people from all over the world were also part of his recipe of success.

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 235.

Concluding Remarks

For the benefit of Mr. Kite
 There will be a show tonight on trampoline
 The Hendersons will all be there
 Late of Pablo Fanque's Fair, what a scene
 Over men and horses hoops and garters
 Lastly through a hogshead of real fire!
 In this way Mr. K. will challenge the world!
 The celebrated Mr. K.
 Performs his feat on Saturday at Bishopsgate
 The Hendersons will dance and sing
 As Mr. Kite flies through the ring don't be late
 Messrs. K. and H. assure the public
 Their production will be second to none
 And of course Henry The Horse dances the waltz-!
 (Circus organ music) The band begins at ten to six
 When Mr. K. performs his tricks without a sound
 And Mr. H. will demonstrate
 Ten somersets he'll undertake on solid ground
 Having been some days in preparation
 A splendid time is guaranteed for all
 And tonight Mr. Kite is topping the bill-.
 ---The Beatles

A brief note on historical contextualization

Do we have a past? An unadulterated, uncontrolled and a purely represented past? My question aims at purist assumptions of history and social science yet the question is an important one that needs to be asked. However the answer to this question would aim at multiple (if not million) explanations confirming that there can be no pure representation/reconstruction of the past and most importantly there can be no past(s) which is uncontrolled and exists without the frameworks of history or ideology. Moreover the potency of the past and its repercussions is

reflected in our ironical present where, the past is always floating in the air, from controversies and confrontations over monuments, textbooks to the cultural heritage and paraphernalia of nations and communities. There should be no qualms in admitting the proposition, that our present, our culture and our everyday existence is foregrounded on a past which was substantially created by someone else. A resistant academic and political overture aside, our present is tainted with the representations and formations of a certain history which was created by the west. Our past was produced, ordered and executed to meet the demanding cultural, political and economic needs of colonialism and the west. The modern west always dreaded the unclassified because classification is the important apparatus of control and it left minimal room for ambiguities. My constant rambling with the homogenous words 'us', 'our' need some explanations; it is not my attempt to collapse vast geographies of the Orient within my position (that of a citizen of the Indian nation-state) rather, my (cl)aim is simple, that the modes and means through which the orient becomes the '*Orient*' and the 'native' becomes the subservient 'Indian' and vice versa were strikingly similar. Said leaves no room for ambiguity in explaining how certain discursive modes were working to produce and most importantly essentialism the Orient so that it was 'profitably' grasped/represented by the Occident, so that "European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self". Moreover, for Foucault, the unconscious networks of power had no agent, whereas, for Said (although using Foucault throughout yet departing from this view and further clearing the ambiguous air of the western representation of the orient) the influence of important thinkers, their texts on the orient, their opinion on the vast material recovered within the colonial endeavors and incursions on indigenous cultures and most importantly political aims led to the discursive formation we know as 'Orientalism'. Orientalism reveals the long involvement of western knowledge and representation with the vast history of west's material and political subordination of the non western world.

The representation and essentialization of the non-west as the exotic and the inferior operated at multiple levels, if for the time being we move away from the discursive explanations of Orientalism, the quintessential ethnographic and colonial exhibition, which happened in Paris in 1889 and subsequently in other European and American cities; the exhibitions confirmed the cultural and colonial domination of the west through multiple representations of non European cultures through spatial and aesthetic ordering. Moreover, the non Europeans (in these circus performers) in these exhibitions emerged as the commodities of spectacle, available to the western voyeur: "spectacles like the world exhibition.....set up the world as a picture. They ordered it up before an audience as an object of display, to be viewed, experienced and

investigated³⁰¹. The European in these exhibitions could experience this orient not in the real in which it existed under troubled conditions of western domination but in the exoticized and inferior form as disseminated by the western thinkers, diplomats and colonial adventurers.

Blind men from Hindustan and their elephant that is what the circus is after a detailed historical investigation, scattered productions of knowledge, yet, valid from different perspectives. Then what do we do with such a reluctant theme that refuses to be straightjacketed within any given academic thematic? We tame it, cajole it into revealing both its 'true' and 'untrue' natures. The circus stories and their social implications that we investigated in the chapters of this dissertation to a substantial extent reflect this fissiparous nature of circus history in South Asia.

The world was a referent through which the circus sought to establish its successes, majorly literal examples of circus companies using epithets like World's Greatest this and that are too many to be ignored. The circus performance in the 19th century embodied that the world is a place which can be comprehended through its act and travel. The very meaning of the circus travel changed ideas of who is what and how one becomes what. Through the interaction with circus, people escaped and created hybrid locations for themselves, which defied categories of description and origins. In my dissertation I have tried to locate these ruptures and beginnings that the Circus brought in within the colonial space. The greatest problem of working on the field of Circus history is that of geography. Even if one pertains to maintain a specific geographical landscape where introduction of the circus in the colonial period due to archival familiarity, accessibility to language etc, the problems, which arises, is that circuses from a specific landscape, was always on tours. On these tours they sometimes acquired characteristics through which they could be best analyzed. Therefore, during my research period, I often found interesting themes about Indian circuses in archives, where in ideal situations they would not have been present. This archival scattering also points towards the global and transnational feature of the Circus industry in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Before embarking on a detailed note about this archival problematic it is imperative to draw the continuities of the Circus industry within Colonial India. Circus apart from its winter arrivals gradually declined in the India. Its importance and reflection, however, were long lasting. The first medium to soak the features of Circus in was the Bollywood commercial cinema and regional cinema of different parts of India. Mammooty, a famous Malayam movie-star, featured

³⁰¹Timothy Mitchell, 'Chapter 1: Egypt at the Exhibition', in *Colonizing Egypt* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1988), 6.

in one of the first cinemas depicting the whole process of the circus. The feature film, named *Mela* (The fair) was released in 1962. The movie portrayed the setting up of a circus tent to its last show. The depiction of animals within Indian circuses also left long lasting impressions within the plot techniques of Indian cinema. Throughout 1960s and 70s, feature films based on animal and human bonds were produced. These feature films, the most famous being *Haati Mera Saathi* (The Elephant is my friend) featured the life-story of two individuals, an elephant tamer and his elephant. The cinematic treatment followed closely the publicity guidelines which were used by the circus in depicting their animals. The elephant in this particular movie was represented as a ‘caring’ as well as a ‘violent’ elephant who remembers both cruelty and love. Literature was also highly influenced by the circus. The most important trope that a lot of writers used was the idea of the ‘escape’. Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay’s *Chander Pahar* (The Moon mountain) revealed a Bengali ultimately frustrated with the drudgery of an occupational life (imposed by the British) leaving everything to embark on an adventure in Africa. The landscape and the visual stories that the circus told enabled the destabilization of an idea of ‘home’ within Indian literary landscape. Within theatrical genres the circus influenced the likes of Nabarun Bhattacharya and others. Nabarun’s *Fataru* visualized a chaotic circus space. The theatrical performance of this text moves through dark alleys of Calcutta, spewing filth and expletives, disrupting ‘high’ culture events and conversing with the dead. Forms blend with the content and the architecture of the stage never allows any character, even the protagonists to overcome each other in their presence. The characters jump around in divided segments resembling the three-ring circus. The circus influenced television also profoundly, a TV series named ‘Circus’, launched the career of the movie star Shah Rukh Khan in the 1990s. This particular television series followed the social themes introduced by the circus in the subcontinent two hundred years back. The tropes of escape from unbearable societal norms, an unrequited love story and the overcoming of odds through the site of performance were the major themes of this series.

Archival musings

An archive of circus history, one can say, is a visual treat. When other themes in history record themselves in dusty files, circus attempts to recover itself in posterity through its images. Therefore, it is imperative to contextualize an analysis of circus histories under an overarching umbrella of visual culture.

‘It is some time now since historians ceased to feel obliged to work only with written evidence’³⁰²

Ginzburg, here, is speaking of both a shift and a novelty. In the sense, from the dependence on written sources, historians are increasingly looking at images as valid historical documents complementing other written sources and displacing them at times. However, it may be asked that, art historians have always used images as their (sole?) documents to reconstruct the history of a certain painting genre (and also accommodate images within the greater scheme of history), but, the quote aims at another point, which hints, that, the images may produce a radical narrative, which differs from the narrative which has used written documents. On a similar note, Pinney mentions ‘not a history of art, but a history made by art’³⁰³. Circus images, relegated to the world of posters, playbill art and glossy brochures inhabit an archival location where they are in-between the academic demands of defining artistic styles of great masters through images and wall decorations. From circus images radical readings could be generated about prevalent notions of visibility regarding racial stereotypes, gender roles and cultural positioning. As circus was always directed to the widest audience possible one should not look away from the possibilities of the talking Macau lovingly pecking the African lion.

Mitchell remarks, ‘vision is a cultural construction, that is learned and cultivated, not simply given by nature; that therefore it might have a history related....with the history of arts, technologies, media, and social practices of display an spectatorship; and that it is deeply involved with human societies, with the ethics and politics, aesthetics and epistemology of seeing and being seen’³⁰⁴. The question of circus visibility then assumes unease and dynamism. Invested with incomprehensible (and fantastical) meanings, for example, the circus poster featuring the love stories of a demon (an African or any native in most cases) with an animal takes into account the racial fantasies that were translated in to circus images.

Moreover the practice of showing and seeing initiate new horizons of possibilities and differences, where the ‘normal’ and the ‘abnormal’ interact and most importantly, where the very categories of ‘human’ and ‘animal’ are problematized. Mitchell remarks, ‘visual culture encourages reflection on the differences between art and non art, visual and verbal signs, and

³⁰² Carlo Ginzburg, *The Enigma of Piero: Piero Della Francesca*, Trans., Martin Ryle and Kate Soper (London, New York: Verso, 2000), xxvii.

³⁰³ Christopher Pinney, ‘Introduction’, in *Photos of the Gods: The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004), 8.

³⁰⁴ W J T Mitchell, ‘Showing seeing: a critique of visual culture’, in *Journal of Visual Culture*, Vol. 1:2 (2002): 166.

ratios between different sensory and semiotic modes', also the hierarchization of senses and their subsidiary reflections are destabilized³⁰⁵.

By ideological use of images, circus managers instrumentalised the use of images in conveying universal notions perpetuated as self evidently true. For example mass circus images of eastern/oriental women are as overtly sexual and licentious, animal and goddess, perpetrator and victim. Here, ideology is used in a Barthesian sense, and by ideology, he means, is an attempt to make something universal and legitimate, what is in fact partial and particular. For a concrete example consider the British definition of the white, male, colonizer as *normal*, and other bodies as inferior version of the original, exemplified through the categories of *savage*, *effeminate* and many others. However, the conceptualization of visibility and image as totally hegemonic deflects attention from other, dynamics of power, implicit, in the domain of visual culture and its mediums.

Bruges is a carefully conserved old town in West Flanders, Belgium. Dating back to the Pre-Romans, the cobbled streets and the canals of Bruges make for an idyllic getaway. Inside one of its ancient streets there is a five hundred year old house opposite a pub claiming to be the oldest in Europe. The house is run by an octogenarian couple, who had spent their lives collecting circus ephemera which they have catalogued and weather controlled in their attic.

One of the largest collections of circus material concentrated on Europe is based in a nuclear bunker outside the city limits of Amsterdam. The building is utilitarian in its construction and a heavy doors need to be negotiated (with the help of August curators) to research at the circus section (where the author was astonished to find magic memorabilia of the world famous Indian conjurer of the 1950s, P C Sorcar, Sr.). Located outside the city limits of Hamburg, Hagenbeck Tierpark (zoo) is a lush landscape of flora and fauna. At its west gate a building overlooking the Flamingoes houses the Carl Hagenbeck Archive. Antiquarian bookshops line the small street of Cecil Court, London. Nudged between a design shop catering for the new age and a defunct shop of film curiosities there is a shop that sells circus books for the discerning. A quaint town in North Kerala, Thalassery, is the home of a circus performer turned journalist who had devoted his life in preserving images and pamphlets of Indian circuses from its earliest times. A little further up North Kerala, in the politically charged town of Kannur, there is an old man who owns a resort and three last big circus companies in India. What is the significance of these snippets in this conclusive part of the dissertation? These are the unlikely places and the individuals which surprised me while I was on archival hunt for research material on Indian circuses. The diversity of geographical locations, the variety of individuals and the non-

³⁰⁵ For example, the hierarchy of creative based on the sensory organs, in the sense, the art of smelling perfume is considered subaltern in relation to the visual art.

establishmentarian locations of collectibles form the many worlds of the Circus archive. Like the performance itself, circus archives and their searches led me to questions of identity, travel and the ambivalence of transnationalism. Subjective experience of any archive is bound to include surprise and serendipity about findings and non-findings. Yet on the circus trail one is constantly tormented (albeit, in some cases, happily) about what is going to appear next and scarily, where? The circus in its travels left traces throughout the world. Posters, playbills and other ephemera were collected by fans who preserved them for their memorializations of the circus. Since the circus was relegated to the realms of low art, most of the times in history, a serious method of preservation of circus history was never undertaken. Individuals sought out circus objects for themselves and the ones who were successful in preserving them ended becoming the chroniclers of circus history. As the circus in its inception struggled to find a foothold and meaning within societal imagination, circus archiving was also considered irrelevant most of the times. When I started on researching on Indian circuses, the materials, which the World Wide Web spewed out, were articles which either talked about the decline of the circus in the second half of twentieth century because of stringent animal protection laws or the lack of enthusiasts towards the circus. Government archives in different parts of India had barely anything on Indian circuses. These bleak image very gradually turned its course when I realized that to need to find out about Indian circuses, one needs to go beyond the institutional archives boundaries and speak to 'insiders' of the circus. Any circus anthropologist would agree that Circus companies are very protective of their performers and their information. I was lucky in this respect, where in a complete unknown language world of South India, I came across a collector who was both an insider and an archivist. The trail for circus holy grails has led me to people whose life stories are circus archives. Outside the limelight of traditional academia and its archiving principles these individuals devoted their entire lives in collecting and making sense of the circus. These are the last remaining eclectic personal collectors, who would perish with corporatization of education, these people sought to emulate the circus in its quintessence. Away from the strictures of an institution with its accessibilities to only a privileged few, most of these circus collectors whom I met opened their doors for me to rummage through their material over fascinating stories.

What happens when the spectacle recedes into the backdrop? The ring is empty, vacuumed out of roaring beasts and crackling whips, the trapeze moves warily in the air, and the gallery rustles with leftover traces of laughter, claps and scared screams. What happens to the lives of the men and women performing great feats of humor and danger? Do they return to their lives as mundane as ours? Or they fade into the disappearing flickers of their achievements?

Remaining as the grotesque or the comic within the transient public memory and frozen institutional academic spaces?

Reconstruction is an act of tramping. Recreation of the colonial circus is a labor against death; we can only seek to reach out for the traces, left by the archive and our cultural imagination. A solace is all we have, because, the historian is the tramp, who, foraging through the garbage can only dream of the house, from where his food came; neither can he enter it nor can he grasp it. The tramp can only imagine the house and the delectable conversations wafting through the dinner table. And when the reverie collapses he can only laugh at the mess that surrounds him.

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