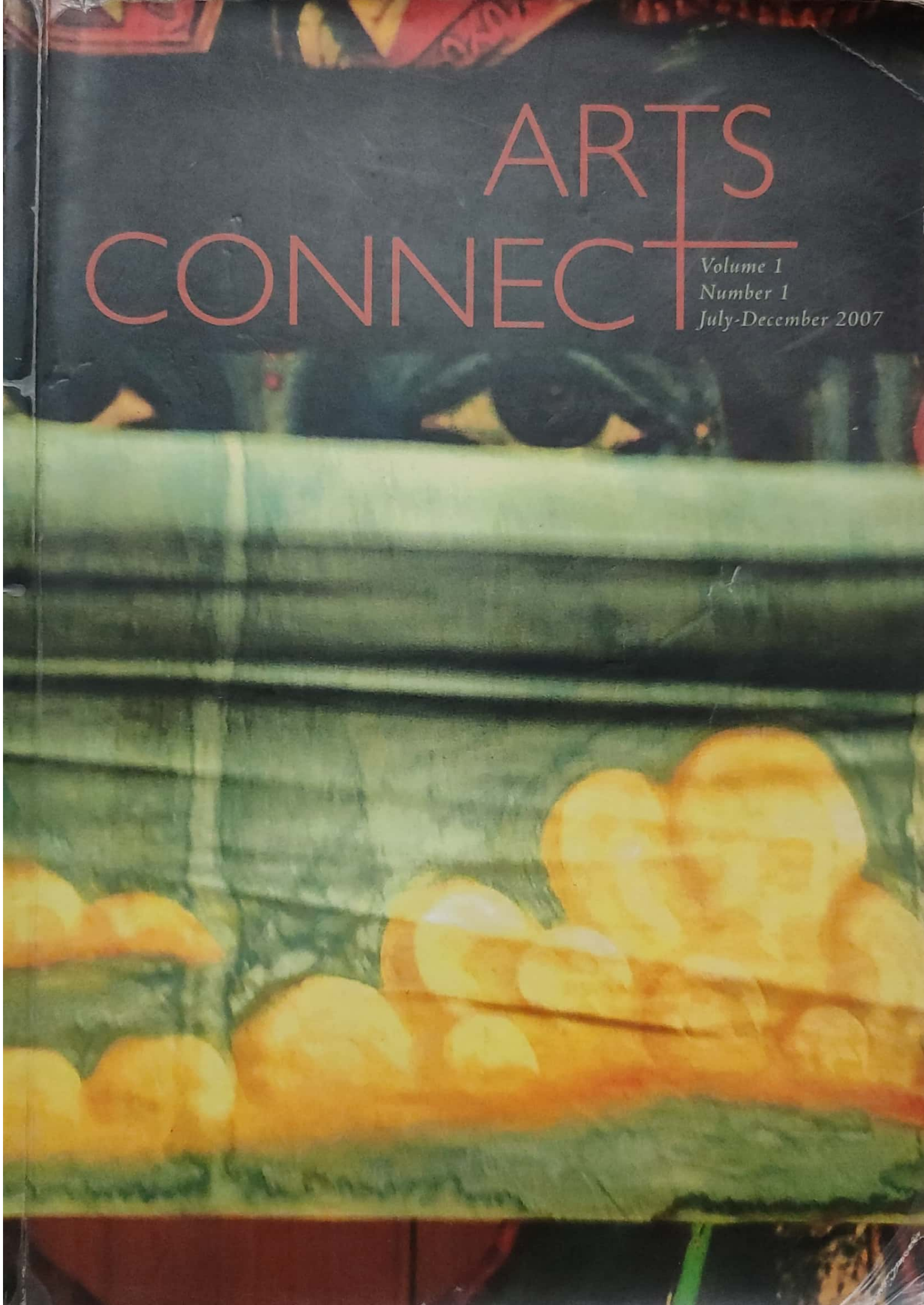


ARTS CONNECT

Volume 1
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July-December 2007



ArtsConnect

The IFA Chronicle

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July-December 2007

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ArtsConnect The IFA Chronicle

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Contributors

Ashoke Chatterjee was Director of the National Institute of Design (Ahmedabad) and served there for twenty-five years following positions in industry, international civil service and the public sector. He is now associated with a range of development institutions including the Crafts Council of India of which he is Honorary President.

Taran Khan is an independent writer and filmmaker currently based in Mumbai. She received two IFA grants to make a documentary film in collaboration with her writer grandfather, SM Mehdi, on Sufi practices in the Awadh region of UP. She can be contacted at taran.khan@gmail.com.

Bhooma Padmanabhan works as Programme Officer at the Foundation for Indian Contemporary Art in New Delhi. She has an MA in art history from the MS University, Baroda.

Moushumi Bhowmik is a singer-songwriter of Bengali music with several albums to her credit. She is part of a band (with four British musicians) called Parapar. She has also composed music for documentaries and features. Moushumi received IFA grants to research, document and disseminate the folk music of eastern India and Bangladesh which involves the element of *biraha* (longing in separation). Her recordings of this music will go into archives in India and abroad.

Kamal Swaroop graduated from the Film and Television Institute of India in 1974 and has been writing and directing documentaries and feature films for the last thirty-three years. IFA has supported Kamal to conduct workshops with students towards generating a storyboard on the life of Dadasaheb Phalke as well as to document these workshops through a series of films.

Jagan Shah received professional training in architectural design, history, theory and criticism but has maintained a continuous involvement with theatre and media since high school. After graduate studies in Cincinnati and New York, he returned to Delhi and has since been immersed equally in architecture and filmmaking. An IFA grant helped him research the history of the Indian People's Theatre Association.

Lalit Vachani's previous documentary films have been on the starsystem and the social worlds within the Bollywood film industry, and on the indoctrination, ideology and the politics of Hindutva propagated by the Hindu fundamentalist organisation, the RSS. His current project is a road movie style documentary filmed in Gujarat that follows the trail of Gandhi's salt march of 1930. He received an IFA grant to make a film on the street theatre group, Jan Natya Manch.

Vasudha Thozhur is a Baroda-based painter who has exhibited widely in India and abroad. She has been visiting faculty at MS University of Baroda, NID, Ahmedabad, and IICD, Jaipur. Vasudha received IFA grants to conduct art workshops with the rehabilitated victims of the 2002 Gujarat riots in collaboration with Himmat, an activist organisation based in Vatva, Ahmedabad.

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Moushumi Bhowmik is an accomplished singer and a sensitive listener and she brings both these gifts to bear on her project on *biraha* in the folk music of Bengal. Just as the term "*biraha*" evokes a recognisable but hard-to-define mood, the word "Bengal" becomes, in Moushumi's research, an imaginative rather than geographical category. It is possible for her to be as moved by an encounter on a busy London street with an immigrant from Sylhet, quoting the poetry of his Sufi grandfather, as by a Baul singer in a railway station in Bolpur who teaches her "something about discernment". It is through her encounters with such vividly sketched figures that she begins to understand what *biraha* might mean in music and in life.

*I Hear the Drums Roll:
Lessons in the Art of Listening*

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Moushumi Bhowmik

The evening light was descending on all things as the train moved in a slow rhythm, stopping from time to time. It was the end of November, the fields were shorn of crop, and people were returning home from work. My companion, Sudheer Palsane, was looking through his cinematographer's lens. I think I said something to him about how this light always fills me with sadness—this light which does not last. Remember that Impressionist painting of a man and woman standing in a field, by their cart loaded with crop, heads bowed in prayer? Sudheer asked. He could not remember its name; I did not know it either. But after returning home I identified it—Francois Millet's *Angelus*.

*Ore bela gelo bhabar haate,
Aar dinomaan boshilo paate.
Ami aar katokshan thakbo boshe?
Ghire elo andhakar.
Pare jabi ke bhabanodir?
(Bengali folk song)*

The day went trading life
Now the sun sits on the horizon.
How long shall I keep waiting?
It is getting dark around me.
Who will go across this river?

This was in 2003 when I had gone on a recce to Birbhum and Siliguri in West Bengal to make my first contacts

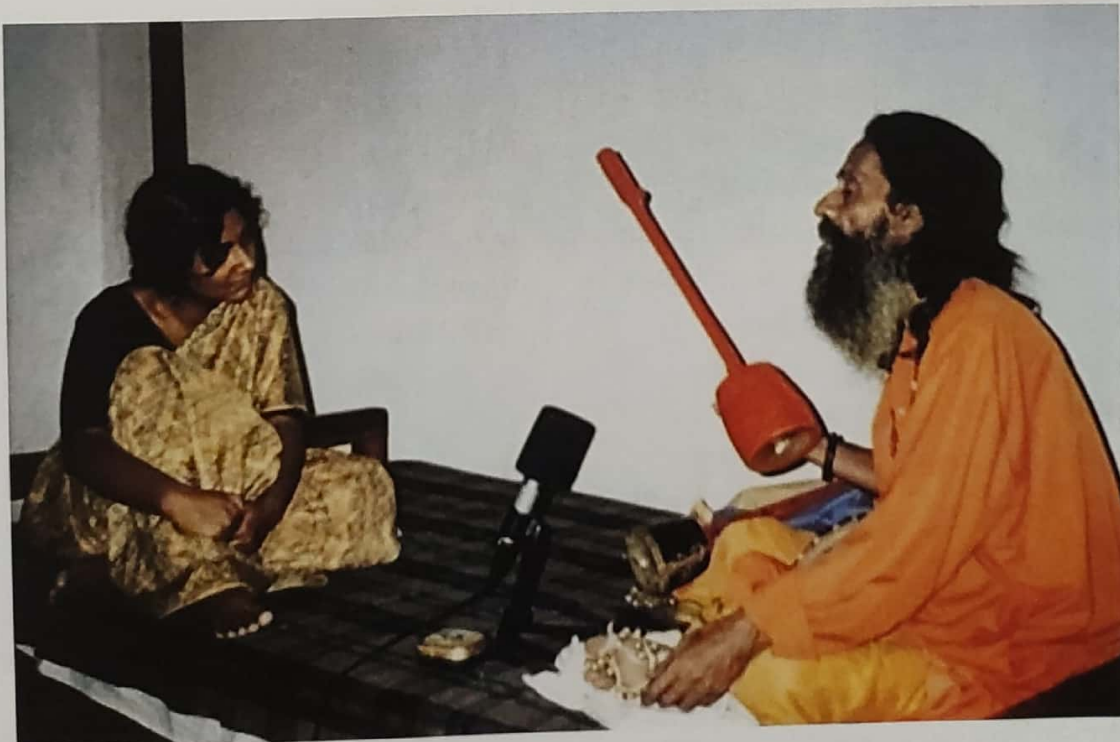
for a project on *biraha*, that I had proposed to the IFA (Songs of Love, Loneliness and Longing: *Biraha*—the pain of separation and the quest for union with the beloved as expressed in the folk music of Bengal; a musician's journey into a world of music). I wanted to collect and archive songs and interviews and also write about my travels. The word "*Angelus*" has stayed with me ever since that first trip, it is like the muezzin's call to the maghrib or evening prayer. Both words conjure up an image and a sound; one is a reminder of the other. I think that some words acquire special meanings for some people—they become more than just words. And throughout my journey I have come across words which are infused with such music that they make bearable the inevitability of love, loneliness and longing.

I remember the locality of Shobharampur on the banks of the Kumar river in Faridpur town in western Bangladesh, where as the sun set in the horizon, sound recordist Sukanta Majumdar paused his work, while the call to *maghrib* was given out from a nearby mosque. Ibrahim, our main singer that day, lit a cigarette. He was the same blind Ibrahim whose dark voice I had heard once in the dead of night, leading a community through *milaad* (community readings from the holy texts and chants of the Prophet's

name to mark an occasion, usually birth, death or some anniversary). The whole congregation was repeating his words in a rhythm which sounded like oars beating the waters of a river: Al-lah, Al-lah, Al-lah, Al-lah. Ibrahim had then become the boatman who would take everyone to the other shore, including me, for I too was drawn into his trance. That is the story of my travel—a journey into worlds of sound, all the time taking lessons in the art of listening.

In the beginning the word was *biraha*, which I had put down as the “longing for union while in a state of separation” in my IFA proposal of 2003. But now that seems a little dictionary-like; it leaves much unsaid. How

was one to show that the stress could be on any of those words—“longing”, “union” or “separation”, depending on the context of the song and the perspectives of the singer and listener? I think of what Eva Hoffman wrote in *Lost in Translation* about leaving Poland. “I am suffering my first attack of nostalgia, or *tesknota*—a word that adds to nostalgia the tonalities of sadness and longing.” I am tempted to say that *biraha* is one such word—it is a waiting and to that waiting are added “the tonalities” of the sadness of absence, the desire for union as well as the joy of anticipation. It is almost like a trance, which is broken once union takes place. Around the late 1990s, I became interested in exploring expressions of *biraha* in the folk music of Bengal for both



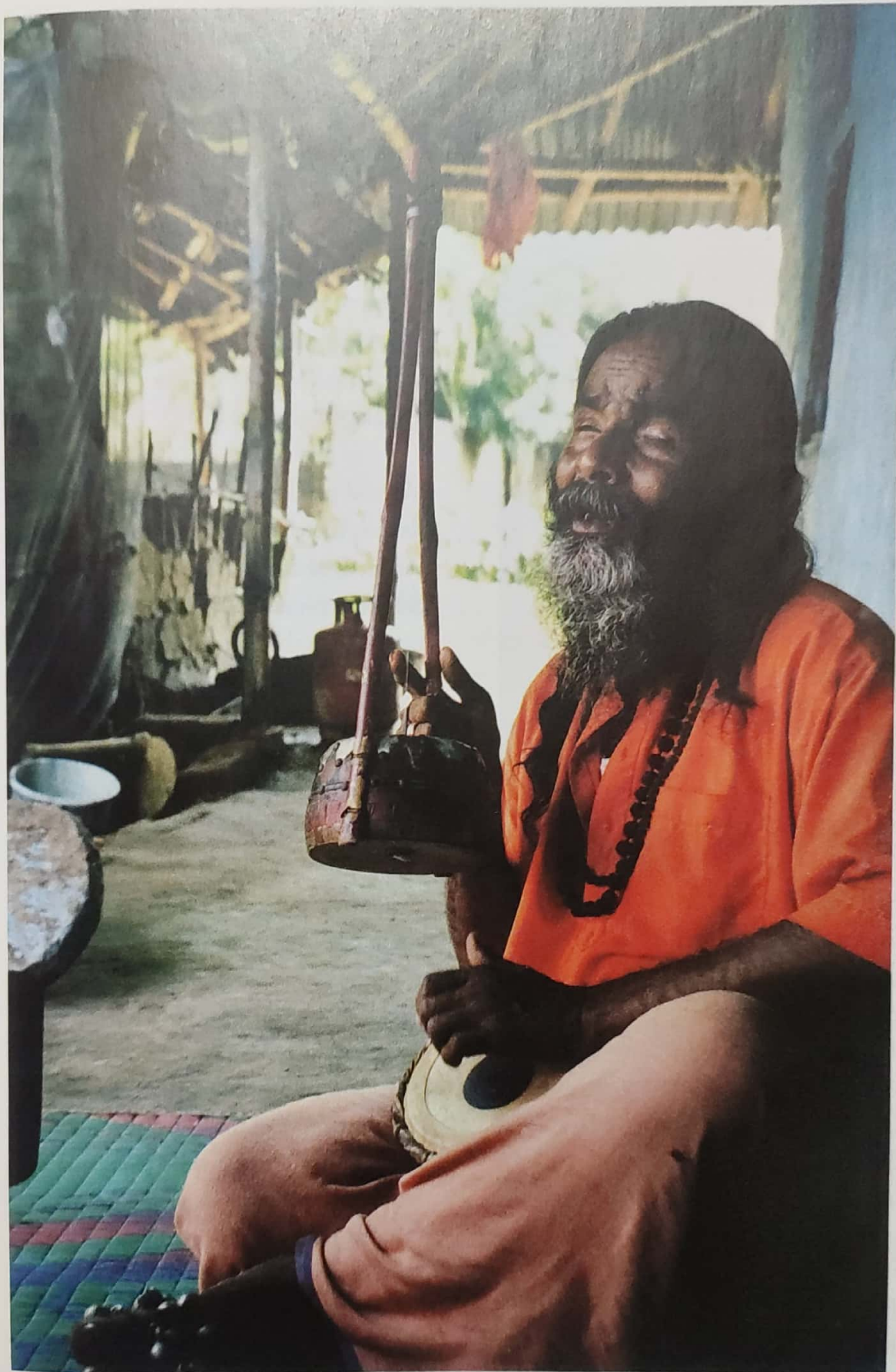
Moushumi with Debdas Baul at Santiniketan, Birbhum
Photograph: Sukanta Majumdar

personal and aesthetic reasons. While my own work as a songwriter was bringing out my alienation within home and in art, a sense of waiting to go somewhere I was not (*Shorirtari bhitore poran namer ki jeno ke thake/ Tari dake ami ghar-bahir kori*. There is this thing inside me/That goes by the name of life/It's what pulls me out/It's what takes me home), I was also listening more keenly than ever before to songs of *bichchhed*, *kirtan*, and other folk forms which are built on the theme of *biraha*. I had at that time left Kolkata, the setting for my life and work for more than fifteen years, to go to London. By early 2000, I began to write the first draft of my proposal to travel in the trail of songs of *biraha*.

In concrete terms, this journey across West Bengal, parts of Assam, Bangladesh, and also in places far away, such as the Bengali/Bangladeshi quarters of East London, has yielded over 75 hours of field recordings of rare music and interviews, video footage, seminar papers, new performance, soundscape design, further grants and more research and documentation. But there are things beyond all this. For me (as well as for Sukanta) whole new worlds of experience and understanding have opened up, and we have been initiated into new ways of listening and seeing. At one level, songs and stories are such solid things: you can almost touch them, especially if you are working in audio

recording! But then there is so much emotion and imagination that goes into the making of a song and so much abstraction that can come out of it. Then the song itself becomes a story—it does not stand on its own but is part of a larger narrative, a greater scheme of things. That has been one of my most important realisations from this journey. I was looking for songs of waiting, songs of longing, songs of desire. But all that longing and waiting and desire is part of our lives as singers and listeners; pluck a song out of the entanglement of life, and it loses something of its life.

The Kumar River meanders through Faridpur town in western Bangladesh. It must have been a fuller river once, but now it has silted and dried up in places. Besides, the month was January. I wanted to record some *bhatiyali* songs that the boatmen sang, and I had asked if we could get some actual boatmen, whose music this was. Our friend, Salamat Khan, said it would be good to go down to a *char* (temporary island formed by alluvial deposits on the riverbed) in the Padma and we could stay the night and record songs. But the plan did not work out, so we thought instead to go on a boat along the Kumar, with a few boatmen who lived along its shore in Uttar Shobharampur. These boatmen came from Bedepara—home of the *bede* or the gypsy.



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Kanai Baba, the blind singer of the Tarapith Kali temple in Birbhum, at his home
Photograph: Mousumi Bhowmik

We went on a boat on the Kumar one afternoon with friends and boatmen. The boat could not go very far, nor could the songs, because these boatmen did know many *bhatiyali* songs. Yet there were moments of beauty in the music of that afternoon, as the songs mingled with the sound of the water gently rocking the boat and people talking. You hear all those sounds in the recording session of that afternoon, which is called Kumar Nodi. "I don't really know how to sing," one boatman said, "but can I try a new song of Shanai Fakir?" "*Firayo na khali haate*, Don't send me back with empty hands"—the man was shy and his voice soft and feeble. "Don't send me back with empty hands. I sit here waiting like an orphan, like an *etim*..." The Kumar and its people have marked me with humility and submission. On another trip to Faridpur I met Hajera Bibi who also lives in Shobharampur, near where the gypsy boatmen live. Hajera Bibi is more than 90 years old and although she has lived a whole life in song-writing and singing, today she spends her final days in obscurity, in the company of her nearest relatives. If anyone asks her, then she talks a little about her past; if you insist then she might also sing for you a few lines from one of her own songs. She has lost most of the exercise books in which she had written the songs.

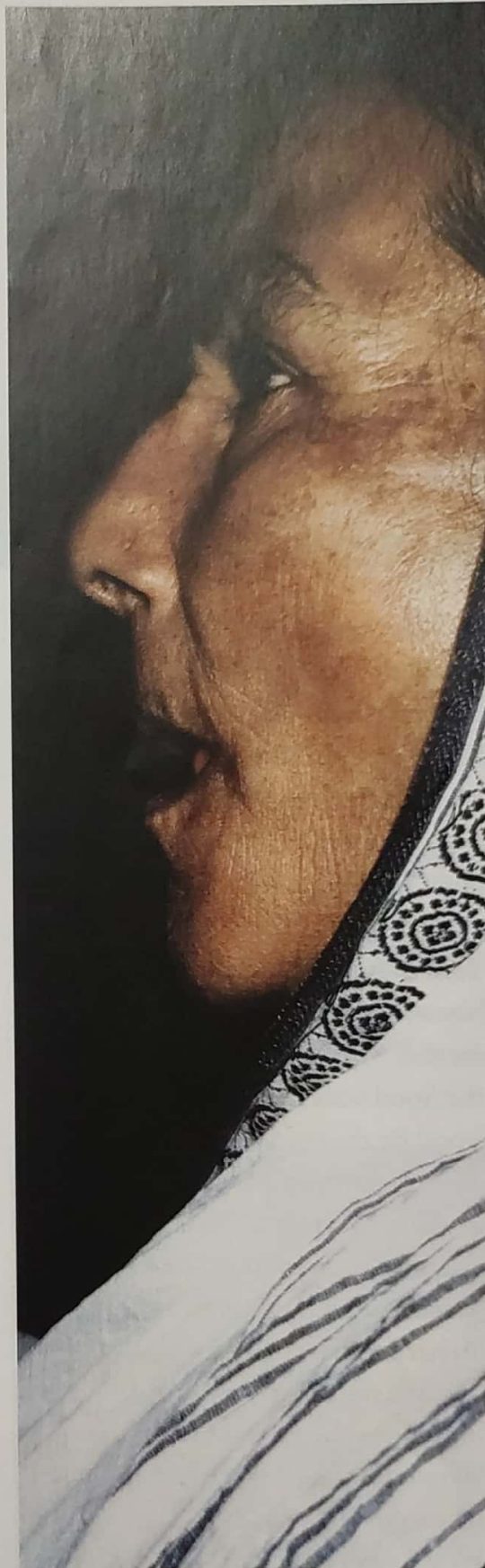
*Tumi antarar antarjami
Tomay ami bolbo ki?
Je haale rekhechho murshid
Shei haale thaki*

You live deep within me,
What can I say to you?
O murshid, I live in whatever way
You keep me.

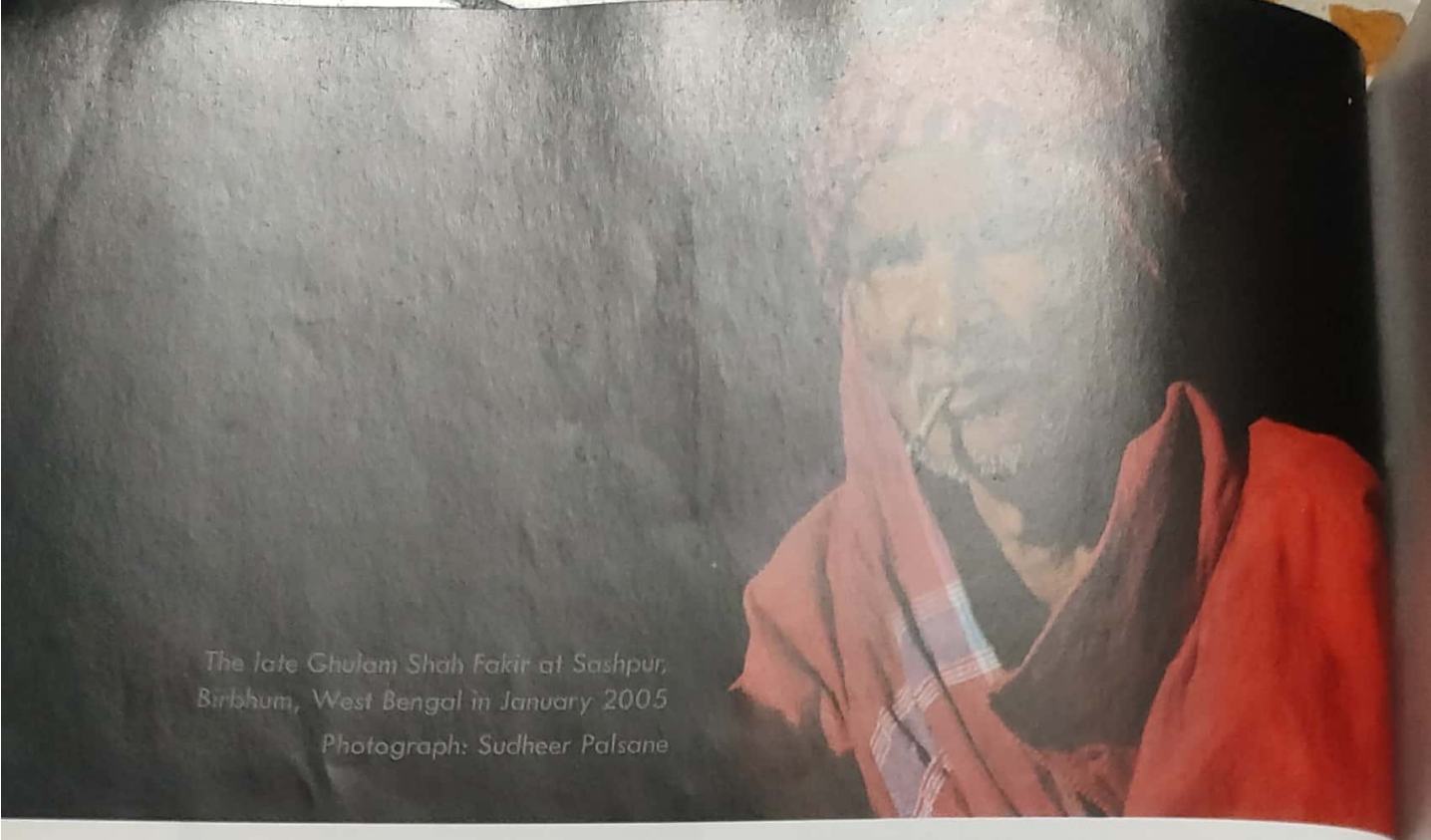
Deluge!

We did not know it could rain like that in October. We should have realised, of course, because when Sukanta came in a taxi to pick me up to go to the station early in the morning, the road outside my house was flooded—it had rained through the night and was still raining. Yet we set off; why, I cannot say, but it seemed like going or staying back was not in our hands. No one in their right mind would go out on such a day. That was in 2004, and it was one of my early field trips. From Howrah station the Ganadebata Express started on time and we got ourselves two window seats, although the shutters had to be pulled down because of rain. We were going to Rampurhat, from where we would take an auto-rickshaw to Tarapith. I had fixed up to meet Kanai, the blind singer of Tarapith Samsan (crematorium) and Kali temple, protagonist of Ranjan Palit's documentary *Abak Jai Here*.

When the train reached Sainthia, a couple of stations after Bolpur-Santiniketan, I saw the Mayurakshi river fuming and panting away; fields and houses were partially submerged; people were carrying things on their heads and wading through waist-deep water. But we still did not stop—as though we had to see the end of this. What happened after this is really the theatre of the absurd. We reached Tarapith floating in a raft-like van rickshaw. “I don’t know how to swim,” I confessed to Sukanta, clinging to our bag with the mini-disc recorder and microphone. We felt light in our heads I think, because we said something like, “what dedication to field work! IFA should reward us!” I don’t think we had much of an option but to take in whatever was coming our way. Ahead of us was another van covered in blue tarpaulin, tied with a rope. There was a soft chant of “*bolo hari hari bol*” coming from somewhere and it took us a while to understand that under the blue tarpaulin was a dead body and the van was headed for the *samsan*. I feared I might see corpses floating in Tarapith’s stale waters. But Kanai, who was sitting on the steps of the temple, waiting, was quite unmoved. He looked the same as he did many years ago, in Georges Lunau’s film *Songs of the Madmen*. In it you hear one of the most gentle renditions of the song “*Nodi bhora dheu, bojho na to*



The involved listener. During a kirtan session at Jaidev Mela in Kenduli, Birbhum
Photograph: Moushumi Bhowmik



The late Ghulam Shah Fakir at Sashpur,
Birbhum, West Bengal in January 2005
Photograph: Sudheer Palsane

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keu, Keno mayar tori bao bao re? Why row your boat of illusion in these turbulent waters?" We began to interview Kanai and he talked about growing up with music. Music has been his saviour, he said. Otherwise, what could a blind man have done?

That evening we decided to return home. Because, after floating about as we did, we could not wait to see when the flood water would go down. So I stood by the roadside while Sukanta went to find out if a car would take us to Sainthia. A woman bent with age, wearing a white sari with a red border and an enormous red bindi on her forehead, was gleefully coming towards me, muttering something to herself. As she passed by I heard her: "*Bhashchhe, bhashchhe*, they are floating away!"

We promised Kanai we'd return in less madder times and the following week we went again for his songs. He

was pleased to see us. The rains were gone; the temple and the streets were thick with people. We went to Kanai's house. The man talked and sang in his gentle manner and there was a smile printed on his face. "*Krishnakatha shunte lage bhalo*, It is a joy to hear Krishna speak," he sang. It was indeed a joy to listen to Kanai. While he was talking and singing, his wife was cooking in the outdoor kitchen. The sound of frying and stirring and boiling are mixed together with Kanai's songs in our soundtrack.

When it came to taking leave, our blind singer said, "How can you go without eating rice?" "*Anno*" is the word he used. *Anno*, rice—what a beautiful word! The wholeness of the grain fills up the inner space of the mouth.

Debdas Baul has a meal of rice and mutton curry with his little daughter, Kali, every Sunday. First they go and

take a dip in the Ajoy, then go to a hotel to have lunch—it is something of a ritual with them. Kali is the only girl Debdas has; the rest are boys, much older and in life's struggle to become men of some means. For them the option is between getting into some kind of business or following in the footsteps of the father and becoming Bauls too.

The Bauls are the most celebrated folk musicians of Bengal, whose songs, performance and lifestyle have attracted generations of artists, scholars and listeners from all over the world to their homes and their festivals of music. The Bauls are also the most travelled folk musicians of Bengal. Purnadas Baul appears on the cover jacket of Bob Dylan's 1963 *John Wesley Harding* album; there are wax cylinders of Adrian Bake recordings of Baul songs from the 1930s, kept at the National Sound Archives in the British Library, London; British scholar of religious studies, Jeanne Openshaw, has been studying and writing about Baul philosophy for the past 30 years; countless films have been made on them; musical collaborations have taken place such as the Real World Album of Paban Das Baul and Sam Mills, *Real Sugar*. This is a complex world of art which

intrigues me. I think that here many interests come together, one of the common points being the question of *anno* or livelihood. There is much debate about who the "real" Baul is: the *sadhak* (practising) or the *shilpi* (singer), and much exoticising of the mystical elements in this art. I don't understand these questions very well and they don't interest me that much either. But I thought what Paris-based Paban Das Baul said about his life and art is quite incisive. He was talking with British anthropologist, Laura Roychowdhury who was researching the role of Anglo-Indians in the Indian Railways. "I am just a singer trying to make a living," shrugs Pabon. "Don't ask me about Baul tradition. But I know a thing or two about the railways. That's part of your research, isn't it? I've travelled on them since I ran away from my village as a boy. I'd sing to the commuters on the local trains to make a little money ..."

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The boatman's song. On the Kumar river in Faridpur, Bangladesh. Seen in the picture are singer Sadek Ali, the majhi, another bede or gypsy singer and recordist Sukanta Majumdar.
Photograph: Moushumi Bhowmik



44 Once on a train back from an early field trip in Birbhum, I had written this in my notebook: "Why is it that the Bauls I meet often seem to lack in the dignity that becomes an artiste? Is it because: a) they live so close to the city; b) the city/Western world have been interested in their art; c) they are caught in the problem of having to "be"/"live" their songs. So they are not at peace with themselves, with their lives as performers. Even he who shrugs and says "So what?" is being apologetic. I do not see this problem among practitioners of any other genre. The Bauls carry the burden of wisdom, and that is sometimes too much of a load to carry.... From when the train started I had paid the Bauls, then the boy who came with a stick of a broom to sweep the floor of the train, then a little girl came, dressed as a miserable and shabby Father Christmas and later the one-eyed woman. By the time the mute *hijra* came and started clapping her hands, I had had enough of this procession of fringe people, so without hesitation, I paid her too."

Looking at the notes now I think that my views were partial then because I had not yet met the likes of Debdasda or Ghulam Shah Fakir. Debdas Baul is a man of minimal personal needs; he sits in the railway platform in Bolpur and smokes away, talking with the people who come and go. He has become our friend

and guide, he introduces us to music and instructs us on composition and forms. He teaches us something about discernment, the art of listening. He brings two women singers, Nandarani and Gitarani Dasi, to my Santiniketan guest-house room and the three of them sing baul and kirtan, which we record. Then Nandarani asks me to also sing for them.

Those days wherever I went, I used to sing a song of Pratima Barua, the legendary folk artist of Goalpara in Assam. I loved her bittersweet voice and the way she let the words roll on her tongue. "*Mori he mori he mori he Shyam, / Shayane shopone tomar naam.* I am dying, I am dying, I am dying O Shyam (Krishna)/ I call for you in my sleep and my dreams." When I finished Nandarani said, "*Bolihari jai*" (You leave me speechless).

Bolihari jai is what I have felt like telling so many people whom I have met on the road. Much of this journey leaves me speechless. I do not know how I can best respond to the sounds I carry with and within me, so I think it is best to keep silent. The songs are many; then there are interviews, pictures, roadmaps, travel plans. Seventy-five hours of field recordings to be archived in India and England, more field recordings to make in East London, amongst the Bangladeshi community, on the

theme of *biraha* for the homeland and notions of home. There is a quest in these people, a search for home in a land that is far from home. Second-generation, third-generation immigrants, who cling to the sound of words and songlines like artifacts from home.

I have begun to see how people take sound and the memory of sound with them wherever they go. In remote St Andrews in Scotland, an island known for its golf tourism, there was a restaurant called “Balaka”. It is such a strange coincidence that many years ago, in the early 1950s, my father and his friends as young men had gone

from their home in Bengal to a hill town in the northeast of India called Shillong, to work. There they had named their shared residence “Balaka”, after Tagore’s collection of poems. Words awaken remembering in us.

Kushira is an old and famous business house in London; one of the few businesses in which the Sylhetis have made it big. Kushiara, the river that runs through Sylhet in Bangladesh, is also the dividing line between Cachar in Assam, India, and Sylhet. As a little girl I saw this river when I went to Karimganj in Cachar with my father— “That is Bangladesh,” someone had pointed to me. Now,

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The late Ghulam Shah Fakir at Sashpur, Birbhum, West Bengal in January 2005

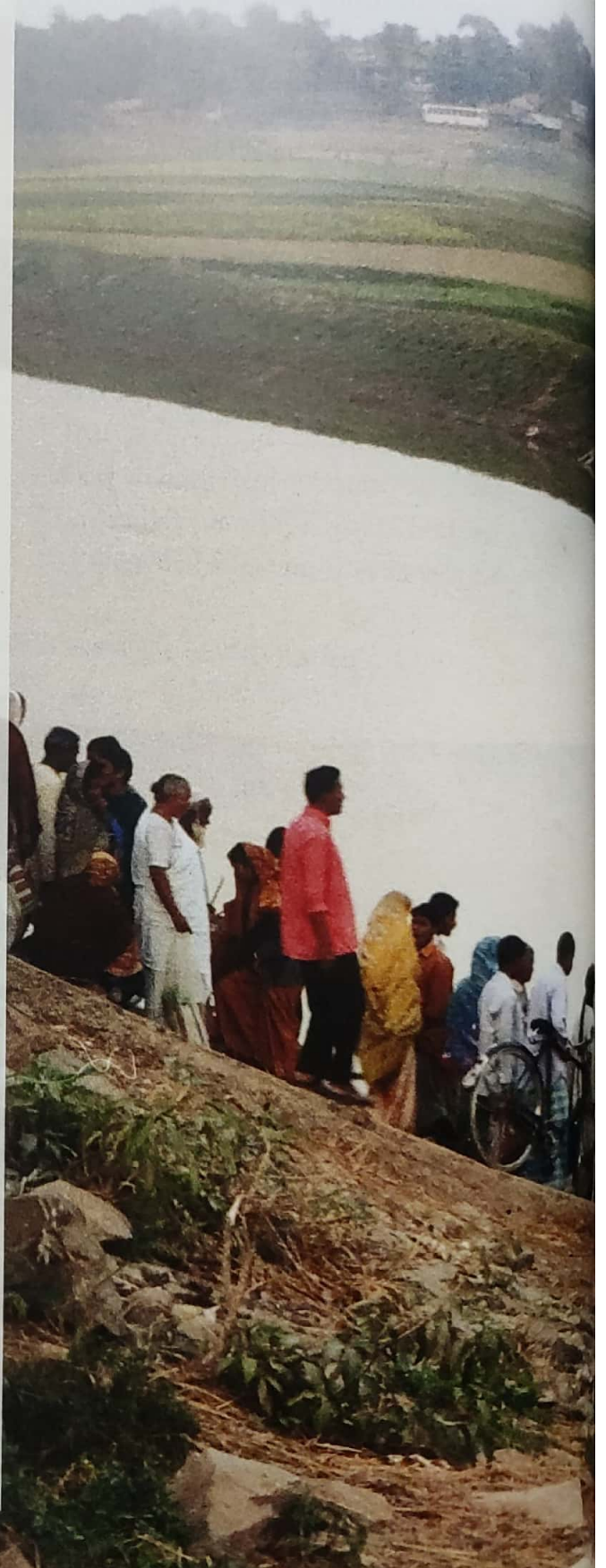
Photograph: Sudheer Palsane



in March 2007, I was walking with journalist Ahmed Moyez down East London's Commercial Road. Moyez comes from a family of Sufis in Syedpur, Sylhet, and he is a poet at heart. I think that for him home is wherever poetry is. He touches the listener with his own faith in poetry and the song

The big red buses are running along Commercial Road—cars, eight-wheel goods transporters. They make a lot of noise. Moyez does not care—he is busy talking about his Sufi grandfather Majiruddin and his son, Moyez's father, and about Shah Sultan, another Sufi poet from his region. He quotes from old texts with ease, now reciting, now breaking into song. He sings of the abstraction of sound: *Mridange uthichhe dhwani/ Shuni tar padadhwani re/ Shei dhwani-r-i kampan amar/ Hiyate sunilam amar/ Mon, mon re, kyane ba tare chinilam?* It is a longing to listen to the Sound of the Universe that he is talking about, about hearing the footsteps of a Coming as it were, of an Awakening.

Moyez sings on, ignoring the sounds of the big city, which try to overwhelm him. I hear in his song the celebration of poetry, of words which fill the inner space of the mouth like food; I hear the celebration of music which lulls the child to sleep and which makes loving so beautiful. All that I want to say is: "Bolihari jai. I am speechless."



The Gadadhar river of Gouripur in Assam features in many folk songs of the region such as "Gadadharer paare paare re" made popular by the singer of Goalparia geet, Pratima Barua
Photograph: Moushumi Bhowmik

