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**The Jumping Devils:
A tale of circus bodies**

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The Jumping Devils: A tale of circus bodies*

Nisha P R

Two children's rights activists, Kailash Satyarthi from India and young Malala Yousafzai from Pakistan, shared the 2014 Nobel Peace Prize. This global recognition for Mr Kailash Satyarthi has an intimate connection with Indian circus. The peace prize winner has been waging a war, so to say, against circus companies in India for decades:

Mr. Satyarthi was lying on the ground, bleeding profusely from the head, while a group of men converged on him with bats and iron rods. They worked for the Great Roman Circus, which was illegally employing teenagers trafficked from Nepal as dancing girls. Mr. Satyarthi, a Gandhian activist in simple white cotton tunic, had come to free them (*The New York Times*, 2014 October 10).

It was on a petition filed by Mr Satyarthi's organization, *Bachpan Bachao Andolan*¹ that the Supreme Court of India on 18 April, 2011 banned the employment and performance of children below fourteen. The apex court directed the Government of India to conduct simultaneous raids in all circus companies to liberate children and check if their fundamental rights were violated.

The petitioners *Bachpan Bachao Andolan* proposed to notify circus as a "hazardous industry" pointing out the high risk factor of acrobatics and the daily routine hindering the all-round

* Revised version of the lecture delivered at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, 11 February 2015.

¹ 'Save the Childhood Movement' was founded by Kailash Satyarthi in 1980; see the organization's website <http://www.bba.org.in>.

development of children. They argued that there is instability in the children's life due to the "nomadic existence":

The petition has been filed in public interest under Article 32 of the Constitution in the wake of serious violations and abuse of children who are forcefully detained in circuses, in many instances, without any access to their families under extreme inhuman conditions. There are instances of sexual abuse on a daily basis, physical abuse as well as emotional abuse. The children are deprived of basic needs of food and water.²

We shall come back to this socio-legal discourse of cruelty and liberation soon. My attempt here would be to discuss some key aspects regarding body, performance, dignity, and livelihood which are rendered invisible by such a discourse. Let us shift now to a different time and space; where many had found in a new physical culture called circus and the "nomadic existence" it offered, a great liberating potential against the atrocious social proscriptions within which they lived.

Malabar and Circus

In 1959 *King Pole* magazine published from London wonders: "Today there are several really large Indian circuses whose artists are predominantly young girls, most of whom hail from a place called KERALA. Who are these girls and where do they get their training?"³

The place, precisely, is called Malabar, the northern part of Kerala state that came into being in 1956 integrating Malabar, Kochi, and Travancore. Unlike the other two provinces, Malabar had been under direct British rule and Thalassery town in North Malabar was a major trade point and judicial center of the British

² Writ Petition (C) No. 51, 2006, *Bachpan Bachao Andolan Vs Union of India & Others* (hereafter 'BBA Petition, 2006').

³ "The Circus in India", 1959, *King Pole*, 2 (15), p. 21.

administration. Thalassery still figures in the postcolonial fantasy as a showpiece of the colonial heritage. The official website of Kerala State Tourism Department brags that “It is often called the city of “three Cs” in the state—cricket, cake, and circus. It is the place where the British first played cricket, the first cakes introduced by the British were baked here in the Mambally’s Royal Biscuit Factory, and Indian circus had its origins in this town as well”.⁴

The Malayali imagined community has always let this fable flourish. Let me narrate an interesting tale from 1955, the chaotic period when the new territorial unit, Kerala state, was coming into being. A group of famous writers, journalists, and actors—all men—from Travancore in the south made a trip to the north, Malabar. The travelogue *Malabaarilekku oru Ethinottam* (A Peep into Malabar) written by one of them, K Balakrishnan—renowned writer and editor—and published in his immensely popular *Kaumudi Weekly* lay bare many predicaments of treading into an unfamiliar terrain. Let us take up one such defining dilemma from Balakrishnan’s interesting text. The following incident happens while the group was staying at the home of the eminent short story writer, Pattathuvila Karunakaran in Kozhikode, one of the major towns in Malabar:

The next morning we saw a strange figure at the veranda of the neighboring house. A beautiful girl of about eighteen years in bright green skirt and blouse stretching forward with her hands held high with a firm grip on the block above the door. She slowly lifted from the ground hanging on to the hands and then came down bending backwards, like a ballerina. She must have not seen us. For us such a performance on the veranda was weird and we right away came to the conclusion that the house is “indecent” and the girl is “licentious”.

⁴ Kerala Tourism, <http://www.keralatourism.org/kerala-article/212/historic-thalassery.php> [Accessed on November14, 2012].

“Watching the circus?” we heard our host asking. Then only we realized it was a circus camp. That girl was reminding us that Malabar tops the circus rings in India.⁵

The angst about the Other in this masculine-tourist ‘peep’ is more than obvious. But what is equally striking is that a popular and overriding narrative comes in handy for the conflict resolution: circus and Malabar. Incidentally, I would say the gaze that stigmatizes the circus body has always been dominant. During my field work many of the female artistes were reluctant to show me the old photos of their performances. Their grown up children or grandchildren thought those “half naked” bodies disgraced the family.⁶

Coming back to the circus and ‘Malayali’ fable, M.T. Vasudevan Nair, one of the most renowned Malayalam writers in the country, claims, “...circus is a universal physical art like *kalaripayatt* or *kathakali* which Keralam can rightly claim as its own; Keralam’s gift to the universe...”.⁷ Alas, the ‘Keralam’ of earlier times had nothing to do with such ideal universalisms. It was notorious for its brutal caste and gender discrimination. Stringent spatial and physical distance, even to the extent of seeing, was practiced to maintain the ‘purity’ of caste: “The movement of the body in public spaces was regulated through a system of distance pollution, the sacredness of the space and the purity of the body being dependent on restrictions of access to other bodies in terms of visibility, touch, hearing and clearly

⁵ K Balakrishnan, “Malabaarilekku oru Ethinottam (A Peep into Malabar)”, *Kaumudi Weekly*, Malayalam Era 1131 (1955), Midhunam 4 – Karkidakam 15 (7 issues), Reprinted in *Kaumudi Special Edition*, July–September, 2009, p 35; unless specified otherwise all translations from Malayalam are mine.

⁶ Photograph collections of circus community have been a significant source for me. One will definitely find a collection of images with almost all of them; wonderful visual records of performances, ceremonies and celebrations in the tent like marriages and birthdays. It is as if they have been creating an archive of one’s own.

⁷ M T Vasudevan Nair, 1998, *Ramaneeyam Oru Kalam (Beautiful Times)*, Thiruvananthapuram: Maluben, p 149.

specified distances.”⁸ The traditional physical forms mentioned by Vasudevan Nair, *kalaripayatt* and *kathakali* were no different and it is within this uncanny configuration of caste, gender, and region that circus acrobatics took shape in this part of the world.

The circus *kalaris*—circus training spaces—that produced most of the renowned circus acrobats from Malabar who ruled the tents across borders were established during this time. The conversion of the traditional *payatt kalari*—where caste and its embedded social status dominated in many ways—into a circus *kalari* that undermined that system of exclusion by recasting the body with a new physical culture was definitely one of the most significant moments of the era. But this does not figure in any colonial, nationalist, or subaltern historical narratives of ‘resistance’ or ‘reform’ in Malabar.

Some prominent writers have mentioned in passing about the obvious links between *kalaripayatt* and the development of circus acrobatics in Malabar. In the introduction of his celebrated book on *Kalaripayatt*, Philip B. Zarrilli points to the influence of it in training the early generations of circus artistes in the region.⁹ A

⁸ Udaya Kumar, “Self, Body and Inner Sense: Some reflections on Sree Narayana Guru and Kumaran Asan”, Elleke Boehmer and Rosinka Chaudari (ed), *The Indian Postcolonial*, London and New York: Routledge, 2011, p 215.

⁹ Zarrilli, having pointed out the long history of martial arts being adapted for different practices and presentations in various contexts, directs our attention to the uses of *kalaripayatt* in training other arts like *kathakali* or *teyyam* and mentions “...its use in training the first Indian (Malayali) circus performers in the late nineteenth century...”; Philip B. Zarrilli, 1998, *When Body Becomes All Eyes: Paradigms, Discourses, Practices of Power in Kalaripayattu, a South Indian Martial Art*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p 3. It should be noted here that just as early *kalaripayatt* practitioners joined circus, many of them had entered cinema industry as stunt masters (I am grateful to Professor Partha Chatterjee for pointing this out to me). One of the doyens in the southern film industry, stunt master Thyagarajan who as a child learned *kambuvati* and *kalaripayatt*, says, “...one who does not have suppleness of body cannot do this job...” (*Mathrubhumi Weekend Edition*, March 29, 2009). Gyan Prakash also notes that, “...Indian stunt films drew on deeply rooted traditions of physical culture and performance...”; Gyan Prakash, 2010, *Mumbai Fables*, Delhi: Harper Collins, p 108.

Marxist historian from Malabar, K K N Kurup notes that kalaripayatt was influential in the growth of *theyyam*, *poorakkali*, *mutiyett* and circus.¹⁰ But interestingly neither of them mentions the few circus kalaris that came into being in Thalassery and Kannur regions in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It could be because the circus kalaris are not seen as integral to ‘tradition’ as the other arts and physical cultures mentioned above.¹¹ So despite being an amazing space of physical strength, skill, and display the kalaripayatt admirers seem to have paid no attention to the circus kalaris that produced most of the renowned circus acrobats from Malabar who ruled the tents across borders in the first part of the twentieth century.

Those from within the circus community who had ventured into writing the history of their vocation do refer to the circus kalaris. But regrettably they did not go much into exploring the significant role these centers had in shaping this particular physical culture. In *Circus* Kandambulli Balan writes about Keeleri Kunhikannan’s circus kalari, but fails to mention the other two major centers. Sreedharan Champad’s *Circusinte Lokam* (The World of Circus) mentions the circus kalaris established by Keeleri Kunhikannan and M K Raman, but hardly speaks about their characteristics or what brought about such an endeavor. Likewise, he hardly mentions the circus kalari training systems in his other two books. In his reminiscences, circus artiste and entrepreneur Gemini Sankaran also mentions Keeleri Kunhikannan’s kalari briefly, from where he started his career. While Sankaran refers mostly about Keeleri’s disciples who went on to work in various circus companies, Sreehari Nair’s biography of Gemini Sankaran in English is totally silent about these kalaris.¹²

¹⁰ K K N Kurup, *Samooham, Charithram, Samskaram (Society, History, Culture)*, Kozhikode: Poorna Publications, 1990, pp. 96–112.

¹¹ It is interesting to note that the circus kalaris are cherished by the local memory. For instance, the area where M K Raman’s circus kalari had been established is still known among the people of the locality and auto-rikshaw drivers in Thalassery town as ‘Chirakkara Kalari’.

¹² Gemini Sankaran, Thaha Madayi, *Malakkam Mariyunna Jeevitham (Somersaulting Life)*, Kottayam: DC Books, 2012; Sreehari Nair, 2013, *Gemini Shankaran & the Legacy of Indian Circus*, Thalassery: Gayathri Designs and Promotions, 2013.

Others who have written about the links between kalaripayatt and circus, fail to consider circus kalaris as a distinct site and the socio-cultural significance of its transformation. For instance, Sasikumar Kallidumbil mentions Keeleri's circus kalari, but does not talk about the kalaris of M K Raman and M Mannan.¹³

Keeleri's Circus Kalari

Keeleri Kunhikannan teacher was born on 12th August, 1855 in Thalassery. A report by the newspaper, *Mitavadi* (1914 January) notes that after gaining expertise in indigenous physical sports such as "*muchaan, otta, kettuvari, thotti, maravu, kunthapayatt*", he travelled to Madras, Mysore, Trichi and Madhura and found teachers there to fulfill his learning: "He has also become skilled at Punjabi wrestling and foreign practices such as the *cheti, baana, lejj* and *shankilipothu*". Keeleri underwent gymnastic training in Madras for a year under the Field Games Association and learnt kalaripayatt under Maroli Ramunni Gurukkal and later on under Unni Kurup.¹⁴ He was also into wrestling, weight lifting, and games such as cricket. He joined the Basel Evangelic Mission School at Thalassery as a gymnastics teacher in 1884. He also taught horizontal and parallel bars and the Swedish Drill.¹⁵

There are different narratives regarding Keeleri's 'first' encounter with circus. Kandambulli Balan and Sreedharan

¹³ Sasikumar Kallidumbil, "Kalaripayattum Circussum (Kalaripayatt and Circus)", Champadan Vijayan (ed), *Gnanodayayogam Sathabdi Charithra Smaranika 2005*, Thalassery: Sree Gnanodaya Yogam Centenary Committee for History Preparation, October 2005, p 205.

¹⁴ *Mitavadi*, 1914 January; S Narayanan, "Prof. Keeleri Kunhikannan", *Circus Worker*, 1(4), 1980, p 5, 8; Sasikumar Kallidumbil, "Kalaripayattum Circussum", p 205; Sreedharan Champad, "Circussinte Eetillam (The Birth Place of Circus)", Raju Kaattupanam (ed), *Smrithichitra: Thalassery Vidyabhyasa Jilla 2004-2005*, Thalassery: Vidyarangam and Subject Council of Thalassery Educational District, 2005, p 149.

¹⁵ A Sreedhara Menon, 1972, *Kerala District Gazeteers: Canannore, Trivandrum*: Government Press, 1972, p 245; Murkoth Kunhappa, "Circussilude Arogya Sambadanam (Gaining Health through Circus)", *Circus Worker*, 1980 1(3), p 23.

Champad—both from circus community and penned the tales of circus—locate this in different places and times. Balan notes that Keeleri saw Chatre Circus in 1888 at Thalassery, “...Gurukkal, who had not seen an organized circus till then, decided to try whether the breathtaking items of Chatre’s circus could be taught to Malayali youngsters. He was optimistic about this experimentation because he believed that the land of North Malabar, where the daring heroes and heroines of *Vadakkanpattukal* were born and brought up, was fertile for physical arts to flourish...”.¹⁶ Sreedharan Champad argues that it was in 1884 Keeleri had seen some European circus in Madras and he met Chatre in 1887 when the latter came to Thalassery: “...The rendezvous of two physical art masters”.¹⁷

Whatever knowledge and training Keeleri had gained in the field of circus acrobatics had the flavours of many cultures and styles. Circus acrobatics in the Indian subcontinent is a complex and hybrid form where different sorts of bodily acts and performances, different regions, and cultures come together. And Keeleri’s passion for the form and his decision to establish a training centre to disseminate might have a more radical reckoning to it. He must have found in this ‘modern’ and ‘assorted’ physical culture the possibility to imagine an egalitarian space of the bodies, of different castes and genders. The daring choices he made in his personal life stand testimony to his constant seeking out for a better and equal world.

Keeleri was born into Thiyya, a ‘Backward’ caste. He did not believe in the caste system and married from a ‘lower’ caste and joined the Brahma Samaj.¹⁸ The Thiyya Sabha had decided that

¹⁶ Kandambulli Balan, *Circus*, Kottayam: NBS, 1961, p 49.

¹⁷ Sridharan Champad, *Circusinte Lokam (The World of Circus)*, Kozhikode: Mathrubhumi, 2008, p 129.

¹⁸ Examining the role of Basel Evangelical Mission in bringing out social changes in Malabar, M Madhavan notes, “Brahma Samaj made its entry into Malabar in 1898 with the establishment of its branch at Calicut. They gave more attention to the depressed castes. Brahma Samaj warned the people not to send their children to mission schools. The Theosophists and the nationalists propagated the concept of national education. Annie Besant called upon the

the Thiyyas who joined the Brahma Samaj will be declared outcastes. But the caste masters could not subdue the spirit of a being like Keeleri (*Malayala Manorama* 1903, April 29; June 17). He converted to Christianity and remained so until his death on 22nd September 1939 at the age of eighty one.¹⁹ We should bear in mind that for most ‘lower’ castes, conversion to Christianity had been an act of resistance and survival of the Hindu casteism unlike the generally perceived notion of conversion as a compulsion from the part of missionaries.²⁰

Nettoor P Damodaran notes pointedly in his memoirs that Keeleri “...selected his pupils from underprivileged families stigmatized as untouchables by the upper castes”.²¹ Keeleri trained *Mukkuvass*, fishing community, from Thalayi, a coastal region in Thalassery in large numbers including the renowned Parammel Kesavan, acrobat turned animal trainer. Ramanathan who is from the fishing community proudly told me that “his people” were the favourites of Keeleri.²² John Roselli notes that the members

Hindus to establish their own schools, as in Mission schools their religion was blasphemed. They opposed the domination of religious ideals in the educational activities of the Basel Mission. They also attacked the prevailing caste system, untouchability and other evils in the society.” Madhavan M, *Social Reform Movements in Malabar*, Doctoral Dissertation, University of Calicut, Kerala, 2010, pp 79–80.

¹⁹ Keeleri Kunhikannan Teacher was buried at CSI Gundert Church Cemetery, Illykkunnu, Thalassery. The epitaph says, “Keeleri Karunakaran (Professor Keeleri Kuhikannan Teacher) Father of Circus who Spent his Life Time in the Service of the Poor and Needy Died on 22-9-1939 - Aged 81. He died as He Lived Every One’s Friend Till God Called Him Home”. After converting to Christianity he changed his name, to ‘Keeleri Karunakaran’; Interview, Edward Williams. It is interesting to note that he adopted a ‘Hindu’ name rather than an explicit ‘Christian’ name even after conversion.

²⁰ See P Sanal Mohan, “Struggles against Inequalities: Dalit Movements in Early-Twentieth- Century Kerala”, Paper presented at the Papiya Ghosh Memorial Annual Workshop-cum-Seminar on ‘Minority Cultures’, CSSSCAL, Calcutta, 25-26 June, 2010.

²¹ Nettoor P Damodaran, 1987, *Anubhavachurulukal (Folds of Memory)*, Kottayam: NBS, 1987, p 11.

²² Interview, Ramanathan, retired circus artiste and trainer, Thalassery, 18 June 2013.

of early Bengali circus were “...a mixture of odd members of the upper castes or the educated category and people of unclear but probably humble social origin”.²³

Interestingly in both Maharashtra and Bengal, the other two centers where circus flourished, the circus body seems to have been implicated in *swadeshi* and Hindu nationalist discourses of the time which endorsed a certain scheme of power, masculinity, and strength. Savarkar and Tilak had ties with Maratha circus companies such as Deval circus.²⁴ Babasaheb Deval who started the company was a Maratha Brahmin and an active member of the Hindu Mahasabha. In 1948 Deval circus tent was burnt down by an angry mob, the backlash of Gandhi’s assassination.²⁵ It is significant that no records that I have come across relates circus in Malabar to such discourses while there had been a strong revival move in the case of kalaripayatt. Ian McDonald argues that the resurgence of interest in kalarippayatt in the 1920s was part of the reaction against colonial discourses of Hindu effeminacy and it was celebrated in public discourse as an encapsulation of Kerala’s valorous martial spirit and an idealization of Malayali manhood.²⁶

It is significant in this context to note an instance in which the circus tent figures in a totally different political scenario. Two major biographies of the great Dalit leader from Travancore, Mahatma Ayyankali (1863–1941), register that the large peace

²³ John Rosselli, “The Self-Image of Effeteness: Physical Education and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Bengal”, *Past & Present*, 86, February, 1980, p. 144.

²⁴ Interview, Rajendra Deval, grandson of Bandopant Deval, Miraj, 24 January 2013; Photograph of Savarkar’s visit to their circus tent is in the Deval family album and also published in Bandopant Deval’s autobiography. See, Bandopant Deval, 1982, *Circus Barobal Chaleez (Along with Circus for Forty Years)*, Mumbai: Majestic.

²⁵ Interview, Rajendra Deval, grandson of Bandopant Deval, Miraj, 24 January 2013; Kandambulli Balan, *Circus*, p. 48.

²⁶ Ian McDonald, 2003, “Hindu Nationalism, Cultural Spaces and Bodily Practices in India”, *American Behavioral Scientist*, July, 46, pp. 1563–1576.

gathering on 1915 December 19, soon after the legendary Perinadu Rebellion was held at a circus tent in Kollam Town. Perinadu Rebellion, also known as ‘Kallumala Samaram’ (stone necklace struggle) was a momentous struggle when Dalits publicly discarded caste marking stone ornaments in the face of violent retaliation from the upper castes. When the organizers of the peace meeting could not get a suitable place the circus owner graciously offered the tent. What is more striking is that both the biographies state that this owner was a Dalit woman. While Chentharassery says it was Tarabai, Kunnukuzhi Mani and Anirudhan gives the name Ratnabai.²⁷ I interviewed both the authors, Chentharassery and Kunnukuzhi Mani, and Chentharassery told me that there were disputes regarding her caste—that she was a Thiyya. Kunnukuzhi Mani said he has no further details regarding the circus or its owner.²⁸ But I have not come across a Dalit woman circus owner, Malayali or otherwise, in my research yet. Tarabai, renowned as Lady Sandow, an acrobat and animal trainer, and owner of Tarabai circus was born in Bandique in Rajputana (*Bombay Chronicle*, 1914 March 12). Neither in the historical records I read nor in the memories of the circus community I could find any information regarding “Ratnabai”, but could be a misreading of the name Rugmabai. The lady sandow was from Andhra.²⁹

²⁷ T H P Chentharassery, 2009, *Ayyankali*, Thiruvananthapuram: Prabhath, pp 86-87; Kunnukuzhi S Mani and Anirudhan P S, 2013, *Malthama Ayyankali*, Kottayam: DC Books, pp 110-111.

²⁸ Interview, T H P Chentharassery, Thiruvananthapuram, 18 July 2014; Kunnukuzhi S Mani, Thiruvananthapuram, 15 July 2014.

²⁹ Sridharan Champad, *An Album of Indian Big Tops*, Houston: Strategic Books, 2013, p 28; During the second World War when Japan was bombed, Rugmabai Circus and its animals were burnt to ashes. Rugmabai and company returned to India travelling through forests, starving and suffering. Sridharan Champad, *Circusinte Lokam*, p 155; According to Vanaja, the incident happened in Burma and they travelled on foot to Assam leaving everything behind; Interview, Vanaja, retired circus artiste, Melur, 23 May 2008.

Training in the Circus *Kalari*

Coming back to Keeleri's circus kalari, it was built at Chirakkara in Thalassery, adjoining his home.³⁰ A notice published as part of the endeavour to revive this kalari in 1949 states the year of the establishment as 1888.³¹ While Kandambulli Balan, Keezhanthi Gopalan Teacher and historian Sreedhara Menon are of the opinion that it was built in 1901, Sridharan Champad says that it was built as a "temporary shed" in 1888.³² Almost all the items such as the *horizontal bar*, *varma chattam* (frog), *trapeze*, *rope dance*, *weight lifting*, *rings*, *foot juggling*, *pole* and *wire* items used to be taught in the circus kalaris. However, although Zarrilli, K K N Kurup and Sasikumar refer to the influence of kalaripayatt in circus acrobatics they seem to have missed the key aspect that it was a *payatt* kalari that Keeleri transformed into a circus kalari.³³

Edward Williams said that his grandfather, Keeleri Kuhikannan trained men and women and placed them in the circus companies owned by Marathis and later in Malayali companies.³⁴ After the completion of training the acrobat could suggest the name of the company s/he wanted to join and the Teacher helped them out by arranging a bond of four to five years with the company.³⁵ At times the companies sent agents to him for acrobats talented in some particular item.³⁶

³⁰ Interview, Edward Williams, retired circus manager and grandson of Keeleri/Kuhikannan, Chirakkara, 26 March 2010.

³¹ Notice dated August 1949, "Late Professor Keeleri Kuhikannan Teacher's All India Circus Training Hall, Cherakkara, Tellicherry (N. Malabar)".

³² Kandambulli Balan, "Maharashtrathil ninnu Malayalathilekk (From Maharashtra to Malayalam)", *Circus Worker*, 1(1), 1980; Keezhanthi Gopalan Teacher, "M K Raman", *Mathrubhumi Illustrated Weekly*, 29(52), 1960, p 22; A Sridhara Menon, *Kerala District Gazeteers*, p 245; Sridharan Champad, *Circusinte Lokam*, p 129.

³³ Zarilli, *When Body Becomes All Eyes*; K K N Kurup, *Samooham*, *Charithram*, *Samskaram*; Sasikumar, "Kalaripayattum Circussum".

³⁴ Interview, Edward Williams.

³⁵ Interview, Kunhiraman, retired circus artiste, Melur, 24 January 2009.

³⁶ Interview, Edward Williams.



The circus kalari was also a social space for an emerging new community feeling; a space to gather, chat, and engage in discussions with larger dimensions of their profession and the world around them, in contrast to the ‘traditional’ disciplined payatt kalari.³⁷ The artistes who come on their annual leave from the circus companies would visit the kalari and treat the students to tea parties and exciting stories from their circus life.³⁸

Keeleri was, in fact, reconstructing the very structure of acrobatics in the world circus arena with his meticulous blending of different physical cultures in circus acrobatics. This could be one of the reasons why his disciples received almost instantaneous recognition with their distinguishing feats not only in Indian circus companies but also all over the world.

Rosie Thomas notes in her paper “Still MAGIC: An Aladdin’s Cave of 1950’s B-Movie Fantasy”,

Since the mid-eighteenth century the circus had been gradually introduced alongside this (street) culture; by the start of the twentieth century Indian circuses—incorporating Indian traditional martial arts, acrobatics, magic, and lion-taming acts—were travelling India’s entertainment circuits alongside circuses from Europe, Russia, Japan, and elsewhere, inviting audiences to wonder at apparently impossible feats that confounded the rules of the ordinary world. All such shows celebrated bodies pushed to their extremes and wild beasts subdued by men’s—and women’s—remarkable powers. An underclass of artistes from European, middle-Eastern, Indian, and Anglo-Indian backgrounds provided the bodies that peopled these extravaganzas, which were, in many senses, transcultural shows, seen as ambiguously both modern and traditional.

³⁷ Vasudevagurukkal E P Kadathuruthi, *Kalaripayatt: Keralathinte Thanathu Ayodhanakala (Kalaripayatt: The Original Martial Art of Kerala)*, Kottayam: DC Books, 2000, pp 24–26.

³⁸ Interview, Rajan, retired circus artiste and trainer, Muzhappilanhad, 17 September 2009; Sreehari Nair, *Gemini Shankaran & the Legacy of Indian Circus*, p 135.

European and Asian traditions merged to present hybrid fantasies of exotic otherness. Anecdotal accounts suggest circus images were almost as popular as Hindu gods and goddesses in the turn-of-century magic lantern as shows that toured India.³⁹

In 1914, a decade or so after Keeleri's circus kalari had been established, a Malayalam newspaper, *Mitavadi* (January) reports:

More than sixty people belonging to different castes, from the Brahmins, and (other) religions trained in the *kalari* have been getting salaries of more than hundred rupees from various circus companies. There are also girls among them. The leading fifteen performers of the famous Chatre's circus are the disciples of Mr. Keeleri Kunhikannan. The best of the lot is M K Raman who performs with bars on the bar. He has received lots of rewards from kings and nobles. M. Yesoda of the same circus company, and M Madhavi and O Devaki from National circus are also his disciples. The ten year old boy, Chandu, who enthralls the spectators with his tight-rope items, is also one of his foremost disciples. Many Malayalis must have seen the performances of P Kunhambu, P Govindan, Parayali Kannan and K Kanari, the main players of Karlekar circus.

Following the master's footsteps, his disciples M Mannan and M K Raman also established their own circus kalaris.⁴⁰ It is apparent that circus provided an alternate space of dignity and livelihood for many young people, especially from the subaltern communities. The circus rings witnessed the heroic transformation of their lives. A glaring instance would be the life of N P Kannan who was the nephew of Keeleri Kunhikannan, who became a globally renowned circus acrobat as "Kannan Bombayo".

³⁹ Rosie Thomas, Still MAGIC: 'An Aladdin's Cave of 1950s B-Movie Fantasy, Tasveer Ghar: A Digital Archive of South Asian Popular Visual Culture', 2010, <http://tasveerghar.net/cmsdesk/essay/103/index.html> [Accessed on 12 January 2011].

⁴⁰ For a detailed discussion see, Nisha P R, "Performing Bodies, Physical Cultures: Looking at the Circus Kalaris in Malabar", *Social Science Probings*, 22(1), June, 2010.

Kannan Bombayo

Sreedharan Champad narrates Kannan's initiation into Keeleri's circus *kalari*: One day Keeleri heard a child's sobs while he was walking and when he looked up he saw child Kannan sitting on the high branch of a jack fruit tree. Tearfully the child told him that the fragrance of the ripe fruit led him there but now he was afraid to climb down. Keeleri smiled and asked him to jump into his hands which he did. Child Kannan was taken straight to the circus *kalari* and a glorious acrobatic career began, at the age of seven.⁴¹ In 1928, at the age of 22, Kannan left for Europe where he made a great mark.⁴² The book, *The Circus: 1870s to 1950s*, has a 1933 circus poster of Hagenbeck–Wallace circus which mentions him as “Bombayo, the Man from India in the most astounding midair somersaulting exploits ever witnessed”. The book notes in its caption, “...the remarkable Indian acrobat Kannan Bombayo became an international circus star for performing double somersaults on a bounding rope. The fact that he was Indian was a bonus that the Hagenbeck–Wallace circus didn't fail to enhance visually in this 1930s poster, which linked the show with the circus' exotic menagerie and its Indian elephants”.⁴³

It was Betram W Mill, owner of the Betram Mill's circus who introduced him as “Kannan Bombayo”. He toured the United States with Barnum & Bailey Ringling Brothers and such was his clout that he performed solo in their central ring with the weekly salary of 400 dollars.⁴⁴ Murkoth Ramunny, the chronicler of Malabar, notes, “...he married in Italy, the European girl who had been his friend... In the course of his engagements he played at the Olympia and toured America with the Barnum and Bailey's combined show. Rulers of many countries like His Majesty, the

⁴¹ Sreedharan Champad, *An Album of Indian Big Top*, p 30.

⁴² Also see, A Sreedhara Menon, 2008, *Cultural Heritage of Kerala*, Kottayam: D C Books, p 130.

⁴³ Noel Daniel, 2008, *The Circus, 1870s-1950s*, Los Angeles: Taschen, 2008, p 131.

⁴⁴ Sreedharan Champad, *An Album of Indian Big Top*, p 32.

King of Britain, Herr Hitler and Signor Mussolini bestowed medals on him as marks of their favour. Altogether Kannan had 405 medals....”⁴⁵

Kannan Bombayo’s encounter with Adolf Hitler in Berlin is legendary among the circus community in Malabar. It is said that after watching Kannan’s spectacular performance of double back somersaults on a simple slack rope in mid-air in his popular item known as *rope dance*, Hitler is said to have exclaimed “Jumping devil of India” with his mouth agape.⁴⁶ This was definitely a remarkable moment which should be read along with that of Jesse Owens in Berlin Olympics, two dark bodies demolishing Fuhrer’s myth of Aryan supremacy.

As mentioned earlier Keeleri’s disciples M Mannan and M K Raman had also established circus kalaris in 1937 and 1941 respectively. The circus kalari, established by M K Raman was modeled on the kalari of Keeleri Kunhikannan. Of the circus kalaris mentioned here this is the only one that still stands, as remains of a past. There were futile attempts to revive both Keeleri’s and Raman’s kalaris during these times. But by then many big circus companies emerged in Malabar, most of them established by former artistes or managers. The Kamala three-ring circus, for instance, was the largest in Asia at the time and the second largest in the world. These constant-moving tents had become training sites of the next generation artistes. And circus must have started figuring in a certain common sense as an awful exploitative realm with abused women and children, crudely and

⁴⁵ Murkoth Ramunny, 1993, “The Jumping Devil of India: Circus Artiste Who Created Sensation Abroad”, M G S Narayanan, (ed), *Malabar Mahotsav 1993 Souvenir*.

⁴⁶ There are different versions of this tale where Hitler checked the shoe soles of Kannan or the ‘jumping devil’ reference was given to Kannan as an autograph and so on. In the absence of conventional archives, memories of the circus community are a major source of my research. And memories vary, obviously. What women remember is often strikingly different from that of their male counterparts!



cruelly treated animals, primitive labor relations and extremely dangerous working conditions.

Circus Trade Unions

Interestingly, a public critical expression and appeal to State first came from the circus community itself in 1964 which was significant, following the establishment of the circus trade union Akhil Bharat Circus Karmachari Sangh. We may bear in mind here that if one looks at the history of the trade unions in India, we would hardly find circus workers' unions although circus flourished in North Malabar along with Communist and trade union movements in the first half of the 20th century. Three days after the union registration, on 10th March 1964, a bill titled 'Protection of Circus Employees Bill' was brought before Indian parliament, by K Ananthan Nambiar, veteran communist trade union leader elected from Tiruchirappalli, Madras, who was instrumental in the formation of the union. At the outset Nambiar made a crucial strategic move differentiating the workers from the owners: "This is not a bill about the circus industry. This bill only seeks protection to be given to the tens of thousands of employees working in the circus industry." After a heated debate Deputy Minister for Labor and Employment responded to the bill dismissing it by categorically stating that circus workers are "...covered by the existing labour legislations and absolute protection is available to them..." And then the minister put the onus back on Ananthan Nambiar:

The Employment of Children's Act definitely provides that children below 12 years should not be employed in any industry. My honorable friend can take advantage of that provision and also move for banning children below 12 years being employed in the circus industry.

The predicament of Nambiar is apparent in his feeble response:

I ought not to be accused that I am provoking some sort of an action whereby the circus industry will be at disadvantage

because it will be deprived of the service of the children; I should not be attacked in that way...My purpose was never to do any harm to the industry and I made it clear.⁴⁷

The dilemmas of class antagonism and tactical alliances have obviously continued over the decades in circus industry, especially with regard to children and animals; two key moments being the banning of the performance of wild animals in 1991 and children below fourteen in 2011. The organization of company owners, Indian Circus Federation, filed a petition in Delhi High Court challenging the animal ban and the Indian Circus Employees Union supported the move by filing another petition simultaneously. But significantly, years later, when the Supreme Court of India banned the employment and performance of children below fourteen years the position of Indian Circus Employees Union had been wavering. In a letter addressed to the Central cabinet minister A K Antony the union concedes, "...as a responsible national trade union with conscientious ideals and actions, the Indian Circus Employees Union understands and appreciates the legal and ethical spirit of the honorable court's ruling. The fundamental rights of children should be held high in any democratic society, indisputably".⁴⁸

The State, Courts, and NGOs tend to overlook these significant differences in positions. A key argument of the circus labour leaders regarding the ban on wild animals was: "...an animal has at least three keepers including the animal trainer. Thus at least 1200 trainers and keepers have become jobless with that order. The animal keepers and trainers who have been looking after the animals haven't got any compensation either from the circus owners or from the government".⁴⁹ Another major aspect is that the personal attachment and affinity between the animal

⁴⁷ "Rules of Akhil Bharat Circus Karmachari Sangh", *In Memory of Keeleri Kunjikkanan Teacher* (hereafter *IMK*), Thalassery: Akhil Bharat Circus Karmachari Sangh, 1964.

⁴⁸ *IMK*.

⁴⁹ Interview, (Late) V M Prabhakaran, retired circus artiste and union leader, Payyoli, 3 February 2009.



and its keepers and trainers do not even figure in the discourse of law and rights. This reminds one of what Meena Radhakrishna emphatically called “Civil Society’s Uncivil Acts”, in the context of the Kalandar community’s livelihood being shattered following the ban on their traditional occupation of bear dancing. It is quite unfortunate that those who argue for legal prohibitions seldom pay attention to the lives of humans and animals caught in the game.⁵⁰

Child Performers

Children have always figured prominently in the history of physical training and acrobatic culture in circus. Items such as *high wire*, *boneless*, *seesaw acrobat*, *bamboo pole*, and *china plate* are almost exclusively for child performers.⁵¹ This is because circus acrobatics demand absolute balancing of the body and a child’s body could master the skill easier and better. Moreover, a child’s body, the circus trainers believe just as the kalaripayatt practitioners, can be molded in accordance with the requirement since it is more flexible and suppler. Strict diet and strenuous training are a fundamental part of circus acrobatics training. The training would usually begin at early morning and will go on for about five hours. An outsider view could be totally different, as the Bachpan Bachao Andolan petition does: “... life of these children begins at dawn with training instructors’ shouting abuses, merciless beatings, and two biscuits and a cup of tea”.⁵² But we must bear in mind that these conditions lay bare the inequalities and violence of the world outside the tents. John Irving, author of *Son of Circus*, notes, “...the Indian circuses reflect an atavistic and compassionate life [...] Who are most of the acrobats? They are children, mostly girls; for many of them, the alternative to this life would have been begging (or starving) or prostitution.

⁵⁰ Meena Radhakrishna, 2007, “Civil Society’s Uncivil Acts: Dancing Bear and Starving Kalandar”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, XLII(42), 2007, p. 2.

⁵¹ Nisha P R, “Children and Indian Circus”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, XLVI(33), August 2011.

⁵² BBA Petition, 2006.

And what is the circus life for them? It is three performances a day, every day. To bed about midnight, up about six.”⁵³

It would be interesting if we read this discourse of ‘cruelty’ along with some other physical cultures which are recognized as legitimate, by being essentially ‘traditional’ or ‘modern’. One can find tales of grueling training sessions and ‘cruel masters’ in the reminiscences of many prominent kathakali performers which of course is accepted as a ‘traditional’ method for learning the art.⁵⁴ Same is the case with kalaripayatt or dance forms; or gymnastics and athletics.

The limitation of the framework of cruelty/liberation is strikingly apparent here. ‘Childhood’ cannot be treated as a romantic universal category. It has to be looked at in the context of regional economies and social inequalities which shape it. In his seminal work, *Childhood in World History*, Peter N. Stearns observes that one knows more about the history of childhood in the West and in China than about the developments in Africa or India, and the imbalance remains frustrating. He further notes that building on eighteenth century intellectual currents, a striking feature was the idealization of the child as “wondrous innocents, full of love and deserving to be loved in turn”. The “modern model of childhood”, he says, even when “...began to be formulated in Western society, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a quite different set of changes affected children in many other parts of the world...” and that “...colonialism and slavery were not the only forces shaping childhood outside the West during the early modern period and the nineteenth century...”⁵⁵

⁵³ Foreword to Mary Ellen Mark’s Book *Indian Circus*, 1993, http://www.maryellenmark.com/text/books/indian_circus/text001_icircus.html (Accessed on 25 August 2014).

⁵⁴ For instance, see the autobiography of the great kathakali artiste, Kalamandalam Krishnan Nair, *Ente Jeevitham Arangilum Aniyarayilum (My Life on Stage and Backstage)*, Kottayam: D C Books, 1991, pp 54–56.

⁵⁵ Peter N Stearns, *Childhood in World History*, New York and London: Routledge, 2011, p 79, 84, 91.

Circus Schools

This makes one think why after the era of circus kalaris circus acrobatics has never found a proper, legitimate, institutional ground. There have been some futile attempts to establish circus schools by some major circus companies. In early 1950s K Gopalan established a short-lived physical training centre of circus acrobatics in the garden guest house of Raghojirao Bhonsle in Nagpur, Maharashtra. It also included a zoo foreseeing a lucrative future in the existing animal trade.⁵⁶ K Damodaran, owner of Kamala circus, wanted to build a Circus College and a hostel in Malabar and had kept aside acres of land in Kathirur, Thalassery for a centre for circus acrobatics.⁵⁷ In an article published in 1957 he proposed a University giving both academic and acrobatic education to circus people who will excel the European circus artistes who have both academic degrees and physical excellence: “As the student advances in her academic education to get a university degree, she should also be advancing in her training practices till she attains a means of livelihood by being proficient in at least one of the acrobatics”. He compellingly argues that the union government has been promoting music, drama, and cinema while it was not even ready to admit that circus is an art and this is the very reason for the crisis in Indian circus.⁵⁸ In 1957, Kandambulli Balan also wrote compellingly about the need for a circus college putting forward a note worthy suggestion to include kalaripayatt and circus in the curriculum of the Kathakali School, Kerala Kalamandalam, which was on its formative stages.⁵⁹ Envisions an anonymous author in *Big Top*, half a century ago:

The government of India should think of setting up a school to teach circus art, preferably to be located in New Delhi,

⁵⁶ “Circus Vidhyabyasa Kendram [Circus Training Institute]”, *Mathrubhumi Illustrated Weekly*, 30(34), 1952 pp 19-21.

⁵⁷ Sasikumar Kallidumbil, “Kalaripayattum Circussum”, pp 195-209.

⁵⁸ K Damodaran, “Keralathinoru Circus University [A Circus University for Kerala]”, *Mathrubhumi Illustrated Weekly*, 35(19), 1957, p 32.

⁵⁹ Kandambulli Balan, “Keralavum Circussum [Kerala and Circus]”, *Mathrubhumi Illustrated Weekly*, 34(51), 1957, p 22.



where boys and girls from all over India may be recruited and trained to become first grade circus stars, who may be in great demand throughout the world.⁶⁰

However, the first time there was any concrete move was in 2010 when the Kerala Circus Academy was established by the Kerala Government in Thalassery. But hardly four years into running, this academy is heading towards closure.⁶¹

The primary purpose was to select ten children from various circus companies and include another ten from the locality. In the Malayalam dailies applications for admission were called for. Eleven applications were received and six people appeared for interview in May 2011. But nobody joined. Like this twice applications were called for with almost no response.⁶²

Velayudhan, the CEO of the Academy told me: Nevertheless, in 2012 while I was doing my fieldwork there are six girls and four boys from different parts of India and Nepal; four each from Tamil Nadu and Assam and Bengal, and one each from Bihar and Nepal. In effect, all these children belong to circus companies of a single owner and they will return to the same after finishing their training.

A significant proposal came from the chairman, Kerala Sangeetha Nataka Akademi to attach the circus academy with Sangeetha Nataka Akademi and develop it. But nothing came out of these plans since there was pressure from both the Cultural and Sports Ministries. The chairman told me that, "Sports Ministry asserted that circus comes under sports and they are entitled for any move concerning it. But they don't move and plus

⁶⁰ "Circus in India: Its Problems, Solutions", 1965, *Big Top*, 1(1), 1965, p 10.

⁶¹ For a detailed discussion see, Nisha, P R. Folding the Tent: Kerala Circus Academy. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 11 January 2014, Web Exclusive, <http://www.epw.in/web-exclusives/folding-tent-kerala-circus-academy.html> [Accessed on 12 January 2014].

⁶² Interview, Velayudhan M P, CEO, Kerala Circus Academy, Kannur, 16 June 2013.



circus is not a *sport*, it's an *art*".⁶³ This opens up the crucial argument of treating circus *as* sports which limits its complexities as a performative form with multiple layers. As in circus academies abroad, the children should have opportunity to get professional training in band music, textile design, acrobatics, dance, tent technology, and programme management.

It is noteworthy in this context that none of the children taken from the circus companies following the ban were offered placement in the Kerala Circus Academy which had been established the year before, in 2010. The Supreme Court had instructed that the Nepali children be handed over to NGOs from Nepal. A striking fact is that one of these NGOs, The Esther Benjamin Trust has started a circus company with these children called 'Circus Kathmandu'. The Trust claims that "In 2010 thirteen young Nepalese people who had been rescued from trafficking and the streets turned to contemporary circus to build their self-esteem and to chart a path out of stigmatism and poverty..." and "...they are now in a position to make the free choice to use the circus skills they acquired as children, to enjoy an amazing international career".⁶⁴

The flow of Nepali performers (mainly from Hetauda) diminished considerably after the monarchy in Nepal was overthrown. The hiring of foreign performers and showcasing them as the 'main attraction' have become common after the ban on wild animals. Most of these foreign artistes hail from economically backward regions such as Baluchistan, Uzbekistan, and Kenya. It is notable that their pay also differs with the country of origin (the currency exchange rate with Indian rupee) rather than the complexity of the item performed.

⁶³ Interview, Soorya Krishnamurthi, Chairman, Kerala Sangeetha Nataka Akademi, Thiruvananthapuram, 6 October 2013.

⁶⁴ Circus Kathmandu: Nepal's First and Only Contemporary Circus, <http://www.circuskathmandu.com>; Esther Benjamin Trust, <http://www.ebtrust.org.uk/latest-news/circus-kathmandu-june-2014.aspx> (Accessed on March 30, 2015).

Conclusion

Let me briefly mention about ‘Nouveau cirque’ or ‘new circus’ which has gained popularity in Europe and United States over the past three decades. In ‘new circus’ skills are developed on a theme or a story performed by trained artistes in an auditorium or theatre unlike the traditional ring. At the same time they try to retain the traditional circus items like trapeze, juggling, aerial skills, and acrobatics in new aesthetic impact of lighting, music, and costume. These performances seldom have animals and children. Ernest Albrecht points out in the introduction of his book, *The Contemporary Circus: Art of the Spectacular*, “In 1974 Alexis Gruss and his *Cirque National a l’ancienne* reintroduced western audiences to the sanctity of the single ring and the possibilities of the circus as an art form. This is the circus that inspired both Paul Binder of the Big Apple Circus and Guy Caron of Cirque du Soleil, and it was the first to feature many of the elements that came to be the hallmarks of the contemporary circus”.⁶⁵

For instance, “In its production titled *Dralion*, Cirque du Soleil fused ancient Chinese acrobatic tradition with the brand of high theatricality that the company has established as its hallmark”.⁶⁶ Lenaig Fanniere, the French circus artiste of 3X Rien company who recently toured India told me, “The traditional circus is based on the element of wonder, the modern circus on aesthetics. The former is objective, more of techniques, but our performance is more emotional, interactive and visionary”.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Ernest Albrecht, *The Contemporary Circus: Art of the Spectacular*, Plymouth: Scarecrow, 2006, p ix.

⁶⁶ “Cirque du Soleil, founded in 1984” abandoned “circus’s historic use of animal performers and making its human ensemble the centerpiece of its productions”. Ernest Albrecht, *The Contemporary Circus: Art of the Spectacular*, p 78, x.

⁶⁷ Interview, Lenaig Fanniere, Circus Artiste, 3 X Rien, Thiruvananthapuram, 30 October 2014.



My attempt in this paper has been to interrogate the framework of ‘cruelty’ set by certain mentalities and legalities concerning the body and its cultures and to ask how do some physical cultures become sanctioned and revered while the bodies, skills, and cultures of some others illegitimate and expendable.

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