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DISAPPEARANCE IN THE RING:
THE PERPETUAL UNMAKING OF INDIA'S BIG TOP CIRCUS

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Abstract

This dissertation surveys the disappearance of the Indian circus as it unfolds in the Southern state of Kerala, particularly around a town in the region of Malabar, Thalassery, known locally as "the cradle of the Indian circus". I examine the ways people in this region remember the circus as a cultural form, and how, through their continuous recollection of it, they collectively produce this cultural form as one which is disappearing. I evidence that despite the prevalent impression that this decline is accelerating, the circus' disappearance is neither a new, nor a quick phenomenon. In fact, archival sources suggest that the circus has been disappearing in Malabar for almost as long as circus shows started being produced in their current, post-Independence form. I analyze the reasons why, and the aesthetic choices by which, circus companies exist in a gerundial temporality of perennial disappearing.

Disappearance, I argue, is a perspectival phenomenon: it is only visible from sites where this process is collectively meaningful, and at specific times, defined simultaneously by the historical conjuncture and in relation to one's life course. In other words, it is a phenomenon most likely to unfold when collective frameworks of sociality encourage such conceptualizations of a cultural form, and at a point in someone's life when looking back is subjectively meaningful. For these reasons, the circus' disappearance stands out the most in Malabar because of the way it nestles into the lives of the region's retired circus professionals, and in the biographical trajectories of their families, which have sought to move on from the past circumstances that brought the circus into their lives. Disappearance ties the 'golden age' of the Indian circus to the lives of ageing, retired or retiring professionals, rather than to people actively involved with the circus today – to whom, tellingly, this anticipated circus disappearance is not always apparent. Senior circus artists, managers and owners once traveled with the circus show on routes much wider than that of current companies. They

performed in a dispensation of the circus – involving spectacular wild animals and child trainees – which has been restricted and transformed since the 1990s by of a series of legal battles about animal and children welfare. This arc of the circus' decline serves as scaffolding for the biographical recollections of former circus professionals. It crystallizes such changes (the ban on animals, the rescue of children trainees) as the frontier to an irretrievable circus past, and condenses this past as an unmatchable standard to which present shows try to conform, eliciting nostalgia and disappointment from spectators. Disappearance, then, places Malabari circus professionals on the more respectable side of that divide and dismisses current shows as a mere afterimage of what circus entertainment used to be.

Combining ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2018 and 2021 in Malabar and in active Kerala-based circus companies, and an analysis of the historical record for circus events since the 1850s in India, I trace the maintenance and transformations of the circus' disappearance. I provide insight on the ways remembering, understood as a collectively sustained human practice, is both continuously attuned to the present context and (re)produces contemporary forms of sociality.

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Introduction

> "[T]here is a kind of retrospective mirage by which a great number of us persuade ourselves that the world of today has less color and is less interesting than it was in the past, in particular regarding our childhood and youth… When it comes to the most somber aspects of our existence, on the other hand, it seems they are enveloped by clouds that half cover them. That faraway world where we remember that we suffered nevertheless exercises an incomprehensible attraction on the person who has survived it and who seems to think he has left there the best part of himself, which he tries to recapture. This is why, given a few exceptions, it is the case that the great majority of people more or less frequently are given to what one might call nostalgia for the past."
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> *The Social Frameworks of Memory*, Maurice Halbwachs (1992: p. 48-49)

This work surveys the unfolding of the process of the disappearance of the Indian circus, and the collective experience of it. It is about the way people remember this cultural form, and about how, through their continuous activity of remembering – sometimes mellow, sometimes elegiac, sometimes collective, sometimes political, sometimes intimately personal – they come to shape a cultural form as one which is disappear*ing*.

The cultural form I study is India's circus entertainment as it exists, or existed in India circa 2020, and as I could gather by living, attending circus shows, and talking to people around a town in North Kerala known locally as "the cradle of the Indian circus", Thalassery, in the district of Kannur.[1] I track the dynamic of cultural disappearance as it unfolds for a particular group of people, and not as representative of all Indian circus professionals, but whose collective remembrance and

[1] Such a self-reference is found, for instance, on an English website promoting tourism in the town, cf. "Thalassery Municipality|Tellicherry|Land of 3 C's-Cricket,Cake,Circus." n.d. Thalassery. Accessed April 30, 2022. *https://learnershub.wixsite.com/thalassery*.

evocations shape how this object of importance to them is perceived more widely. I look specifically at how the Indian "big top" circus, a form of mass entertainment and coordinated artistic and commercial activities offered by various circus companies, is and has been *disappearing* since around the time of India's Independence in 1947 and the end of the British rule in the Indian subcontinent, according to people who, in very different and hardly commensurable ways, know what a circus, and the Indian circus, are.

This work pays heightened attention to claims that something is disappearing. How do people recognize the disappearance of the circus, and how is it distinguishable from less univalent forms of change? The line between change and disappearance is a hard one to draw for any cultural form: they, and the social processes shaping and servicing them, are always unfolding and happening inextricably bound up together, as the stuff of collective processes formed and embodied by sense-making human individuals. These individuals, we, are just as inextricable from these processes, and therefore our perspective on any transformative event inevitably imposes value and sense contingent on our position on the thing observed. Announcing that something is disappearing requires defining what that thing is, where it begins, and where it ends – in other words, it is an act of boundary-making. In the case I consider, for instance, these classificatory activities condense what the Indian circus is by ascribing to it a specific origin (that involves severing some connections with some performance forms and establishing them as outside of the Indian circus' history), a set of definitional criteria (a circus is something that has: items, animal performers, a tent, itinerancy, glamour…), and a historicity that includes some events and eludes others. The collective formed by people I have worked with – Kerala-based circus professionals, with a preponderance of those among them who are retired – tended to agree on these elements; but as I occasionally point out,

their perspective, for which circus disappearance is most salient a phenomenon, can be contested from the point of view of other individuals. Indeed, in other constellations of ("circus"-related) ideas and selected facts, the case could be made that the circus disappeared long ago, or, alternatively, that it has been a remarkably resilient and varied domain of human practice (for almost two centuries, others even say for millennia).[2]

What one person deplores as a loss of authenticity, another might celebrate as the opening of a new, more inclusive time, or as a better fit to their situation. A set of skills formerly bound by the framework of an activity which has become obsolete, might relocate to other practices. More than a form of relativist or diffusionist optimism (in the face of ubiquitous processes of social changes which can seldom be equated with a diminution of social inequities or the leveling of enduring forms of privilege), what I want to convey is the fact that life does not inhere to practices, as practices are not life forms. It is the lives of people (and sometimes, as for the circus, the lives of non-human animals) that shape and are shaped by socio-cultural practices: what exactly, then, is at stake when a practice is said to be disappearing, or dying? Whose or which lives go into and with them, and what sort of effects does it have on them?

My account does not venture to speculate on the most physically violent of social transformations brought about by the conditions created by the identification of a disappearance, although the not-unrelated violence of some circus recollections, and the quotidian, exploitative dimensions of circus work, is reflected here in the accounts of what some people told me. Overall, I focus on the more

[2] I consider the question of where the circus begins and stops for individuals invested in these definitional efforts in more details in chapter 4.

atmospheric changes by which the sense of cultural disappearance acquires durability, and the practices of remembering that sustain the perception of change as decline and death. The history of cultural forms in South Asia features many analyses of historical processes by which a group's loss signals another's success. These analyses often foreground processes of appearance or disappearance, even though these processes sometimes acquire greater definition in-and-through these analyses than they had at the time in which they are said to have unfolded. Indeed, analyses of processes of dis/appearance bind time in a given way, with varying degrees of success and consensus. They make time graspable in the manner of their own analytic positions, with their own hopes and aspirations – in a word, they flesh out time with history and historicity. The detached work of a "historical materialist", to borrow Benjamin's figure of a critical historian, is to point out how "cultural treasures…owe their existence not only to the efforts of great geniuses who created them, but also to the anonymous toil of others who lived in the same period." (Benjamin 2003 [1940]: 391-392). This intuition, informed by Benjamin's situation in 1940 Germany, is no less relevant for the socio-cultural context of 20th and early 21st century India, a context marked by different but pervasive forms of caste, class, and gender inequities, which produces striking status differentiations among legitimate and illegitimate cultural actors. Amanda Weidman's work *Singing the Classical, Voicing the Modern* (2006) documents for instance how the appearance of "classical" Carnatic singing also signals the evacuation from this musical practice of groups of non-Brahmin instrumentalists who once performed the music that became a classical Indian music ; Davesh Soneji, in *Unfinished Gestures* (2012), gives a glimpse of the reminiscence of forms of dance which, through their standardization, crystalized as Bharatanatyam, while excluding from the origin accounts of this form some of the performers who shaped what the form is today. The fact that the bringing into awareness of these ancestors for Bharatanatyam by Soneji and others nurtured a social movement of reappraisal of their legacy, shows the dynamism and shiftability of perspectives on

change, and signals that moments of appearance and disappearance are, due to their perspectival quality, ever-revisable.

Such works help realize that appearance and disappearance become visible under some conditions of possibility. Anthropological and historical-anthropological works also highlight that the 'life' of social forms is structured, naturalized and facilitated by a set of organicist figures of speech and sensuous (primarily visual) metaphors by which anything that lives must meet an end and everything that is visible might someday become undiscernible. According to these tropes, some cultural forms are faced with the threat of their extinction (Sodikoff 2012), some languages become endangered (Garrett 2012; Eisenlohr 2004), some arts and crafts are dying (Stocking 1992). By a continuous game of resonance and uptake, the presentation of a change as disappearance comes to be shared by a network of benevolent institutions, and actors who position themselves so as to attract the intervention of these institutions. To notice the ubiquity of such forms and point to them does not amount to a condemnation of what they *do*, and does not put the social utility of such practices at stake. It simply foregrounds that the life of social form is a situated projection, modeled after the developmental processes of forms of being which are different in nature from socio-cultural processes, social forms, cultural objects. It seems irrelevant to question the capaciousness of this metaphorical imagination of social forms: if endangerment and trajectories of disappearance have shown such resilience, purchase, and expanse, it only shows their uses and the extent of what they can accomplish. What seems more important is the nature of what they do.

The elegiac modality in which the disappearance of the Indian circus is cast does, however, call for caution for an observer and participant like me, with a capacity to relay and recirculate it. For the

nostalgia that often permeates the observation of a disappearance has effects on the object presumed to be disappearing (Halbwachs 1992: 48-49). Due to the colonial connection of anthropology's past with what Renata Rosaldo called "imperialist nostalgia," the tendency of agents of colonialism to "mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed" (Rosaldo 1969: 69), and reifying disciplinary tendencies encompassed by the aims of "salvage ethnography" (Redman 2021), it seems one should be doubly cautious. Dwelling in and regretting something which is disappearing obscures the definitional work it takes for a social form to become bounded in this way. And it also occludes the dynamics of exclusion and disinvestment it takes for a sense of disappearance, rather than a less determining sense of change, to be sustained. The nostalgia of retired circus professionals, the contrastive reminiscence that the circuses today is nothing like "what it used to be," for instance, discounts the point of view of active professionals who envision what their work is today and will be tomorrow. With more consequential results, the re-circulation of the narrative of the circus' disappearance by some of its detractors, such as NGOs working for animal welfare and children's rights, deflects public attention from the effects of these rescue missions on the "already-disappearing" circuses, as I suggest in chapter 2 and 3.

At the same time, it would be impossible to study the disappearance of the circus without adopting and yielding to the perspective of the group which most intensely 'sees' it. Thus, this work's approach to the circus, especially because of the contemporaneous perspective of any ethnographic work, cannot avoid the implicit perspective and definition of my interlocutors. Since a majority of them were retired circus artists, and since the disappearance of the circus was most obvious to them, this is what I offer most insights on. As a work hoping to offer a synthesis of insights, then, this

might feel like a confirmation of the tangibility of disappearance. But as I hope to suggest, remembering and a nostalgic sense of loss is, at this point, a crucial part of the Indian circus show.

The circus, recollections, and genres of practices.

The recognizability of a cultural form like the circus in India has much to do with the recollections people come to form of it. The transmission of both the skills of the circus artists and the ways of running a circus company business involves the mobilization of past iterations of the circus, in India and internationally. To learn a circus item (for instance: group trapeze, juggling, clowning), a trainee will resort to techniques that cite existing circus instances: they may learn under the supervision of a circus trainer who already has an idea of how best to display the trainee's skills in a performance, or they might watch online videos of circus shows which have taken place and try to replicate a movement or a trick through mimicking. Likewise, the circus business owners I spoke to had learned how to run a circus business, how to travel with a circus company, or how much money to give to their employees, either from a family member who had run the circus before them, or by first working different jobs in the administration of a circus company.

At the same time, the circus show, its continuous performance by circus companies, and its administration can be thought of as *genres* of performance and practices. This brings to our attention a "diachronic" (and here also, generationally-anchored) feature of "generic intertextuality" [Briggs and Bauman 1992]. As the linguistic anthropologists Charles Briggs and Richard Bauman write, "[i]nvoking a genre… creates indexical connections that extend far beyond the present setting of production or reception, thereby linking a particular act to other times, places and persons." (1992:147). For these reasons, they continue (following an insight materialized from their reading of

Bakthin 1981, Hanks 1987, and Bourdieu's theories of practice), "generic intertextuality affords great power for naturalizing both texts and the cultural reality they represent." (1992:148).

This diachronic dimension of genres is relevant for understanding the importance of individual and collective recollections in regimenting what the circus is now, and to account for the disappearance of the circus. The Indian circus (as a genre of performance, and as an activity which involves genred practices) has not experienced social processes of 'classicization' or explicit standardization and legitimation in India in the ways other artistic traditions have locally (as, for instance, forms of 'classical' Indian music, but also Indian street magic (Zubrzycki 2018), or some 'tribal' or 'folk' art forms like Gond painting or Pattachitra) or national traditions of circus have elsewhere, for instance through nationalization in the USSR (Neirick 2012), humanitarian intervention promoting training in acrobatics in Ethiopia (Kendall 2017), or the development of circus schools in France and the United States. An implication of this lack, most keenly perceived by the Kerala-based circus professionals I worked with, is that *what the circus is* is mostly spelled out by people who are involved in the circus themselves, rather than being articulated in negotiations with and with reference to an externalized, and provisionally fixed set of expectations. For instance, there is no authoritative censor board defining what qualifies as a circus show and what should be kept out of it, no competition fixing rules of arbitration by which circus artists can be assessed, no 'board' for the Indian circus – although historically other institutions have occasionally sought to play this role (for instance, the NGOs I talk about in chapter 2 and 3, which sought to intervene, albeit in a purely socio-demographic way, by regulating *who* could be a circus performer).

What the circus has, however, in significant numbers, is professionals who are no longer practicing, but remember what their practice entailed. Careers in the circus are most often short, because of the intensive and continuous demands the performance of circus items makes on the circus artists' bodies. For various historical reasons I come back to throughout the chapters, many retired artists are now settled in the taluk, or township, of Thalassery in the Northern Kerala district of Kannur, in the South of India. Retired circus owners and circus managers, who came from the same region, have their homes there. This is also the area near which I lived to inquire about the Indian circus, because I was aware of these circus professionals' demographic importance there. The presence of many circus professionals in this area creates a collective in which recollections of all things circus have currency, in which the individual experience of a circus professional resonates with that of several other individuals. As Maurice Halbwachs writes, this is a favorable ground for the preservation of memory because "memories occur in the form of systems. This is so because they become associated within the mind that calls them up, and because some memories allow the reconstruction of others. But these various modes by which memories become associated result from the various ways in which people can become associated. We can understand each memory as it occurs in individual thought only if we locate each within the thought of the corresponding group." (1992: 53). What has fostered these "associations" of people by which a group and its corresponding "collective framework" of circus memory are produced and reproduced are the numerous individual life trajectories that have involved a passage in itinerant circus companies and a return to Kannur district. In chapter 5, I contrast the ways in which such frameworks allow for retired circus artist's narrativization of circus recollections based on photographs taken during their circus careers, sometimes in contradiction with the memory frameworks maintained by their own families. That such frameworks may compete, or create emotional tensions for individuals, confirms the prominence, and local commensurability, of a collective framework sustained by the circus

community in relation to other widely observed frameworks, such as the family, the caste group, the neighborhood, etc.

The genres of practice related to the production of the Indian circus find support in the existence of these Kannur-based collective frameworks: they provide precedents from which 'what the circus is' can emerge, they provide elements of comparisons by which to distinguish what is suited for a circus company, and what isn't (i.e. standards). They foreground what everyone seemingly remembers as important to the circus as a set of genred practices. In other words, they define the Indian circus and give it defining features by which what the circus is can be spelled out. Importantly, thereby, the recollections of former circus professionals simultaneously articulate, implicitly, the generic features by which a circus show is identifiable, and offer a contrastive ground, formed by the collective mental and archival 'stock' of circus recollections, which the circus shows of the present can strive to cite or depart from, and against which they can be assessed.

As I point out numerous times in the following chapters, that a set of recollections is widely shared does not ensure their accuracy, or completeness. As Nancy Munn pointed out with her analysis of the memory worlds of the Kaluli "Gisalo" songs, there are many kinds of present-anchored "cultural dynamics of remembering," some of them, for instance, "a deliberate effort on the part of some people to make others remember certain past relationships" (1995:84). The reminiscences of the Indian circus are likewise honed over time by various and evolving dynamics of remembering, some of them influencing the framework of memory so as to overrepresent certain recollections over others – on occasions, I try to hint at *genres of recollections*, favored by some 'rememberers', or in some commemorative contexts, by which some genres of circus practices can be asserted as the 'proper

circus ways'. For instance, recollecting the circus often involves the material support of what I refer to as *circus publicity* in the coming chapters (a corpus of advertisement images, personal photo albums filled with photographs taken by studio photographers commissioned by the circus companies, lore about circus travels, hagiographic details about circus owners and animal trainers…), which, by way of what it makes available to remember, already structures things that can easily be told about what the circus once was (it was huge, it was glamorous, it was different from other people's lives), and conceals others, for which no such evidence exists.

Nonetheless, a corollary of the importance of recollections in defining what the circus is, and what genres of practices are its entailments, is that the ability of defining what the circus is shared, in potential, by all those who are living or have lived with the circus; in other words, by all those who have an experience of the circus. This includes spectators and people who live in societies in which there are circuses, although these individuals are typically less concerned than circus professionals about identifying what a circus is. This does not amount to an ability of each thusly 'experienced' individual to spell out, with any degree of precision or authority what the circus as a genre specifically entails: much of the circulation of "circus-ness" – by which I mean, the recognizability of something as having the aesthetic qualities of the circus – happens diffusely, without implying a conscious citational effort, nor an attempt at exhaustively representing all aspects of the circus. Nonetheless, the idea that individuals, through frameworks of collective memory that they participate in, condition the ability to remember and reproduce the Indian circus carries much weight in the chapters that follow.

In particular, to return to the issue of the circus' disappearance, this means that individuals condition collectively, with their recollections, what the Indian circus is (and the genres of practices identified as pertaining to it), thereby granting it also the boundedness it needs to be disappearing. As I mentioned earlier, the circus does not disappear as clearly from all vantage points, but it disappears strikingly from the situation in Malabar (as the Northern Kerala region I worked in is referred to by locals and outsiders), in which many individuals find the circus similarly placed in the past of their life trajectories. In *The Plural Actor*, the sociologist Bernard Lahire observes (also building on Maurice Halbwach's work *On Collective Memory*) that the "groups that constitute the social contexts of our memory are… heterogenous" and that the individuals that go through them are "always the variegated product of this heterogeneity of points of view, memories, types of experience" (Lahire 2011: 26). "Because we do not occupy identical or similar positions in such social contexts," he adds (one "can be and [has] variously been" a child and a parent, a circus artist or administrator, a trainee or a trainer, an in-law to someone, a member of an association, an attendant at a religious ritual, a neighbor, etc.), "we live experiences that are varied, different, and sometimes contradictory." Lahire argues that the "plural actors" who are socialized in these varied, co-occurrent or successive contexts, learn, more or less smoothly, how to mobilize in each of these contexts the "repertoires of schemes of action (habits)" (2011:32) which are contextually relevant. My own argument here draws from Lahire's in proposing the following hypothesis: that the visibility of the disappearance of the Indian circus in Kannur is more pronounced because it is meaningful and contextually relevant as a cultural dynamic of the figuration of the circus for many people settled there. For many circus professionals retired in Kannur district, the circus constitutes a past social context, dissonant in various ways with present social contexts, and the figurations of the circus which cast it as a disappearing cultural form are socially more meaningful to their situation.

Layered disappearances

> "the Indian circuses were reminiscent of a purity of days gone by, an innocence impossible to find in Western cultures. In an attempt to head off the demands of the contemporary world, each circus clings to a simpler, older way of life, but the circuses, which were introduced from Europe in 1880, are disappearing quickly. In the mid-sixties there were fifty-two big tops. Today less than half that number remain. There is a great fear that the Indian circus, like the American circus, is a dying art. The circuses are being closed down by a rapidly changing modern India that considers them old-fashioned – even an embarrassment." *Indian Circus*, Mary Ellen Mark (1993:13)[3]

The longer one dwells in the impression the circus has left in and on Thalassery, the more certain the disappearance of the circus seems. The events people refer back to, the decaying photographs circus artists preserve, the aesthetic envelope of the current shows which open – as if ritually, like a visit to an old relative – in the neighboring city of Kannur – all seem to point to a sense of a cultural form that is wrapping up. This impression pervades the outlook adopted by the regional media and that of many Malayalis who have taken up the representation of the circus offered in various media objects. Even in the busily performing park of Magic Planet, it is possible to see the circus show as a relic, since Gopinath Muthukad, a famous stage magician and owner of the park, has explicitly set out to protect, with this park, "the public oriented art forms and street performers which face complete extinction due to lack of platform from the main phase of our society like magic, circus, folks arts, puppet show, etc."[4]

[3] Mary Ellen Mark (1940-2015) was an American photographer, fondly remembered by those who were circus artists in India in the 1980s and 1990s. She spent many months exploring Indian circus companies during trips spanning the 1980s, and produced striking portraits of circus artists and circus animals, taken in the circus compounds and in the tent where they lived. With her partner Martin Bell, she also authored the BBC-broadcasted short-form documentary "The Amazing Plastic Lady", focused on a child performer of the boneless act. I discuss this documentary in more details in chapter 3.

[4] The park, Magic Planet's website adds, "will be a permanent Rehabilitation hub for the craving Indian street performers which include Indian street magicians, circus artists and other folk artists. This would be a platform for the neglected Indian street performers to earn their livelihood which include the food, education and other

Early during my time conducting this research (in 2017-2018), I paid several visits of a few days to Sreedharan Champad, a Kerala-famous historian and archivist of the circus residing near Thalassery. An inspiringly lively and energetic man who had just turned 80 at the time, we would go together to various places where he generously introduced me to people who helped me begin to situate how the circus featured in the Malayali landscape of artistic performance and entertainment: local circus celebrities, families of owners, among others. Champad's unprecedented archival work and his writerly celebration of the glamour of the circus (he has written several novels and helped draft several screenplays for Malayalam movies set in the circus) had occasioned lasting friendships between him and these interlocutors. As a result of his well-established position in the circus community, Sreedharan was never short on circus gossip, stories and news, which we would discuss in the evening, on the front porch of the joint family house where he lived along with his wife, his children, and grandchildren.

The notes I took on these visits are filled with joy and a mild irritation: joy at having found and getting to meet some of the circus aficionados who, I had suspected, still took an interest in the circus and owned active circus companies, and irritation with what I perceived as a tradeoff for the greater definition this circus landscape was acquiring, namely, the prophecies and declarations of all these new interlocutors that the circus was no longer what it used to be, unworthy of my visits - basically done for.

necessities of family members, something which the benevolent stage magician can at best preserve in his conservatory of street entertainment." *http://magicplanet.in/*, "Our Mission and Vision" (accessed on April 27th 2022).

As I progressively gathered, when a longer stay in Kerala (between 2019 and 2021) gave me a chance to visit more active circus companies and old circus artists, Thalassery is the best site from which to contemplate the demise of the circus. Sreedharan Champad was uncontestably relaying a local truth when he was sharing his impression that 'nothing could stop the movement of decline the circus was going through', that current-day circus shows were "commercial" and "not about artistry".

Circus disappearance is manifold, and nowhere does it find greater consistency than in Thalassery.

This is because some subjectively experienced aspects of the circus' disappearance are foregrounded by the collective framework sustained by the circus community, as I mentioned earlier. This great view on the disappearing circus is also an ethnographic artefact: since this is a place in which I, along with others, have taken interest in the accounts of retired circus artists, there is a diffuse historicizing intent in what circus artists say, especially in the case of those most committed to the collective framework of the circus community (for instance, those among them who take part most regularly to the activities of the circus employees union) and those who have been interviewed more than once and have thus formed an idea of what I and other people before me who are interested in the circus as "outsiders" might want to hear. As Alessandro Portelli has noted, "interviewees are always… studying the interviewers who "study" them. […] The final result of the interview is the product of both the narrator and the researcher." (1991: 54) This is especially true when there is, as in Thalassery, a collectively cultivated form of historical consciousness revolving around circus-related events, which the disappearance narrative services.

Even while it may seem especially current today, even if it makes intuitive sense, in the aftermath of the bans on public gatherings and public shows during the COVID-19 'lock-downs' of 2020-2021,

that the circus might be slowly but surely disappearing, the certainty of this fact intimated by concerned Kannur resident is part of something larger. The circus has been disappearing consistently for several decades, as the citation of Mary Ellen Mark, an American photographer who observed Indian circus life in the 1980s, reminds us. The disappearance of the circus might look like a protracted situation, but closer scrutiny suggests that its apparent stability is the result of the sedimentation of distinct rationalizations for why the circus will disappear. Statements anticipating the circus' disappearance go way back, reaching into the period considered now as a 'golden age of the Indian circus' (cf. Chapter 4). The menace of disappearance is for instance central to the way the All India Circus Federation, active since the 1950s (under a different name) and the 1960s, framed some of its demands for governmental support.[5] In its mouthpiece, the short-lived magazine *Big Top*, the owner K. Damodaran conjures up an early iteration of the circus' disappearance in a piece entitled "In Plea for a Better Deal." The article, pointing out the "[checkered] career of the Indian circus," notes the "rank" and "callous indifference the rulers of our country are showing towards the ancient art of circus." It is relevant that the author, to stir its potential politicking public, regrets an Indian circus golden age now situated in the irretrievable past of the pre-Independence era: "during the pre-independence days, circus had certainly enjoyed better facilities and assistance from the then Government. […] It may seem paradoxical, but the conclusion is irresistible, that circus art rarely prospers in democratic countries. […] The circus in India is passing through a struggle for survival. Governments, both at the Centre and the States must wake up and help the few existing circus companies to carry on without financial eclipses and collapses" (*Big Top*, Vol 1, No. 1, October 1965). This position marks a longstanding motif, in the discourse of circus owners (foregrounded in this excerpt by the recent constitution of a group of them into a professional organization), by

[5] cf. On this subject, cf. Nisha P.R. 2020:196.

which bankruptcy can be read as part of a broader and characteristic "struggle for survival" of the circus. It also suggests, more clearly than the accounts one can gather in present-day Malabar, in which the disappearance of the circus seem common-sensical (to us), how the disappearance of the circus can be invoked with specific publics in mind (in this case, politicians, but on other occasions: sponsors, historians, relatives suspicious of one's circus past).

Durably anticipated and evoked, the disappearance of the circus is also a phenomenon its various publics come to sense. As the example above shows, the circus community resents the indifference of authorities with regards to a show that seemingly escapes the scale and mode of its intervention (calibrated as it is to stable and sedentary objects, communities, and cultural forms). As an itinerant show, the mode of appearance of the circus is fleeting and hardly tangible. Circus workers are neither strangers with whom one can form intimate bonds (Simmel 1971 [1908]), nor are they promising vote banks for local politicking (as a circus owner, resigned to the forthcoming slippage into bankruptcy of his circus company, once deplored). The appearance of a circus company in a city always-already foreshadows the moment of its concrete disappearance from the *maithanam* it temporarily occupies. For this reason, the aesthetic envelope of the circus always-already conjures – and for reasons I delve into in chapter 1 and 3, it also cultivates – the nostalgic celebration of its dis/appearance, by a sedentary community which is reminded, through the travels of the circus, or its own coherence and (sedentary) collectivity.

The overlaying of these co-occurrent, but not necessarily commensurable, modalities by which the circus' disappearance sharpens as a widely identifiable phenomenon compose the atmosphere in which present-day circus shows take place, but not only: it also defines the framework in which

various generations (of circus professionals, but also circus spectators) dwell into the recollection of their past and the past of the circus, and it illuminates some constellations of events as significant to the Indian circus' history (for instance, the time when there was a three-ring circus in India, as I mention in chapter 3, or the events leading up to a circus animal ban, evoked in chapter 2).

In the chapters that follow, I analyze various dimensions of this circus disappearance.

In the first chapter, *Circus Routes*, I present the itinerancy that characterizes India's circus industry. I show that the extent of the travels of circus companies and the cosmopolitan image it allows some of them to cultivate (along with the subgroup of circus professionals formed by these companies' high-ranking professionals) matters to the way circus professionals define what the circus is, and to what makes the industry special – specifically, what makes the circus cosmopolitan and glamorous in contrast to the profession of others – in their opinion. Establishing the circus as cosmopolitan and glamorous across a wider public of potential spectators calls for a second form of circulation, practically conditioned by the circus' itinerancy – the mentions of circus shows and companies in newspapers, the striking promotional posters plastered on the walls of the city where a circus is about to perform, the appearance of a circus company in a hit film – which circus professionals actively seek to produce and reproduce. Premised on itinerancy, these publicity efforts are also rendered more painstaking by the industry's constant travels, since prominent publicity outlets tend to be sedentary. Nonetheless, I suggest the circus industry effectively succeeds in publicizing and projecting its travels as a sign of glamour and fame. The fleeting quality of the image of the circus formed by this publicity, the fact that it is here today, and faraway tomorrow (and in that sense, also, dis/appearing) features, in this publicity, as one of the central attractions of the circus show.

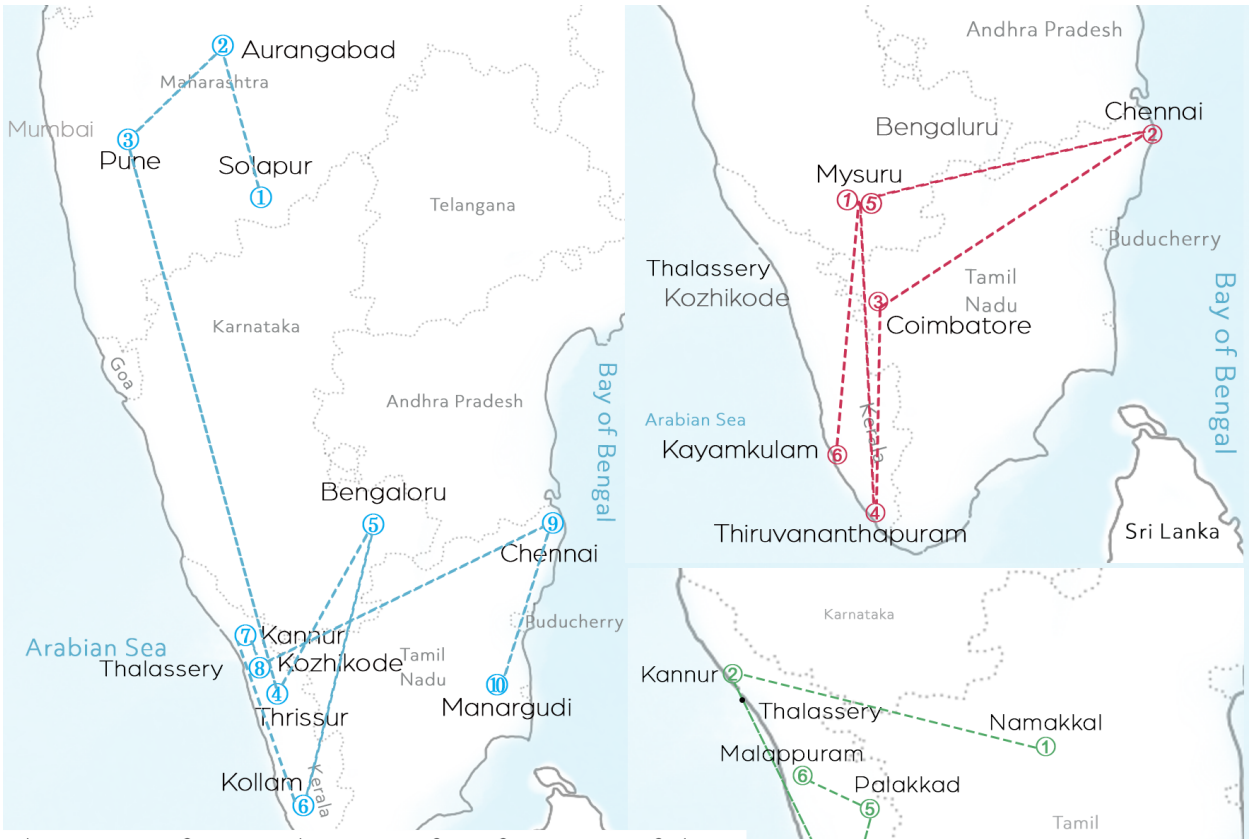
In the second chapter, *Wild Animal Men*, I show how a series of interventions led by the Indian state and various NGOs against circus companies, which were part of a battle for the definition and protection of animal rights, crystalized as a historical turning point in the recollections of Indian circus professionals. I argue that it is the importance and stability of the circus' publicity image, recognizable as cosmopolitan and thereby also different from an imaginary of what being an Indian citizen is, which in fact caused the circus to be the site for this battle for animal protection. I foreground that forms of trans-species sociality and affects were central, prior to the animal ban, to circus professionals' publicity, but also to their sense of distinction and worth, hence the importance taken by the 1990s animal ban as a catalyst of the end of the circus in the narratives of circus professionals who were active since or during the late 20th century.

In Chapter 3, *Circus Itemizability*, I focus on the structure of the circus show, particularly on the way the circus show is centered on a series of "items" (circus acts) presented by the circus artists hired by a company. I analyze the importance taken by circus artists in defining 'what the circus is' and what *circus-ness*, the quality that makes citations of the circus and its aesthetic widely recognizable as such, is. The preponderance of circus artists, whose intense kinetic and gymnastic work to reproduce items ensures the novelty and prodigiousness of the circus show, and whose careers are also, therefore quickly over, also matters to the way the circus is collectively remembered. As I suggest, circus shows in the past, incompletely remembered both by spectators and by those who performed them, form the mental stock that define the Indian circus as a genre, according to the Kerala-based professionals currently in the business and owning various big top circus companies. This constrains the innovation authorized for the overall "aesthetic envelope" of the show to continue to be perceived as circus-like. In the second part of the chapter, I exemplify the implications of this

memory-based genericization of the circus by tracking the historical evolution of an item which generates lukewarm reaction, despite its long history in the Indian circus tradition: the "boneless act." I evidence that the current ageing of the female contortionists skilled in this item (after a 'circus children ban' in the early 2000s limited the recruitment of children trainees) generates a tension in the stable reproduction of circus-ness, opening the circus show to interpretations that depart from what the circus is understood to be (and therefore *should* be). Such items are frequently simply disavowed by Kerala-based senior professionals who perceive them as 'unlike what the circus used to be', or unlike the circus.

Chapter 4, *The Malabari Disappearance of the Indian Circus*, embraces and reflects on what the circus is understood to be in the town of Thalassery, where the disappearance of the circus is felt most strongly. After presenting some of the socio-economic factors that have conditioned Thalassery and the region of Malabar's association with the Indian circus, I foreground some of the regularities encountered in locally produced historical accounts on the involvement of Thalassery with the circus. Noting that some events are structuring and recurrent in the ways in which this history is told at the time when I conducted my fieldwork, I show how they form an arc of decline which places the golden age of the circus around the time when Malabaris gained prominence in the circus industry, and the last generation(s) of Malabari circus artists, many of whom are now settled in Thalassery, at the ever-receding point at which the circus disappears. I suggest that the local narrative of circus disappearance constitutes a framework which opens up a space in which the sociality of former circus professionals organized around (*what*) the circus (*was*) is not only permitted, but also celebrated, and locally respected.

This respectability, or at least the toleration of the *disappearing* circus (in contrast to a vibrant, *living* circus) is crucial to its durability. As Chapter 5 explains, the management of a circus past by individuals who have one is a subtle and complicated thing: the atmosphere the circus conjures inevitably contrast with the value regimes prevalent in Malabari homes and in the lives of the relatives who accommodate individuals with a circus career. While the media in which the publicity of past circuses is inscribed are old and sometimes faded, they still retain their potential to reanimate painful ghosts and to puncture, when exposed, the familial honor and respectability of the former circus artists' families and contemporary lives. Sometimes concealed, and sometimes revealed, in moments where it makes sense and upholds the framework of a particular and now concluded regional history, or in moments when a former circus artist wishes to be outside of the conventions of the places where they have come to settle for a short while, the corpus of circus photographs preserved in artists' albums ensures that past iterations of what the circus has been steadily and perennially keep on disappear*ing*.



These maps feature the sites of performance of three circus companies (On the left: Great Bombay Circus; On the right, the large company Jumbo circus (known by circus professionals as "big Jumbo", at the top) and the smaller one ("small Jumbo", at the bottom), both Jumbo circuses are owned by the same family. The lines represent schematically the order in which they visited these sites (G. Bombay starts at Solapur; big Jumbo in Mysore, and small Jumbo in Namakkal). These maps are based on the information I could collect from newspapers and the internet, and some sites along these routes are missing. They nonetheless are indicative of how circuses traveled for the 2018-2020 period, until they were temporarily halted by the lock-down measures imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic in India.

Figure 1. Maps representing the trajectories of three circus companies (2018-2020)

I once asked Jimmy, a former circus manager, the son of a circus owner from North Kerala (India), how his company decided where the circus would settle its next camp. Explaining that the person in charge of this decision had varied over the years, he remembered:

> Actually my father was very good at that. He used a map of India: he would just pinpoint, [with] his hand like this *(he points to a place on an invisible map with his finger)*, and he'd say: "this is the place."[6]

While Jimmy's gesture may be the product rhetorical flourish or a kind of bravado, it does evoke a logic common to the stories of circus professionals. In their recollection of the way circus companies circulated, which not infrequently invokes romantic visions of the profession in its golden age, circus operators conjure up maps which defining coordinates are the opportunity for a "good collection" (the term used by owners to designate the earnings generated by ticket sales). Guided by this profit-oriented logic, a savvy finger dropped on an imagined map could determine the migration of several hundreds of people, a parade of elephants and other large animals, and equipment that would require and fill several dozens of lorries or train cars.

Indian circus companies like the ones still operated around 2020 by professionals from Kerala plan their movements in India[7] in order to move from one camp to the next as efficiently as possible (Figure 1). These circus companies cater entertainment to the place where they set up their camp in the form of two to three circus shows daily, open for ticket sales. There are circuses (i.e. circus companies and circus shows, though both tend to be conflated in the shorthand 'circuses') of

[6] Interview with Jimmy K, Ernakulam, November 2019. The interviews with circus owners and their relatives cited in this chapter have been conducted in English, unless specified otherwise. Most of the names of my interlocutors have been changed to pseudonyms (consistent with the socio-economic information salient in their original name), unless their statements explicitly had to do with published information also cited in this essay.

[7] These movements once extended farther than India but since the 1990s Indian circus companies do not venture abroad, and most of those run by Malayalis only perform and travel in the South of India.

different sizes: while overall circus companies have become smaller both in numbers of staff and in the hosting capacity of their infrastructure during the last fifty years (a trend shaping circuses worldwide), even a small Indian big top circus today will require the rental of ten or twelve lorries for transportation, and supervise the journey for sixty to eighty employees. The larger circuses can be two to three times that large. Many circus companies allow employees to take leave on a rotational basis, so the show can perform throughout the year and the circus infrastructure tour continuously. Travel dates are fixed in advance, three to six months before, sometimes longer: dates in large cities and for competitive grounds can be agreed upon years in advance. Camps are chosen for their profitability as performing sites, and the choice is constrained by the availability and competition for existing grounds (called മൈതാനം "*maithanam"* in Malayalam and *maidan* in Hindi and English). Overall, distance between two camps plays a secondary role in deciding a future location. Few of the managers and owners I have interviewed ventured to offer technical details or accounts about the traveling days, unless prompted: they have much more to say about the periods of intense promotion and camp construction which take place in the new site before the circus performance premieres. This perception seems shared among those who work inside the circus; the circus artists I have spoken to do not single out memories of what happens during the long journeys from one place to the next, and most do not own pictures capturing their life on the road. It is part of the circus's image to mushroom suddenly in a place, to create a sense of urban transformation and anticipation through the copious deployment of posters and visual promotion, and the mysterious appearance (and disappearance)[8] of the circus's remarkable infrastructure: the big top

[8] Mira Nair's 1988 *Salaam Bombay* incidentally begins with such a disappearance scene: the movie opens on the scene of a circus packing up to move to its next camp site. A circus manager asks the young teenager Krishna, one of the film's protagonists to run an errand, but when Krishna returns, he finds that the circus has left, leaving no trace on the empty maidan it once occupied. The possibility of such physical disappearances (also enacted when a bankrupt company closes suddenly, leaving no information about the whereabouts of its gigantic but also non-specific and collapsible constitutive parts: poles, iron bars, ropes, tents…) lends credence to the idea that the circus might soon disappear as a cultural form.

(Figure 2).[9] Thus, although the circus is an itinerant institution, which by its own definition cannot settle, life on the road does not define it either. The circus is instead a site that continuously visits and entertains new places. This attitude towards traveling distinguishes Indian circus professionals from what has been reported about other forms of itinerant entertainment and labor, in India and elsewhere. Itinerant sellers, or street performers, who move from place to place and can adjust to suddenly arising opportunities for business often seek to maximize the value of the distance traveled, either by minimizing their mileage or by flexibly seizing the opportunities a long journey generates.[10]

Figure 2. Setting up the poles and the big top: Film stills from G. Aravindan's Malayalam film *Thambu* (1978). (Version of the film accessed on Youtube, April 2022)

Although minimized by professionals' metadiscourses, *circus routes*, the itineraries for travel from one destination to the next, inscribe the circus companies into the space they traverse, and shape up the

[9] Carmeli observes that, in the British circuses he studied in the 1970s, "[c]ircus travellers consider the fast build-up (and pull-down) of the Big Top and its sudden and surprising appearance as part of the familiar attraction of the circus. The circus usually comes at night (after a performance in another town, pull-down and travelling)." (Carmeli 1987, 224-225). For more accounts of the work it takes to engineer this effect of suddenness, cf. Janet M. Davis (2002). For a Kerala-specific visual reference, Govindan Aravindan's 1978 Malayalam movie *Thampu (*"The Circus Tent") begins with a segment showing the arrival of a circus company in a village in Kerala, and the build-up of the tent (cf. Figure 2).

[10] In the literature on South Asia, these other traveling groups have been more frequently featured than the circus. This may be because the slower pace of these communities' travels made their presence more likely to feature as a regional feature by colonial literature and classifications (E. Thurston & K. Rangachari, 1909), and their engagement with police authorities more sustained (Zubrzycki 2018). Some other itinerant performers also have strong ties to their linguistic community (for instance, Tamil Special Drama performers) (Seizer 2005), or to the festival traditions of a specific place (Freitag 1989). For a broad survey of the similarities between mobile groups of entertainers and traders in South Asia and worldwide, cf. Gmelch's *Annual Review* "Groups that Don't Want in: Gypsies and other Artisan, Trader, and Entertainer Minorities" (1986).

temporality of circus life. They involve planned movement over long distances (by road or using the Indian railway network, as well as sometimes air and sea),[11] minimizing stops and time until arrival to the next settlement (as Figure 1 shows, the itineraries are focused on destination, going back and forth between general cardinal orientation is not systematically avoided). In my interlocutors' narratives, a circus route is configured through a selective mode of recollecting which emphasizes time *in a place* over time *between places*. Whether they are occupying high-ranking positions in the circus and enjoying the expertise and mobility one can draw from constant traveling, or lower positions (as staff members or circus artists) caught up in mobile but repetitive routines of performance, these routes are central to circus professionals' relationship to space and time. For high-ranking professionals, routes are a constant preoccupation and topic for strategizing: the distances that must be covered to travel between camps are anticipated, imagined, and logistically actualized by securing the resources (lorry rental, extras recruited near the new camp to help pack or unpack the tents, and much ahead of that, rental of maidans negotiated with municipalities and their stakeholders) required by the planned movements. For those working in the circus but kept out of these key positions, travels across the circus routes conditions all aspects of their lives, from their housing (be it a tent on the circus compound or a room in a lodge shared with colleagues) to the frequency at which they visit their relatives.

Beyond their significance for everyday circus life and sociality, circus routes also exist through the patterns of interaction they create between circus companies and their publics, composed of

[11] "Circus special trains" and "bonafide Professional Circus parties" still hold a particular status for the Indian Railways, although circulars from 2000 and 2007 limited the advantageous rates on these concessions which previously facilitated the long journeys of circus companies (cf. Gov. of India (Railway Board), "Commerical Circular NO. 93 of 2007", "Revision of Rates for Circus Special Trains."). The companies owned by the Kerala-born circus owners I interviewed now seldom travel by trains, as traveling with rented lorries is more cost and time-efficient. In the past, in the context of international tours, and still today, on specific occasions and for star artists and business partners, it is not uncommon for circus professionals to travel by flight.

individuals who are also, in potential, the paying spectators for the circus shows. As such, they can serve as an index of other changes in India's demographic and spatial dynamics: the migrations of people who enroll in the circus and the itineraries fixed in each circus companies reflect transformations in India's economy and signals demographic trends also observable in other (low paying) service industries. Circus routes are also shaped by several environmental, logistical, and economic factors, as I will show below. In this way too, changes in these routes also indirectly signal the transformations underway in India's geography and economy.

Circus routes manifest the professional acumen of circus managers and owners, who possess expertise in planning such itineraries. If they are mostly unnoticed by the unconcerned circusgoers settled in a place, they can be traced, albeit incompletely, by paying attention to and collating the visual publicity and advertising deployed and elicited by circuses wherever they visit. I attempt to offer a description of these routes and the way professionals discuss them in part as a corrective for what I have experienced, in my ongoing education in the social sciences of South Asia, as a heavy reliance on a regional conceptualization of South Asia, even within India. While the division of South Asia's "sub-areas" in India along lines informed by historical and present administrative divisions (e.g. the North-East, Kashmir), cultural similarities (South vs. North India) and physical geographical features (e.g. the Deccan) is relevant to and often instructive for research work, the tendency to seamlessly reinforce areas of demonstrated cultural consistency can obscure how local and insider perceptions of space might be connected to histories that build up through travels, and regular visits – and how such subjective apprehension of space, through a professionally and economically motivated experience like that of the group of circus professionals broadly understood

(owners, employees, artists and stars, temporary laborers), can take on a collective, at times institutional, dimension.

Works on islanders are generative to unsettle regional modes of thinking, perhaps because of the ways thinking from or with an island entails taking into consideration the physical conditions in which the categories of inside and outside (and insiders and outsiders), of continuity and separation come into play in shaping ideas of society, community, and specific "lived worlds" (Munn 1986:8; cf. also Monsaingeon & Bess 2019). In their introduction to *Manifestations of History: Time, Space and Community in the Andaman Islands* (2017), Heidemann and Zehmisch offer a reflexive evaluation of academic appraisals of historical time after realizing that "[the informants from the Andamans and the researchers] applied different strategies to reduce the complexity of historical narratives," with Andaman informants laying more emphasis comparatively on the "spatial aspects" of history: "as memories of the past are to a certain extent spatially oriented, there is, consequently, a need to recognize that history is space-bound, too" (2017: 2). I also draw insight on the circus routes from Nancy Munn's analysis of what she termed "the sociocultural spacetime" (1986: 9) in which Gawans generate cultural value through continuous interactions (visits and hospitality) with and as overseas visitors, and her emphasis on how "in the Gawan case, value may by characterized in terms of differential potentials of *spatiotemporal transformation* – [i.e.] in terms of an act's relative capacity to extend or expand what I call *intersubjective spacetime* – a spacetime of self-other relationships formed in and through acts and practices" (ibid.) inscribed in the space opened up by inter-island travels in the context of kula exchanges. Here my argument concerning space offers some related insights, emphasizing ways in which my interlocutors' perception of space departs from conceptions of space ordered by national, sub- and inter-national scales, and foregrounds instead dynamic connections

arising while a professional group navigates a territory over time. I venture that such appraisals of space invite us to consider other ways of perceiving, thinking, and talking about space, but not only: they also illuminate the influence and capaciousness of practices of (self-)publicity, such as those I delve in in the second half of this paper, and their implications for the subjective assertion of a professional identity.

In the first section of this chapter, I explain why the way circus routes are talked about in circus companies calls for an analytical approach to time and space that departs from prevalent forms of regionalism in area studies. The circus profession is defined by its ambulatory engagement with space, characterized both by the migratory patterns that lead people to enroll as circus professionals, and by the continuous and recursive movement materialized by the circus routes. Consistently with this experience, circus professionals, I argue, characterize circus careers as implying a distinctive relationship to space, premised on the dual experience of migration to join a workplace and of the continuous travels of that workplace. As I evidence in the next section, this grants much importance to the planning and anticipating of the circus routes, the planning of which is the responsibility of managers and owners. Highlighting the geographical information circus owners and managers consider to determine the circus routes, this section shows how navigating the Indian territory becomes intuitive for them. Methodologically, it is a challenge to track these movements because the publicity of a circus company in a place is an ephemeral event. The historical evolution of circus routes is primarily revealed by the promotional materials issued and sometimes preserved by circus company owners and their relatives whom I have interviewed. In the third section, I emphasize the situated nature of the non-local image foregrounded by circus advertisement: I show that in order to produce the image of the circus as a cosmopolitan lifestyle and entertainment, circus companies

integrate in their routes and must depend on production sites and image industries that can produce still (i.e., mainly, photographic) and long-lasting visual imageries for what the circus is. It is through painstaking and continual efforts at self-promotion that circus companies and their owners (re)produce the circus as an itinerant, glamorous show. These concerted strategies which unify the profession are dependent on the collaboration of localized, sedentary media industries (be it newspapers in regional languages, India's many film industries, regionally centralized poster printing facilities, etc.) who can provide the companies with promotion materials. This publicity (newspaper articles, the appearance of recognizable circus companies in films, posters, company-commissioned photographs, taken by a studio photographer) facilitate their circulation through networks broader than the premises and spectatorship of circus shows, evincing a second, supportive kind of mobility for that of the physical infrastructure commodifying the circus show. This second kind of mobility has more to do with fame – understood here in a way akin to Munn's definition of it as "a mobile, circulating dimension of the person [or in this case, a business entity, a circus company]: the travels… of a person's name… apart from its physical presence", by which "the name takes on its own internal motion traveling through the minds and speech of others" (Munn 1986: 105). While the combination of itinerancy and publicity effectively produces the circus as a mobile entertainment in India perceived as cosmopolitan (by contrast to sedentary communities perceived by themselves and others as local, homogenous, and desi) and glamorous, the circulation of this image and the fame that some circus owners occasionally attract demands constant efforts on the part of leading professionals to be visible. This generates feelings of isolation and despondency among Kerala-based professionals: unlike other forms of spectacles, which they perceive as *receiving* media coverage and positive attention from society, circus professionals deplore the close and proactive management it takes to achieve the visibility essential to their itinerant spectacle, which leads them to often express their anticipation that the circus will eventually disappear.

Thinking space beyond Regional Scales

Numerous anthropological and historical studies of the Indian subcontinent identify themselves as contributions to the study of South Asia as a region, or as studies of a region within South Asia. This regional angle of Southern Asian studies can be credited for allowing the analysis of phenomenon downplayed by nation-centered analyses (Murphy 2017) and has also led to the development of intra-regional literatures that provide a heuristic fragmentation of the subcontinent and India meant to represent their cultural and historical specificity. While both tendencies in regional studies are useful to elucidate a broad range of behaviors, traditions and migratory movements, they do not provide much footage to understand the professional culture of my interlocutors who work or have worked as circus people. While various scholars have scrutinized and critiqued area studies for the epistemological divisions they operate informed by Western academic interests (Dirks 2015, 265-290; Rafael 1994; Hirschman et al 1992), here I make a case for thinking outside regional categories not so much because of this academic history, but because thinking with regional scales can fail to account for how groups that travel on a regular basis, particularly a multi-cultural group such as circus professionals, come to think about space.

Circus professionals constitute a diverse and strongly stratified professional group. In a circus camp, people with very different biographical trajectories, professions and backgrounds cohabitate continuously. The local status of these professionals does not map seamlessly onto prevalent status systems existing in South Asia (Nisha P. R. 2017, 2020). While the circus is not necessarily the space without caste, class, or religion that it claims to be (Champad 2013), the importance of caste and religion as identity-markers locally is overshadowed by the divisions and ranking of the circus' three sectors of professional activity: management, performance, and camp maintenance.

No traditional, informal or formal restrictions limit enrollment into these groups on the ground of one's place of origin, religious or caste background, and the biographical details of how a circus person joined the profession widely vary, even when focusing on region-specific patterns of recruitment, such as the ones that made Malabari artists so significant for circus companies until the late 1980s.[12] In that sense, the circus community differs from other entertainer communities of India for which affiliation is based on language, kinship or caste-specific transmission. The circus industry is molded and characterized instead by what Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan have defined as *labor circulation*, "the movement of people whose livelihood strategies involve relocation, both periodic and permanent, but whose self-making strategies retain a significant involvement with places of origin, especially rural homelands" (Gidwani & Sivaramakrishnan 2003: 341). Indeed, even if the status of circus workers is determined inside the company and through the exercise of their profession, they remain attached to their place of origin, culturally and linguistically. This makes certain aspect of the circus professional life particularly salient in some regions, such as the Kannur district of Northern Kerala (more on this in chapter 4). For instance, it is for the retired circuses settled there that the disappearing of the circus – at any rate, the form as it is defined and dominated by Kerala-born business owners – is most visible, and regretted. But on the road, the shared lifestyle,

[12] In Kannur district and across the Northern region known as Malabar in Kerala, I have spoken to circus professionals of varied religious and caste background. While many circus artists appear to have belonged to Malabar's Thiyya community (this fact is confirmed by the few administrative documents I could consult in the archive of the Circus Employees Union in Thalassery, as well as by Nisha P.R.'s writings (2020)), some artists also belonged to Nair families (social endogamy seems to have been preserved through arranged marriages inside the circus profession for these upper-caste individuals). Professionals had Hindi, Muslim and Christian names, with Muslims being the smallest of these groups in the profession. Love marriages among artists were much more common than elsewhere judging from the biographical interviews I organized. Some of these weddings brought together spouses coming from very distant parts of India, a specific form of circus Hindi acting as a lingua franca in these couples. Arranged weddings with grooms or brides unrelated to the circus but born in the same area as a circus professional were common too. Inter-caste (and inter-religious) weddings also happened. From the gossip and stories reported by professionals about their colleagues or bosses, it seemed common for men in management positions to arrange marriages for themselves with prominent female artists raised in the companies, which could account for some of these inter-caste marriages. This trend also explains a frequent marked seniority of husbands over wives (ten years or more) in the profession.

camp-specific routines and the informal rules defining interactions between workers of different statuses level many of the differences, deferential behaviors, and structural inequities that shape the native places of circus people. The busy routine of a circus camp englobes all performers and functions as a relatively inclusive terrain for a historically changing, linguistically and culturally diverse group of professionals.

In this geographical functional economy, Kerala continues to feature as the point of origin of a certain form of the circus. Circus ownership has continued to be passed on among Kerala-born men (and much more rarely, women), from father to son, and these owners continue to hire Malayalis, mostly from Northern Kerala, to manage their circuses; even as, meanwhile, circus artists and staff from Kerala became rarer, replaced by performers coming from Assam, Manipur, West Bengal, Manipur, and the neighboring country of Nepal. Overall, this has resulted in the prominence and visibility of Malayalis in the circus industry's executive positions ("Administrative Department", in Figure 3). Among the three largest circus companies now active in India, two have management positions entirely staffed by Malayalis, with most of these managers established in the Northern district of Kannur. Among the six circus companies I have regularly visited between 2016 and 2021, five of them also had several managers who were from Kerala. This suggests that hiring trends in the circus profession are consistent with broader migratory trends across India. As such, circuses are places that index economic and spatial dynamics, as well as interregional migration patterns.

The coordinated movements of these professionals coming from different places as framed by the circus company influences this group's conceptualizations and appraisal of time and space. Circus companies travel continuously throughout the year, most of them shifting their location every

Figure 3. Gemini Circus' Team Portraits.

Promotional Brochure meant to be sold or distributed during the show. 2010 (Photographed with permission, Circus Employees Union Office, Thalassery, 2020).

Note the classification of professionals according to their gender and status (artists, administrators, the temporary and typically locally recruited maintenance staff members are not featured in the brochure). "Couples" features as a distinct category, dominated by artists but including also some administrator husbands. The names of the professionals belonging to the Administration Department suggests that many of them are Malayali; meanwhile the names given for artists (often short name forms or stage names) does not reveal their region of origin.

month or other month. They interact in limited ways with the places where they set their camps. The circus camp, which includes the performance big top, and the compound, in which, typically, female artists and couples stay, and the management has a reception tent and an office tent, is where most

of the day is spent for all circus professionals (Figure 4). Within the circus compound, the diverse origins of the performers and workers create a work environment that deviates from regionally situated, sedentary businesses.

Circus professionals from Kerala-founded companies negotiate on a daily basis with a polyglot, multi-cultural group of co-workers: Malayalam, Hindi, and English are routinely used, in addition to the other languages circus workers happen to have in common (in the circuses I have visited, Assamese, Amharic – because of the large number of foreign performers from Ethiopia that were hired in 2018-2020 –, Tamil, were also frequently used for instance). Unlike industries relying on the services of intermediary staff managers (Raj & Axelby 2019; Sargent 2017), the scale of circus companies does not allow for mediating positions to emerge below that of the overseer of the camp and other managerial positions, frequently still occupied by Malayalis. At most, a performer who was hired as part of an artist troupe may be assigned the role of negotiating with the camp manager, but this does not prevent others in the troupe from having to interact and live alongside the other employees of the company. This necessary cohabitation renders all employees more versed than average in living alongside and interacting daily with people with different languages, cultures, and places of origin. Because of this, their outlook is characterized by the sort of *cosmopolitanism* Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan identify in their study of circular migration: circus professionals "straddle a world of difference […] and come to recognize the political relations that secure and naturalize that

Circus compounds. From left to right, top to bottom: Circus compound from as seen from the nearby road (my photograph, Tirur, 2017); chai in the circus owner's quarter-cum-reception tent (my photograph, Tirur, 2017); view inside a circus compound, showing the artists' quarters and the big top on the left (Kunnamkulam 2020); timepass in an artist's tent (place unknown, 1970s, artist's personal collection); the girl's quarter in a circus company running in the 1960s (place unknown, artist's personal collections); closing the camp after the night show (place unknown, 2000, circus owner's personal collection).

Figure 4. Circus compounds. Selection of archival photographs documenting the everyday life of a circus camp.

movements in geographic space not just sensibilities and ideas, but also the materials and techniques that enable the production and transformation of the social space of multiple worlds (not merely the social space of the rural, but also of the urban, the regional, the national, and what gets inscribed as the global)" (2003: 361-362). For circus professionals, this definition of cosmopolitanism seems to take on an additional dimension: while cohabitation in the circus company leads to the production of a social world in which multiple origin narratives and visions of India's regional constitution are expressed internally, the circus company is also a place that moves and which business is based on engaging with new places and narrowly situated publics (their potential paying spectators). The reproduction of the circus as a performance exhibited to an ever-changing audience – i.e. the show, and its episodic installation and presence in sedentary spaces – engages and "transforms" the multiple worlds already contained by the circus as well as those of the places and people for which it comes to perform.

Because these spaces are often visited more than once, and because the circus routes have changed over time, there is a sui generis historical quality to the managers and owners' navigation and descriptions of the Indian territory. This history is longer than the careers of today's professionals, and includes the expertise accumulated and transmitted across generations of circus owners and managers. It also features the travels circus companies took part in as part of longer world tours that were facilitated by European colonial presence across Asia especially. From the 1940s, Indian companies occasionally toured Malaysia, Singapore, the Middle East, East Africa, in addition to many sites in India and Sri Lanka. Up until the 1990s, circus routes also included many local festival venues within India annually, which means the companies changed their location more frequently than they do now. Current circuses tour strictly within India, and big tops focus on renting ground

in metropolises where they can camp for months at a time. Nonetheless, the generations of professionals who have directly experienced the diminishing of the circus routes and particularly Malayali circus owners and managers service the recollections of these wider travels, sometimes with a nostalgia for a past golden age of the circus, but also through the conversion of the historical associations of the circus with itinerancy into a spectacular *aesthetic envelope* of cosmopolitanism and glamour for the circus show, sustained by the evidence of the circus' internal diversity and continuous travels. By doing so, for instance by demonstrating their intuitive sense of a good circus routes for their circus companies as I show in the next section, they sustain the moral economy or practices of "value transformation" (Munn 1986:20) – by which the extant of travels and the dimensions of the show are indicative of a company's worth – in which the fame of their company amounts to influence in the profession, and potentially recognition and economic success beyond its realm.

Circus Routes

Some consistent features of my interviews with circus owners, particularly the eagerness of several of them to recall and narrate their tours in distant sites and how they went about to plan them, suggests that the ability to tell entertaining and colorful tales of past tours has social currency among circus executives. Detailed, lively, and nostalgic observations about the geography or sociology of a place the circus visited are the privilege of a minority in the circus, who can go out and interact with their environment with comparatively more freedom: men rather than women, families and troupes rather than company boys and girls, managers and owners over employees.

For those occupying subaltern positions across these contrasted sets, a majority in any circus company, the sense of travel leaves merely a blur, and a reinforced sense of the monotony of life in the circus. There remain few traces of the travels in the accounts of circus artists, and the fact that many women leave the circus as soon as they marry – often to colleagues in the circus as well, says something of the difficulties circus artists associate with this lifestyle. In the continuum of daily performances and the brief intervals during which a company hurries to the next camp, days of vacation stand out for circus artists. Interruptions in the circus' drastic routine are often fondly remembered, to the extent that the details of what happened on those special days is sometimes made to stand, in people's accounts, for what being a circus artist was like (Figure 4; more on this in chapter 5). Overall, though, for most employees of a circus company, everyday life consist in a monotonous preparation for the three daily performances of the same show. This means that in spite of their constant travels, many circus workers hardly leave the camp, and that access to everything which is outside the traveling camp (and the lodge in which male artists and workers often stay, usually very nearby to the camp) is sociologically restricted to a few who are constructed as not endangered by the foreignness of the camp's exterior (and the anticipated stigmatization that circus workers, especially female circus artists, if recognized as such, might incur from sedentary people).

Due to their constant co-habitation and interactions with employees occupying positions comparatively less well-paid and more restrictive than theirs, the higher echelons of the profession tend to be aware of their privilege – both in relation to the people they hire and live with, and in relation to the people who might be in socially or economically equivalent positions to them at home or in the place they come from. It is mostly those in these better-paid positions – circus managers and owners, members of family troupes whose contracts in a company was negotiated collectively by the family head, animal trainers, and sometimes senior performers reconverted as

Recollections "puncturing" everyday life in the circus. *From left to right:* circus artist Viswanath posing outside the circus camp in Neirobi , Kenya (1970s); circus colleagues visiting a fort on a day off (site unknown, India, 1970s); a rare photograph preserved by Sathi, circus artist, of the circus company she worked in traveling by flight (a very rare occasion) to Singapore (date unknown, 1980s). Artists' personal collection, kannur district, photographs of photographs taken in 2019-2020.

Figure 5. Recollections of everyday life and holidays in the circus.

trainers – who can engage with the places traveled with enough autonomy to become curious, and knowledgeable about these places. By their own account, their position compares positively to that of people of comparable economic status in their places of origin; in their stories, no one joins the circus without a taste for the itinerancy and the travels it entails.

Having framed its itinerancy as a privilege, this group is often keen to share its knowledge of the many places it has traveled. In practice, I focus here on the accounts of the circus managers and owners I could interview, rather than family troupes and other high-ranking circus workers: although others recounted experiences similar to the owners and managers, those of my interlocutors who could invoke the circus routes in relation to recent experiences or present-day circus routes were all from the latter subgroup. This is partly because owners and managers are more frequently inserted in dynamics of circus-specific cultural transmission, in which a younger man comes to learn under the mentorship of an older professional in a similar position, on occasions, an older relative. Similarly to the progressive acquisition of fame, and thereby influence, in the Gawan context analyzed by Nancy Munn, here also the knowledge and skills to plan, actualize, and remember circus

routes, "is built up over time through continuing transaction" (1986: 107). The pragmatic aspects of circus management, namely, living alongside people of different social status, origin, and language, and handling their issues daily, while benefitting from the mentorship of similarly placed, already established, professionals, makes circus executives particularly astute observers of the ways of life, desires and aspirations of others, inside and outside of the circus companies.

Jimmy, the retired circus manager mentioned earlier, explains to me in an interview that it was the extended stays in a place and proximity with its residents that make him remember his former profession with fondness:

> Now we go to a place and [when] we are there… Bengal for example, then we [get to] know the local culture, the people, what they eat… so closely we are involved, you know? For instance, we stayed in some place in Punjab. There are no hotels. [So] we stay[ed] in somebody else's house. And then we get involved with their family, and, you know, the culture of the family. So those are the memories which, which I miss actually, hum… [when] we go for holidays, the show is running somewhere. [So] my kids and my wife, my children, my sisters, the family - normally [when] we go for holidays, we stay, we [just] take a place for three days. We all hang out. But [in this case] we stay for a month, so one month we are in the same town, we go out and [discover the place]… That's a big holiday – staying a month in one place.[13]

[13] Interview with Jimmy K, Ernakulam, November 2019.

He also noted that one of the perks of being a circus manager was the cultural and geographical knowledge one gains through such experiences: "how well we've seen the country […] – very few people have seen the country [in this way]." For managers and circus-owning families, traveling and staying in different places, with different people, constitutes elements of their identity, and informs their accounts of the places they have lived at. If people in the visited places may not always remember them, the narrativization of their travels to a public constituted by family members, neighbors in their native places, and their archiving of souvenir photographs (Figure 5 and 6), ensures that they become known, at the local scale of the places where they were born, or have settled, as well-traveled, cosmopolitan people.

Figure 6. Circus owner M.V. Shankar and his wife photographed in Moscow, in 1962, during the visit of the Indian Circus delegation to the USSR. This photograph has been recirculated in various publications about Shankar's life and circus accomplishments. Featured here as captioned in *Big Top*, NO.1 (1965) (Circus owner's personal collection, photographed with permission, 2020).

The circus routes they describe are characterized by details on the sociological diversity of India, the cohabitation of speakers of different languages, and by their awareness of India's numerous festivals and pilgrimages – for which the circus can hope to provide a light but remunerative side entertainment. At once an affect-laden mnemonic feature and a form of business expertise, the knowledge gathered by being "close" to the people can be reinvested in making future decisions about where to set up a camp, directly shaping the future circus routes.

Because they are responsible for determining where it is best for the circus to go next, camp managers and owners must develop a sense of where a circus camp might be successful. To do so, they build on their past experiences and on the observation of the routes of other circus companies. They draw meaningful connections between towns and cities through their itineraries, which inform the way they continuously plan the next camps. Their curiosity and enjoyment of itinerant life and their business intuition blend into a noted character trait, remembered by their relatives outside the profession. As Shobha, the daughter of a successful circus manager (and founder of the large company *Asian Circus*)[14] who passed away in the 1970s, explains to me in an interview in October 2019,[15] her father "was a genius in circus." Explaining that her father was "very, very cunning and very able," managing up to four circuses at the same time at some point in his life, she adds: wherever he traveled, "his breath [was] always with the circus." In her description, as in Jimmy's description of his dad pointing the next location on an imagined map, the circus owner is the embodiment of his business, with a physical knowledge that enables the strategic decisions that must be taken to ensure the success of the company. Jimmy, who learned the circus business directly from watching his father, clarifies that what may look like intuition in the moment of decision-making is in fact structured by extensive, practical knowledge about the places that can be toured:

> [Father] knew, he later developed it [that knowledge], [as he did] in Assam: what is the festival in that town, what is [the performance ground like] in that town, if it's raining there… we know the geography of the country so well: the festivals, [the climate, etc.]. When it's raining, we play [in] Rajasthan, in Kerala if it's raining you go to Tamil Nadu to compensate – like that.

Such accounts are useful to tease out concrete factors that weigh in the planning of the circus routes. Circus routes must take into account the infrastructural needs of the company first and foremost.

[14] The name of this circus company has been changed.
[15] Interview with Shobha, Kozhikode, October 2019.

Circus life is organized around the tented shows that take place two to three times daily. The big top, as well as the rest of the camp, is installed outdoors, on an empty ground rented to the municipality or a private owner. It is crucial that that ground stays dry and that it can attract enough crowds to cover what it costs to run the show with ticket sales.

Figure 7. Flooded circus camp (site and date unknown, 1960s, artist's personal collection, Thalassery. Photographed with permission , 2019.)

Weather conditions are thus an essential criterion for selecting future destinations. Circuses must avoid areas affected by the monsoons and plan cautiously in areas with changing weather: strong rains can quickly damage the camp, the facilities in which the employees stay, and the tented ring; they can also compromise the performance (Figure 7). Cycling, bike stunts, and acrobatics can be

visually less impressive, or pose greater danger to the performers, when they are performed in a ring where the floor is uneven or wet. Unpredictable weather has made small circus companies particularly vulnerable to climate change in the recent years: as another circus manager, Sajith, whose company, Sun Circus, has since shut down, explained to me in an interview in the spring of 2018:

> [T]he climate conspired against us. Previously, we used to spend the rainy season in Tamil Nadu, where it didn't use to rain. But now June and July are highly unpredictable months, even there. And December, November, which are usually relatively dry in Kerala have been very rainy this year.[16]

Another major factor at play in the charting of circus routes is the rental prices of grounds large enough to accommodate the performance tent and the compound. Maidan prices and their variations according to local festivals and competitions with other aspiring users (other circuses, melas, exhibitions, fairgrounds, etc.) are well known information among managers and circus owners.[17] The price of rental grounds is indexed to the size of the city and the area in which it is located, its local popularity as a place to stroll by – in addition to the actual size of the maidan, and its connections to urban infrastructures (bus service, ease of access to water and electricity, etc). Even in the current context, where many circuses have closed, one can distinguish circuses of various sizes and means, including a handful that can afford maidan that cost more than 30,000 Indian Rupees (~$406) daily, while most others seek less expensive deals.

[16] Interview with Sajith, owner of Sun Circus, Kozhikode, March 2018.

[17] Here are some examples of daily ground prices I could gather over diverse interviews for the state of Kerala in 2017 and 2018: Kochi/Ernakulam – between ₹30,000 (~$406) and ₹60,000 (~$813) daily. Thiruvananthapuram (Kerala state's capital: ₹14,000 (~$190) daily. Kannur (largest city in the Malabar region, Northern Kerala): ₹8000 (~$108) daily. A circus manager noted that some states, such as Maharashtra and Gujarat offered much cheaper facilities (in Gujarat, ₹200 (~$3) daily) because state governments had policies to facilitate and sponsor circus performances.

The evolution in maidan prices is an important element that explains how the trajectories of circuses have changed over time. The diversification of promoters with an interest in renting out a large ground, with the development of events such as music festivals, popular music concerts, book and film fairs and massive political party events has led to a steep increase in prices in some cities, and it sometimes put an end to the preferential rents that circuses were given in the past. The flyer displayed in Figure 8 is a promotional document for a show put on by Jumbo Circus in the city of Ernakulam, the largest city in Kerala. While no large circus company has visited Ernakulam in the past ten years, due to the premium value of maithanam spaces in the busiest city of Kerala, this document evidences that it was formerly a venue included in the circus routes. Note that while the flyer states the show comes "in your town for the first time," this need not true; is a common marketing argument found in almost all circus advertising even today. Thus maidan prices and the climate chart out the sites where it is possible to perform.

Figure 8. 1986 Jumbo Circus promotional flyer (Malayalam and English; courtesy of one of my interlocutors, photographed with permission in March 2018, Thalassery, India)

Circus companies are further constrained by competition with other circuses, and with other forms of entertainment that perform on the *maidan*, such as *melas*. Competition issues among circus companies have been documented (and featured in films),[18] but those involved in them rarely venture information about the precise nature of events, or the way these competition issues were dealt with. With hindsight, Shobha tells me the following story:

> "Once, when [our circus] was running in Pondichery, Venus [another large circus, now closed] also came to Pondichery. Real enmity, no, at that time, real enmity! *(she exclaims and laughs)* At that time I still remember my amma [mother] and everybody used to tell me: don't go there, that [these] people will kill you kill you kill you. I would say why [would they kill] me? […] Then one day [the owner] came to our circus to see the show and we also went there, finally it became friendly, haha! Everybody was thinking that we will have a very good fight. My brother was running at that time, not my dad [the circus' first owner]."

In this account, the owners of each circus alleviate the tension caused by the prospect of competition by visiting the other circus playing the same city. However, Shobha mentions it was her brother who was "running the show at that time:" by her own account, her brother, who was much more interested in making films than in the circus venture he had inherited, was a bad strategist in planning circus routes and intendance. He eventually sunk his father's business, which shut down a few years after Shobha's father's death. The mishap of having two circuses playing in the same city that was avoided by two men of different generations making a concerted effort to be friendly towards each other could perhaps have been entirely avoided had it involved owners of the same seniority and caliber. As Jimmy, who happens to be the son of the competing owner Shobha mentions in this account, explains, large circus companies have set up patterns of collaboration

[18] For an example of competitive strategizing in a European circus company, one can refer to the French case presented in Jean-François Mehu and Jacques Letellier's short 1950 docu-fiction "Un Cirque Passe," which narrates the everyday life of Achille Zavatta's circus in France.

amongst each other in the past, which might be perceived as collusion from the standpoint of the circuses who are not their "friends":

> "We plan six months in advance so anybody coming in our way that we face - we try to stop them. […]if [their] application comes to the office *[the office of the municipality where the maidan is negotiated*], we'll know that another circus is coming. If the other is our friend we might — we say, 'we'll come after six months.' Because whatever we do, we can't come right after [*here the manager means that if they come too soon after another circus has gone, they won't be met by an audience*] that means that we can't come back. So we avoid it. So like that we have small-small issues. Then, there's this understanding — between the three-four companies of ours [*i.e.. the group composed of Venus Circus and its "friends" mentioned above*]. So if somebody wants to play A - he plays town A. 'B town *you* play' 'C town *we* play' Then they say: you give me B town, I'll give you A town."[19]

Thus circus companies of comparable status make alliances and use negotiation to determine itineraries that avoid direct competition with companies perceived as "friends." As to other circus companies, they do their best to spot the ones that "come in their way" and thwart their attempt to secure the rental of a maidan.

The price at which a circus ticket is known to sell at a given place can also weigh in the choice of a performance destination. A retired circus owner discussed with me why large circus companies now tour almost exclusively in Maharashtra, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. He explained that in some other states, like Uttar Pradesh or Gujarat, it is not possible to sell a ticket or more than 15 (~$0.2) to 30 (~$0.4) rupees a seat. "How can you run a show with that kind of money?" he asked. "That's why [big circuses] tour in places like Kerala [*where ticket prices in a small circus vary between 100* (~$1.4*) and 300* (~$4) *rupees depending on seat placement*]".[20] While circus is not a particularly popular entertainment form currently in Kerala, the budgets families can dedicate to entertainment there are still higher

[19] Interview with Jimmy K, Trivandrum, November 2019.
[20] Interview with Gopal, New Mahe, October 2019.

than in other states. This is seemingly a recent development, that has resulted in more pronounced restrictions of circus routes along a North-South axis, with an understanding of the South limited to Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

Many factors weigh in the decision to "play" a city, with some of them being specific to each circus company and the recursive nature of their routes. Aside from competition avoidance, specific histories of engagement with a festival, school vacations, good or bad relations with the local police force can also play a role in shaping itineraries. Owners and managers come to envision space through these factors and through strategies that can maximize the company's collection. The movements planned according to this sense of space, do not, in and of themselves, mark space durably. What makes circus routes endure, and what makes them a perennial source of "communal value" (Munn 1986) for the Indian circus, is the surfeit of publicity – understood broadly, as encompassing both the fame and influence they allow some men, such as circus executives, to acquire, and the trail of advertisement, images, and secondary media circulation produced as a circus company travels – generated along and through these travels. It is through their publicization that circus routes come to constitute the spacetime of the circus' lived world.

Figure 9. Posters announcing Bombay Circus' Kannur opening, in the neighboring town of Thalassery (about one hour away by road and 30 minutes by train). My photograph, 2019.

The Construction of Circus Publicity

Keeping track of the circus' routes described by my interlocutors, and how they have changed over time is only (and partially) possible because of the copious amount of publicity generated by the arrival of a circus company in a new city, and left behind, both in newspaper archives and more fleetingly, on urban infrastructures and public buses, as they move to new places. The production and circulation of publicity about the circus is an integral part of the planning of the circus routes, and owners and managers concertedly consider the potential for coverage and the threats of "poster wars" between companies competing for a town in their planning of circus routes. Through their promotion, circuses ensure that their arrival at a new destination becomes known of potential

spectators. Simultaneously, they co-create with the media they enlist the image of the circus as an ever-exotic, swiftly come and gone (dis/appearing), cosmopolitan form of entertainment with a wide popular appeal. If circus personnel can ensure the creation of the circus' image to an extent through the deployment of poster teams ahead of the arrival of the camp (Davis 2002, Carmeli 1987, Bouissac 2010), the production of a mass mediated circus image inevitably involves the actors who control circulation across these media, be it poster printers, journalists relaying the circus' promotion, or the cinema and the directors choosing to use the circus as a set.

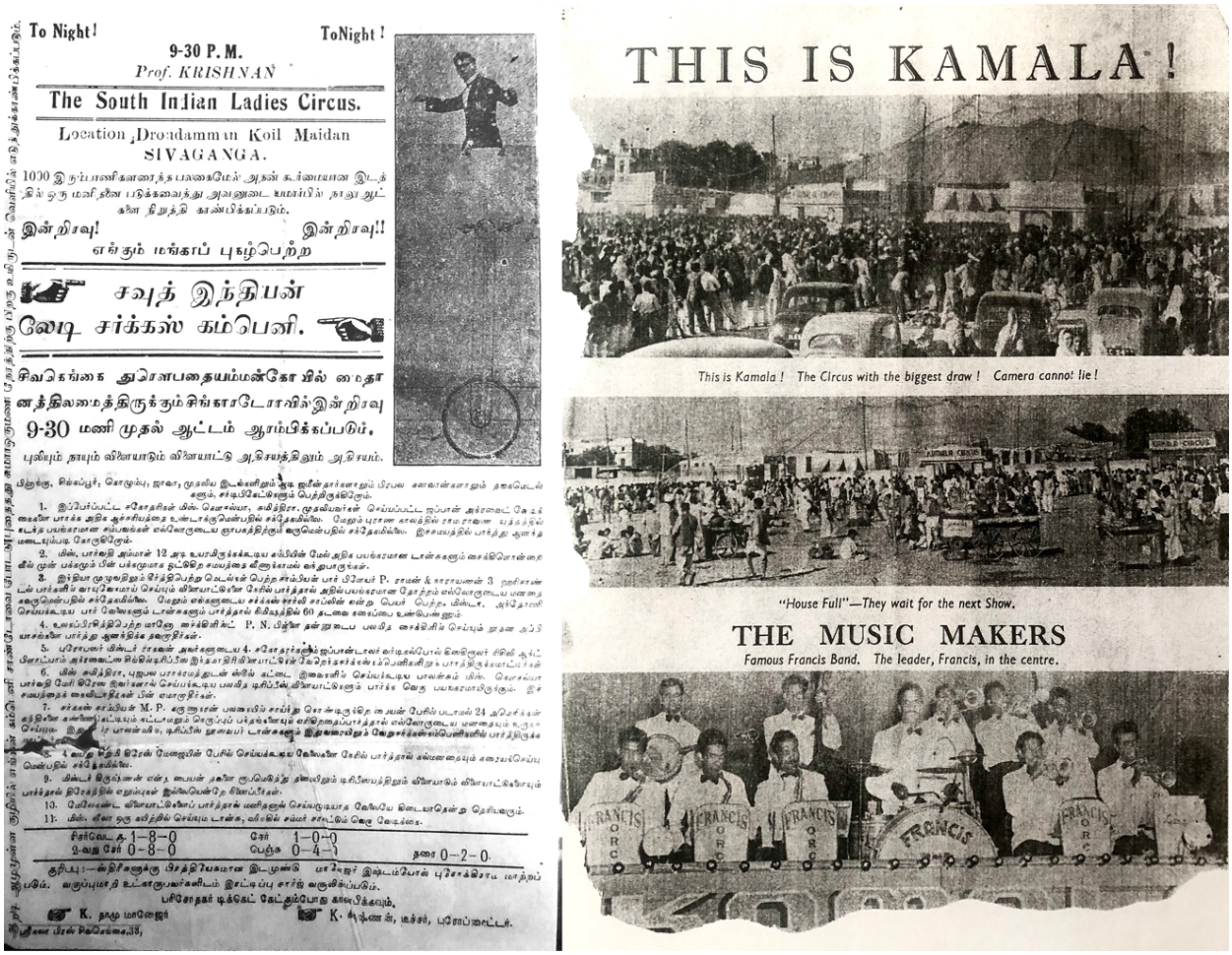


Figure 10. Two circus posters, advertising respectively The South Indian Ladies Circus playing in Sivaganga (date unknown, 1930s) and Kamala Circus, playing in Bombay in 1955-1956. Private collection, photographed with permission in Thalassery, 2020.

The promotional strategies of circuses in India have been overall consistent in the decades the circus

has existed, and resonant with the forms it takes in other national traditions of 'traditional' circus. They have capitalized on the movement of the companies across presumably larger-than-life routes, which connect the distant and exotic to the local scale of small towns. A promotional page on the South Indian Ladies Circus (Figure 10, left side), whose original provenance and publication date are unknown, but likely excerpted from a 1930s Tamil daily, for instance, bolsters the circus' exoticism and exceptional character through the juxtaposition of the foreign places the company claims to have traveled ("Penang, Singapore, Colombo, Java") and its immediate presence in Sivaganga (then in Ramnad District, of the Madras Presidency). Using this implicit contrast between locational proximity and the distance of its emanations, it creates an anticipation for the show, reinforced by the differently sized sets of text praising its established reputation ("**எங்கும்மங்கா புகழும்பெற்ற** ", 'famous everywhere'); list of items admired in various places; the fact of having a performer 'just like Charlie Chaplin'; and highlighting the immediacy of a performance not to be missed (the latter suggested by indexical phrases: "Tonight!" "**இன்றிரவு**" and practical information such as the seat quotas, the maithanam's location, etc.) The picture featured in this poster, presenting a cycle performer perched on a tall monocycle against a dark background revealing nothing about the cyclist's location, reinforces the text's intention: offering as an additional *attraction*, the suggestion of a sight entirely detached from Sivaganga, something otherwise inaccessible in the city that the circus makes visible (a similar de-localization is noticeable in the contemporary poster seen in Figure 9). Crucially, the photograph, other non-textual elements such as the font size changes and the hand symbols could also grab the attention of people in Sivaganga beyond the elite minority that could read English or Tamil.

Over the years, in an aesthetic transformation democratizing circus appeal, the balance of text and

images shifted in circus advertisement, giving more room to images as a means to entice potential spectators. The interest in photographic image also seems to have been motivated by faith in an ideology by which photography (or related images, such as a heavily retouched one, or an illustration traced from a photograph) can represent to an extent the liveness of the circus experience,[21] as the caption in the second promotional image seen in Figure 10 suggests: "*This* is Kamala! The Circus with the biggest draw! the camera does not lie!" (my emphasis).[22] The importance of photographs is especially striking in circus poster art, which developed as a form remarkably succinct in text, visually impactful, virtually deployable anywhere with very few adaptations, and copiously scattered on the walls, pillars, and auto rickshaws of localities where a circus performs. The visual language of these circus posters remained overall consistent over the years, supporting the broader emanation of timelessness the circus cultivates, imparting the communities circuses visit, by contrast, a sense of their own situation in time and in relation to past and future generations (Carmeli 1987).

The use of photographs marks a feature of circus publicity leading us back to the owners and managers planning and optimizing the circus routes: while the content of the posters could become increasingly visual, and, by the same token, de-localized, the production of such images has been more dependent on technologies that were developing as local, regional industries. Producing circus publicity implied incorporating these locales into circus routes, especially in the decades following Independence, when these technologies were less widespread and less mobile (Pinney 1997).

[21] On such ideology, and the relation between 'real' performance and photographic and moving images, cf. Sobchack 2004; Falk 1994 (Chapter 7).

[22] The Kamala circus promotional image on the right-hand side of Figure 10 (it appears to have been featured in a Bombay Free Press report in 1955-56) must have been conceived approximately 20 years after the South Indian Ladies Circus Poster. The South Indian Ladies Circus was active in the 1920s and 30s (accounts differ on the closing date). When its owner died, his son, known as Professor Damodaran, took over the business, and renamed the circus as the Kamala Circus.

Tamil hubs in which printing, photographing, and filming technologies were available, for instance, came to form nodal points on the circus routes of Malayali-owned companies. The formats of printed advertisement favored by circus companies from the 1950s onwards (particularly posters and illustrated stories in the newspapers of regions where a company was playing) required striking photographs, which could appeal to the unconcerned audience of a daily newspaper, or a passerby noticing a poster on a wall. Images that can withstand imperfect reproduction, provided by photographers competent in the realization of high-contrast and glamorous images.

Figure 11. Group photograph of the Grand Fairy Circus, date unknown. Photograph taken by Imperial Studios, Tirunelveli, possibly on the occasion of a camp there by the company (seal detail superimposed by me, originally visible in the picture mat framing the image). Circus Employees' Union Office, Thalassery, photographed with permission in 2020.

Interviews with performers currently retired and settled in Thalassery, in Kannur district, as well as an overall survey of the photographs I gathered for which a printing studio's name had been provided, confirm that a number of them were taken and processed by Tamil studios. Kareem, a circus performer active in the circus between 1960 and the late 1970s, remembers that every year, the company would commission a photographer, when the circus set its camp in Madras.[23] His account suggests that circus owners must have favored a group of photographers whom they knew could take high quality "circus pictures." The data gathered by the STARS project, particularly its geomapping of photographic studios in activity between 1880 and 1980 in the territory administered at one point by the Madras Presidency,[24] confirms the concentration of photographic studios in the Southeast (rather than in what corresponds to present-day Kerala) in a timeframe whose beginnings coincide with the development of the fist Indian-owned circus companies. Group pictures such as Figure 11, which were sometimes featured in newspapers and weeklies in the 1960-70s, would typically be taken on these journeys to cities regularly visited in Tamil Nadu, along with portraits of the circus artists, taken by a photographer in the compound or at a studio, with props, or animal colleagues framing the studio portrait as a circus picture (I analyze more closely the latter kind of photographs in Chapter 2). These images could then be provided to journalists covering the opening of a circus' show, even if the show was set in a different and distant locality.[25] The absence of regional specificity in almost all promotional photographs commissioned by the circus owners contributed to the production of their cosmopolitan image: free from regional associations, the circus and its compounds could have been anywhere. These images shed no light on the mysterious

[23] Interview with Kareem K., in Malayalam (in Malayalam, Thalassery, 2020)."

[24] I thank Zoë Headley for sharing this information with me.

[25] While the pictures used in the brochure page featured in Figure 3 are less impressive than the older group picture in Figure 11, note the consistent use of posed grouped photographs (materially structured by the inclusion of plastic chairs to sit on, and the contrasted work clothes of administrators and artists) to visually suggest the scope, respectability, and importance of a company. These confirm the overall consistent aesthetic of circus publicity over the last 60 years.

routes devised by the circus professionals: they could be in Malaysia one year, and Krishnagiri the next. Better to see the circus when you had a chance to.

Mobile entertainment and moving images

The evocativeness and photogenic quality of the circus also occasioned several crossovers between the circus and the regional cinema industries. Between 1947 and today, various circus companies have adapted their routes and struck deals with filmmakers in several regional film industries. These companies sought, with different degrees of success, to use their feature in broadly circulated feature films to enhance their visual publicity and draw cinema crowds to the live circus show.[26] To the best of my knowledge, SS Vasan's *Chandralekha* (Gemini Studios, 1948) was the first movie made in India to feature extended sequences of an Indian circus.[27] *Chandralekha*'s circus sequences were not part of the original script.[28] They were added as the shoot was going on - most likely shot in 1943, before one the companies involved in the sequences, Kamala Circus, would have started a "10 year tour

[26] These connections seem to have also occasionally prompted the professional conversion of circus personnel into cinema professionals, though I could only document two such cases: an animal trainer in the circus who now specializes in training animals to act in films, working in the Bollywood, Telugu and Tamil industries and occasionally abroad; and a woman, born in India but from a Belgian circus family, who briefly worked as a Bollywood item dancer in the 1970s, before leaving India and settling into a career as beautician near Brussels. In both cases their distinctive and high status in the circus industry (the former due to the specific set of skills of animal trainers, the latter thanks to her foreignness and her being a much-on-demand "exotic" performer) seem to have facilitated their professional reconversion. Such transitions do not seem to be otherwise common.

[27] Cultural programs excerpted from 1940s Madras dailies suggest that there were shorts on the circus, perhaps shot by Tamil studios, prior to *Chandralekha*, but I have not gathered information about them so far, and the copies of these films are likely lost.

[28] It is worth mentioning that this feature film produced by Gemini Studios was for some years the most expensive movie made in India, and that it benefited from marketing and distribution strategies that were unprecedented in scope. The historical drama (it would be a challenge to determine which historical era exactly it is set in!) features the village girl and dancer Chandralekha (T.R. Rajakumari), in love with a prince, Veerasimham, who gets swept up in the prince's brother's plans to control the kingdom. Her adventurous love life leads her to spend much time on the move and seeking help, both states making the itinerancy of a large circus convoy, 45 minutes into the film, particularly propitious.

abroad."[29] The unnamed circus cast in Chandralekha – its travels, the life and collegiality of the camp, the night performance in which Chandralekha premieres – is a significant part of the plot for about 45 minutes. During this time, visually appealing circus items are presented to the film audience: mouth trapeze, flying trapeze, seven-bars (an item only ever learned in Thalassery which has since long stopped being performed), clowning, cycling… Kamala Circus and Parasuram Lion Circus, two companies run by Malayalis at the time, provided the infrastructures and artists filmed in this sequence, and camped in Madras for several months for the purpose of shooting the film.[30]

Some of the sequences at the circus are, albeit oddly anachronistic for this 'historical' drama, a very successful iteration of what circus companies seemed keen on projecting about the identity of this entertainment form in the 1940s and 1950s.[31] The healthy, uniformly dressed and synchronous bodies of the company girls in *Chandralekha* resonate with the kind of circus propaganda Professor Damodaran actively sought to publicize through the 1950s press releases about Kamala that I could access. In dozens of short articles and show reviews, the circus owner carefully articulated for the press the sort of community and project he envisions the circus to be:

> "For the participants, circus is complete education by itself. Apart from developing a healthy and strong body and an alert mind, work in the circus inspires in one the spirit of confidence and teamwork. Ever alive to the consequences of disharmony, circus artists always function as one single unit. If only the nation could take a lesson from the ring, there would not be so much of political rivalry or parochial strife." ("It's Entertainment with a difference," *Free Press Bulletin*, Bombay, 1955)

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[29] Source from Free Press Bulletin, 1956.

[30] Tamil film historian S. Theodore Baskaran writes: "In 1948, those who visited the Gemini Studio campus in the heart of Madras would have wondered if they were in an elephant camp as scores of elephants were kept there and taken care of. Two well-known circus companies, Kamala Circus and Parasuram Lion Circus, camped in the Gemini Studio compound for shooting a film." ("Theodore Baskaran, The Elephant in Tamil Films." 2014. February 3, 2014. *web.archive.org/web/20140203155029/http://www.india-seminar.com/2013/651/651_s_theopore_baskaran.htm.*)

[31] Cf. for instance, the company of company girls prior to the night performance (~01:09:50).

At the time at which *Chandralekha* was released, the Tamil film industry thus promoted and furthered the publicity of the Indian circus and its ideological emanations. It supported the circus' intent at being represented as a form of cooperative living regulated by the discipline imposed by an itinerant lifestyle, "physical culture", egalitarian principles, and "the [inculcation of] a secular outlook in every participant" (ibid), under the guidance of a benevolent and great man, the enlightened circus owner, "a hero in the field of Indian circus." ("Second Greatest Show on Earth," *Bombay Chronicles*, 2-11-55)

Conveniently omitting the co-participation of Parasuram Lion Circus, Kamala Circus appears to have used its feature in *Chandralekha* as a credential for more than a decade. In its promotional press releases, casually reversing *the time-freezing* faculty of film, it stated:

> "The Kamala Circus has already made its mark in India as well was abroad. It is this Circus that *has immortalized* 'Chandralekha' with its thrilling feats and especially the unforgettable flying trapeze items. Even today the flying trapeze of Kamala Circus is an item envied even by the best of foreign Circus troupes and double somersaults, double twist and twist passing in the mid-air are sufficient to stamp the supremacy of the Circus."
>
> ("From Humble Beginnings, the Second Greatest Show on Earth is Born"; *Free Press Bulletin*, 10th November 55)

The writer of this excerpt has assertively reversed the phrase that has things typically immortalized *by* a cinema, suggesting that it was, in fact, the circus that immortalized, through the "mark" it left with its international travels, the feature film. It is true that the circus, as an already-constituted performance institution, served this movie well in its intention to be one of the most spectacular long features ever produced (especially as it could provide many elephants).[32] But the consistency of press releases like this one across newspaper sources also suggests something noteworthy about circus publicity broadly speaking. These hagiographic press releases on Kamala, or on other

[32] I come back to the spectacular and widely remembered infrastructure of Kamala circus in Chapter 3.

comparable circuses of the time, such as Bharat, Gemini, or Great Bombay, which one would struggle to locate in an archive if they had not been carefully compiled by relatives of these circuses' owners and preserved at ancestral homes in Malabar by relatives I happened to meet, suggest the limited circulatory powers of circus publicity in comparison with the media presence of sedentary, regionally anchored entertainment forms. Circus advertisement, especially when it involves descriptions of the circus by company owners, may be grand and bold at claims-making, the communication circuits of the circus – always shifting places, impermanent, and based on quickly-outdated supports like dailies and posters – pale in comparison with other entertainment forms perceived as cosmopolitan, and particularly, the cinema. If images of the circus' glamour have and continue to circulate, their recognizable animation of the circus show, crucial to the successful association of the 'circus-ness' advertisement promises and the commodity object being sold, a ticket to the circus show which is *here now*, hedges the potential for innovation of such publicity forms: the newness of the circus, in other words, is always that it is *here now*. The stylistic conventions by which the circus is identifiable, meanwhile, remain fixed (I speak more of this aesthetic constraint in Chapter 3) – facilitating its mobilization as a set for other cultural forms, but less so its uptake as a source of public interest in itself. In addition, continuously busy as they are with the countless other tasks living on the road brings about, circus owners and managers sometimes find the time to re-produce an instantiation of their circus image, but they have neither the time nor the resources to durably control the reception and the re-circulations of this public image, as I will continue to evidence in the next chapter.

The Circus Owner as Itinerant Diplomat

Despite of these structural constraints, the publicity operations led by circus owners has sometime paid off, and succeeded in making some circus companies (Kamala, Jumbo, Gemini…) household names in India. In such cases, the fame of a circus foregrounds primarily the circus owner – as both businessman and brand name for a circus business – as a public figure and familiar face in the world of entertainment (cf. Figure 12 below). M. V. Shankar (or Shankaran) (at the center of the third line on Figure 12), popularly known in Northern Kerala as Gemini Shankarettan (which combines the name of his most famous circus to his own name, to which the Malayalam kin term for big brother "chettan," has been added), owner of the Kannur-based Jumbo Circus and (now closed) Gemini Circus has been especially successful, for instance, in becoming a public figure in Kerala, beyond the confines of the circus as profession. Part of his success can be credited to the feature and visible mention of the Gemini Circus in the 1970 Raj Kapoor movie *Mera Naam Joker*, which, albeit not a commercial success, became the most famous 'circus movie' produced in India. In the 1950s and 1960s, he also established himself as a skilled diplomatic negotiator among circus owners and welcomed on his circus compound many politicians and public personalities (among them Jawaharlal Nehru, Louis and Edwina Mountbatten, Indira Gandhi, Kenneth Kumbia, the president of Zambia, V.K. Krishna Menon, N.T. Rama Rao, Martin Luther King Jr.; the list goes on, supported by many photographs).[33]

[33] An incomplete list of M.V. Shankar's guest can be found in the English biography written by his nephew, Shrihari Nair: *Gemini Shankaran & the Legacy of Indian Circus, My Personal Account* (self-published in Thalassery, 2013).

Figure 12. "Who's who in Indian Circus," *Big Top*, 1965 (Mr. Vishnu's personal collection, photographed with permission in 2020, Thalassery).

In the only existing issue of *Big Top* (as far as I know), a circus-themed magazine published by the All-India Circus Federation (a business association set up by leading circus professionals active between 1954 and 2015), M. V. Shankar describes his experience as "Leader [of the] Indo-Russian Circus Cultural Delegation," which included M. V. Shankar, his wife, one business partner, and four young performers from Gemini Circus. The Delegation was sent to the USSR in 1963 "to represent India in the International Circus Fair held in important cities in [the] USSR like Moscow, Sochi and Yalta" on a three and a half months itinerary. In his article entitled "Impressions of my Russian Tour," M. V. Shankar notes: "everywhere [they] went [in the USSR] the Indian team was accorded great welcome and affection was showered lavishly upon [them]." He goes on to describe their return to Delhi, and the way he briefed Prime Minister Nehru on their visit to the USSR: "[o]ur late beloved Prime Minister Panditji was much interested in our tour and heard our experiences and listened to most of the suggestions I put forward to him" (1965: pages not numbered).

Since it was released in the little distributedself-published magazine *Big Top* authored by circus executives for themselves and their business partners, this account of Shankar's influence must of course be taken with a pinch of salt. Nonetheless, it is useful in assessing how the leaders of the circus profession aspired to be portrayed at the time when this issue was published. Reminiscent once more, of Nancy Munn's discussion of fame based on inter-island travels in the context of the circulation of shells (kula), the fame of M.V. Shankar is evidenced and increased by the circulation of publicity in which his influence and fame among an influential circle of distant foreigners and subjectively distant politicians are celebrated. Fame, shaped through continuous travels across circus routes, here also "can be understood as a coding of influence – an iconic model that reconstitutes immediate influence at the level of discourse by significant others about it" (1986:117). In the case

of the Indian circus, influence, shaped up by savviness on the circus routes, is encoded by the publicity circulated by other media (for instance, the newspaper reports featuring M. V. Shankar as a circus magnate). The circus travels, by which a circus executive builds a name in the business, also precondition its possibility to gain in status: if a circus does not travel, then there is nothing left to advertise about the circus, since a circus is only a circus if it travels. To this day, while the ease of circus owners and managers in navigating space and social milieus cannot be credited to a meritocratic culture in circus alone – these men also typically come from families with economic capital and a relatively high caste status compared to other circus workers – it is their habit of traveling constantly across their country, the knowledge they have formed first-hand in the places they have visited through the circus routes, their savviness at navigating and striking deals in other media industries, which continue to shape their unusual careers and to define their public image, in connection to that of their circus company (which is, in Munn's terms, the "media" through which the lived world of the circus is (re)produced).

Yet even at the comparatively thriving time during which the Circus Federation published *Big Top*, it appears that narratives representing the circus businessman as an itinerant diplomat also served as a palliative for the broader support the circus industry was lacking. In its editorial,[34] *Big Top* states: "if the Indian Circus occupies a prominent position in the world arena, it is not because of any assistance or patronage extended to it by Governments, either at the Centre [India's Federal government] or the States [India's state governments], but entirely owing to a handful of persons interested in the existence of this art." Conscious and dissatisfied with the lack of patronage for their business since its emergence, circus professionals seize opportunities to dwell on their insertion in

[34] "Editorial. Plea for a Better Deal," Big Top 1, no.1 (October 1965). Pages not numbered.

the "world arena," framing their activities and their routes as part of an international circulation. References to Indian circus figures who have performed in distant places, and discursive emphasis on the international exposure of Indian circus companies, are frequently featured in the narratives of circus owners and of important circus figures I have interviewed – showing their aspiration to be connected to a global scale and history, rather than to the national and sub-national scales that seem to disown them. For instance, on my first visit to the Union of Circus Employees' director Govindan S.,[35] we spent most of our time together going over his collection of pictures of the acrobat Kannan Bombayo, whose travels to foreign and distant countries, and encounters with several world leaders (Hitler, the Queen of England), were presented as evidence of India's contribution to circus history (cf. also, chapter 4).[36] While these histories have remarkable currency in a place like Thalassery, which has a large community of circus professionals, they have not been taken up to the same extent by circus histories written outside the town, let alone outside India. In international circus festivals, and in the specialized literature produced on the circus, references to the Indian circus and appreciation for its particular features are scarce. When it gets mentioned, it most often has to do with the negative coverage received by the Indian circus in the 1990s, than these earlier exchanges and circulations.

The public image circus people seek to project requires relentless implementation, especially from the vantage point defined by their ambulatory situation. Photographs taken in the circus with cinema celebrities, or politicians often exemplify the unequal conditions under which these personalities and the circus companies see their image mediated by other media: while for an actor on a shoot, a

[35] Interview with Govindan S., Thalassery, January 2019.
[36] Jando, Dominique. "Kannan Bombayo - Circopedia." Circopedia.org, date unknown. http://www.circopedia.org/Kannan_Bombayo.

picture taken at the circus memorizes an informal moment on set, kept at best by producers as a souvenir of a film shoot, these documents are carefully preserved by circus professionals, and reproduced on numerous occasions (in booklets, brochures distributed during the circus show, biographies of circus owners written by one of their relatives), to signal the circus' belonging in the cosmopolitan spheres in which these famous personalities are found. The publicity deployed along the circus routes, mostly constituted of ephemeral and self-published document, is only maintained through the perpetual efforts of self-same public performance and performance of publicity by which the rest of the circus ecology is also reproduced. In spite of the increasing difficulties voiced by circus owners, the profession is nonetheless successful at leaving behind itself the faint trail of its cosmopolitan singularity.

This hard-won success, however, is a double-edged sword: the visibility and striking aesthetic of circus publicity is prone to being taken up by detractors which have powerful, locally anchored support bases. Meanwhile, the circus, because of its itinerancy, remains a liminal institution, which slips into the scales and aesthetics of all forms of discourse (visual, cinematographic, political metaphors, philosophical figures of speech), but settles in none.

Chapter 2. *Wild Animal Men:* the protean character of circus publicity and the circus animal ban

The removal of many circus animals from circus companies throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, under the initiative of various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) dedicated to the enforcement of animal rights and authorized by organs of the Ministry for the Environment, Forests, and Climate Change,[1] is the most recurrent topic in the stories that Malayali circus artists, employees and owners tell today when asked to reflect on their profession. According to my interlocutors' periodization of this fateful time, the "animal ban" (as the governmental notification and the era of local pursuits and interventions that ensued is often called by circus professionals) span roughly over a decade (1991 – early 2000s) and resulted in the seizure of most of the circus animals that would until then, take part in circus shows. These developments consisted in conflictual negotiations, by means of FIRs, court cases and appeals between Indian animal rights activists, working both in NGOs (often newly formed and made prominent by contemporary political circumstances) and governmental offices, and circus owners, who at that time, occasionally worked loosely associated as the Indian Circus Federation.[2] The animal ban added up to an earlier 1987

[1] Specifically, the Zoo Central Authority of India, created in 1992, and the Animal Welfare Board of India, based in Chennai until 2018, which advises the Ministry concerning the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals since 1990. Politician and animal rights activist Maneka Gandhi, Minister of State (Environment and Forests) between 1989 and 1990, played an important role in the 1990s restructurings of this Ministry and in defining its policies regarding animal rights, animal testing and animals in entertainment.

[2] On March 2nd, 1991, the government of India issued a notification, supported by the 1960 Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, banning the training and exhibition of five animals: bears, monkeys, tigers, panthers and dogs. On August 7th, 1991, a corrigendum was issued to withdraw the training and exhibition of dogs from the notification. The validity of the notification was promptly challenged by the Indian Circus Federation, by filing Civil Writ Petition No.890/91 before the High Court of Delhi. The High Court of Delhi upheld the notification by an order dated 20-3-1991. [Source: *Balakrishnan v. Union of India (2000.06.06)(Cruelty of Animals: Circus Animals*), Kerala High Court]

legislation banning the *sale* of animals to circus companies (Nisha P.R. 2020: 115) – but not their breeding, or exchange with other animal-holding institutions such as zoos, which were occurring until then –, and resulted in the permanent ban on the training and exhibition of bears, monkeys, tigers, panthers. It also authorized much greater scrutiny on behalf of the detractors of the circus, in the following decades, leading up to various animal rescue missions organized by Indian NGOs and animal seizures in several circus companies.

Overall, the animal ban contributed to drawing sustained, negative attention to circus companies. At the time when it happened, the publicity image carefully (re)produced by circus companies, as explained in the previous chapter, was invested by detractors of the circus (in particular, various NGOs working to promote animal welfare): they used its already-established circulation to convey a message that reframed the glamour and foreignness of the circus as a sign of the profession's corrupt morality and lack of ethical principles. It drew public opinion out of its relative indifference to the circus and towards a more sustained stance of moral suspicion vis-à-vis circus companies and the peculiar lifestyle they embodied. In 1982, *Times of India* would still publish a circus managing partner's refutation of "reports in a section of the press" that Appu, a baby circus elephant serving as mascot for the ninth Asian games "was being ill-treated." ""Animals in our circus are like members of our family. Ill-treating them would be like doing that to our own children," Mr. Sahadevan said," the refutation read.[3] The circus elephant's participation in the ninth Asian games also signaled the collaboration of circus companies with state institutions on occasions in the 1980s. By 2000, after over a decade of discursive activity reframing the circus as a site of "animal suffering"

[3] "No truth in Appu being ill-treated," *Times of India*, September 28th, 1982.

in India (to use a phrase used by Keck and Ticktin (2015)),[4] the courts unproblematically drew a clear distinction between state-endorsed places of animal captivity such as zoos, compliant with the newly created Central Zoo Authority, which were "meant for conservation and education purpose" and circuses, which "sole motto […] is monetary gain for the owner of circus company in the name of entertainment."[5] Such institutionally endorsed portrayals of this entertainment made publicized celebrations of the circus, or even matter-of-fact presentations of the shows, much more cautious from then on.

Narrating the animal ban is complex and loaded with affects for anyone whose position cannot sit easily with the ideology of proper concern and care for animals defined by animal rights activists prominent in India at the time: the ethical standpoint promoted by institutions and NGOs from the 1990s onwards is easier to endorse from an unconcerned spectators' position of "distant suffering" (Boltanski [1993] 1999) than it is from the standpoint of a professional working daily with animals. As Radhika Govindrajan has noted about the organization People for Animals, an NGO chaired by Maneka Gandhi which was very active in the rescue of animals from circus companies: "while the organization was committed to ensuring the flourishing of animal life, it framed its acts of animal rescue in terms that were familiar from other projects of rescue in colonial and postcolonial India – as acts of liberating speechless victims from barbaric oppressors rooted in savage, superstitious tradition." (2018:15)

[4] Fréderic Keck and Miriam Ticktin offer an analysis of animal suffering drawing from Luc Boltanski's analysis of humanitarian action and the manifestations of mass mediated "distant suffering" (1999) which has supported the development of humanitarian causes during the 19th and 20th century. Keck and Ticktin notice an increase of humanitarian activity around animal suffering "in the last thirty years" (2015: 145) which coincides with the forms of interventions in the name of animal rights which have concerned the circus in India as well.

[5] Citations excerpted from the court case *Kerala High Court, N.R. Nair And Ors., Etc. Etc. vs Union Of India (Uoi) And Ors. on 6 June, 2000.*

From the perspective of Malayali circus professionals with whom I conducted my fieldwork, the animal ban is an eventful time which ends badly. It gave the community identifiable nemeses, influential in the staging of a set of self-serving humanitarian interventions, prompted by a one-sided outlook on the meaning of *humane* treatment, oblivious to the material circumstances of their intervention, and resulting in generalized losses: the loss of prestige for the circus profession, the loss of animals both for the companies and generally, since their removal did not ensure their proper care past the moment of their rescue, the loss of livelihood for those who took care of the animals. It is, I must say, a narrative which I have a hard time not finding compelling if one acquires a perspective on it from the standpoint of the circus community, and it is perhaps best to disclose this at the onset of this chapter.

The animal ban is unanimously held by the circus community of Thalassery as a turning point on which the narrative of circus disappearance finds solid support. Since several of the circus detractors that were involved in the animal ban still hold influential positions, it gives credence to the idea that the circus will continue to disappear in the future. Case in point, the early 2000s witnessed a similarly structured 'circus children ban,' unfolding through a very similar rhetoric of humaneness and humanitarian intervention centered around the prevention of child labor, with other detrimental repercussions in the circus community (I speak more of this in the next chapter).

The sustained affirmation throughout the animal ban that circuses are "unnatural," "improper," and "undignified" sites of entertainment and unfit for animals to live marked the history of India's big top circuses with what many interpret as a point of no return: animal acts and their presence at the circus sedimented as so integral to the big top Indian circus that Kerala-based owners impacted by

the ban found it impossible to envision reconfigurations of the show in which the vacuum left by animals would not be obvious. From the standpoint of now-retired professionals, the effective ban on animal acts deeply alters the format of the big top circus as entertainment: it removed some of the show's most spectacular acts, it diminished the appeal of the show for families with children, the group they most favored among their usual spectators, and it led to the disappearance of many positions in the circus organized around the upkeep of circus animals.

Figure 13. Camels standing and resting by a circus camp in Kozhikode, 2020 (my photograph)

Most large animals had been removed from Indian circus companies by the time I conducted my ethnographic fieldwork, although a few animals who had not been directly targeted by the animal ban still lived in some of the companies I visited (Figure 13). For this reason, much of what is considered here is set in the past simple and perfect, going both by a straightforward timeline, and the temporalities invoked by my ethnographic interlocutors' accounts. Yet the dynamic of value reversal centered on the figure of circus animals which I put forward in this chapter still matters in the present for Indian circuses. Circus entertainment continues to derive the spectacular imaginary that shapes its publicity from its associations with wild, exotic, unusual animals. These non-human individuals' withdrawal from the

Indian rings remains striking, and a subject of conversations for all those involved with the circus – including its detractors.

For the spectators of the circus show, and the towns and villages they are from, the coming of the circus has been associated with the sightings of unusual animals. The presence of an elephant or a tiger in a circus ring, the promise conveyed by circus advertisement of seeing such individuals which prevalent cultural representations recognize as majestic and wild beings, buttresses a company' claims to greatness, glamour and its exceptional status, in accordance to a circus aesthetic existing in India and internationally. Representations of the circus mediated by circus advertisement, films, novels, and news outlets in India prior to the animal ban foreground not just animal presence in circus companies, but also the peculiar ties that bind usually untamed animals to their keepers in the circus. The close association of trainers, human artists, and animals creates a circumscribed imaginary in which wild animals, as tamed co-performers, are brought closer to humans by their apparently human-like tasks, emotions, and performances; while trainers, through their attentiveness when training animals, come to think and feel more like them. All human individuals in the circus, meanwhile, become used to living, interacting, and sometimes growing up among 'wild' animals.

This convergence is central to circus publicity and its success and yet, the ease with which this configuration can be negatively charged and morally inverted has proven detrimental to circus professionals since the circus ban. This chapter traces how human and non-human associations came to be a characteristic by which circus companies sought to convey their distinctiveness and their glamour, and the dynamic of investment of this aesthetic feature by other civil society actors who successfully reversed its moral valuation. It argues that the circus' emphasis on advertisement

and visibility and its concerted aesthetic envelopment, emphasizing the conflation of what the circus *shows* with what the circus *is*, exposed companies and circus professionals to suspicions, accusations, and attacks in moral arguments which they continue to be ill-coordinated to win. These battles are reframed by those with an investment in the circus as further confirmation that the circus is disappearing.

Menageries and Circus animals

Menageries and animal performances started being an important part of the circus shows presented in India prior to the development of Indian-run companies.[6] Traveling circus menageries first developed in American circuses of the early 19th century: the transition from a show featuring primarily humans and horses to one including rare and exotic animals dates to the late 1820s in the United States, when the circus, as historian Janet Davis explains, "merged with another popular form of public entertainment, the animal menagerie, when Joshuah Purdy Brown combined the two in 1828. Circus owners were eager to join the animal menagerie business because many Protestant clergymen denounced the circus for its seminude athletes and the practice of gambling on the show grounds" (Davis 2002:17). Prefiguring similar developments in circus companies from other parts of the world, the presence of animals conferred the American circus spectacle an educational flavor: the exhibition of rare animals attracted families and brought more children to the circus show.

[6] Amitava Chatterjee studies the early history of performer circulation and Bengali interest for European and native circuses in the decades prior to the First World War in his article "Exhibiting masculine identity through circus in colonial Bengal" (2015). The form taken by the circus show then would not have fitted easily into the definition of the circus given by the Malayali company-owners whose understanding of the circus my work is attuned to, but it nonetheless prefigures the Big Top circus that became prominent around the time of India's Independence. In this article, Chatterjee also speaks of a man who might have been the first world-famous wild animal tamer in Indian history, Suresh Biswas, who performed with animals in Europe and South America in the 1880s (2015: 234).

These developments are contemporaneous with an intensification of animal trading facilitated by the ease of travels across colonial routes in the 1830s. The cattle fairs located in India, such as the Sonepur Mela, were significant trading places for European and American animal traders, entertainment entrepreneurs, zoo staffers and circus owners such as the Hagenbeck family, or the business partners running the Ringling and Barnum circus and exhibition companies (Chatterjee 2015; Ghosh 2014; Zubrzycki 2018).[7] Owning exotic animals gradually became a defining feature of circus companies internationally, and the emerging Indian-owned circus companies of the 1880s did not cultivate an exception to this norm. On the contrary, the eased access to animals considered exotic ensured the development of large menageries in the subcontinent, which were carried by train, or boat during international tours. At a time when public zoos were developing in India as elsewhere, the menageries of large circus companies functioned as traveling animal exhibits in areas where such institutions did not exist. The following description of the Marathi circus Karlekar, in business between sometime in the 1890s and 1935, gives a sense of the diversity and proportions of what could be found in a circus in the first decades of the 20th century, and the logic of accumulation of species and peoples by which the scope of a circus was measured:

[7] It is noteworthy that non-human animals were not the only individuals sold along colonial routes at the time. As a *Times of India* article entitled "Freak Hunting in India" crudely reminds its readers in 1894, India was considered to be "the home of the freak," although by the late 19th century "Singapore" had become "the great headquarters or emporium for freaks, as Newcastle is for coals, and Paris for fashions." Merchants like the Barnum-associated trader J.B. Gaylord (wrongly identified in the article as J.*P.* Gaylord), whom the *Times of India* article focuses on, were famous at the time for their ability to assemble groups of animals and humans to fill World Exhibits, zoological gardens and circuses, both in Europe and in the United States, at a time when differently institutionalized forms of racism made actionable the category of specimens as the basis of homologies and comparisons between humans and individuals of other species. The development of an exhibition-oriented human 'freak' trade along these routes suggests the diversity of commodities that must have been sold on the markets for human and non-human beings in the late 19th century.

"Karlekar Grand Circus consisted of twenty-five elephants, sixty horses, twelve camels, six Australian kangaroos, three Gorillas, six zebras, one sea horse [i.e., a seal], 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."[8]

Figure 14. Advertisement for Gemini Circus presenting the Company's Hippopotamus "Star Artiste", 1965. (Big Top, No. 1, 1965)

Circus historian Nisha P.R. notes that being on a par with the menageries of Marathi circuses like Karlekar (and one could add the Great Bengal circus owned by the Bengali Professor Priyanath Bose, also an important circus of the early 1900s)[9] was initially a challenge for Malayali circus owners. The region's performance specialty was human acrobatics, and the first Malayali circuses only presented human acts (Nisha

[8] Satyadevnarayan Sinha, *Circus ka Anokha Sansar* (Lucknow: Ministry of Culture, India, 1984: 52), cited in (and probably translated by) Ghosh 2014:38

[9] Cf. Chatterjee 2015: 235. In 1901, Bose's circus featured a female performer "Miss Susila" who performed an popular animal act with two Bengal tigers.

P.R. 2020:118). Their progressive domination over big top circus entertainment, which reached a peak in the middle of the 20th century, went hand in hand with the acquisition and transmission of increasingly large menageries, occasionally passed on by retiring or bankrupt Marathi companies. By the 1960s, the leading circuses which advertising featured in the first (and to my knowledge, only) issue of *Big Top*, a magazine published by the Malayali-dominated All India Circus Federation boasted "huge Managerie[s] including Elephants, Lions, Tigers, Horses, Monkeys etc. etc." (Bharat Circus, 1965: n.p.) or called themselves "The Travelling Zoo of the East." (G.A. Circus of Bombay, 1965: n.p.). By then, all circus businesses strived to include animals perceived as wild, exotic, or awesome in their companies and their shows.

Frequently owned and exhibited "wild" animals included elephants (in large numbers), wild cats such as tigers, lions, panthers; bears; monkeys; hippopotamuses; seals, and others. In addition to these, a wide range of less awe-inspiring animals were also trained to perform tricks, such as camels, horses, dogs, and parrots (some of these species continue to be featured in circus shows today). As Ajay Shankar, the son of Gemini and Jumbo circus magnate M. V. Shankar explained to me during one of my visits to Jumbo circus, which he now runs, the promise of seeing wild animals suggested by circus

Figure 15. Promotional Parade of Kamala Circus in Rangoon, featuring the numerous elephants of the company, circa 1945. (Mr. Vishnu's personal archive, Kannur, photographed with permission, 2021).

advertisement in the places they settled their camps (Figure 14 and 15) was, until its problematization, a major draw for crowds of families and school concessions, particularly in small towns where inhabitants could not see animals in zoos[10]

Not all circuses were equally successful in presenting a large and diverse menagerie of circus animals, even when it was allowed. Their upkeep was expensive, and as performers who had to be purchased (by contrast to human performers frequently hired on informal, poorly paid and precarious contracts), wild and exotic animals were a formidably costly investment. One of my interlocutors in Thalassery, a retired female circus artists of 78 in 2019, once told me the great and unexpected difficulty her husband had faced when he realized he had been swindled during an animal sale deal he was conducting on behalf of the circus company in which he was a manager at the time. The deal had taken place in West Bengal, with unscrupulous salesmen this Kerala-born circus man was not in regular business with. Faced with an unrecoverable debt of several lakh rupees in the 1970s, he had done what his wife had come to rationalize, with the years, as the only solution he could imagine to spare his family the burden of an inextricable debt, and ended his life. This tragic story gives a sense of the remarkable amounts invested in populating circuses with animals, and the relatively modest scale at which human employees made money.

Even the more common animals seen in the circus are expensive to own and care for. In addition to veterinary costs, providing adequate food, accommodation, and of course training often makes animals more costly and troublesome than human performers. Trainer Santhosh, who still

[10] Notes on a visit to Jumbo Circus, Kannur, October 19-22, 2017.

occasionally trains animals on request, told me of five dogs (two dalmatians, two labradors and one black labrador) he had trained for a then-newly opened circus in 2019. After training them for several months how to walk on their hind legs, perform equilibrium acts, and play with sticks and umbrellas, so that they could respond to the cues of a circus performer in the ring, he had delivered them to the company when it was performing nearby, in Kozhikode. When I met him four months after the delivery, he had received only a fraction of the money he was supposed to receive for this dog sale, and he kept pestering the owner of the circus for INR 30,000 he was still owed.[11] On a visit I paid to this circus a couple of months later, there were no dogs performing in the show. As Santhosh had anticipated, the owner had sold the trained dogs several months before to another company, to cut costs and reinject money in his indebted business. Nonetheless, over the couple days I was with him, the circus owner continued to notice, take and abridge Santhosh's call, still asking for the money he was owed, reminding the owner daily of the dog transaction months after his circus had stopped including any animal.

The question of animal retirement is another issue complicating animal care in the circus: while animals, especially elephants, can be donated to select places (temples, government or privately-run elephant sanctuaries, zoos), the optimal decision between keeping an old animal that can still be shown and removing them from the itinerant company is a complex equation on which managers, trainers, vets, and the circus owners' friends weigh in and debate endlessly, especially as they are aware of the fact that animal rights activists are keeping close watch on the condition of ageing animals in circus compounds.

[11] I suspect this must have been between 30-50% of the total sale price. By current standard, dalmatians costs ~INR 20,000, labradors ~INR 4,000 and black labradors slightly more than that. The training must have increased by INR 10,000-20,000 the overall price of the dogs.

For all the complications that investing in animals generate, then, some circus companies have sought to limit their numbers and strategized the investments that could make them compete as quality circuses without the hurdles created by a large menagerie. But at any rate, as these anecdotes all show, having animals (or having had them as long as it was possible) is as constraining as it is a defining feature of the circus, which conditions the recognition of big top circus by those with a long experience in the profession. The presence of animals in a circus informs not just the administration of the menagerie, but the structure of circus entertainment and the sociality and professional life of circus compounds. It also draws animals and humans close in distinctive ways, invoking planes of comparisons between humans and individuals of other species on which similarities and differences across species become unusually salient.

Camp Sociality

> *"To our surprise, the nine polar bears formed a union only a week after their arrival. The demands they presented to Pankov [the company owner] were anything but demure, and when he ignored them, they began a tumultuous strike. […] Even though we humans could have used showers and a cafeteria, we'd never have had the courage to confront Pankov with such demands. Our days and nights were filled with such frantic labor that we had long since forgotten the very terms of our contracts."*
>
> Yoko Tawada*, Memoirs of a Polar Bear* (2011: 85)

Figure 16. Two elephants standing near a tent housing human circus employees, 1980s. (Artist's personal collection, Kannur, photographed with permission, 2019.)

The compounds of circuses were formerly crowded not only with the tents in which some of the circus artists lived, but also the animal cages, fenced areas, and cleared grounds on which animals could graze and rest. The presence of many animals in most circus companies meant that they were an important part of daily life for those who worked alongside them, and bystanders during most quotidian activities occurring in the compound (Figure 16). The albums of circus professionals are also filled with photographs – some seemingly casual, other carefully posed – in which humans feature alongside tamed animals (elephants, tigers, bears, dogs), both in the ring and in the circus compound. These images confirm and prompt further recollections of the formerly extensive cohabitation of humans and other animals in circus compounds.

Figure 17. Picture of a foal born in the circus and their mother, preserved by a circus owner. (circa 2000). (circus owner's personal collection, Kannur, photographed with permission 2019).

This cohabitation did not imply a deep acquaintance with *every* animal that joined the circus. In some cases, it is just the idea of living among animals which is remembered or boasted by human professionals. For instance, Sujit Dilip, a circus owner interviewed by the circus historian Nisha P.R., remembers: "I'm afraid of dogs, but I've never been afraid of lions. They were let loose in my house and they were not *wild*, they were bred in our own circus, and I was brought up along with them, in their company" (cited in Nisha P.R. 2020: 94). This circus manager's statement suggests some of the ways animals can be framed in the context of circus cohabitations: besides drawing attention to an impressive form of familiarity and domestication, ironically reenforced by the fear of regular pets, it also indicates that wild cats used to breed within the circus. Their ability to reproduce in captivity signals – presumably to veterinarians, zookeepers, animal rights activists – their well-being in the circus.[12] The fact that they live as families also makes their social behavior somewhat alike that of their human colleagues who also formed families in circus companies (Figure 17). Thirdly, the sharing of an age cohort ('we grew up together') suggests a resemblance between Sujit Dilip, and the lions – based on the synchronous experience of growing up, and the sharing of substance implied by living and eating in the same home. Overall, the presence of lions (in general,

[12] The fact that circus animals frequently gave birth to cubs in the circus is often invoked as a sign that captive animals were healthy and well taken care of. Circus owners foregrounded such births in the Indian context during the animal ban, to remind their detractors that circuses were in some ways faring better than the zoos by which their animals were seized. Braverman (2013) also emphasizes the interpretation of breeding as a sign of good care and "pastoral" success in contemporary American zoos.

as a species, not any one lion) is mentioned with casualness, signaling – overstating, perhaps! – the normalcy of relatedness with individuals of other species in the world of the circus. Their figuration as ordinary participants in everyday life (as dogs would be for other people) of course enhances the circus' glamour, as an extraordinary place where animals are more domesticated and humans more fearless.

The accounts of animal trainers, who form deep bonds with some of the animals they work with, also occasionally express how some animals are interchangeable for the purpose of a circus, even as they acknowledge the distinct personalities of performance partners. In his biography entitled *Wild Animal Man*, Damoo Dhotre (1902-1972), an internationally famous Marathi circus trainer, describes such a situation: after performing an act a few times with a volatile elephant called Boy to keep his word with the Russian circus owner who had hired him, Dhotre explains that the company got rid of that elephant and replaced him in the act:

> "I never performed with Boy again. I had proved what I had to prove.
>
> Boy was sold to the forest department of Ceylon in exchange for two young elephants.
>
> I quickly trained a new animal – a female – to take Boy's place in the act. No one ever knew the difference, except Mr. Isako, the mahouts, and me." (Dhotre, 1962: 68)

These excerpts confirm the status of circus animals as a valuable and yet fungible, replaceable asset and status markers for the companies that owned them, in ways similar to humans hired as performers. While they are purchased and owned, and thus commodity-like, they are simultaneously business collaborators who increase the visibility of the circus through their spectacular presence in the small human societies formed by circus companies. It is on that basis that some animals came to be particularly appreciated by human colleagues and circus managers. Their acquired skills as circus

performers placed them in a *humanizing* local economy, in which responsiveness to training and performance skills are conditions of entry into an ensemble of human-dominated interactions regulated by human participants and the work that they set out to do. I use humanizing as an adjective here and below to emphasize the domination of human expectations, particularly those regimenting the production of human entertainment performances, structuring the sociality non-human individuals are inserted into. It applies singularly to *circus* animals because circus labor is not premised on making use of animals performing or manifesting qualities which are assigned to their nature (like a cow giving milk in a farm) or to their projected "wildness" (the self-reliance, grace, or innocence of an elephant or a tiger in a jungle, removed from human societies). Instead, the paradigm defined by the circus show and which extends beyond it to compound sociality is one in which certain skills are cultivated through training, for a genred form of aesthetic enjoyment. Non-human individuals come to occupy a position in the sociality organized around this cultural form by performing. Their performance activity resembles the work done by human performers and company colleagues: they are integrated in the companies for their ability to do tricks, to look good in a show, less frequently to help set up the camp or to make equipment travel.

Perhaps because of this perceived similarity in the tasks they come to perform despite their different (personal and phylogenetic) "background," the lower-ranking human employees, working alongside circus animals but having no say in the circulation or training of animals, most consistently use collegial terms and practices, when they remember their non-human collaborators. In their recollections, a presumption of comparability between what they all did *as performers* takes on a form of casual and friendly collegiality for circus members of other species. Most (non-trainer) circus artists I interviewed volunteered information about some of the animals they remembered living or performing an act with. They identified and showed them to me in the photographs they had kept in their album or on their phone. They gave about them the kind of information one could give about a former human colleague with whom one had spent time,

Figure 18. Rajan recovering. Place and date unknown (1980s). (Artist's personal collection, date unknown. Photographed with permission in Kannur, 2020.)

without building an enduring friendship beyond that.[13] Sunitha thus remembered, for instance, the gentle character of Rajan, a chimpanzee with whom she had been repeatedly photographed at Jumbo Circus. She has preserved a photograph of a day when he was sick, (and made to pose) in a posture of human convalescence (Figure 18). She also remembered the great sadness of the circus owner, when, some years later, this chimpanzee had passed away suddenly. Animal trainers, although they maintained closer relationships with circus animals, also refer to them in terms which emphasize the commensurable status in the circus of human and non-human animals: in a photo album an animal trainer has published on Facebook for instance, containing approximately 120 photographs in which a majority of them feature him and his children with the animals he has worked with, he makes a systematic effort to comment on them by naming all persons featured, and specifying their relationship to each other (Figure 19): terms of kinship (son, daughter of), friendship (for co-eval human and non-human animals, such as his own children and that of his non-human students) and mentorship ("my student")

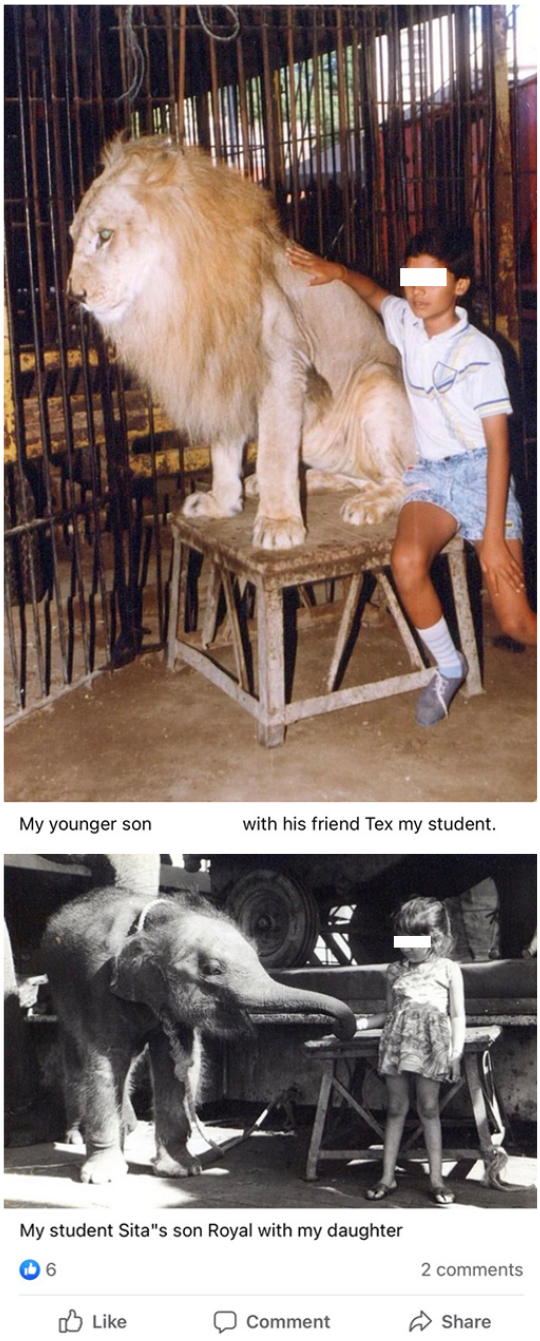


Figure 19. Excerpt from an animal trainer's Facebook photo album, featuring relatives, students, and students' relatives. (2016). (Excerpted and anonymized from a public Facebook page in 2022).

[13] This is also the kind of relationships humans in the circus could maintain among themselves, unless they were the exact same 'kind' of employees, or a couple or family unit: company girls, male camp workers, bachelor performers and

Compared to human employees, animals often benefited from an advantageous treatment and the greatest care by virtue of being also a form of capital (in addition to being performers). In the context of the circus' very hierarchical labor structure strictly dividing the artists, the managers, the temporary staff, the homologies between animals and human performers has been more than once noted, both by external observers of the circus and by circus people themselves. Numerous works of fiction dramatize this comparability, first by foregrounding the image of a multi-species group of workers in the circus; and then, by pointing out the better treatment animals receive by virtue of being owned by companies. A Malayalam film generally frowned upon by circus professionals, Hariharan's 1981 *Valarthumrugankal* (വളർത്തുമൃഗാങ്കൽ, which can be roughly translated as 'domesticated animals'), exemplifies this portrayal of circus society by juxtaposing the minimal treatment received by an injured female artist, and the concern of the circus owner when an animal becomes ill (among many other social evils prevalent in this fictional company). More generally, the tropic rapprochement of the artists constrained to perform tricks to earn a livelihood at the mercy of a cruel owner, and the animals of the circus, pampered because they are costlier to replace has had a long life in mass mediated representations of the circus. It confers the epigraph of this section its striking character: it is not that surprising, considering the importance of animals to the circus show, that animal performers might remember their rights as workers better than their human colleagues.

managers, are, likewise, expected to keep to themselves except in monitored and occasional circumstances where everyone gathers.

These homologies across humans and non-human species are not always portrayed in a bad light. On occasions, the resemblance of human and animal choreographed formations in the circus, the trained and skilled collective formed by human and other bodies becomes the support of the appeal and fascination exerted by the circus. The promise of entertainment provided by a trans-species collective – with all the mysterious solidarities, emotional complexity, and extra-ordinary communication it leaves actual and potential spectators to imagine – is the support of much of the visual publicity circulated by and about the circus: whether it is in the Malayalam newspaper *Mathrubhumi*'s montage of similar photographs of lines of circus girls and parades of elephants

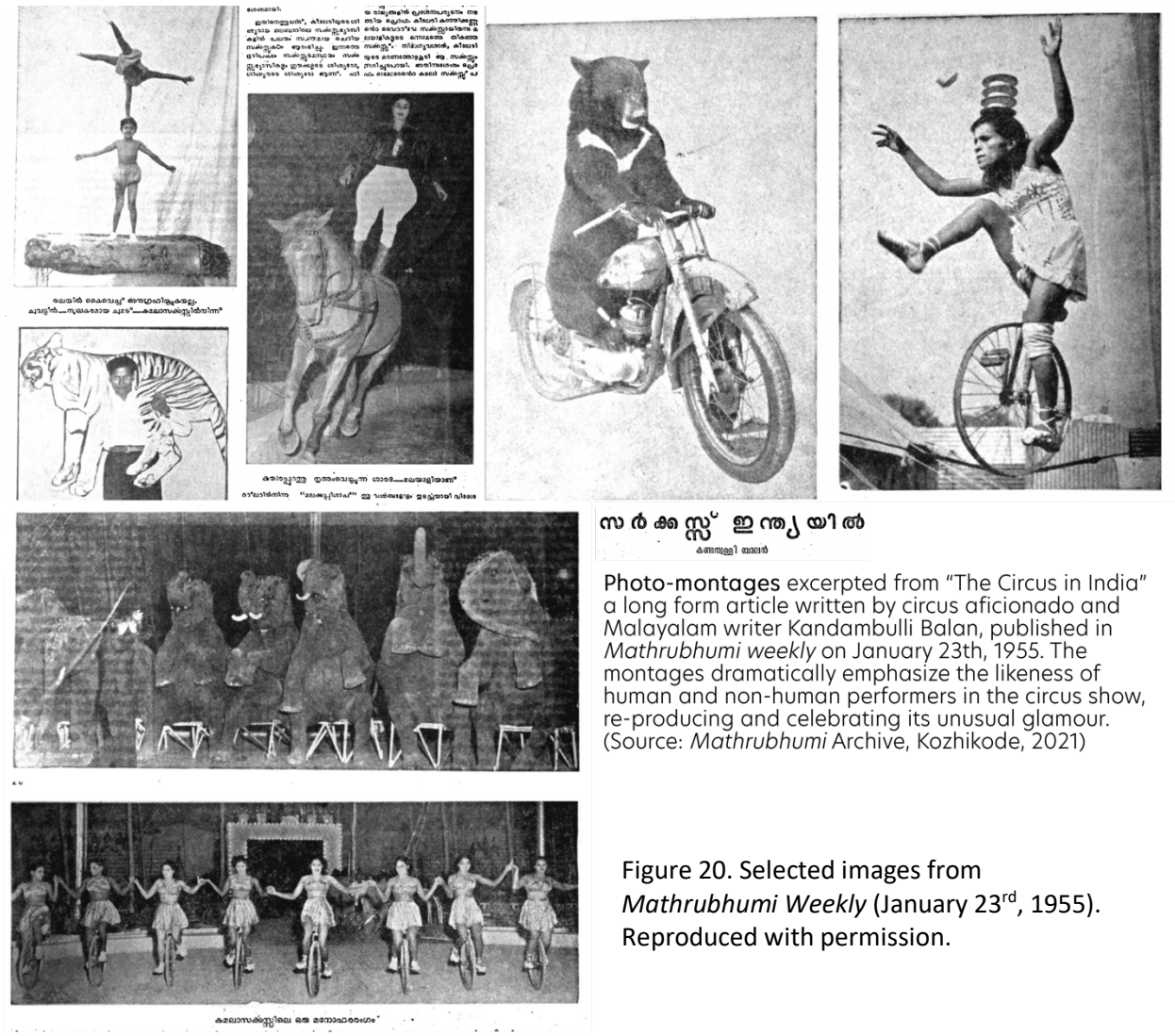


Photo-montages excerpted from "The Circus in India" a long form article written by circus aficionado and Malayalam writer Kandambulli Balan, published in *Mathrubhumi weekly* on January 23th, 1955. The montages dramatically emphasize the likeness of human and non-human performers in the circus show, re-producing and celebrating its unusual glamour. (Source: *Mathrubhumi* Archive, Kozhikode, 2021)

Figure 20. Selected images from *Mathrubhumi Weekly* (January 23rd, 1955). Reproduced with permission.

Figure 21. Newspaper article discussing animal presence in circus companies, featuring a picture of Circus artiste Gloria and a hippopotamus performing, preserved by the artist (Kannur, photographed with permission in 2017).

(Figure 20), or female artists' privately preserved souvenir photographs, sometimes reproduced as illustrations in newspaper articles, in which they pose next to the animals with whom they perform an act (Figure 21), the baffling juxtapositions of human and non-human performers, the portrayal of wild animals inexplicably doing human things, and of humans befriending animals builds up and amplify the circus' glamour and popular appeal.

Wild Animal Men

The mingling of human and non-human animal life at the circus thus constitutes an important material factor which has shaped the forms taken by the circus in India in the 20th and 21st century. The importance of animals to what the circus is and to what it can potentially embody for the rest of society has not been lost on circus owners, and their constant work of (re)production of circus publicity has exploited nearly every aspect of this unusual cohabitation and the practices of care it entailed.

The homologies between human and animals also lent support to the publicized celebration of deeper and singularizing emotional bonds existing between some animals and some humans at the circus. These relations have tended to be foregrounded, to the point of becoming a conventional feature in the descriptions of human circus professionals occupying two positions in particular: the circus owners and the animal trainers (or tamers). The advertisement intended to circulate by companies, the biographies written about famous animal trainers, and the descriptions volunteered by circus employees do not differ much in tone with regards to the evocations of these relationships. These sources consistently present these bonds as forms of care, affection, and sometimes, infatuation or love, occasioned by the peculiar sociability and economic regime defined by the circus show.

The accounts given by circus professionals and relatives of circus owners of the times prior to the ban on animal performance often make mention of the singular relationship they had witnessed between an animal and an owner. Shobha, for instance, the daughter of a circus owner who passed away in the 1980s, associates, during our conversation, her father's dedication to his business, and his fondness for the elephant Muttu, whom she still visits occasionally in the temple where he was donated after her father's death and the closing of the family circus. She remembered that Muttu was "always with him," and that his father's rare shows of indulgence were for him – even when this meant making up for the elephant's show of destructive jealousy for the attention of her father (Shobha took this jealousy as a sign of the elephant's reciprocal feelings).[14] By Shobha's account, her

[14] During our interview (Interview with Shobha, Kozhikode, 2019), she volunteers one anecdote to exemplify her father's forgiveness and light-heartedness when Muttu was in the picture: "Car has been placed, dad's car - [he] used to keep it near Muttu only, every time [near] that elephant. That elephant is very happy [about that]. Once what happened is when he came [in] his car, he [couldn't] keep [it] near Muttu, because so many other vehicles [were parked] there. So, he kept it aside – his driver kept it aside [elsewhere, farther from Muttu] and left. At that time, Muttu has turned aaaall the vehicles

father would have done anything for Muttu; he was a more affectionate man with the elephant than he was with her mother or herself (both women living at a remove from the circus and only visiting occasionally).[15]

In such stories recalling an owner's special care and affection for a non-human individual, animals, even those which are simultaneously "wild," "tamed" and rare, figure as integrated and integral participants in the society of the circus compound. Non-human individuals' amenability, once tamed, to being treated like other (human) members of the circus functions as a premise to the affection some humans come to feel for them. It is their training, assimilated to a form of acculturation, and their role as performers, to which they are more or less predisposed as individuals, that enlists them into the network of human social relations in which they can become distinguished as worthy of affection, special treatment, and praise. The owners themselves, through their special relationships with some animal performers, instigate, reproduce, and are caught in the dispensation of capitalist spectacle that makes everything in the circus public-facing. Their affection for an animal – a form of affect induced and predicated on the forms of life the circus allows and circulates through the mediation of other cultural forms – is expressed and manifested, and therefore, in practice, experienced, through the same regime of publicity. In such a context, beloved animals are also distinguished animals, famous animals, mascot animals. The circus owners' affection places

– pushed them all. [Me: to be with your father's car!] Shobha: The pappan [mahut] rushed to beat him. [But] my dad said: *no, never beat him*. I'd put the car there near… the elephant is ok."

[15] This tropic allusions to interspecies jealousies and favoritism are (re)circulated by fictional works such as R.K. Narayan's *A Tiger For Malgudi* (1983). The protagonist tiger of this novel recalls the frequent quarrels between "the Captain" (the circus owner and his owner at the time) and his wife: "'Your horoscope and the tiger's seem to be better matched,' she would say. […] I don't know why she was measuring herself against me all the time. Fancy anyone being jealous of a tiger! Yet it was not really so. Given her chance, I don't think she would have poisoned me. She enjoyed being argumentative, that's all." *(*R.K. Narayan, *A Tiger for Malgudi,* 1983: 59)

them centrally in the sphere of human activities in which every circus person participates: this is how portraits of animals such as the sick chimpanzee Rajan finds its place, several decades later, in the album of former circus employees; how a Christmas celebration comes to involve an elephant cutting a cake (Figure 22); or why everyone remembers the inconsolable sorrow of Ajay, when the black panthers of his circus were taken away in the late 1990s.[16] Fondness for an animal, felt by the company owner and aesthetically manifest to all in the company (and beyond its realm) through this humanizing inclusion of the beloved individual in the community's events and the commemorative traces of such events, also, in this way, re-inscribes through an emotional modality the paternalism regimenting the stratified structure of circus entertainment.

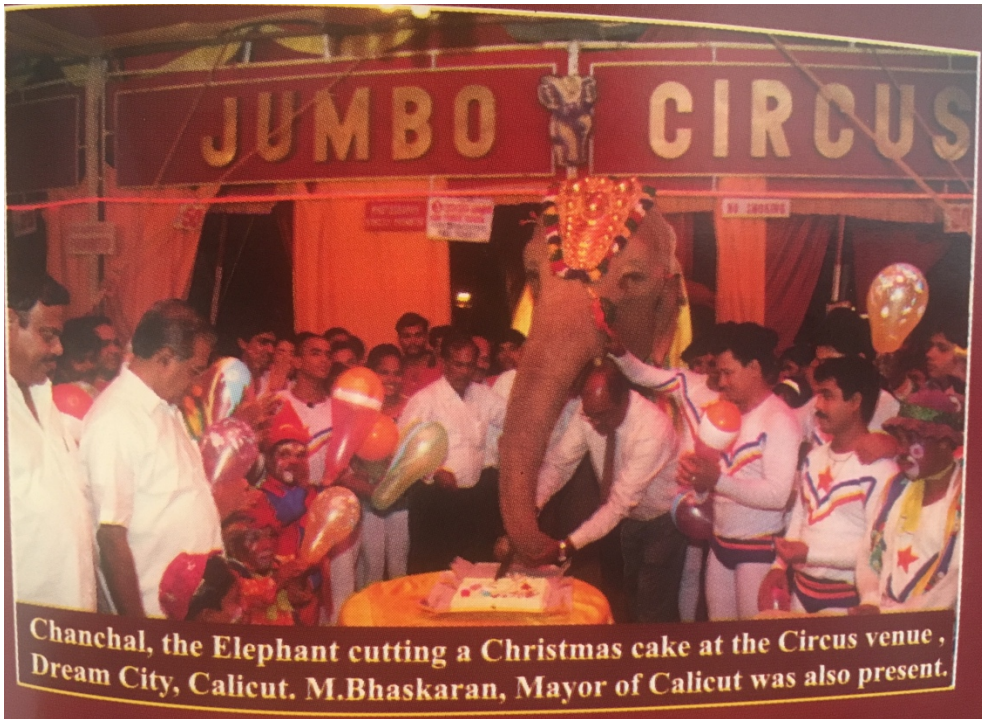


Figure 22. Photograph and caption excerpted from a Jumbo Circus brochure, meant for distribution to sponsors and presumably during the show (printed in 2000, gifted to me by Jumbo Circus owner, photographed in 2019.)

[16] Notes on interview with Santhosh, Thalassery, August 2019.

It seems important to emphasize the bearing socio-economic situations have on affects tied to inter-species sociality considering the secondary position it occupies in the current paradigm through which the relationships of humans with other species is often publicized. On the one hand, the public-facing discourse of animal rights activists and conservationists often represents individual animals as synecdochic for their species, "wild animals" and other abstract groupings of non-human individuals (as the court cases mentioned earlier and cited in the next section exemplify for instance). This perspective regimenting ideas about the proper forms of human care for such groups is complemented by humanitarian discourses foregrounding animal individuals as deserving or requiring care because of their innocence and potential endangerment (Keck and Ticktin, 2015). Critical approaches to the ethics of interspecies relations, meanwhile, possibly because of their speculative and thought-provoking orientation, often theorize based on observations gathered with groups or people which have the resources to frame both their relation to animals (manifest in the ways they care for them) and their publicized expression of concern for their fate through the specific experiences of moments of intimacy at a remove from economic processes, in which ethical directions more mindful of one's own animal condition can be sensed as immanent, emerging from practices of care or play (Davé 2014; Haraway 2003). While the mass mediated militant discourse on animal rights and critical theory written on animals and affects greatly differ in intent and ethical orientation, they contribute in different ways in sustaining a paradigm in which the integration of non-humans in human social processes is thought independently from the inequities and social differences that regiment the conjuncture in which differently placed human individuals come to interact with animals. Like other affects lived in social forms regimented by capitalist economies, the affection for animals felt and conveyed by circus owners emerges and shapes up within the conditions of ownership the animals live in. As it is also the case, with more commonly domesticated animals, in professional domains such as agriculture, or temple services in India, the

fact that a non-human individual's worth and the emotions they inspire is tied to their participation in a form of human labor comes to be taken for granted and naturalized by people working in these sites. For someone situated within the circus industry, *it makes sense* that, for better *and* for worse, the trade of exotic animals is the condition of possibility for the circus as a genre, and the human and non-human lifestyles it sustains. And in that professional context too, it is not surprising that the experience of affection and care practically manifests through the picking of a favorite, doing favors, prioritizing one individual over others.[17] The affection, love and concern felt by circus professionals for circus animals evidences that the parameters of someone's socio-economic situation deeply structure any experience of relatedness, and highlights that, if one comes to think of the animal condition from the perspective of the circus (and therefore, also, anchored in its locally inescapable *humanizing* premise), the regulation of proper interactions with animals is currently narrowly defined, based on the situated experience of a few, privileged and self-selected spokespersons.

The figuration of the animal trainer in the publicity put out by the circuses is a counterpoint and ultimate confirmation of the weight of the circumstance of circus work in defining inter-species interactions. Prior to the ban on circus animals, animal trainers stood out among circus performers, and often had better leverage over their salary, their living conditions, and their status as performers, because of the rare set of skills they possessed. These included the training techniques necessary to

[17] The Hindi movie *Eeb Allay Oo* (Prateek Vats, 2019) explores compellingly the complex affective experience of relatedness and lack of relatedness with non-human individuals and species as it unfolds in situations constrained by contingencies such as one's professional background, one's caste, class, and gender. *Eeb Allay Oo* narrates the experience of a migrant taking a job as a monkey repeller, tasked to shoo monkeys and langurs away from government buildings. The movie captures brilliantly – especially in its final scene – how and when it is possible for him to become like a monkey, and think with them, and the ways in which this experience is also removed from him, at time, due to the hurdles he experiences at work, at home, and in interactions with people from different milieus, class, and caste backgrounds in the city. I thank Shubham Shivang for reminding me that this movie resonates in many ways with what the experience of my interlocutors with circus animals also conveys.

instruct animals how to respond to cues, the ability to perform with potentially dangerous and unpredictable animals, an ability to determine circus animals' needs and ailments, and to ensure their overall wellbeing.[18] The biographies of trainers (both as they themselves orally recount them and as they are featured in texts and writings on the circus) insist on the sense of a vocation felt, from a young age, of being with and among the animals of the circus, to be "intimately acquainted with them" (Dhotre 1962: 35). In contrast to the owners' selective affection, their experience and their apprenticeship is marked with intimate relationships with many different animals.

The numerous encounters and faceoffs with frightening and powerful animals which the training of a trainer inevitably involves is often conveyed – both in the circus show and in the ways it is celebrated by various publicity objects – through an aesthetic reminiscent of *shikar*, 19th century trophy hunting for the kind of animals a tamer is usually seen with.[19] The glamour of it relies on a comparable exaltation of positions of (masculine) domination, of compelling an animal into doing things, to which a non-participant reacts with awe, wonder and, although this is not the intended effect, concern for the animal. But at the same time, animal training is differentiated from hunting – as visually suggested by the very same images and texts, and as the trainers insist – by the ways in which comprehension, intimacy and non-violence are held and explicitly professed as central principles for trainers. In his biography *Wild Animal Man*, Dhotre recollects some of the lessons he learned during his apprenticeship with Mr Chavan, his "guru" for animal training: Some "traits are

[18] Pratap Singh, an animal trainer born in the circus and now reconverted as an animal trainer for regional and the Bollywood film industries, once explained to me that learning animal training is not streamlined in the way mastering an item such as the boneless act or trapeze items is. Competence in training is selectively transmitted, sometimes within families, from father to son (animal trainers are overwhelmingly men), but sometimes by sheer perseverance at pursuing another trainer and convincing him to share his knowledge. Damoo Dhotre's biography confirms the selectiveness of the process by which one becomes an animal trainer.

[19] For visual references, cf. Vamika Jain's "A Perfect Shot: Photographs of the Hunt" (date unknown, accessible on *Pix*: *enterpix.in/pix-post/a-perfect-shot-photographs-of-the-hunt/*)

common to all members of [a] species. But *within* the species each animal is an individual. One is mean; one is generous; one is loving; one is a killer. You must be intimately acquainted with each animal personally to know what kind of *person* he is" (Dhotre 1962: 34-35; emphasis original). Those among my interlocutors who were trainers, like Santhosh and Pratap Singh, were adamant to publicize through our conversations, perhaps as a form of refutation, that training can never involve violence. As Santhosh puts it, what matters is conveying to the individual in training that they should neither fear you nor doubt you.

The daily life of a circus trainer is entirely turned towards animals and requires dutiful adaptation to their routine. The account of Santhosh, a trainer mentioned earlier, a former circus trainer who worked as a pet shop keeper in 2019 when I met him, gives a sense of the all-involving process by which animals are brought to perform acts through training: 'it is really worth it, he explained to me, to train big cats before 6AM, which is when most human activities and training begin in circus compounds. If you start your day, say, at 4AM, it can divide by half the time needed to achieve good training. This is because big cats have a limited attention range, and they are least disturbed when a minimum of peripheral activities is going on beyond their training. This is more easily achieved when other people are still asleep.' Santhosh's human memories and detailed recollections of various animals he trained still manifested his embodied familiarity with the animals he has worked with, and the mutual adjustments it required to collaborate and perform acts together.[20]

[20] Notes on interview with Santhosh, Thalassery, August 2019

The communicative channel the trainer must establish to train animals for performances draws him into a bond other human individuals are not privy to, and allows the trainer as individual to shift (at least in his self-presentation) back and forth between the humanizing sociality of the circus and the animal world he is constructed by the circus show as belonging to. While their work is no less caught up in the productive regime of the circus than the owners, the other employees and the non-human animals, the trainer's status is indeed, that of a *wild animal man* (as per the title of the trainer Damoo Dhotre's biography). This liminal status, combined with the relatively secure position of trainers in the circus economy, allows them to cultivate an attitude of subversion vis-à-vis the human-dominated circus company, which they convey by siding with the animals (presumably, as a spokesperson for their mental states) *against* the humanizing pull of circus sociality. In the opening chapter of his biography, for instance, Damoo Dhotre narrates a fire that ravaged a circus compound he once was working at. He insists on the "violent reactions" he had when he became aware of the fire: first, he felt great fear that "the animals I had learned to love and respect and whose love and respect I thought I had won" might have been injured in the fire. Realizing they were fine, his next thought was for the untrained animals that had been caught in the fire, and the next one for the "effect this might have on my own animals" (1962: 4-5) Human colleagues and friends, are expressively, left out of this rendering. With the disappearance of trainer jobs in circuses, and them being compelled to turn to other profession (pet shop owners, stuntmen, animal trainer for cinema…), they can side with animals through more critical words currently, as when a trainer told me privately, in the compound of a circus owner friend of his both of us happened to be visiting: "Listen, I'm not blaming the government for taking away the animals. The owners, and the caretakers, they don't know anything about them there no school or anything - there is not a proper trainer in India. From the beginning itself. From 100 years back." When I asked him if this applies to his pupils, he immediately tempered his statement, confirming that indeed, he trained his trainer

student according to the principle of patience, care for animals and absolute non-violence. This shift in position suggests the ability of the trainer to both represent the animals he works with (and through this imagined animal-centered stance, to emanate some of their wildness and animality) and to be inserted in human lines of transmission and into humanized sociality.

Such individual stances taken by professionals and by which the figure of the trainer is made subversive – queering existing patterns of interaction between a dominating human figure and wild animals, siding with other species over humans related to him – condense in the persons of actual animal trainers, making some of them, such as Damoo Dhotre, well-remembered circus 'stars.'[21] It is probably thanks to these ambivalent emanations, reminiscent of the ways certain early Hollywood male stars, such as Rudolph Valentino, inspired fascination because of the ambivalences and seemingly contradictory qualities they condensed (Hansen 1991: 245-268) that the figure of the animal tamer has been so central to the circus' glamour. Regardless of his preferential connections with animals, trainers are steeped in and contribute to the publicity regime of the circus. The quirks of their experiences, and their occasional rebelliousness is featured as a conventionalized attitude that reestablishes the circus as the exceptional site in which animals and humans can be friends, and where the trainer, with his remarkable abilities and proximity to animals, can exist as a hero straddling human and non-human realms (Carmeli 2003).

[21] This ability to condense onto his person the emanations of the inaccessible world he frequents professionally is reminiscent of the construction of stardom in early Hollywood, at least as it is analyzed by Edgar Morin: "The heroes of the movies – heroes of adventure, action, success, tragedy, love, and even, as we shall see, of comedy – are, in an obviously attenuated way, mythological heroes in this sense of becoming divine. The star is the actor or the actress who absorbs some of the heroic – i.e., divinized and mythic – substance of the hero or heroine of the movies, and who in turn enriches this substance by his or her contribution. When we speak of the *myth* of the star, we mean first of all the process of divinization which the movie actor undergoes, a process that makes him the idol of crowds." (Morin 1960: 39). Here, it is not heroism that the trainer absorbs, but the wildness of the animals seen with him in the ring.

The singularity of the trainer among the animals he has trained, along with the owner's easily mocked craze and infatuation for the animals his money could buy him, complete the picture of the circus as a multi-species society in which, by virtue of the healthy work everyone is subject to, everyone lives peacefully. These tropes – as well as their negative counterpoints which reverse the valuation of each of these terms – have traction and shape the publicity of the circus, not just by way of more or less intentional forms of advertisement or mass mediated opinions (posters, films, autobiographies of famous circus people, etc.) but also through the publicity constituted by the recollection of circus professionals and the spectators of their shows, which use the same tropes and images as the vehicle of personal recollection. That these tropes by which the circus, or circusness, is invoked come populated – or unnaturally "peopled" – by circus animals, incidentally, makes actual circus companies prone to being invested as a targetable site by actors outside the circus whose agendas do not align with the circus'.

Taming the circus

> *"On an average, a circus has about 20 wild, and 300 other animals and a small assortment of dogs, geese, etc. While watching these animals perform in the ring the audiences' hearts go out to these 'poor, half-starved animals in captivity' but, in reality, these creatures are better off than the two-legged performers who have incarcerated themselves within the circus tent."*
>
> "Circus Days, Dog Days," *Times of India,* April 27th, 1980 (accessed online).

Circus professionals of Thalassery, when they recollect the animal ban, often bring up the fact that many sites in India – zoos, the cinema, Hindu temples, horse-riding clubs – involve animals in ways similar to their own activities, and yet, they were not targeted by interventions in the name of animal rights in the way the circus was. Why did it have to be the circus, they regret, that was singled out as a major site in which the legal and moral condemnation of the exhibition of animals played out?

While my interlocutors are swift to name some of their most prominent detractors as the reason for the accusations circus businesses faced, here I make the argument that circus publicity and fame (cf. Chapter 1) made this specific site particularly opportune for the battle waged by animal rights activists. The forms of publicity cultivated by the circus profession (actualized in circus advertisement and in the various personal and collective ways in which people live, remember and celebrate their associations with the circus), which renders salient and celebrates the ways in which the circus is not like the societies for which it performs, could be used as a support by animal welfare groups who sought a widely visible locus to reframe discussions and enhance specific norms regarding proper care to animals in human societies. The prominence of animals and their intimacies with human colleagues in circus publicity could, once reframed in accordance with a consistent and different agenda, serve as a compelling support for the enforcement of animal rights. Meanwhile, and significantly, the lack of discernability between circus companies for the unconcerned public of potential circus goers (for whom attending *the circus* amounts to attending *any* circus) made it easier to extend factual accusations of animal abuse in one company into a suspicion generalizable to all circus businesses.

Historically, the attention to animal rights violations in the circus followed a first set of litigations (initiated by the filing of FIRs in local police stations by members of city-based NGOs) regarding the condition of the dancing bears and trained monkeys performing alongside itinerant performers in Bombay and Delhi. In spite of some criticisms and unsuccessful initiatives seizing performing bears in some cities,[22] tied to these animals constituting the livelihood of their keepers, this battle

[22] Cf. "Animal Baggers" *Times of India*, February 28, 1988 (accessed on the newspaper's online archive). This piece by Sally Walker, a prominent American conservationist, mentions on its second page how she sought to get some performing bears belonging to some itinerant performers confiscated from them by the police, and how this effort

was overall successful and set a precedent for what was to follow. Curating itself as an uprooted and disappearing form of spectacle and lifestyle (inhabiting a distinct chronotope), distinct from the societies of its sedentary spectators, the circus projected at a mass scale an unusual situation of animal upkeep, which the limited presence of itinerant and traditional bear performers had only occasionally brought to widespread attention. For animal rights defense groups located in India's large cities, pointing at the publicity circulated voluntarily by the circus (as I have explained in chapter 1), instead of or in addition to small-scale urban performances like that of street performers, allowed for an amplification of the battle on animal performances which had until then been led piecemeal. The circus companies, ironically successful in that regard, with their cultivated cosmopolitan image, their mention in newspapers and works of fiction, relayed the concerns which activists worked to associate with the circus form in Indian mass media and worldwide.

The publicity of Indian circus by which animals come to fit in a humanized sociality could be pursued as an object of intervention by putting in question the very terms that the circus had used to promote its distinctiveness. This rhetorical operation is well rendered by a headline from October 26, 1997 (*Times of India*): "For this circus, the show must go on even if the lions are blind." A common trope defining the circus as a genre (the fact that the show continues, in spite of everything) is pointed back at a specific circus company ("*this* circus"), accused of pushing the inherent logic of the circus to an extreme by imposing it to the ailing lions of the company.

failed. On the day following the confiscation of three bears, she complains (rather obliviously), "the fellows had caught hold of some politician who came complaining to his office that these people had no other means of livelihood, etc, and creating an awful fuss. He was forced to issue permits to these people for the bears."

The value reversals this critical stance enables are well exemplified by a 2000 Kerala High Court Case upholding the 1991 and 1998 notifications on the ban of performing animals in the circus (*Kerala High Court, N.R. Nair And Ors., Etc. Etc. vs Union Of India (Uoi) And Ors. on 6 June, 2000,* §13). It concludes with a carefully worded paragraph on the principles by which the decision was reached. In circus companies, the paragraph begins, "circus animals are being forced to perform unnatural tricks, are housed in cramped cages[,] subjected to fear, hunger, pain, not to mention the undignified way of life they have to live with no respite." Through the rhetorical association of the material conditions in which animals are said to live, and their ontological implications, i.e., an "undignified way of life" in which animals perform "unnatural" tricks, the judgment lays out its moral orientation and allows us to shape the contours of the stance from which it is written. The judgment, taking on a humanitarian stance predicated on the judge's legitimacy in distinguishing dignified and undignified conditions ("in conformity with the changing scenario, values of human life, philosophy of the Constitution, prevailing conditions and the surrounding circumstances to prevent the infliction of unnecessary pain or suffering on animals" (2000, *,* §13)), is also reminiscent of discourses on performance prevalent in India's colonial history, in which performing artists and their lifestyle is inherently suspicious and improper as a form of livelihood, especially when it associates persons of different kinds (Weidman 2006; Soneji 2011).

Ruling out the possibility that the treatment of animals in circuses might be anything but an inhumane deployment of "cruelty and torture," the judgment continues with a remarkable description of animal behavior through a vicarious comparison to what humans do: "In many respects, [animals] comport better than humans, they kill to eat and eat to live and not live to eat as some of us do, they do not practice deception, fraud, or falsehood and malpractices as humans do,

they care for their little ones expecting nothing in return, they do not proliferate as we do depleting the already scarce resources of the earth, for they practice sex restraint by seasonal mating, nor do they inhale the lethal smoke of tobacco polluting the atmosphere and inflicting harm on fellow beings."

This passage indirectly points back to several qualities which circus publicity has been made to stand for during the animal ban. The circus is implicitly treated here as a shorthand for places where animals are led astray from their natural state and "denied rights." The only reason why this description makes sense in the context of the judgment is because the circus, the site considered in the judgment, is a place where many of the vices animals do not indulge in are imagined to be endemic: eating meat unnecessarily, being disingenuous (including professionally, by plotting "malpractices", and lustful, or smoking, for instance. This vicarious exposé of the vices circus animals do not have, and its referring back diffusely to the circus society is meaningful in part because these vices are already associated and circulated more broadly (for instance, by Indian cinema) as typical of the lower-class and lower-caste, male dominated society the circus is imagined to be by the more middle and upper-class, upper-caste public of a court judgment. [23] The circus is made to appear not just as an uncivilized site, but one which perverts the natural state of animals, constraining them to conform to vicious human ways. The glamour drawn from the homologies sustaining an unusual human-non-human sociality at the circus unintendedly grants a powerful and visible support to these legally binding declarations. By the value reversal that this court decision animates, circus publicity becomes the poster case for animal rights denial, and the peculiar

[23] In 1964, the Animal Welfare Board of India, a government office involved in this court case as expert, had already published a booklet entitled: "Circuses - Amusement for the Uncivilised." It is unlikely that its position concerning the quality of those who attend or work at the circus had improved by the time this case came to the Kerala High Court.

humanizing of circus animals in the circus is the evidence used to demonstrate the inhumane character of those who depend on animals for paid performance.

Thus, the spectacular publicity of the circus, both already circulating (as I explained in chapter 1) and establishing a strong bond between circus people and circus animals, was a convenient target for proponents of greater enforcement of animal rights: similarities between animals and humans were already solidly established (as the excerpts from a 1980 investigative piece used as epigraph to this section suggests), and it took little work to portray animals, in that context, as dignified victims in need of urgent intervention.

Targeting the circus as a site in which animal rights are denied also pre-figured potential practical victories for the NGOs and the government agencies which implemented the decisions of the animal ban era: as I analyze more closely in chapter 4, the circus exists and is re-produced as a disappearing form. The widely anticipated demise of the circus can also amount to an end of the activities which animal rights activists reframed as abuse, or exploitation – brought about by their intervention, and signaling their success. Some associations, such as PETA India (India's branch of the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, founded in 2000), have in fact increased their fame by waging this battle, and used the public visibility their acquired by intervening in the field of animal entertainment as influence in other battles. The publicization of successful interventions in the circus allows animal welfare NGOs to signal their effectiveness at changing norms concerning animal welfare (even as it is remains difficult for them to make these norms prevail in numerous other sites in which animals are present, such as temples, or sports involving trained animals, which are supported by more prominent and influential political actors). Since its foundation, PETA India

has for instance continuously relayed its activities of "Inspection of Animals in Circuses in India",[24] posted montage of circus footages titled as "Circus animal abuse" (Figure 23, note that the video is published in August 2020, during the COVID-lockdown, at a time when no circuses are performing)[25], on its social media pages and website, eliciting comments social media from followers such as: "Stop Watching Circus" or "Ban circus… across the world". This continuous circulation of animal rights NGOs' intervention in circuses framed as participation in an effort to stop the circus suggests that they found in the disappearing circus a continuously efficacious vehicle for the cause of animal welfare as it is widely construed, and for the spectacular enforcement of animal rights.

The unintentional harnessing of animal rights publicity to circus publicity after 1990 consolidated the collective perception of a critical turn in the decline of big top circus among the Thalassery community of circus professionals. The removal of beloved animals and the recollection of such moment granted stability to the narratives of generations of performers who got to witness it firsthand, and to those who had retired before it even happened. For these performers, the animal ban crystallized as a point of no return for the circus, since, from their perspective, a circus without animal was hardly a circus at all. In the next chapter, I focus more closely on the circus show (now including predominantly human circus artists) as it is performed currently and as it evolves over time in the face of historical events such as the animal ban, an ulterior ban on child training, and in the midst of discourses foreshadowing the form's disappearance.

[24] Released on Youtube by 'officialPETAIndia', on September 4th, 2013: "PETA India's 2013 Inspection of Animals in Circuses in India." *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lPUf6G08Pl8*.
[25] Released on PETA India's Facebook Page. August 1, 2020. PETA India. 2020. "Circus Animal Abuse." *https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=3092852287496312*.

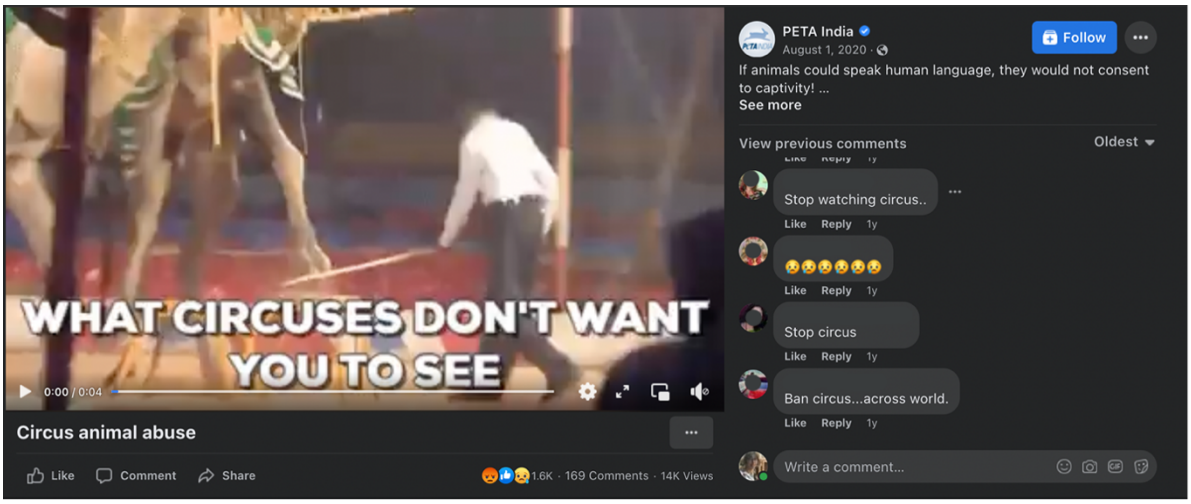


Figure 23. Image grab from PETA India's Public Facebook Page (publically accessible page, accessed, excerpted and anonymized in May 2022)

Chapter 3. Circus itemizability: On the formation of present-day items through the recollection of the circus past

The disappearance of the circus has a ring to it. The scale reduction noticeable in the expanse of the circus tours, the animal ban and the criticism it drew to the circus companies, the progressive decay of the corpus of circus archives enmeshed in the lives of those who have retired from their circus careers (more on this in Chapter 4 and 5), all seem to point back to the past as a time when the Indian circus was more than what it is now. As one of the outcomes of an ethnographic inquiry that focuses on a community of Kerala-based circus artists which has predominantly retired now from the circus routes, and moved on to other activities, this might seem unsurprising. But, as I argue in this dissertation, that the circus appears to be disappearing is not merely an artefact of this ethnographic project. There is something propitious in the idea that the circus is disappearing for those who have ceased to be a part of it. There is prestige in having seen and lived the last of something, and there is also comfort in a raffish episode of one's past finally lying still unless summoned. In this sense, one begins to grasp why a group of retired professionals might choose to dwell in the disappearance of the circus.

But the currency of accounts of the disappearance of the circus expands widely beyond this particular site and this particular group of people. Nostalgic aesthetic features have durably regimented much of the circulated publicity of the circus in Kerala and for many of my Kerala and India-based friends who were not particularly concerned by the circus. For these interlocutors and friends, what a visit to the circus somewhere in India amounts to is a diffuse recollection they could

make of another, almost forgotten, visit to the circus in their childhood. "We used to go with my grandparents… are they still performing nowadays? Do they still come to town?"

And yet, this diffuse impression of a disappearance is easily challenged by considering contemporary circus practices in India. The performances of circus companies (even just the Kerala-based ones) engage the livelihood of hundreds of workers; circus companies, such as Geo Circus, have emerged, grown and been the talk of the (Thalassery) town, and have tragically come to an end (with the unexpected death of its owner at a young age) all within 2018 and 2020. Meanwhile, artists from West Bengal, Nepal, Central Asia and even Ethiopia have been contracted each year to perform items in Indian circus companies. In other words, even if it has reduced in scale since what it was in the past, the circus industry is active, the shows produced by companies continue to change and they, along with circus artists in their practice of circus items, seek to innovate, despite the circus being cast by many in an elegiac modality. What are the connections between elegiac discourses on the circus and these facts evidencing that the show *does* go on, that circus "items" continue to be learned and performed, that some spectators continue to visit the circus tents? Are there ways in which the circus as it is performed today support accounts in which it is also disappearing, ways in which disappearance might be inscribed in the very presence of the enactment of circus acts?

This chapter focuses on the commodified, aesthetic, and physical dimensions of the circus show, which are constitutive elements in a local economy of the circus and its perceived disappearance, to attempt to explain how the disappearance of the circus widely appears sustained even as circuses continue to make regular appearances across villages, towns and cities in India. To track the actualization of what seems like a contradiction, I focus on a specific feature of the circus'

recognizable aesthetic, namely the circus items – the spectacular performances presented by circus artists and organized as what spectators come to see at the circus. In order to flesh out what an item is and how items come to be defining, in practice, of the ways the circus is remembered, recognized as a genre, and perceived to be disappearing, I present one item in particular, the boneless act in the second part of this chapter's argument. I track how the boneless act sits in relation to the processes of social and aesthetic changes that have shaped what the circus is, or has become, over time.

I first define what items are, outline some of their features, and point out their importance in the economy producing and circulating 'what the circus is,' or "circus-ness" (qualities that render something recognizably evocative of the circus, whether it is a show, or another cultural form). I emphasize the way items are intimately connected to the social body and physical bodies of circus artists. Senior circus artists, whose bodies and minds bear the traces and recollections of their intense practice, are influential, I argue, in shaping the informal dispensation regulating the circus form – what it is and what it should be. In the next sections, I demonstrate the connections of the current economy of the show with the diffuse memory of the circus' past. I suggest that the genericization of the circus from its past fixes what I call the "aesthetic envelope" of the current shows, i.e. the set of aesthetic features which coordinate a varied and changing set of acts into a recognizable circus show possessing sufficient circus-ness. The circus genre's emergence from an amalgam of recollections instils a conservative taste in the re-production of the circus show, which strives to elicit in spectators nostalgic impressions – "this show was like *that* show I saw when I was a kid," or "this is nothing like the shows I saw as a kid, it's all gone now".

In the second part of my argument, I narrow my focus and consider how an enduring circus 'staple' act, the boneless act, is currently being performed. I suggest that the boneless act is a site where the disappearance discourse finds support in aesthetic features regulated by the recollected, retrospective basis for the circus' genericization. Indeed, the unease of circusgoers confronted with the boneless act is an effect of the ageing of performers in the show, as opposed to a time when the performers could be, and were, children. The ageing of circus performers is itself an effect of a circus children's ban instigated by NGO workers who denounced the Indian circus as exploitative and anachronistic. The innocence and gymnastic wonder of children bending and rolling has taken on lascivious and sexy connotations now that the performing bodies are adult bodies. The aesthetic envelope reinforces the daringness of the act – a quality also featured in the aesthetic repertoire of "circusness." Yet as this daringness of the circus' aesthetic envelope is no longer balanced out by the presence of more "innocent" items in the show (which, gymnastic feats performed by children were once aesthetically celebrated as), this heightens the sexiness of what the circus is overall – resulting in the perception, for spectators and for observers such as its retired professionals having in mind older iterations of the circus, that what the circus is today departs from, and is less good than, what the circus was before. The decline in the goodness of the circus for this perception is aesthetic, and hence, moral. From this position, the competence and the training of the performers is no longer what it used to be, and the circus-ness of the show is compromised.

This suggests then, that circus disappearance emerges at the conflation of two processes, both anchored in the same memory of what the circus was: on the one hand, the scaling down of the circus (the withering of its animal population, the diminishing number of young trainees, the smaller hosting capacities of modern circuses and their movements across space now confined to India, or

even South India) appears to former circus professionals and circus publics able to recollect circuses of the past as a phenomenon of disappearance. On the other hand, the fact that the circus as a performance genre seeks to minimize the intertextual gap in its citation of a condensed image of the circus show in the past (actually made from countless shows, collectively remembered, forming an idea of the 'greatest show on earth' which any circus show attempts to live up to), constrains the aesthetic envelope of current shows in such a way that the show is received as a production of its disappearance, an evidence of it being less good, by standards of taste anchored in former performances.

Circus items and the itemizability of the Circus Show

The "items" performed by circus artists are brief performances presented during the circus show, most of them under ten minutes. Some of these items are animal performances ('tiger act,' 'elephant passing'), other, involving only humans are focused on aerial feats (group or solo trapeze items, silk and rope acts…) or acrobatics (group acrobatics, 'brick-dance,' 'boneless,' etc.). Others yet focus on making the public laugh (clown acts) and exhibiting unusual human abilities (the contortion of the boneless artist, the precision of a blade thrower or sharpshooter, sword swallowing, walking on sharp surfaces, drinking and spitting out large quantities of water…). As the circus scholar Peta Tait explains, items, also referred to as acts in other national circus traditions,[1] feature "a recognizable repertoire of physical skills arranged in distinctive patterns. Programmed together these create the

[1] While I could not clarify why the preference for this term over *inankal*, *abhasankal,* or *acts* remained prevalent even among non-English speaking professionals, archival news clippings as old as 1879 suggest that the term entered common parlance from the British vaudeville and circus circuit. In a 1879 article in the *Times of India* ("Wilson's Circus", March 19th), for instance: "A second visit to the Circus [Wilson's Circus, a British company] confirms us in the opinion we have already expressed as to the excellence of the company. In a previous issue we gave a general account of the performance on the opening night, and we now propose to give a more detailed account of the various *items* on the program." [emphasis added].

traditional circus." (2016: 3) Items, in the "traditional" grammar of the big top circus which the Indian circus companies follow,[2] are treated as distinct, autonomous moments of the show – sequences juxtaposed and bounded by the performers' (human and non-human) entrance and their exit from the ring. As the circus semiotician Yoram Carmeli writes, the circus show is characterized by "a deliberate effort to present variability within each circus category and within the circus show as a whole. It [is] the public's expectation that each act in a circus show [will] be experienced as the only one of its kind. The owner and performers [know] that any similarity between acts must be avoided" within the performance of a show (2016: 319-20). Both scholars, through these characterizations, insist on the circus show's presentation, as a type of performance falling within an easily recognizable genre, of distinct skills, bounded by consistent temporal and visual features (the item-specific musical accompaniment of the artist's performance, their entrance and exit from the ring, the commensurable and consecutive duration of each item), coordinated together.

This 'itemizability' of the circus show, on which I also want to draw attention in the context of the Indian circus, is determining for the production of "circus-ness" by an iteration of a circus performance. As the set of aesthetic qualities by which the circus is easily identifiable, circus-ness also makes citations of the circus by other cultural objects or texts immediately recognizable by individuals familiar with this quality (to the extent that one can routinely refer to an everyday state of affairs or an ordinary situation as a circus in expressions like, "What a circus!"). The presentation of items is a central element to the definition of the circus show and a vehicle for circus-ness: there is

[2] This understanding of traditional in Tait's analysis emerges in contrast to contemporary or "new" circus forms which have mainly developed in Europe and the United States. Such forms had not developed significantly in India at the time when I conducted this study, nonetheless circus owners and observers are aware of these developments abroad occasionally characterized their circus as traditional to mark the resemblance of the big top circus in India with the latter forms in other parts of the world.

no circus show without the consecutive performance, in the ring, of several circus artists who can perform unusual items. In addition, the value of items (their successful contribution to the circus-ness of a show, or of anything that cites the circus) is tied to the spectator's recognition of their novelty and, for some items, of the element of risk and prodigiousness their performance involves. The renewal of novelty and the presence of performers who take perceptible and dramatized physical risks in the performance of the item (jumping or being thrown to or from great heights, doing something dangerous without a safety wire or net, swallowing or stepping on knives or fire, achieving equilibrium in a potentially harmful position, being alone with large animals…) structure competition between different circus companies. While this competition and the status system it structures is not discernible by circus-goers, who most often simply attend *the* circus (that is, any circus show) that performs nearest to them, it nonetheless is part of what ranks circus companies from the perspective of managers and owners (as evoked in Chapter 1): it plays a part in a circus company arising durably as a 'top-tier' circus able to aim at performing in a 'top-tier' city. This competition stabilizes the expectations about what a circus is, particularly the quality expected of item performers, and the rate at which items lose their novelty. It makes the Indian circus reminiscent of the "commodity world" of "phantasmagorias" which also developed in the mid-19th century (Buck Morss 1992; Olalquiaga 1998), and that brought European circuses to colonial routes. Like World fairs, Western department stores, or Indian melas, the circus' business model is one which continuously negotiates with the inevitable numbing and anesthesia of a spectator-qua-customer ever increasingly indifferent to "shocks". In particular, the rotation of items hopes to create a surfeit of danger or newness which will grab the spectator's attention and ensure that they come again the next time the circus plays in town.

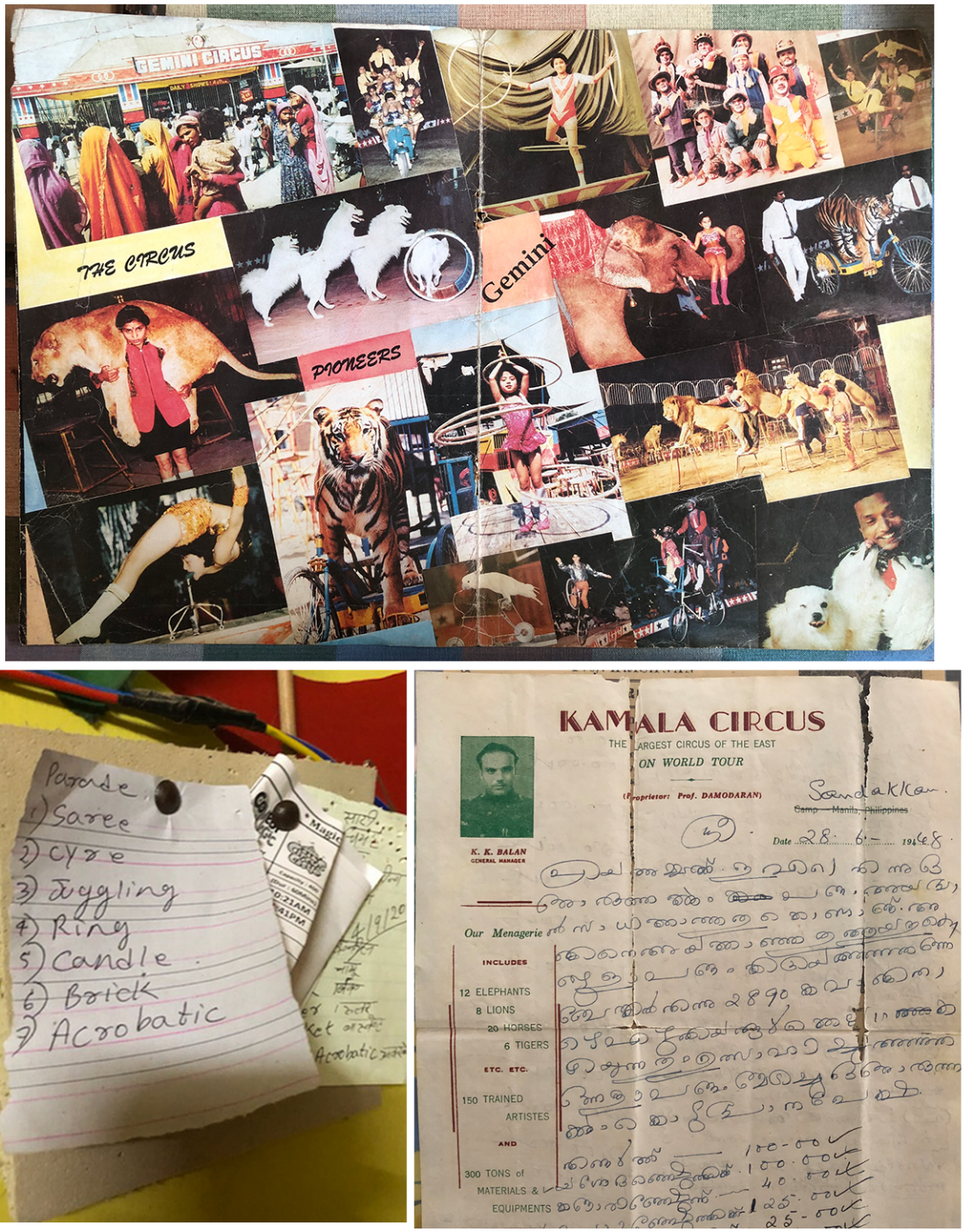


Figure 24. Various documents exemplifying the aesthetic of juxtaposition and accumulation in the circus, both in public instantiations of 'circusness' and in documents circulated to business partners.

Top: excerpt from a souvenir program (Jumbo Circus, date unknown, 1990s, photographed with permission atfrom the Circus Employees Union in Thalassery, 2020); bottom left: "items list" for a circus performance at Circus Castle, Trivandrum 2020, my photograph; bottom right: a letter written by a Kamala manager on the company's letterhead, advertising the size of the show through a description of its infrastructure and menagerie (dated 1948) (owner's personal archive, photographed with permission, Kannur 2020).

A corollary of this economy of circus-ness is stability and recognizability in the "aesthetic envelope" which aesthetically and materially frames the items as the circus show. Items condense the novelty expressed by a circus show, while the other aesthetic features of the show (the way the tent looks, the conventionalization of the costumes worn by performers, the length of the show) serve as contrastive ground for the novelty, the prowess, the risk, shown in items. This consistent aesthetic envelopment of items ensures that circus-ness does not become quintessentially attached to any single particular item (although some *genres* of items – trapeze, acrobatics, clowning – are inevitably expected and integral to this aesthetic envelope), but arises from, circulates, and suffuses the whole performance, the controlled environment which a circus ticket gives access to.

The few rules constraining the order in which items are presented – for instance, that it is best to keep the items that require a long equipment setup (group trapeze for which a safety net is installed, animal taming acts for which a cage has to be set up) for the beginning or the end of the show in order to minimize installation and de-installation during the show, or that it is best to present an attention-grabbing item in the middle of the show in order to keep the audience interested in the performance – are mostly logistical and the structure they impose on the juxtaposition (or sequencing) of items is hardly noticeable to the audience. When the circus performance is successful, and the hope of circus managers is that it always is, circus spectators observe the show as an uninterrupted flow of spectacular items, as a Kamala Circus advertisement brochure diagrams in its uninterrupted movement from the mention of one spectacular item to another: "See and admire yourself Aerial-trapeze magnificent, acrobatics lavish and comedies Indigeneous Rib-breaking

Cycling-in-cage Universally Superb."[3] Depending on the occasion and the size of the circus, the length of the show and the number of performers involved vary, but itinerant Indian circuses rarely perform less than 15-20 items in a show, which amounts to a show of approximately 2 hours (including a 15-20 minutes intermission half-way through).

Optimizing the variety of items in themselves, their sequencing, and their synthesis as a coordinated and all-involving circus experience for spectators informs the decisions that companies take, and factors in almost all aspects of a company's daily life, from its specific composition (the artists and trainers hired, the number of people setting up the infrastructure and assisting during the show, etc.) to the work schedules of everyone on each day. The social and infrastructural conditions of possibility for the marketable experience of the show and the show itself are frequently presented as two sides of the same coin in circus publicity, as the letterhead used by Kamala Circus in the 1940s exemplifies with its description of the circus' menagerie, including the weight of the equipment which "The Largest Circus of the East" travels with on its seemingly perennial "world tour" (Figure 24, bottom right). It also regiments the economic management of a company: tickets sell more for large circuses in which spectators can expect to see high quality items. Artists are paid depending on their competence in one or several items (and their confidence in marketing them and negotiating with the owners), and other expenses are likewise made on the show motivated by the desirability of an attractive and varied program. Item lists scribbled by circus managers (Figure 24, bottom left), announcements featured in the advertisement columns of newspapers, but also posters, decorative

[3] Advertisement for Kamala Circus during its 1949 tour in Indonesia and Singapore. Cited from an archived ad featured on the blog of "Rojak Librarian" and accessible here: "Kamala Circus - The Great Indian Circus visits Singapore" (07/05/2018). URL: *https://mymindisrojak.blogspot.com/2018/07/kamala-circus-great-indian-circus.html*

panels placed at the entrance of circus camps (Figure 25) are some of the material traces of how these dimensions of a company's social life organize around the daily production of the show.

Figure 25. Bombay Circus' Opening Night in Kannur, Kerala (front banner displaying items presumably performed in this circus). October 2019. (My photograph).

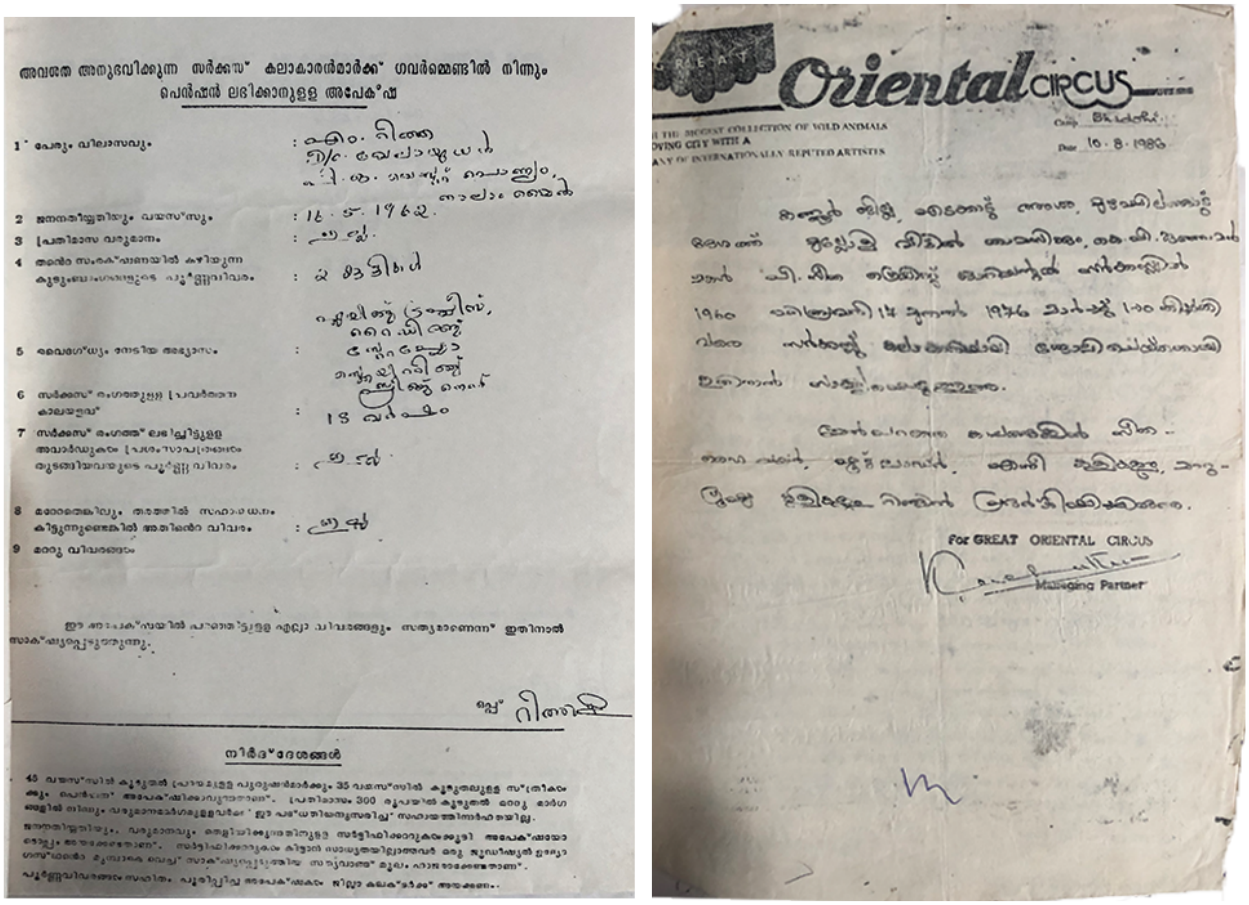
Items and Circus Artists

Items engage the bodies and lives of those who perform them with more sustained intensity than most forms of work. That it is unconceivable (and because of that, of course, a common fantasy scenario) to send anyone but an animal trainer in the lion's cage, or to ask someone to join a trapeze troupe somersaulting above the ring, conveys the way in which circus items are intimately bound to those who have learned to perform them. Many of the skills demonstrated in items require long periods of training, and many permanently injured artists who have had to retire early after something went wrong during a show or during training are alive to remind others of the physical

effects and biographical implications of the risk-taking and innovation that sustains the performance of items in the circus shows. The hyper-specialization of circus artists in the performance of prodigious items, thus condenses the circus items and the circus artists into a composite. This condensation is encouraged by the aesthetic envelope which the circus company produces for the show. One aesthetic feature of circus-ness, foregrounded in following chapters, is the conflation of the show and the lives of individuals belonging in circus companies (Carmeli 1987). This cultivated amalgamation facilitates the equivalence established between the items and those who perform them: circus artists become significant bearers, thereby, of circus-ness, of what the circus is, which is instantiated by any iteration of a circus show, in which their bodies (re)produce and animate 'what the circus is' (or circus-ness).

This condensation has many effects, and one of them is that "circus artists" are foregrounded as the *sine qua non* of the circus show and of the entire circus economy. While other circus workers, who help set up the tent and infrastructures, and circus hands, who assist during the show, are equally essential to the unfolding of the performance, their work is not regarded as "skilled" or specific to the circus profession in the same way. Their group evolves faster, their rank frequently supplemented by the intermittent recruitment of local men on daily wage, especially when there is a need to start a camp in a new place or shut it down once the circus' stay ends. As a result, they remain in the shadow, particularly so during the performance since the "circus artists" are what the spectators, the consumers of the show, come to see at the circus. This, however, does not entail that the circus artists' labor is irreplaceable or systematically protected. In fact, the conflation of items with the bodies performing them places circus artists in a precarious position when the owners and managers' intent to innovate renders some items, and thus also, some circus artists, dispensable. But

the necessity of items – that is, of a contingent of circus artists exhibiting the abilities, audacity, beauty, or ugliness of their bodies – for there to be a circus has had social, economic and cultural implications for the circus profession and for the ways the circus is circulated by other cultural objects and grasped as a social form.



അവശത അനുഭവിക്കുന്ന സർക്കസ് കലാകാരൻമാർക്ക് ഗവർമെണ്ടിൽ നിന്നും പെൻഷൻ ലഭിക്കാനുള്ള അപേക്ഷ

1 പേരും വിലാസവും
2 ജനനതീയ്യതിയും വയസ്സും : 18.5.1962
3 പ്രതിമാസ വരുമാനം
4 തന്റെ സംരക്ഷണയിൽ കഴിയുന്ന കുടുംബാംഗങ്ങളുടെ പൂർണ്ണവിവരം
5 വൈരൂപ്യം നേടിയ അദ്യാസം
6 സർക്കസ് രംഗത്തുള്ള പ്രവർത്തന കാലയളവ് : 15 വർഷം
7 സർക്കസ് രംഗത്ത് ലഭിച്ചിട്ടുള്ള അവാർഡുകളം പ്രശംസാപത്രങ്ങളം
8 മറ്റൊരുതൊഴിലും തരത്തിൽ സഹായധനം കിട്ടുന്നുണ്ടെങ്കിൽ അതിന്റെ വിവരം
9 മറ്റു വിവരങ്ങൾ

ഈ അപേക്ഷയിൽ പറഞ്ഞിട്ടുള്ള എല്ലാ വിവരങ്ങളും സത്യമാണെന്ന് ഇതിനാൽ സാക്ഷ്യപ്പെടുത്തുന്നു.

നിർദ്ദേശങ്ങൾ

GREAT Oriental CIRCUS

THE BIGGEST COLLECTION OF WILD ANIMALS
LOVING CITY WITH A
ARMY OF INTERNATIONALLY REPUTED ARTISTES

Dt. 10.8.1986

For GREAT ORIENTAL CIRCUS
Managing Partner

Figure 26. Application form for the Kerala Retired Circus Artist Pension & Employment Certification Letter provided by Oriental Circus in 1986 used to support one such application. (Circus Artists Union Head Office, Thalassery, photographed with permission in 2020).

For instance, that circus artists and circus items can be grasped as one in evident in the eligibility criteria of social protection initiatives for circus artists in Kerala. The only existing state benefit scheme to which circus professionals are eligible in Kerala is the "Retired Circus Artist Pension Scheme" (*"avashanayanubhavikkunna sarkkass kalaakaaralmaarkku gavarnmantil ninnum penshan"*,

Figure 26, on the left), which is practically only accessible to circus artists. Eligibility to the scheme is determined by answering a form which includes the lines: "items performed" ("vaidagdhyam nEdiyittulla aphyasam") and "number of years spent performing." Application to the scheme also requires a certification of this information by one of the circus companies the applicant has worked for: documents in which a circus managing partner often feels compelled to write that the circus artist was "good" and hard-working in the execution of a small set of explicitly named "items" (Figure 26, on the right). In this case, the artist's competences being certified are: "'highwire,' 'foot ladder' and other items"). The phrasing of the government form, which seemingly disqualifies non-performing professionals from applying,[4] suggests the importance of circus artists in shaping the public identity of the circus community. Thus, proficiency in various items is both a form of social currency, indexed to the circus community's value system, and the result of an experience that physically and socially inscribes the status of 'circus artists' into the bodies and lives of individuals as they evolve both inside and outside the circus companies. This persistent memory – of the body, of socialization as a circus artist, of situation in the coordinated succession of items perceived as the show – makes the circus artists recognized members of the circus profession, and their experience passes as an index of their legitimacy as people who can recollect what the circus is. In a society that grants much social currency to experience and seniority (such as Kerala's), this reenforces the retrospective orientation of legitimate interpretations of *what the circus is* (or circus-ness), since more senior, predominantly retired, circus artists, are also those regarded as having the most experience, and thereby as more legitimate in their identification of what is truly circus-like.

[4] Although circus assistants and other employees sometimes apply, and presumably end up receiving the pension, as some application files preserved by Thalassery's circus union suggest.

The socialization involved in performing the same item repeatedly during training and throughout repeated performances of the circus show has effects on how the circus is remembered by the senior artists. One of them is dissociation from the show as a whole. I have noted elsewhere how the memory of circus artists seems trained on details, while they appear to smooth out many of the contextual elements that structure the recollection of particular days or even years (Rimbault 2021). The recollections of circus artists reproduce the itemizable quality of the circus show, because their bodily recollection focuses on the kinetic experience of performing their item hundreds of time, exfoliating the granularity of the item's placement in the unfolding of any given show, or the flow of days of repeated training and performance. This makes physical media, especially those for which a date and a place can be given like photographs, newspaper clips, important structures for their recollections. These happens to typically be media of circus publicity, under the authorial control of the circus companies (I speak more about this in chapter 5). Significantly, such documents of circus-ness and their participation in the circus artists' recollection aligns the perspective of circus artists to a spectatorial position on the show they so centrally partake in. Reminiscent, there too, of the phantasmagorias evoked by Karl Marx, Walter Benjamin and Susan Buck-Morss, the circus in India encompasses over time the glamour of many repeated circus performances, while "[concealing] every trace of the labor that produced them," "[encouraging] their beholders to identify them with subjective fantasies and dream," (Buck-Morss 1992: 25) or in the case I put forth here, widely shared recollections that regiment what is expected of an evolving specific genre of popular entertainment.

Recollected Circus & Genericization

How do these observations on circus items help understand the widespread perception that the circus is disappearing? This has to do, in part, with the fact that the conventions by which the circus

is recognizable as an items-involving *genre* of performance are inferred primarily from the circulation of recollections of past iterations of the circus, in other words by reference to and inference from what the circus *has been*. As I just explained, the circus is remembered both by unconcerned spectators and by circus artists, an important group among circus professionals, from a position that distinguishes circus-ness not through its focused appreciation of the challenging skills displayed in items (and by the circus artists) but through a broader experience of circus-ness afforded by the commodified experience of *seeing the circus* (in the show, in the publicity image produced by circus companies, in the newspaper, etc.) While items are central to the circus show, the performance of any specific item is thus rather incidental to the ways in which people recall past experiences of a circus show.

Much of the collective memories of circuses focus on the effect produced by the immersive circus experience of the entire show, and on the signs indexing the remarkable scale of the circus spectacle. Vishnu, for instance, a middle-aged upper-caste man working in the pharmaceutical industry and an enthusiastic interlocutor always ready to talk circus, takes much pleasure in reminiscing about his great-uncle Prof. K. Damodaran's famous circus, *Kamala*. It is well-known by people of his generation and older that Kamala Circus was a particularly successful Indian circus company, hiring and training some of the best circus artists, and offering some of the most lavish displays of circus spectacle ever given in India. The company's three-ring, six-pole, circus tent, used for performances in the 1950s, continues to be cited both by circus artists and unconcerned Malayali spectators who remember it, as a form of spectacular apotheosis, or "climax" (to borrow the expression of the

circus owner in the 1943 Disney film *Dumbo*),[5] and as a sign that the greatness of the circus is irretrievably located in the past. The factual recollection of some circuses which used to be larger and traveling longer routes, complemented by striking combinations of still photographic images taken for publicity purposes, and moving image snippets from circuses orchestrated for the cinema (Kamala circus in *Chandralekha* (1948), Gemini Circus in *Mera Naam Joker* (1970)), renders those who speak of them nostalgic for the circuses of the olden days. The tents used to be bigger, the VIP visitors more famous, the crowds more enthusiastic – the ways in which the circus was better, manifold.

But the performances reconstituted from memory are composite images. Even a professional circus observer such as the scholar Paul Bouissac explains that it takes him three visits to get to a point where he can "retrace in writing the unfolding" of an act – and even then, many more viewings still do not allow him to capture in his "verbal copy" of an act "the miracle of the body presence of artists and the colors of [his own] emotions" (2010:2). For most spectators who only pay once to attend the circus show, the show leaves diffuse impressions which are incompletely translated into words or mental images: one might keep in mind for a few days the recollection of an item which was well-performed or appreciated (or on the contrary, an item that went wrong, inspired angst, or failed in some way), but the overall recollection of the show is likely to be structured primarily by one's assessment of the scale of circus infrastructures, material support (photographs, illustrations,

[5] The discussed excerpt from *Dumbo* can be found here: *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_5C1hbqM8T4* Note how the circus manager-qua-owner-qua-ringmaster in the scene has an intuitive appraisal of the kind of event – i.e. climaxes – it needs to make an impression on the audience, and how all participants in the scene (the attendant mice, the human clerk inside the tent, Dumbo, a performer, and ourselves as spectators of the film) are brought into the same fold of searching and desiring the climax with this scene. This confirms how spectators and performers might be in the same value regime vis a vis the spectacular quality of the circus show (even as the circus continues to be construed as socially suspect, and potentially vicious, as I discussed in chapter 2).

nowadays also phone videos) evincing the dreamy glamour of the show and its coordinated visual palette. On an occasion when I met a senior couple who had had a chance to see the three-ring-circus of Kamala in their youth, for instance, their recollections of the event decades later did not amount to anything precise. It merely validated why we could evoke Kamala together in the first place, namely due to the sense that it constituted at the time an unusual attraction in Kerala's entertainment repertoire: *there were dozens of elephants, a show so vast you had to walk around to see it all… Back then, the circus was a much more popular show*! That their impressions could just as well have been pieced together from the sort of publicity document Vishnu preserves with the diligence and care of an archivist is not surprising. Even Vishnu, in fact, only has generic recollections of seeing Kamala's show.[6]

This skewing of recollections by the memory of moments or objects condensing circus-ness with some intensity does not spare the circus artists. The artists whom I interviewed could only speak of the shows in which they performed in generic terms – speaking not of performance on specific days but of daily routines structured by training for and performing items in a show occurring two or three times in a day, every day. The consistent temporalization of their lives according to the repeated performance of shows even generates surprising artefacts, as when Chandina, Priya and Rajani, three former artists of approximately the same age (early 60s), mistakenly remembered the opening 'parade' item of a show in which they all participated, until one of them corrected the

[6] Vishnu's sharpest memories are those, sustained by tropes found in British children's literature and Bollywood cinema, of sharing the everyday life of the Kamala Circus company during his school vacations, having 'run away with the circus,' just for a few days.

group, noticing that although they had worked for the same companies, the three of them had never worked for the same company simultaneously.[7]

Accounts of circus shows of the past, given by artists and sometimes by spectators who attended shows as children, are reminiscent of the way Maurice Halbwachs describes the reconstruction of family memories from one's present context in his work *On Collective Memory*:

> "A given scene which took place in our home, in which our parents were the principal actors, and which has been fixed in our memory therefore does not reappear as the depiction of a day such as we experienced it in the past. We compose it anew and introduce elements borrowed from several periods which preceded or followed the scene in question. […] [Such scenes] have become pregnant with all that has preceded them just as they are already pregnant with all that will follow. As often as we return to these events and figures and reflect upon them, they attract to themselves more reality instead of becoming simplified." (1992 [1950]: 61)

The experience of going to the circus, or of being part of a circus company, might seem rather different from such family scenes. And yet as circus semiotician Carmeli has shown, "When "the circus comes to town," the performance of perpetual and repetitive moves, if successful, will evoke in the public an experience of their community." Carmeli notes the distinctive capacity of the circus, as a popular and regular entertainment, to make an imprint on people's experience of social and collective time, much like a ritual event: "The sense of pertaining to a collective generated through the contrasted experience of encounter with the itinerant circus is strengthened by the recurrence of the visit to the circus as an occasion attended as family: "Over time, people do not go to the circus to see different programs; rather, by going again and again, first as children, then as adults with their own children, they see how they themselves have changed" (Carmeli 1987: 240).

[7] Interview with Chandina, Priya and Rajani, Thalassery, November 2019.

Attending circuses over time thus becomes significant as much for what the show exhibits, as for what it recalls: other similar experiences of having attended *the* circus in the past (with little concern or recall in India for which company it was, let alone which artists performed), the people who took us there or that we invited along with us, etc. In this perspective, the show and its grandiose aesthetic appear, by contrast with one's retrospective take on their own lives, as almost static and naturally consistent – an almost *timeless* sort of spectacle. Even if, in the moment, the novelty of items or the risks taken by a circus artist confer to the show a unique intensity, memory retains a more diffuse impression of the show from which the moments of danger are dulled, naturalized by the faint recollection of similar acts creating shock, excitement, enjoyment or fear, in other shows. The mental images of singular performances dissolve into a compound mnemonic spectacle bringing together sensorial elements gathered from shows seen in the tent, but also in televised and cinematic representations of big tops (for the audience), and significantly, memories of how one felt – as a child, as a parent or grandparent – seeing (an instantiation of) the circus. As a capacious template or type by which a circus' – indeed, any circus' – quality can be identified and appreciated, the distinctness of the items and their variety is evacuated from spectators' (and even professionals') perceptions and remembrances. Meanwhile, the summation of circus shows and items past homogenizes the variety of the circus show as a conventionalized, generic, feature of circus-ness, conveying the importance of novelty, of presenting distinctive and impressive items to the present time in which circus shows are continually produced.

Golden Age Standards for the Modern Circus

These peculiar ways in which people remember the circus constrain what the circus is in the present in India. Managers and owners strive to adhere to the sedimented quality of circus-ness produced by experiences of the circus by providing shows which conform to the aesthetic and structure of shows

in the past. Mindful of the expectations potential paying spectators have formed as to what the circus is, and of their anchoring in the (recollected) forms the Indian circus has already taken, most of them are conservative when considering large-scale infrastructural changes for their companies. The strategies they develop to tackle both the issues that chronically confront them, such as diminishing audiences, and even those which signal more long-lasting transformations of public opinion, such as the ban on animal performances in the 1990s, and on child performers in 2011, focus instead on transforming or replacing the more immediately permutable items (and circus artists) juxtaposed in the show.

Arun, a circus manager, thus explained to me in 2017 that his clowns were "not good," and that he needed clown trainers, such as those "we" had in France to help his company. When I showed him, a few days later, examples of French circus shows in which the role of clowns had been rethought entirely, making them more integral to the grammar of all items, Ajay promptly shrugged the matter off. He interjected that Indian audiences were not primed for this sort of performance and would not welcome it. Pulling up his phone, he searched and showed me a clip he remembered, recorded from a televised variety show in which an item that was performed in his own circus was presented in a version of exceptional skillfulness. 'This is the kind of innovation we are hoping for,' he seemed to suggest. Changes in the format of the show, it is widely perceived, could endanger the circus-ness of the show which spectators are assumed to look for every time they come to the circus.[8]

[8] Carmeli reports a similar situation based on his fieldwork documenting the 1970s British circus: "In the British world of family circuses, a family show would hardly change its program at all. It would come back to the same town over a three-year span, attracting the public by introducing the very same show as 'never seen before'. When asked about the introduction of change to his balancing act, Willy answered 'Why bother? They [the public] are not interested and he [Brown {the circus owner}] wouldn't pay.' Willy's hand balancing act was thus repeatedly presented to circus audiences in Britain for over 20 years without being remembered and without being compared to itself, and Brown knew that he could still hire Willy in 1975 to perform the very same hand balancing." (Carmeli 2016: 320)

Even items modeled after and aesthetically citing past performances such as clowning acts, must thus diligently "pass over this possibility [of asserting their self-difference] in silence" (Nakassis, 2016: 60). The performance of items appears regimented by a regime of preservation of circus-ness: they must harmoniously find their place within and avoid any challenge posed to the overall nostalgic structure of the show, while at the same time they must innovate in conformity with the form of improvement validated by the circus show, namely strive towards greater prodigiousness or remain consistent with past instantiations.

This leads us back to one more effect the conflation of circus items and circus artists has for the economy of circus-ness and its incessant disappearance, relevant for the next sections. Since its stabilization as a form run mostly by Malayali families in the 1950s, the Indian big top circus has produced itself in a constantly changing society, and has adapted, in conformation with circulating impressions of what the circus is to an evolving social conjuncture. The relative poverty and the demographic significance of large, low-caste families of the region of Malabar, whose children enrolled at a young age in Kerala-based circuses until the 1970s, the early retirement of Malayali women from the circus in order to participate in the domestic economy of their husband's families, the possibility of recruiting foreign performers, or the efforts of the Indian central government in tightening control over visible forms of child labor after the 1990s, are examples of the historical processes which have had an influence on the recollections which regiment what the circus is, and thereby on the formation of genres of circus practices.

In a constantly changing context, the conflation of the items performed with the artists who present them has meant that these socio-historical transformations have had effects on the perceived circus-

ness of particular acts. The ban on children performers (more on this below) thus resulted, for instance, in a change in the body of performers and in the performers' bodies. While ageing performers are frequently able to perform prodigiously well into adulthood, the changes of their bodies inevitably transforms, simultaneously, the ways in which an act can be framed as exhibiting circus-ness, and brings about progressive change and adaptation to the aesthetic envelope of the item and of the circus show more broadly. Such transformations that long-practiced items might go through are, as I will show in the next section, apprehended with suspicion, and elicit from spectators the diffuse impression that the circus is disappearing.

Plastic Artists & Spectacular Transformations

While the precise unfolding of performances has varied over time, "boneless wonders" (*Times of India*, "Professor's Chater's Circus", April 9, 1888), "plastic girl[s]" (Kamala Advertisement, 1962) and "amazing plastic lad[ies]" (Mark, 1988) have been featured continuously in Indian circus shows. At the time when I was able to attend many shows, between 2017 and 2021, there were few variations in the way this item was being performed in the different circus companies traveling Southern India.[9] The item always aimed to exhibit the outstanding overall flexibility of the performer's body, mostly through sequences of movements focused on a particular kind of flexibility (back bends, splits, and standing splits), with some sequences mitigating the gymnastic

[9] Here I am referring to performances observed in six different circus companies: Rambo Circus (remote: September 26th 2020), Grand Circus (2017); Jumbo Circus (2019); Great Bombay Circus (2019); Circus Castle (2020); Geo Circus (2020).

quality of the demonstration through the use of eye-catching props. Judging from the photographs of more ancient performances I have gathered, this item was, at least since the late 1980s, exclusively performed by female youths and women.[10] Boneless performers often evolve in the ring as a pair, with one woman performing the item while another, similarly dressed, assists, and sometimes draws

Figure 27. Circus artist Adaya performing the boneless act during a performance of the circus show "Circus Castle." My photograph, taken from the sound and light control desk. Kazhakuttom, 2020.

[10] This was not always the case: both British circuses touring in India and Indian companies seemed to favor male boneless artists in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

attention, through choreographed movements, to the main performer (cf. Figure 28, top right and Figure 29, on the left).

Figure 28. Photographs of boneless performers presenting four typical motion ranges exhibited in the sequences of the boneless act.

Top left: performer in a back bending "face frame" pose, my photograph 2018. Top right: artist doing a front split (2000, circus owner's personal archive). Bottom Right: Circus performer in "needle" pose (standing splits) (1960s, reproduced from artist's collection); Bottom Left: performer going through the boneless sequence involving object balancing (1960s, reproduced from artist's collection). (All photographed with permission)

There is no hierarchy or order across the sequences performed by the boneless artist although the back bends, such as the 'face frame' position in Figure 28 (top left; a less commonly exhibited form

of bodily flexibility, in contrast to the splits, which are standard in gymnastic and dance trainings) are particularly emblematic of this item and prominently featured in the choreography of the boneless act. Internally, each movement sequence presents postures of apparently increasing difficulty: in a splits sequence, for instance, a performer might start by presenting front and side splits (Figure 28, top right), and then in a side split, lean towards her front and back leg, foregrounding the extreme flexibility of her back, before regaining a standing pose. A choreographed climb and descent from the platform also typically frames the performance, establishing early in the performance that the "boneless"-ness of the item is about contortion: Adaya, the boneless performer at Magic Castle featured in Figures 27 and 30, begins, for instance, by ascending onto the platform with a deep and sudden back bending figure, which sets the tone for the demonstration to follow.

The movement sequences of the boneless acts I attended varied little. However, there were two distinct formulaic aesthetic compositions for it, instantiated in distinct versions of the act. In one of them, the item adopted the more daring aesthetic envelope of a cabaret or "item dance":[11] lit by

[11] Silpa Mukherjee (2019, Bioscope 9(2) 208-209) in a piece focused on the economy and infrastructure allowing for the production of these film sequences, gives us elements of definition relevant here: "The item number of Bombay cinema is a hybrid musical form marked by hypersexualized aesthetics. […] There is an assembling of effect in the item number and a measured investment in the trash aesthetics that it draws from the memory and materiality of B circuit films. The spectacle generated by the item draws on a pattern of design, special effects, and choreography identified with low genres." "This is a deliberate investment in the gaudy, the excessive and the loud. Item numbers borrow extensively from something which serious scholarship treats disdainfully – an animated taxidermy of the decorative as the deceptive, cosmetic, less politically valuable and far too pleasurable to be high art." It is interesting to note that the aesthetic commensalities between the circus and the world evoked by item dances are established enough in the minds of film viewers for item dances to now be shot in circus-like settings, as in the recent item dance featured in Sukumar's Telugu/multilingual blockbuster *Pushpa The Rise – Part 1* (2021). While the video for 'Oo Andwa' was shot in a "special set at Ramoji Film City," the tent in which it is taking place is a non-descript assemblage reminiscent of a circus with its ring, lighting and neons, back curtain and bright colors. There is no doubt that some of the professionals invested in the disappearance of the circus would deny this resemblance, since the circus is framed by them as a place morally above suspicion, or as family entertainment (in fact, somewhat similarly to the way this hit film, through its encompassment of item dances, also frame these racier sequences). (Source: "Pushpa: Samantha begins shooting for item song"

dimmed and oscillating colored lights, the young women who perform are dressed in orientalist, sheer costumes revealing their skin, and their movements are emphasized by the fire of the large candelabras they hold in their hands, with their feet and sometimes, with their mouths (Figure 29, right). They embellish the acrobatic sequences of their item – in which, as in the other version, the performer's body rolls and bends on the floor – by lasciviously drawing arabesques in the air with their legs and arms, and gyrating their bellies and chests in movements reminiscent of belly dancing. The female artist's choreographed presence in this version of the act not only foregrounds the prodigiousness of what the skills they demonstrate. It draws attention to the female form in a "moment of erotic contemplation," reminiscent, in that sense, of item dances (Nakassis and Weidman 2018). The use of candelabras and the emphasis on choreography limits the range of movement the artist goes through. The movement sequences in this version are indeed less

(*TeluguCinema.com*, November 29th, 2021. https://telugucinema.com/news/pushpa-samantha-begins-shooting-for-item-song)

complete, but the principle of contortion is strikingly enhanced by the sense of danger created by the myriad small flames of the candelabras.

Figure 29. "versions" of the boneless act. Left: Global Circus (Kanchanapuri TN, 2020); Center: Jumbo Circus (Thiruvananthapuram, KL, 2019); Right: Jumbo Circus (2019), presented as a second part of the "boneless item." The performer from the center photo can be seen assisting a second performer. My photographs.

The other version of the item involves such props in a minimal fashion. In this one, the performer wears a fitting and typically sequined leotard that foregrounds the athletic shape of her body. In many companies, the performer also wears white or colored knee-high socks, which are reminiscent – at least in the circus community – of the way children performers used to be dressed during shows (Fig. 28 and 29).[12] In this attire, the performer goes through a wider range of sequences, particularly various postures deriving from deep back bends, and standing splits (the 'face frame' seen in Figure 28, top left, 'the needle' featured at bottom left, etc). Towards the end of the item, a prop (a glass filled with water or a candle) is frequently introduced for a sequence or two, highlighting the

[12] Cf. Rimbault 2021: pp. 268-272.

precision and stable quality of the performer's movements (cf. Figure 27 and Figure 28 bottom right).

Audience members might not be able to perceive the gymnastic similarities between the two versions of the item, but due to the principle of juxtaposition regimenting the show, circus companies will only present one boneless act in a show – which can, on occasion, combine the two versions as segments of one same act (cf. Figure 29). In such instances, the two versions of the items are established as variations of a single act. Their aesthetic envelope, (perceived as a feature of the show and its composition, is deemed cosmetic by the performers themselves, highlighting the performer's focus on the act and not on how it gets framed or received. Most circus artists who perform the boneless act can perform it both ways, and must conform to the decision of the show manager as to which one is performed. This is just one example of the adaptiveness expected from Indian circus artists, who must align their performance with their superiors' intent to maximize the appeal of the circus show as a commodifiable experience.[13] The music, costumes, lighting arrangement of a standard act, sometimes even the names by which artists are introduced during the performance, are expected to conform to an aesthetic established by the company, when they are not simply dictated.

In January 2020, Circus Castle, a circus nestled in a magic-themed amusement park near Thiruvananthapuram, has opted for the gymnastic version of the boneless act (Figure 27). Adaya,

[13] This is different for foreign or top-ranking performers, who derive more agency out of being recruited for their act and thus have more control on the scenography, musical accompaniment, type of costume and props, stylistic innovation they feature in their performances of an item. It does bind them to one type of performance, typically more striking but also more physically and economically costly to perform. The higher status of these performers also means their items are not interchangeable with others, which, in practice, means that they are expected to perform in every performance the circus that has hired them is giving (by contrast with items which are more conventional, or which several circus artists in the company can perform).

who performs it, is a Bengali woman in her early twenties, currently temping for the Nepali star player of this show, Soniya, who has taken leave for a few months to celebrate her marriage. It took me a few days to get to know Adaya's name because it differed from the stage name she was given and frequently referred to by, *Athira*. 'People here [Malayalis] are more familiar with this name,' Monisha, the MC for this show, who likely rebaptized her, explains to me. Along with the name, Adaya had inherited the version of the act which was structured for her colleague: the music and lighting, the costumes used for the performance, the movement sequences and the props, had been cautiously decided by the manager of Circus Castle and arranged so as to offset any dissonance or irregularity the introduction of a new performer might have caused in the precisely timed show offered three to four times a day at the Park. Thus, Adaya was expected to stick to the gymnastic version of the boneless act, although, as she explained to me, she was competent performing boneless with candelabras as well.

Neither Adaya's boneless act, nor any other presented in other companies, ever seems to begin a circus show. The boneless act is best kept for a mid-show moment, and often occurs halfway or two thirds into the show. After appreciating the previous performance by commenting, in English, "That was an awesome performance," the female MC Monisha (standing on a theatrical balcony above the ring) marks a short pause to indicate the transition to the next item, before introducing the boneless act. Briefly referring to a Pavamana mantra in Sanskrit ("*tamaso mā jyotirgamaya*…", from darkness lead me to light) and glossing it into Malayalam ("Iruttil ninnu velicchatthilekku…") as an evocation of the "light inside of us" which is our drive in life, Monisha sets up a certain mystery for what is to come.

Pausing again, and shifting to the familiar tone of an MC once again, she erupts: "Next is the boneless act, so put your hands together – for Athira!" [14]

Polite applause ensues from a crowd composed (on most days) of families, schools students in their uniform and the occasional upper-middle class visitors who can afford the costly entrance to the theme park this circus is located in. As the claps die off, they merge with the first notes of the item's music. It is an arrangement derived from the "Principles of Lust," an ambient, new age experimental track released in 1991 by the German musical project Enigma. At the center of the ring, two show assistants (a middle-aged man who also performs juggling items in the show, and a middle-aged woman) have swiftly placed a large circular platform, upholstered in bright yellow satin. It reflects the red filtered light cast over the ring for Adaya's performance.

Adaya jogs into the ring, stops near the platform, smiles and greets the spectators by waving her hand, seamlessly shifting her orientation so as to address her entire audience, seated so as to surround three fourths of the ring. She is wearing a sequined, night blue leotard with long sleeves on top of black leggings, and black ankle socks. The leggings and the socks dress her leg with a gymnastic seriousness: by no semantic stretch could her covering costume be interpreted in isolation as immodest by local standards, which perhaps reflects the theme park's ideological orientation to "rehabilitate"[15] struggling

[14] Monisha's performance as an MC is itself an artefact of the fact this circus is situated in a magic-themed park, with cultivates a strong emphasis on the connections between performance-based entertainment and motivational speaking. In a more conventional circus setting, such references to mantras, and such symbolic framing for items (in which the boneless act might be understood as suggesting how humans face adversity and manifest their drive) would be very unlikely. Note also that this is the only circus troupe in India in which the role of MC was taken up by a woman (she is also, administratively, the manager of the circus unit which responds to the park's administrators).

[15] The park in which the circus is set, its website explains, aims to "be a permanent Rehabilitation hub for the craving Indian street performers which include Indian street magicians, circus artists and other folk artists. This would be a Platform for the neglected Indian street performers to earn their livelihood which include the food, education and other necessities of family members, something which the benevolent stage magician can at best preserve in his conservatory of street entertainment." Accessed on http://magicplanet.in/, "Our Mission and Vision" (accessed on April 27th 2022).

performers such as circus artists. Adaya's hair is gathered into a bun, and she is wearing a simple and visible stage makeup, red lipstick and thick lines of kajal and eyeliner (she applies it before every show, and keeps her large collection of cosmetics in a small case in the women's changing room). The lighting makes her age hard to assess, but the tight costume enhances the curves and fitness of a young adult body. At the entrance of the ring, in semi-obscurity and not attracting much attention, the female assistant has stayed on, standing by the curtain that delineates the last quadrant of the ring. Some circus equipment is placed behind her, ready to be brought into the ring. She is closely watching what goes on in the ring, surveilling Adaya's movements and ready to react to the cues they give her to intervene and to ensure that the unfolding of the act is seamless.

As the beat of the music picks up, Adaya comes near the platform, leans her torso and arms into the surface comfortably, and uses it as a support to – in a split second - flip her back and legs, with an unexpected smoothness and ease, into the air. Suddenly, her body appears bent into a startling fold, with her legs arched over her reclining torso and on the pedestal, framing her head which has remained in its initial position (figure 30, line 1). Without moving her feet from where they have landed, she swiftly unwires her torso, emerging into a standing pose, from which she smiles and waves her arms gracefully at the audience, once again.

This sequence inaugurates the boneless act. On this day, Adaya goes through four different sequences, which I attempt to visually summarize in Figure 30, because, as performance scholar Karl Toepfer notes, "female contortionism enormously strains the power of language to describe and explain what is seen" (1999:120): (1) various deep back-bends (figure 30, line 2), (2) an exhibition of front and side splits (figure 30, line 3), with a deep back bend over her front leg and backwards

toward her back leg, (3) a sequence in which, through a back bending "bridge" position and a lateral rotation she goes to the floor and back up while balancing a glass filled with water on her forehead (figure 7, line 4), and (4) standing splits, in which she pulls her right foot up to her ear, and behind her head (figure 30, line 5).

Adaya does not perform all these segments with the same ease. She lingers in her deep and spectacular back bend figures, evincing her deep bodily socialization in the circus, where these figures have a particular currency for being recognizably circus-like and are thus practiced intensely and mastered exceptionally well by trainees who join as children. While focused on the coordination of her movements, her breathing, and the rhythm of the music which she lightly marks by tipping her toes back and forth when holding a back bend, she wears a distant smile on her face, not seeking for eye contact. When doing the splits, she becomes more engaged with her surrounding, smiling and seamlessly orienting her gaze and smile in different directions, so as to make eye-contact with

the seated spectators. The third segment of her performance focuses her attention back inward and

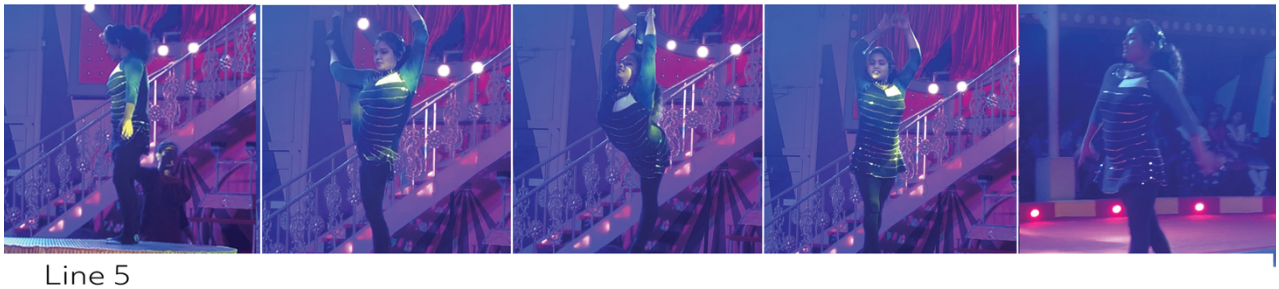
Figure 30 Adaya's performance of the boneless act (film grabs from video taken by me with permission, January 2020).

Line 1

Line 2

Line 3

Line 4



Line 5

onto the glass she balances on her forehead; when it finishes, she takes the time to appreciate the mild applause and make eye contact with spectators in a standing pose, much like a gymnast after finishing a succession of movements. She seems least comfortable in her standing splits, in which she does not linger, so that the strain it causes her remains hardly noticeable. She finishes her performance by stepping down from the platform and saluting the audience, once again, angling her body in different directions to address the entire audience. She then swiftly runs towards the curtain which separates the ring from the backstage and disappears in the area invisible from the performance room. The boneless item performance lasts approximately 2:30 minutes.

Embodied Items

For Adaya, this performance is one among many, and the most tangible impression it gives her, is the daily re-activation of her chronic, lingering, back pain. After the show, she lies back on the floor in the room that serves as a loggia for the female performers, resting her back, browsing her phone, or quietly chatting with her colleagues. When there is time before the next show, she sometimes goes back into the ring when the room has become empty and ordinary lights have been turned on, to do a few stretches. Like many female performers who present the same item more than twice a day, she rarely practices between performances.[16]

Before temping for Soniya at Circus Castle, Adaya used to perform in another circus company in Karnataka, and earlier in West Bengal, where her family lives. Performers of her generation would

[16] Men are generally keener to train and seek out remuneration for newly acquired or updated items. In the period during which I did my fieldwork, most women seem to perform items they had learned at a young age, and there were less opportunities for them to modify their practice within company. They were more frequently slotted according to their ability to perform an indispensable and staple Indian circus item.

have begun performing a few years before the 2011 ban on circus child labor came into effect in India.[17] From what the ethnographic situation in Kerala suggests, the effects of this ban, albeit a severe blow to the reputation of the circus industry, appeared to have been primarily cosmetic in the first decade of its implementation: because the economy of the circus is vastly informal, it mostly helped ensure that performers would not *appear* to be underage, nor provide information that they were. It is not unlikely that in parts of India removed from the fight over the propriety of the circus animated by the demographic significance of the circus in Malabar, the ban would have had a limited impact on the presence of underage trainees. The ban was seemingly much more authoritative in the by-then economically more favorable context of the Kerala circus – in which children of circus professionals were in a good position to turn away from the profession, and where few others would have wanted to join. The ban thus accelerated the recruitment of performers from Northern states in Kerala-based circuses: Adaya and Soniya, for instance, both in their early 20s when I met them, had been performing continuously in various companies since a young age.

This has had significant implications for the circus shows, all of them strengthening for the Malayali circus community the sense of its disappearance. Children were formerly frequent and appreciated item performers. After the ban, items formerly performed by children, such as the boneless act, began "ageing" along with their performers gradually and naturally losing their youthful fitness. This irreversibly transformed the aesthetic and technical features of the performances. As Sanja, a US-

[17] "On 18 April 2011, the Supreme Court of India banned the employment and performance of children and adolescents below 18 years in Indian circus. […] Under Article 21A, the Supreme Court ordered the government of India to issue suitable notifications prohibiting the employment of children in circuses within two months from the date of the judgment. The Bench also directed the government to conduct simultaneous raids in all circus companies to liberate children and check if their fundamental rights were being violated. It was on the petition filed by Kailash Satyarthi's non-governmental organization Bachpan Bachao Andolan (Save the Children Movement) that the Supreme Court ban came into force." (Nisha P.R., 2017: pp. 243-244)

based and adult-trained contortionist I interviewed to gather explicit descriptions of the subjective and physical experience of training in items, explains: "the age when you start definitely makes a difference. Notably, one can 'mold' a still developing body more, specifically in terms of lengthening ligaments (or so is my understanding, as that allows for the more extreme kinds of flexibility). Further, the strength to body weight ratio is different in children, and they are overall smaller, so various moves are just a lot easier. For example, when I was a kid, I could easily do a "stalder press" (pressing into a handstand from sitting), but I still cannot do it now even though I've been working on it for a while." Old photographs preserved by circus professionals and included in newspaper and advertisement montages (Figure 31) confirm that some boneless sequences performed by children are no longer performed, with a range of sequences more narrowly focused around the figures described based on Athira's performance.

Figure 31. Elements of the boneless act not currently performed in Indian Circus.

Dates unknown, respectively approx. 1955, 1980 and 2000. Source from left to right: *Mathrubhumi Weekly*; *Circus Worker* (archived by Circus Employees Union) and circus owner's personal archive, Thalassery. Photographed and reproduced with permission.

The removal of children from the performance also had transformative effects on the sociality of the circus compound, and the ways the conceptualization of the circus company as a training site

informed the performance sold to spectators. "The Amazing Plastic Lady" (Mark and Bell 1995) a short documentary directed by Mary Ellen Mark, gives us an idea of the Boneless Act's aesthetic in the 1980s and early 1990s and of the way in which the boneless act was then included in Jumbo Circus, a large Kerala-based circus. The short film juxtaposes footages of show performances in which Pinky, a ten-year-old trainee, performs the boneless act, and training sequences with circus children, supervised by circus trainer Pratab Singh. The training is intensive, as the trainer explains in the documentary: "Pinky exercises every day. One hundred press-ups, but she always tried to do 200 on her own. I don't tell her to do 200. 100 push-ups, 100 *koti* – [i.e.] handstand. Bringing the leg to the ground and taking it up." That training routinely took up most of the waking hours of the day not mobilized by public performance is also confirmed by interlocutors I spoke to who trained as circus artists before the 2011 ban. In the documentary, the trainer insists on the physical, but also moral, malleability of the trainees: "These children are made from whatever feeling I had in my heart. It's like a sculpture. The kind of dedication he [a potter] makes a sculpture with. But see that potter gets good clay. I don't even get good clay! And I have to make a beautiful pot out of that. It's not the fault of the children. It's just the kind of gutters they come from." On another occasion, mobilizing metaphors of malleability once more, he elaborates on the guru-śiṣya structure of his mentorship with trainees by assimilating Pinky, the plastic girl, to wax: "I'm not just teaching them about being good artists but I'm telling them about the way of life. […] What to do, morality. In our old culture you respected the guru, he was next to god. […] Pinky's just a child, she's like wax, she's not even fully formed as yet. If a little bit of flame comes, or just the heat of the flame… the wax will melt, right? […] We've given them a certain discipline in their lives, about bathing, about practice, about waking up and praying. […] Then god will lead you to the very top."

Figure 32. Company girls on an outing (taken in 1960s, artist's personal collection, photographed with permission, Palakkad 2019)

The association of the circus with pedagogy, physical culture, and discipline that the presence of children allowed Malayali circus owners to cultivate provided a moral backing to the glamorous and cosmopolitan aesthetic of the circus show. The publicizing of the pristine reputation of the company girls, the young women trained in the circus, dressed in coordinated circus apparel regardless of their age (figure 32) could be presented as alluring on account of their fitness, their discipline, and the gracefulness and innocence inculcated by the demanding lifestyle of a trainee. It was a moral assertion which was spectacularly denied to the community when various NGOs, and ultimately the state, ruled out the circus as a morally sound place of training for children.

The reframing that led to the ban focused visually on circulating video excerpts of certain acts deemed sexualizing for children. One chapter of the association Save the Children (existing in India as *Bachpan Bachao Andolan*), for instance, funded the documentary *Starkiss: The Indian Circus Girls* (2003) which dramatized the lives of circus girls around the visually striking act known in India as buccal trapeze, publicized at the time as *starkiss*.[18] In performances of this item, groups of young girls are lifted at some height and made to gyrate from a mouth piece attached to a wire or to another girl on a trapeze also holding a mouth piece. Like contortion items, it is an item which incites a mimetic reaction of pain and unease in many spectators, which was successfully presented as hypersexual by

[18] *Starkiss* (2002, 77 minutes), directed by Chris Relleke and Jascha de Wilde, screened at IFFR 2003.

detractors of the circus. It is interesting to note that the Boneless Act, although it also involved underage women, was not problematized to the same extent, and this is perhaps why it is today more widely and extensively performed than buccal trapeze items.[19]

The problematization of items performed by young women following the ban was a blow for circus professionals transformative at all the scales that structure the circus as a cultural form. The ban not only curtailed the concrete possibilities of an item's transmission by removing underage trainees from the circus, or at least their public performances. It explicitly reframed items formerly framed as acrobatic, or gymnastic, and primarily performed by young women trained in the circus, to interpretation, because of the various circulating narratives now articulating their performances as sexualized and victimizing. As the pre-ban group of female trainees trained as company girls in items such as buccal trapeze, trapeze, acrobatics, the boneless act progressively came of age, items were also transformed by the visual change of having performers with adult bodies, instead of prepubescent ones. As performance scholar Karl Toepfer writes, reflecting on Mark and Bell's documentary, in an article which tracks the association of contortionism and sexual fantasy, "what separates girl contortionism from woman contortionism is the intense power of the girl body to equate this voluptuousness with the expression of innocence […]. It seems that in all cultures, it is difficult for spectators of women contortionists to associate the voluptuousness of their poses with the embodiment of innocence; a woman couldn't contort herself "like that" without being aware of the rich ambiguity of desire and self-perception she creates"(1999: 111). While the universalizing assumptions of this argument are debatable, the case of the Indian boneless act suggests that this

[19] Nisha P.R. notes that: "Items such as the 'highwire', 'boneless', 'seesaw acrobat', 'bamboo pole', and 'china plate' are almost exclusively performed by child performers. This is because circus acrobatics demand absolute balancing of the body and a child's body could master the skill easier and better." (2019: 246)

difference in status between girl and woman bodies is indeed perceived, with some amount of discomfort and awkwardness, by circus spectators in India.

The socio-historical conditions in which the circus has evolved in Kerala, then, has had significance on why the circus' form today gets seen as an insufficient repository of circus-ness. That the boneless act can be (re)framed as an item which unsettles the light, alluring, but also wholesome and athletic, aesthetic envelope of circus-ness (as the scarce applause can be taken to signal) by being sexy or lascivious is an artefact of not only the ban on children in circuses but also the fact that the circus in Kerala has had to contend with its depiction as a place of moral turpitude since the ban. The disappearance of the circus conjures up the possibility that whichever item elicits moral claims or threatens to venture into the field of moral evaluation can be in turn evaluated as an artefact of the circus' decline. The boneless act is no longer as skillful or prodigious as it used to be because it threatens to upset the moral demands placed on the circus today as a dispensation. And that such moral demands intersect with the lives of retired circus professionals, who are now living sedentary lives with families as respectable former artists, perhaps only makes the nostalgic recollection of a circus that is disappearing more reasonable.

Matured Items

Adaya's performance does not generate applause from the spectators who come to see it. Almost each time I am struck by what I perceive as a sense of malaise in the audience. The song to which the item is performed, in this company as in various others, "Principles of Lust"[20] is partly

[20] The musical arrangement builds on the version of this song found in MCMXC a.D. (Enigma, 1990) entitled: "Principles of Lust: Sadeness/ Find Love/Sadeness (Reprise)" (distributed by Polydor)

responsible for the audience's unease. From its first measures, it combines tracks featuring choir voices evocative of Catholic Church music and a bamboo flute reminiscent of 'Eastern' meditation music. Layered over a drumkit track and drony keyboards, I can imagine the arrangement becoming evocative of B-series horror and 1990s erotica for someone, as it did for me. What a spectator could have dismissed as a passing impression is quickly supported by the addition of another voice track in which a female voice playfully whispers lines about the "principles of lust," calls on the Marquis de Sade in French in a daring "breathy" voice (Weidman 2012), or unequivocally pants in pleasure. It is not necessary to understand French or English to perceive the sensual, or rather sexual, atmosphere invoked by this musical arrangement, and its presence throughout Adaya's act dimly but persistently demands that the spectator harmonize the gymnastic quality of Adaya's movements and attire with the adult and daring ambiance produced by the sounds, and the dimmed red and pink lights passing over Adaya's body. This framing suggests that the audience constitute Adaya's body as the sensual center of the act – a demand all the more unsettling given the unease contortionism often mimetically inspires in viewers. Adaya's deep, seemingly uncomfortable and yet inexplicably smooth back-bends, the fact that the item is mostly executed while lying and rolling on the floor, the positions that bring her face unusually close to her crotch, when combined with an unmistakably evocative tune, could all potentially confront adult viewers – or their imagination of how other viewers think! – with images and thoughts better suited to the privacy of a bedroom or the artificial solitude created by the darkness of a cinema hall. One could then speculate that the malaise perceived in the audience (always reinforced as a collective by contrast to the otherness of the circus show and its artists) is likely an effect of these associations, which the generally family-oriented quality of this circus, primarily attended by groups of relatives on the weekends and schools on the weekdays, does not prepare the spectators for.

In spite of the unsettling atmosphere it produces and the lukewarm reaction it elicits from circus spectators, the dramatization and substantiation of the sexiness widely ascribed to a woman body's boneless performance (through the choice of this musical accompaniment, and sometimes through the use of candelabras), evidences the potential for constant change of the aesthetic envelope of the circus show – immersed as it may be, in Kerala, in discourses anticipating the circus' disappearance. The fact that, without exception, the "boneless act" performed by South Asian performers that I have seen (6 items from 6 different companies)[21] between 2018 and 2020 obliquely emphasized the sensual quality of their movement and performance (several of them by synching the boneless performance to a remix of the 1991 track "The Principles of Lust") suggests that active professionals (the circus artists, but also the owners and managers who define the aesthetic envelope of their show) intend to coordinate, not tone down, the 'unavoidable' sexiness of the present-day boneless act within the economy of the show as a whole, so that it does not entail a loss of circus-ness. As the sum of recollection of the circus can confirm, and as their ubiquitous feature of female performers in raffish sequined brassieres and mini shorts evidences, sensuous and subversive elements have always been a part of the circus show. The requirement of circus-ness is essentially that this sensuousness be balanced by other qualities considered prerequisite to the show, such as prodigiousness, physical danger, or glamour (much like the aesthetic equation of a masala movie authorizes the expression of some amount of desire and sexual innuendo).

Current professionals' success in maintaining the perceived circus-ness of the show is dependent on the process by with spectators and past performers construe collectively, with every show, *what the*

[21] Rambo Circus (remote: September 26th), Grand Circus; Jumbo Circus; Great Bombay Circus; Circus Castle; Geo Circus.

circus is (as a genre of performance defined primarily by the memory of performances seen), and therefore always dependent on the situation and the perspective taken by its publics. The relative indifference of active performers with regards to the mild reception of the boneless act – regardless, it is featured in the show, and it goes on - suggests that from their perspective, the discomfort of the spectators might have a role to play in this aesthetic economy. Meanwhile, the interpretation of the present-day circus as vulgar, as not what it used to be, by Malayali spectators and by the Kerala-based retired circus community, mainly betrays the perspectival quality of these views, and the harnessing of taste to a locally meaningful arc of circus disappearance. I analyze this arc, and the narratives that substantiate it, in the next chapter.

Chapter 4. The Malabari Disappearance of the Indian Circus

> *"During the early years of [the 1960s] there were fifty-two standard circuses in India. Forty-two out of fifty-two were under the ownership of Malayalis. More than ninety per cent of artists and managers were also Malayalis. So, the Indian Circus industry [was] dominated by Malayalis, completely. This period may [be remembered] as the golden era of [the] history of Indian circus industry."*
>
> Sreedharan Champad, *An Album of the Indian Big Tops (History of Indian Circus)* (2013:63)[1]

There are only a handful of owners from Northern Kerala currently running circus businesses. There were once more proprietors and managers originating from Malabar in this industry, as the epigraph recalls.[2] But the group of Malayali men occupying the higher ranks of the profession (many of them born in affluent Nair families of the area)[3] seems to continuously become smaller, following the earlier withdrawal of Thalassery-born circus trainees, who, at one point, constituted a majority of

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[1] Many of the untranslated citations throughout this chapter contain minor grammatical errors and non-standard syntax. As most of these inaccuracies do not obscure the meaning of the texts cited, I will either be quoting them verbatim or adapt my citations with brackets. Many of the writings that have attempted to tackle the history of the Indian circus are authored by non-professional historians and it is impressive and unusual that several of them are published in English (and informative of course, of what the underpinnings of legitimate historical claims are made of for these writers and their imagined readers). As must be clear to anyone working in South Asia, the confident use of academic and even standard English is a privilege, and for the sake of my argument correcting the minor oddities in these valuable sources would be uncalled for.

[2] Several articles of the widely ready Malayalam daily and weekly Mathrubhumi published in the 1950s and 1960s signal that this dominance of Malayalis in the industry was deemed uncontestable at least according to Malayalis. Cf. for instance: "Keralatthile sarkkass kala Delhiyogatthinde abhinanthanam" (April 6th, 1954, *Delhi's appreciation for the circus arts of Kerala*); "Sarkkass – Mattoru Malayalikkala" (December 11th, 1955, *The Circus – another Malayali art*); "Malayali abhiaasikal Bombay nagaratthil" (November 17th, 1957, *Malayali exercises in the city of Bombay*).

[3] The Nayar or Nair community is a high-caste, savarna group of Kerala. Some of the cultural, socio-cultural and occupational features by which this group differentiates itself and is recognizable by others differs in the South and the North of Kerala. Their lifestyle in Southern Kerala (Nair families' relationship to ancestral property, local temples, vegetarianism) is arguably closer to the Tamil Brahmin community, but their outlook on professional life is historically different, as Nairs have not traditionally occupied priestly functions (Nairs have been considered a Ksatriya group of castes). Osella and Osella's *Social Mobility in Kerala* (2000, cf. for instance the Introduction), which renders the social dynamics of a South Kerala town (in the 1990s) from a perspective situated primarily in the lower-caste, lower-middle class and demographically dominant Izheva community, helps to grasp caste and class dynamics also operative in the diverse community of circus professionals.

the human performers in India's circuses. The progressive retirement of Malayali professionals and the various instances of liquidation, by local owners, of their circus companies, contribute to the sedimentation of ("of the taluk,[4] or township), of Thalassery, in Kannur district, as a community of circus veterans, in which all that the Indian circus is and has been frequently conjured up, imagined and talked about.

Ranjit, a man in his early sixties once constantly on the road with his family's circus the Madras Circus company, currently lives in Thalassery town, and continues to busy himself with the daily affairs of the business. Ranjit once worked as a manager for his family's circus. Consumed by this work, he had never married, and continues to be widely regarded and praised by circus artists as someone truly concerned with the art and the state of all involved with it. Madras Circus, one of the most affluent and established circuses in India performs regularly in large Indian cities, such as Mumbai, Bangalore, Chennai, Thiruvananthapuram. In 2020, before the first outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic temporarily interrupted travel (resumed by March 2022), moving between these large cities was considered a prestigious itinerary for a tented circus company. But for families like Ranjit's, who have been in the circus for two generations, these itineraries seem limited compared to the distances they could recall traveling in the past.

[4] A sub-district administrative demographic unit in India. A summary of imbricated scales of administrative divisions applicable to a small place such as Kadiroor, where some of the interlocutors for this chapters are from (and most places in India) might go like this: Central Authority (Country, India)>State (Kerala) >Division> District (Kannur) >Subdistricts (Thalassery, *Taluks* feature here)>Block.

Inspired by my interest in talking circus, Ranjit once laid out a fascinating account of the circus' importance to the region in particular and to India more broadly.[5] Spinning a tale incorporating matters as diverse as a folklorist's account of Adivasi groups' ancestral proximity and knowledge of nature in Kerala, evidence of corruption in the Supreme Court, the fiscal regimes applying to foreign circus performers in India and his being in the good books of the local magnates of the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS), a nationally influential right-wing Hindu-nationalist paramilitary organization, he conjured up a social and economic tableau in which the circus was brought to the fore as a place of ever-ongoing politicking, a perpetually threatened yet well-established entity in the current affairs of the state of Kerala and of India at large. Ranjit, meanwhile, emerged in this state of affairs as a powerful man of the shadows. Mentioning by name – off the record, he insisted – the numerous political connections (of all political stripes) he was thinking of mobilizing to improve the situation of his business, he also emphasized that this or that effort would be his last, "before he retires."

As our meeting drew to a close, he pulled out his phone from his pocket to show me a text message which, he told me, he had just received that morning. Vijay, a circus manager from a neighboring town belonging to another circus family, begged him to travel to the Madras Circus' camp at once, to help out Ranjit's brother with an issue that had come up. If you don't go, a second message poignantly added, the circus may be no more next time you visit. He let me express my surprise at the amicable tone which the sense of imminent demise induced between these two well-known competitors in the business of circus. Shrugging, he evoked his retirement, seemingly flustered, and perhaps vaguely satisfied that he had successfully demonstrated that the circus would likely retire

[5] "Notes on my visit to Ranjit" (interlocutor's name has been changed), Thalassery, June 18th, 2019.

soon after him. As he stood and bid me goodbye, he repeated a second time the advice he had for me: don't make the same mistake that I did investing my life in the circus business! Just do this research as a hobby and join the civil service![6]

Talking with circus professionals elicits many rationalizations of why it is no longer worth associating with the circus in any way, coming from people who still seem deeply invested in the business and the imaginary of the circus. That the tented circus is about to disappear, that all circus show will soon cease entirely, is a widely circulated conviction. The circus owners, their acquaintances among local historians, and once-famed artists, who were the first to offer themselves as spokespersons for the circus during the ethnographic research I conducted, were perhaps the most assertive exponents of this idea. But it circulates as a leitmotif across all scales of circus activities.[7] If retired artists and workers do not always voice this discourse of decline explicitly, the

[6] "Joining the civil service" is a parents-approved career aspiration for youths of less than 30 in India. In practice, the expression refers to the preparation of intensely competitive exams conducted by the Union Public Service Commission (most often referred to by its acronym, UPSC), which prepare candidates for entrance into Higher Civil Service careers (tied to the central administration). Candidates often prepare simultaneously other civil service exams, including those, slightly less coveted, conferring access to careers in state-level public services. Jobs in the Civil Service grant those who hold them outstanding income, benefits and prestige compared to most other jobs in India. While Ranjit would have been aware that as a French person doing a PhD in the US, I wouldn't be eligible to prepare these exams restricted to Indian citizens, his comment was motivated by the fact I had told him earlier that I had received my BA training but then left a French Institut d'Etudes Politiques, which, at that time, had a postgraduate track preparing entrance exams to the Ecole Nationale de l'Administration (recently shut down and replaced, in 2021, by the Institut national du Service Public – eliciting proverbial "plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose" reactions from French media observers), truly a structural equivalent, in terms of prestige and parental pride, to the symbolic role of UPSC for Indian middle-class and upper-middle class families.

[7] In 2021, as I write this chapter, the circus semiotician Paul Bouissac has just published a new work on the circus entitled *The End of the Circus*. In its opening section (2021:1), Bouissac sets the tone dramatically: "We have, indeed, reached a point when we may ask: can the circus in its primal nomadic form that welds humans and animals in a common destiny survive the onslaught of worldwide social and cultural transformations, and the toxic political atmosphere created by its detractors?"

fact that circus today is unlike "what it used to be,"[8] and their concerted decisions not to send their children to circus businesses, signals their subscription to the view that the circus is not a viable career.

This chapter unpacks the disappearance of the circus as it is voiced, specifically, in the Malayalam-speaking community formed by a section of circus professionals living or having family around Thalassery, in the Northern district of Kannur in Kerala. The retired circus artists and relatives of circus professionals settled in this region are those among my interlocutors most concerned by the impression that the circus is disappearing, from the comparisons I could make for instance with the active circus professionals mentioned in previous chapters, retired performers settled outside of Kerala, and potential spectators settled elsewhere in Kerala. As I show here, this is because the disappearance of the circus is an empirical fact indissociable from the longstanding organization and the daily life of a community of people, in the Northern districts of Kerala, united by the shared experience of life in circus companies, the comparable biographical trajectories this career gives rise to, and the continuing participation and regional leadership of Malayalis in this show-business over several generations. Their presence as an identified social group of the area, and their continual re-animation of collectively shared recollections of the circus days of the past (in events gathering the community, through the occasional series of interviews collected by a journalist or an ethnographer, by the presence of institutions representing members of the profession) has acquired a local durability which has also inflected the phenomenon and temporality of the circus' disappearance in Thalassery and more broadly. Disappearance, has in fact, I argue, become part of what binds this

[8] For an example of how artists animate the disappearance or the decline of the circus through less explicit assertions, cf. a short conversation description featured in my piece *Childhood Memories of Circus Children* (Rimbault 2021:268.)

community, in ways comparable, for instance, to how a sense of decline helped elicit the features and animation of a Parsi identity in Bombay in the late 1980s in Tanya Luhrmann's monograph, *The Good Parsi* (1996). By focusing here on a collective of people which is frequently made to act as spokesperson for what the circus is, I seek to bring out the ways their sense of an impending disappearance of the circus underpins a dispensation[9] in which the Indian circus – as a medium, a profession, and a career – currently exists, and in which those who actualize this social and cultural form (both this group of spokespeople, but also crucially, the less vocal group of professionals – managers currently traveling, young and middle-aged circus artists – who currently make the circuses run) make sense of the ways it shapes or has shaped their lives. Looking at the circus as it gets constituted as a Thalassery-based cultural form makes it possible to trace the ways in which reiterated disappearance discourses sediment and pre-structure the ever-emergent form(s) taken by the Indian circus, and thereby, the way involvement with it can shape the lives of a person and their family, over generations.

The circus' disappearance is a persistent phenomenon, neither new nor quick. It is easy to point to signs that the death of the circus seemed impending to both its proponents and its detractors in the 1990s, at the time when animals were banned from performing in India (Chapter 2); or in the 1970s, when a project to establish a circus academy in Thalassery failed. But also, in the 1960s, when the newly formed Indian Circus Federation deplored the lack of support of state and central

[9] I follow William Mazzarella in using this term because it usefully "suggests an ordering of things that appears to have been handed down from above – as in 'a system of revealed commands and promises regulating human affairs'" (2009:6-7) while simultaneously allowing for a consideration of the authority vested into the social order the term evokes. While this chapter is not exactly an attempt to establish that the circus' disappearance is a "performative dispensation," this chapter can be read as an attempt to track the ways seemingly stable aesthetic, political and social orders evolve over time in relation to temporally and generationally situated conditions of possibility.

governments for the "physical culture" the circus would bolster. Both for crowds unfamiliar with the distinctions across circus companies, and for those entirely immersed in working within one company, the sense of the imminent demise of the circus as a profession has come to constitute a readily available explanation for any difficulty faced by circus companies. For instance, the economic difficulties of a circus company can be experienced as a result of the always impending obsolescence of the circus.

While the thinning crowds at circus shows may indeed cause companies to become increasingly unviable, my survey of archival, filmic, and interview materials suggests that the itinerant big top circus started disappearing around the same time that it became the canonical institution recognized as the "circus" in India, in the first two decades following India's independence. In other words, and as I have also argued in Chapter 3 albeit with a focus on the circus-ness of current circus shows, the circus' disappearance can be seen as a durable and immanent feature of its delineated "appearance" as an Indian form of spectacle and entertainment. It is not a coincidence that this period of recognition, diffusely located by my interlocutors sometime between 1950 and 1965, is considered the "golden age" of the circus by the Thalassery-based professionals I worked with: as the epigraph asserts, this coincided with the time when this region dominated the industry. What is more surprising is that the regional dominance of Malayali families from Kannur district over the circus industry was never threatened by other circus professionals since it came to the fore, and that while being a marginal phenomenon, circus businesses (with Malayali owners in positions of leadership) have continuously existed, updated their shows, and modernized their infrastructures since then. Why, then, is the circus so frequently produced locally in an elegiac modality? For whom and for what does it keep on disappearing?

One of the reasons behind the repeated iterations of the circus' disappearance is the traction these narratives of loss generate. News media often pitch content on circus-related subjects through tropes and genres consistent with attention-grabbing and alarmist headlines: "Indian Circus Staring at Bleak Future in the Shadow of Pandemic" (*Go News India*, May 22nd, 2020), "The Endangered Performance Art of the Circus" (*The Wire*, December 4th, 2021); "Circus Industry Readies for Final Curtain Call" (*Deccan Herald*, May 14th, 2020), ""The Glitter is Gone: You Are Witnessing a Dying Art"" (*Mathrubhumi*, December 19th, 2019). The impression that the circus is dying is bolstered by conventionalized visuals and puns: clowns who must keep on smiling, descriptions and visuals of muddy campgrounds and shows performed for empty plastic chairs, documentary voiceovers and journalistic asides elaborating on the difficulties of a profession in which the show must *always* go on. Such content, widely picked up and referred within a group of artistic professionals attentive to the rare instances of external recognition they elicit, goes on to be discussed by such artists, preserved in digital and paper albums, and cited by them as evidence of the disappearance of the circus at public events and occasions in Thalassery. It informs the ways Malayali circus artists speak among themselves and, more frequently, are spoken to in contexts such as union meetings, discussions related to the existing Kerala government pension scheme for circus artists, the specialized publications of the industry, and even potential recruiters for active circus artists.[10] If it is a widely circulating discourse outside the circus *about* the circus, such discourse also is voiced within the circus itself as an internal refraction of its ever-disappearing public image.

[10] In January 2020, I conducted participant observation at Circus Castle, a small circus attraction embedded in the successful Magic Planet magic-themed park of celebrated Malayali magician Gopinath Muthukad. A part of the park's mission is specifically framed in terms of rehabilitation of disappearing street art forms, and the same ideology featured in the ways various professionals in management positions in the park spoke about the circus when they interviewed me prior to granting me access to the site.

The modality of disappearance in which the circus is spoken about presents another compelling quality that can account for its success. Metaphorizing the circus as a living entity, a rhetorical move comparable to the ways organicist metaphors of indigenous languages and cultures going extinct are deployed (cf. for instance, Nettle and Romaine 2000 or the volume edited by Sodikoff 2012 for a wide survey and analysis of this literature), grants those who think the circus through this metaphor a certain detachment in relation to the ineluctable fate of everything that lives. Organicist metaphors personifying cultural forms are so common they are hardly noticeable as linguists studying "endangered" languages and revitalization projects remind us (Errington 2003). And yet, such metaphors also implicitly solidify the definitions of "authentic" cultural forms and naturalize an ineluctable sense of their fate; if the circus is dying it is because it still *lives*. In our case, this opens up a (problem) space of possibility for circus professionals and artists, and for other cultural actors with investments in aspects of the circus' thus-fixed identity. This space enables the adoption of a stance of observation and detachment vis a vis what appears as ineluctable. Also, by countering alternative readings of developments in the circus industry – for instance, that what the circus is might be changing, or that circus practices are becoming more scattered across other constituted cultural forms, and setting the terms for an intervention (save the circus as it is, or let it vanish, i.e. let it *keep vanishing*), discourses on disappearance open a discretionary space for thinking and arguing about cultural forms. For most individuals, removed from the political strategizing of owners such as Ranjit, the announced disappearance of the circus does not suggest the possibility of an intervention. Instead, it constitutes a subjective space in which one can dwell, remember, and further reflect and argue over what the circus is, was, or would have been.

In *Discourses of the Vanishing*, Marilyn Ivy notes the particular appeal in Japan of the theme of "[v]anishing, which (dis)embodies in its gerund form the movement of something passing away, gone but not quite, suspended between presence and absence, located at a point that both is and is not here in the repetitive process of absenting."[11] The remembering practices of the Malabari circus community, and the wider perceptions of the circus circulate across other media, also evoke the compelling quality of a gerundial temporality. Disappearing in its gerund form, gives shapes to the contemporary forms of the circus. It does so, first and foremost, figuratively. Until something *actually* ceases to exist – and crucially here, it is much easier to attest to the possibility of such an ending for living beings than it is for socially-constituted cultural forms – disappearance is a metaphor of visuality. It is situated relative to a spectator, by definition: it presupposes a viewer's perspective, and the way the metaphor "works" reveals something about the viewers and the worlds they inhabit, for our purpose here, something of their social vantage point in relation to the object. More than the attested death of an entity, disappearance implies not being able to see it, telling something about the vantage point of those who see or cannot see it. Seeing the circus *as* a disappearing form (as a form that one might soon no longer be able to see), in other words, not only opens up a space of sociality and discourse, a space of memory and remembrance, and not only opens up the space of the circus itself—it opens up such spaces *in a particular way*, for a particular subject (perspective), and serves as a sign of and *for that subjectivity*.

Tellingly, the discourse on the circus' disappearance is minimally animated by performers under thirty, company owners who recently acquired a company (who might, through their control of the

[11] The vanishing, she argues, "can only be tracked through the poetics of phantasm, through attentiveness to the politics of displacement, deferral, and originary repetition" (1996: 20) by which an originary event can only emerge as an event across a relay of temporal deferral.

aesthetic envelope of a circus show, nonetheless reproduce perceived signs of the circus' disappearance, as I have shown in chapter 3), artists performing in South India coming from foreign countries or North Indian states. It is primarily relayed by people who are close to retirement, people considering a professional reconversion, company-owning families with a long experience in the industry who have secured other careers for their children. In other words, by people for whom the death of the circus, were it to happen soon, would not be entirely inauspicious. The disappearance of the circus, in other words, is linked to the life course—and horizons of expectation, as they open or close—of those would animate it as impending. The circus's disappearance becomes an increasingly lively subjective structure for Malayali professionals as they detach from the present of the industry. Disappearance is substantiated, shored up, and evidenced by a rigid historical account of what the circus was, is, and most importantly, should be. These accounts are modeled implicitly after features of the circus at the time when this community was more active in the industry, the descriptive and the prescriptive merging together to produce the circus as a medium–what the circus 'is' is what it 'should be.'

There are many social dimensions to the tale, mnemonic space, and world, of the circus' disappearance. This disappearance is not a homogeneously salient phenomenon. The circus is a profession in which careers are short (especially for women), and as a result, the circus as it features in people's lifespan, then, is soon and predominantly an element of the past for those whose lives bear a connection to it. Conjuring up the circus's disappearance creates a positive context for individuals to cast the memories of their lives' association with the circus: as the anecdote I presented about Ranjit shows, the disappearance of the form, perceived as contemporary, as a phenomenon happening when Ranjit is already 'half-out", signals the importance he might have had

in generating the life of the presumably livelier circus of the past. Such upkeep and servicing of memories, through the metaphor of disappearance, lay the groundwork for establishing a subjective space for making sense of lives———in other words, a place to produce social life and live it.

Such mnemonic practices involving description of the circus and prescription for the circus outline a position from which cultural actors can voice their positions within broader discourses in Kerala around professional associations and caste status. For instance, and adapting situations observed during my fieldwork, one can imagine how a young man from a lower middle class Thiyya family, when justifying the presence in his home of an older female relative who never married because of her career as a circus artist, could draw some assurance from the disappearance narrative, which could support the idea that 'such situations used to be common in the Thiyya community in the past, but it will never again happen to our family.' Or how a group of predominantly upper-class, Nair and Brahmin Kannur notables might decide to give a life award to a circus owner from the community, confident that his quirky career in the entertainment industry will remain charming and on the honorable side of things – now that it is over and that the circus is unlikely to ever pose a challenge to their castemate's propriety (in other words smoothing out an individual's picaresque personality into a *picturesque* one).

As I delve deeper, in the sections that follow, into the social and historical context which makes the disappearance of the circus so vibrant in Thalassery town, Malabar, and in Kerala, I strive to maintain an analytical perspective differing slightly from the already-existing and thorough accounts of the history of the circus in Malabar and India recount per se. What I have learned from my interlocutors allows, me, rather, to propose an exercise in the phenomenology of historicity for

those within it.. I foreground the ways in which a community of circus people inhabit their own history through accounts underpinned by metaphors of disappearance. This is a proactive attempt to not let this cultural object be understood as inherently in decline because it constantly *appears* as disappearing, and to clarify instead why the temptation is so great to see the circus as always on the brink of extinction. While this object is specific, the phenomenon it currently gives rise to in Thalassery and its region is not. Worlds in which things disappear span much broader than the circus tent, and I hope this can illuminate these too. Just as we need remember that historicity is the stuff of history, we cannot yet tell the history of the circus until we understand that one of its elements is (production of) the lived experience of its, in this case, disappearance.

Where the Circus Comes to Die

> "The Indian circus has almost entirely disappeared from India. Once Indian circus was an important art form in our cultural space. It went abroad for the shows and on Republic Day, or Independence Day, and whenever the head of other countries would visit India, the circus was one of the art forms performed in the central hall of Rashtrapathi Bhavan (the official residence of the President of India). That's the history. […] If I am right, there are no Malayalis joining the circus nowadays, we only have the old Malayali circus artists."
>
> (Speech delivered by Sri Narayan, Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee's General Secretary at the Circus Employees Union inauguration (2021: p.11)[12]

The Northern Kerala districts of Kozhikode and Kannur have a substantial historical and economic connection to the business of the circus. There have been several dozens of circus owners from Malabar over the last hundred years, all of them employing dozens more managers, clerks, circus

[12] I thank Sruthi S for transcribing my recording of this event and helping me with the translation from Malayalam.

hands, young trainees, and adult performers, many of whom were recruited in nearby villages, towns and hamlets. In 2020, according to the Circus Employees Union leader at the time, 1600 people based in the area had successfully filed applications to receive the pension secured in Kerala for those who can prove having worked in a circus for at least 15 years.[13]

Malabar's longstanding familiarity with circus entertainment started out as an incidental effect of European presence and British administration in the Kozhikode Municipality (est. 1866) and the trading post of Tellichery (present-day Thalassery, and the neighboring formerly French territory of Mayyazhi, or Mahé), which was already a site of trade for Dutch, French, and Jewish merchants prior to the establishment of the Madras Presidency. The significant presence of Europeans in these local hubs meant that circuses frequently toured in the region from the 1850s onwards, when the European circus, progressively incorporating tented, itinerant companies, took to traveling across colonial routes. By then, these coastal areas of (present-day) Kerala also had infrastructure (municipal grounds, playing fields) for physical education and sports favored by British troupes, administrators and traders settled in the area, in particular cricket (Tellicherry Cricket Club was

[13] Interview with Ashok Kumar (who passed away in 2020), September 22nd, 2019, Dharmatham.
In her historical monograph Jumbos and Jumping Devils (2020), Nisha P.R. mentions that the pension scheme for circus workers (cf. also chapter 3) was established in 1980 for circus employees of Kerala, thanks to the efforts of the Indian Circus Employees Union and INTUC, the national union associated to the Congress Party (2020: 232). The connections between the Congress Party and this union have continued to be strong from what I could attest based on my fieldwork, although they were serviced not so much because of some alignment in political orientation as because of overlaps and connections in union and local party branch personnel. One of the most proactive members and speakers of the Circus Employees Union was indeed a party worker and formerly elected official in the area, Ashok Kumar. While not formerly a circus worker himself, by the time I met him in 2019, he spent much of his time animating the union, organizing commemorative circus events, and assisting retired circus artists in the administrative procedures by which one could secure the pension from the Kerala state government (his understanding of local politics was a strong asset to the union). The Circus Employees Union by the 2020s was, as far as I could tell, primarily a place where retired Malayali circus artists could hope to find help in navigating the administrative procedures necessary to secure the pension (which even if secured, was irregularly distributed and modest compared to everyday life costs in Kerala). Ashok Kumar passed away in an untimely death in 2020. A retired English teacher at a local high school who was his friend continues to participate in union activities and hosts some of the meetings at a coaching institute he runs in Thalassery town.

established in 1830), but also, rugby, hockey, and football, the latter continuing to be a very important hobby and professional sport in this part of Kerala. While these activities were intended for Europeans, historian Anas Ali (2016) suggests that the limitations white settlers sought to place on accessing them were always porous and that in practice, it was not always possible to keep other inhabitants of the region from taking part in them.[14] Indeed, there seems to have been a significant interest from people from Malabar across economic and caste status for various forms of physical exercise, including both traditional games (for instance, bullock race), martial arts tradition such as *kalaripayattu* (an apprenticeship traditionally reserved to Nair men in the South of Kerala (Zarrilli 1984), but not strictly following this caste-based discrimination in early 20th century Northern Kerala (P.R. 2017:19)), the foreign sports played by officers stationed in the area and national and international forms of "physical culture" circulating in the late 19th century (Alter 2004).

As Nisha P.R. notes, Keeleri Kunhikannan Teacher, a revered figure of Malayali circus history, had learnt "*kalaripayattu*, wrestling, gymnastics and weightlifting and was also into games such as cricket, which had been popular in that colonial town. He [had undergone] gymnastics training in Madras for a year under the Field Games association" and traveled across India to train in various traditional martial arts (2017:18-19). His extensive training, while exceptional, points to the existence of resources to master various sports and games in the late 19th and early 20th century. Keeleri Kunhikannan famously trained the first generation of acrobats later turned owners. It is noteworthy

[14] The historian Anas Ali's research in fact suggests that the European inhabitants of Kozhikode at the time perceived the hosting of circus companies on the town's central Maidan (Mananchira Maidan) as detrimental to other physical activities, such as cricket, for which the ground was also used. They also thought that the circus companies brought too many non-European visitors in the "respectable" parts of town. He cites a letter from a British stakeholder complaining that "the presence of a circus on the Maidan brings a larger collection of bad characters into a respectable portion of the town where their presence is undesirable." Ali argues that it "is clear from his statement that the European community in the town wanted the ground an exclusive recreational space for the European community free from the natives" (Ali 2016: 755).

that aside from his importance in the history of circus training, he also worked as a "gymnastics teacher in the Basel Evangelical Mission School in Thalassery" (Nisha P.R. 2017: 18). These schools, often teaching in English, maintained "cordial relations" with the British administration (Shetty 2008:516). The fact that the local Basel school appears to have been an important site for the training of the region's first local acrobats might account for some of the British and European influences on Thalassery's iterations of the circus, from the fluency of many circus owners and managers in English, to the English-sounding names by which the items are known. Teachers and instructors in local schools (some of them English-medium mission schools) also continued to play an important role in the history of the circus, as reliable and locally well-known mentor figures to whom parents could entrust their children for physical training.

Historians (Menon 1994, Priya 2014, Prakash 1988, Nossiter 1982) converge in blaming the colonial administration and the rigid enforcement of caste privileges in Malabari society for the dire economic conditions the region experienced throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century. During the first half of the twentieth century, "[t]he backwardness of agriculture and the lack of development of other sectors, coupled with a growing population, created a situation of chronic unemployment and consequent widespread poverty among the people. A sizeable section of the population was forced to live [in] near famine conditions," which appeared to have been, in the worst years, an annual menace (Prakash 1988:54).

Local Congress politician Narayanan speaking at an inaugural function of the Circus Union in March 2021 (a visit most definitely prompted by the then-upcoming elections)[15] thus renders an experience familiar to his audience composed almost entirely of senior and retired circus artists when he recollects the economic conditions of his native place, Pinarayi, near Thalassery: "Once our land was in poverty... There were many circus artists from Pinarayi, Ambalur, Kathiroor… A majority of them were from these places [all villages within Thalassery taluk]. During my childhood days, in 1970-1972, there were many people in my surroundings who lived in extreme poverty. [Circus owners] would pay a small amount to the parents and taught circus to these kids." Aside from the separate group of people who were born in the circus, to circus artists, and went on to live as family troupes, most senior artists I interviewed confirmed these stories with their autobiographical accounts of being hired as children by a circus recruiter scouting the area for new recruits, following another young distant relative in enrolling in a circus company, or being allowed by their families to join a circus after attending a show. While some people look at their childhood in hindsight as a moment when they "ran away with the circus," the poverty of many families living in the region as recently as the 1970s would more reasonably account for the large number of Malabari children and pupils who were sent to or allowed to join the circus as a way to secure a hunger-free childhood and a potentially valuable training. It is important to keep in mind the commonness of such accounts to understand the socio-historical conditions of possibility of the Indian circus (i.e.,., a Malayali iteration of the 'Indian' circus) that actors born before the 1980s refer to today. The uplift of the local economy after the 1970s, after the large-scale and contract-based economic migration of young men in the region to Gulf countries started to become a defining feature of local lower-middle class

[15] The function was given to mark the resumption of union activities, halted for several months during the Covid-19 lockdown of the previous year, and the constitution of a new office after the death of union leader Ashok Kumar in 2020. The Indian National Congress party, which was in power in Kerala when the statewide pension scheme for retired circus artists was promulgated, has maintained its connection with the retired – and thus, based locally and in a capacity to vote – artists of Thalassery and Kannur, and makes it a point to visit the union during electoral seasons.

households (Osella & Osella, 2000, 2000a; Mathew and Nair 1978; Prakash 1978), changed local expectations and the relative desirability of these prolonged sojourns in the circus. Notwithstanding, times prior to these macro-economic transformations account for the continued existence of a visible sector of labor opportunities in touring circus companies for the Malabari community, through which a regional leadership over the form of the circus as an entertainment medium could be, and continues to be, asserted. More or less detailed accounts, conventionalized, but also idiosyncratic evocations of these socio-economic and cultural conditions are thus part of the histories and the 'social life' (and death) of the circus as they are circulated by Malabari circus professionals today.

These systematized practices of recruitment in childhood shaped a community of Thalassery-born artists with a shared experience of early life itinerancy and intensive physical training, of having received no formal or structured education aside from what their peers could dispense, of limited connections with their constantly changing location, and an unusual and tight form of communal living in the camps and distance from their natal families. These Malabari circus workers also often experienced the challenge of having to reinsert themselves, years or decades after joining the circus, in the sedentary sectors of Malabar's economy, when the state of bodies, marked by age and sometimes exhausted by training, or the phase of life they had reached, did not allow them to continue in the circus. Working in the circus industry, therefore, even for a few years, has much more influence over one's life than what is common or expected in other professions. Looking back for such artists is always a reflection on another world, a time-space not only distinct from the circus-past but one which was, in its present, discretely bound off from the sedentary worlds of normative kinship, sociality, and economy (as mentioned in chapter 1). The artists' accounts of their

lives in circus companies involve frequent and similar evocations of travels from campground to campground, of missing sedentary relatives who have remained "home," and of their feeling of estrangement with regards to the structuring rites of passage and values celebrated there, and of the maintaining of a connection with that place only through rare visits – in which family members are sometimes merely glimpsed from the ring during a show.

Up until the 1990s, some circus itineraries also stretched outside of India. Several Malayali owned companies organized one or more tours in the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, South Africa, Lebanon, Singapore, Malaysia. The combination of the companies' promotional strategy of foregrounding these travels as constitutive of their professional identity, and the uptake of the Indian circus as a marginal and nostalgic, yet an oddly cosmopolitan locale for film plots, enhanced the visibility of this show-business and the popular associations of the circus with itinerancy. That Malayali circuses were traveling broadly, a mixed company (caste, age and gender wise), while simultaneously remaining connected to the small villages and towns of Northern Kerala the company workers were from condensed, through the purposeful work of circus publicity by company executives, as what "the circus" has conjured up in the last sixty years, especially in Kerala: something which could make an entertaining topic for an article in a Malayalam weekly, a good setting for a show, and something a handful of movie songs would immediately bring to mind, stirring an ill-defined sentimentality.

The City of the three Cs (Cricket, Cake and Circus)[16]

The possibilities of citation offered by the circus show and circus life takes us to another realm – besides the physical situation of the circus in Kerala – in which the Malayali *Indian Circus* is constituted. If the situated discourses of disappearance of the circus voiced by the circus professionals gathered in Northern Kerala are influential in constituting the cultural object of the Indian circus, evocations of the circus by other regional and national media (specifically, illustrated news outlets, Hindi and regional cinemas, novels to a lesser extent) also contribute to this representational task. The film industry intently curates representations of the post-Independence circus as a nationally produced form, shaped by consistent exchanges with socialist and communist nations (The USSR, China, Czechoslovakia), primarily under the leadership of Malayalis. This account, to which anchoring in one place gives credence, stalls alternative visions of the circus more connected to what the form was, for instance, in the 19th century, when Bengalis dominated the Indian share of a then more international, vaudevillian show-business (A Ghosh 2014). Going by the definitions which the film industry and the press circulated, prototypical circus companies were large-tented businesses, run by businessmen from Kerala, and had names like Gemini Circus, South Indian Ladies Circus, Kamala Circus, Bharat Circus, Great Bombay Circus, Royal Circus, etc. In this picture, their aesthetic is lavish and foreign-looking, eminently citable (because always-already carefully situated and consistent with one specific idea of what the circus is, built in harmonization with international conventions rather than past locally rooted variations) and, paradoxically, protected from the loss of authenticity that threatens so many art forms in India by its intractable mass appeal and the unquestioned assumption of the show's foreign aesthetic. Whether it is

[16] This phrase is one by which Thalassery occasionally attempts to publicize itself: the city claims to host some of the oldest bakeries in the country, the first Indian cricket league, and it is widely considered in Kerala as the "cradle of Indian circus."

perceived as vulgar, risqué, or successfully cosmopolitan and glamorous, the circus intentionally dramatizes the disjuncture of its aesthetic envelope from cultural forms and practices identifiable as traditional.

Over the decades during which the Kerala version of the circus has existed, these ascriptions of foreignness and vulgarity have kept the circus far from the status of traditional art form many regional art practitioners and cultural activists strive to achieve for their practice. Although politicians acknowledge its well-established presence in the region (as evidenced by the special pension that circus workers can avail in Kerala), the circus remains marginal to both the cultural and athletic landscape of culturally legitimated forms in the state of Kerala. Another speaker invited by the Circus Employees' Union in March 2021 preached to the choir when he lamented:

> "The Dada Saheb Phalke award in the film industry, Padmashri awards…Padma Vibhushan, Rajiv Gandhi Khel Ratna award, Dhronacharyan award… there are many such awards for almost all the artforms and sports of India. The Circus gets nothing! Though we are eligible for such awards, the reason is, we have no way to reach out for such distinctions. In our democracy, if only an MP could arrange some kind of award… Padmashri or any related awards that could be given to ring masters, [circus] managers, office staffs and other such professionals in the circus! All these people should be eligible for such recognitions!"
>
> (translated from Malayalam; circus union inauguration meeting, 2021, pp.5-6)

Instances of such statements iterated in Thalassery encapsulate the locally experienced mismatch between the scale at which the circus is presumably deployed – that of a modern, live, national and popular entertainment, circulated physically over large distances and frequently mediated by mass media – and the dwindling and relatively anonymous group of people who sustain, through their practices, this imaginary. If the circus continues to 'hail' from Thalassery, it is important to keep in mind that the reasons for this situatedness are found in a socio-history of practical necessities often

downplayed by the historical embellishment and selective emphases curated by the circus community (which I analyze in more details in the next section). Thalassery is where circus professionals settle to have children, where they entrust their children to relatives when they are traveling, and where they go to retire. This anchoring thus only lasts for as long as there are Malayali recruits in the circus. For this reason, the circus community in Kannur district effectively is becoming smaller, as no circus family there sends trainees to circus companies anymore. In practice, more than the circus, it is the *circus community of Thalassery* that will certainly disappear (a discourse of disappearance itself displaced by the discourse of the *circus's* disappearance), without a disappearance discourse and ubiquitous gerunds.

Situated Histories

While less circulated and studied than high-brow performance forms, the circus compels researchers and inspires scholarly writings. Attempts at producing historical accounts of the Indian circus are sketched along the dotted lines of the companies' itinerancy. Preserved documents accounting for circus activities in India are limited, and scattered across municipal, police, and newspaper archives, in the cities and towns visited by circus companies, and mostly account for the occurrence of shows, tents occasionally catching fire, animal escapes, or the tragic death of a circus artist during a performance.

Such snippets evacuate the monotonous routine of life in the circus, the lesser and more successful camps, the non-tragic deaths, the injuries compromising an artist's career. As a result of this difficulty in learning about what happens in a circus company, the historical accounts written on the

subject by local historians are replete with mentions that some details are missing (Champad 2013)[17] from the archive they could constitute, requests that the reader "kindly excuse the errors and omissions [that] crept in[to] it" (P.M. Raghavan, 1966: 2).

Surveying this literature, one is also struck by its unavoidable partiality. The most complete accounts are also those most biased in favor of a company owner – since being in the good books of notables is a prerequisite to gain access to *their* books (and personal archives). For this reason, excluding historian Nisha P.R.'s professionally documented monograph on the topic (2020), the consensual events of an Indian circus history emerge at the crossroads of hagiographic tales about specific owners, celebrations of artists leaving their lives and identity outside of the ring in a blur, and incomplete surveys that do not account for what the circus was outside of the moments when the industry was dominated by Malayalis. While these historical accounts are not widely read, they explicitly or implicitly support the entextualization and greater circulation of the disappearance of the circus in and beyond Thalassery. In the highly literate context of Kerala (in which literary and textual sources play a significant role in local status politics), pointing to a book, a pamphlet, a memoir in which the existence of a social form is acknowledged plays a great role in making this form exist to and in wider publics. The circus-related literary production has thus played a role in actualizing the Malayali Indian Circus and helped sustained the elegiac circulation of its anticipated disappearance.

[17] Sreedharan Champad's work *An Album of Indian Big Tops*, as well as his more autobiographical works in Malayalam actually embrace the lacunary quality of any historical account of the India circus. His works tend to move abruptly from topic to topic, composing an atmospheric image of the past liveliness of the Malayali circus. *An Album of Indian Big Tops,* in particular, is filled with sections that depart from the logic set up by chapter titles, some sections ending abruptly with statements that "No details of these companies are available in authentic records" (2013:20).

The works of Sreedharan Champad (1938-), who briefly worked as a circus clerk and performed as a trapeze artist in various 1960s circus companies and spent most of his life subsequently writing books on the circus – fictional, documentary and memoir-like– provides an illuminating and consequent examples of the circus community's uptake of its own historicized past and of its lines of division. By the time I started my research on the Indian circus, Champad's lifelong work writing about the circus was experiencing a niche success and acclaim as historically thorough by showbusiness professionals and non-specialists who had become acquainted with it over the years. It seemed famous enough locally to serve as an authoritative reference for oral, journalistic, and political evocations of the circus' history, as it is told and retold in Thalassery on the occasion of functions such as union meetings, commemorative and political events organized by and catering to the circus community. As historian of the circus Nisha P.R. notes (2020:15), "One can reasonably assume that most of the 'historical accounts' related to the origin of circus rely on the same narratives which are invariably reproduced." These foundational episodes in local accounts are those Champad narrates with the greatest stylistic care (and arguably the least explicitly cited sources), across several of his works.

One such episode is the establishment of India's 'first circus,' the Chatre Circus, by the Marathi stable intendent of Sangli turned circus pioneer Vishnupant Moreshwar Chatre (1840-1905) after a disdainful challenge by the Italian circus owner Giuseppe Chiarini. The latter, Champad tells us, thus "challenged" his Indian spectators on "Christmas Night of 1879", during a performance of the Chiarini Circus in Bombay:

> "I understand that there is no circus in India, and I hope that you Indians would have to wait more and more years to establish such a circus. […] I challenge, if any body can imitate this performance with any other horses, I will give a reward of one thousand British Indian rupees and any of these horses." (This episode is narrated, tellingly, on page 1 of Champad 2013).

Interestingly, Champad's Chiarini, albeit arrogant, had toned it down compared to how he featured in an otherwise quite similar account provided by Thalassery-based circus aficionado P.M. Raghavan in 1966. In this one, Chiarini's challenge was more racist and disdainful, and was experienced as a "gross insult thrown upon Indian people":

> "Now you will witness one of the best items which requires a very skillful and patient training. In India you cannot witness such feats. Because, I dare say, there is nobody in India who can train horses like this. I challenge – if there is anybody in India who can train horses in the way as you see in the Ring within a period of 6 months, I will give him £500 and a golden cup. As regards organizing a circus like this, it is out of question for Indians. Poor India will have to wait many years to have a circus of its own." (1966: 8-9).[18]

Vishnupant Moreshwar Chatre of Sangli of course responded successfully to the challenge, *and the rest is history*; or rather – the rest becomes a delineated field for historical elaboration and factual alignments for those with stakes in this history in potential. Another episode frequently invoked by Malabar-based accounts of the circus is that, crucial to support the ulterior production of circus-ness

[18] Whether this challenge factually happened and if it did, how it was set, remains open to interpretation. While the visits of Chiarini Circus to Bombay is easily evidenced by the presence of its publicity notices in the *Times of India* between 1874 and 1881, the newspaper does not bear traces of this specific challenge, and the historical accounts considered here do not cite their sources. I suspect the story was embellished in part locally, and does not have the same currency outside of Kerala. I thank William Mazzarella for pointing out the tropic dimension of such accounts in an Indian colonial imaginary which kept on resonating as a professional narrative post-Independence. This story is indeed similar to the origin myth of Tata founding the Taj after being denied entry to a whites-only hotel, as featured for instance in this account: "It is said that Jamshedji Tata was inspired to build this hotel after he was refused entry at one of the grandest hotels of British time Watson's Hotel, which was restricted to whites only. Jamsetji Tata took this as an insult to whole Indians and then decided that he would build a hotel where not only Indians but foreigners could also stay without any restrictions, and that's how India's first super-luxury hotel came into being. Now Taj is a centre of attraction all over the world." ("Revenge Story That Inspired Jamsetji Tata To Build Iconic Taj Hotels", *India Times*, July 3rd, 2021, accessed online, https://www.indiatimes.com/trending/human-interest/taj-hotels-a-sweet-revenge-story-of-jamsetji-tata-544117.html).

in Malayali circus companies primarily, of the beginning of a business collaboration between the Marathi circus founder Chatre and the local figure and circus trainer Keeleri Kunhikannan Teacher (1858-1939), mentioned earlier (Nisha P.R. 2017), who was regarded as able to train exceptionally acrobats and gymnasts. This account envelopes the regional 'specialization' of Malabar in circus in a narrative focused on skill transmission from Malabari training grounds to Marathi performance rings (with the socio-economic regional problems that have sustained interest in circus careers receding in the background). A case in point indicative of the excellence of Kunhikannan's 'gurukulam'-like pedagogy, the life and untimely death of a rare international Indian circus star who was his trainee, the "bouncing rope" prodigy Kannan Bombayo, who toured Europe in 1931-39 after marrying a circus artists from the Italian Canestrelli family troupe, is evoked in details by Champad. It is noteworthy that the historical trajectory traced by these facts does little of the existence of Bengali-owned and staffed circuses even prior to Chatre's circus (Ghosh 2014), contemporaneous to the colonial, transnational circulations that can explain the regular visits of European circus families to India throughout the second half of the 19th century (which are mentioned through anecdotes such as that of Chiarini's challenge, or contextualize Kannan Bombayo's marriage with an Italian artist). Like old familiar stories, these episodes elicit several writerly and oral variations, old enough as they are to be spun pertinently to serve the current situation.

Other episodes mentioned in Champad's writings and in that of others focus on the golden age of the Indian circus, a period placed, rather diffusely, shortly after India's Independence in 1947, and lasting for about twenty years. A significant event in this time, for which circus families have preserved more records than prior times, is the visit of an Indian circus delegation to the USSR in 1963. As Champad notes, the circus artists, which had been elected by Gemini Circus business

partner M.V. Shankaran among the artists of his company and greeted by India's highest officials upon departure and return to India, "performed in Moscow, Soochi, Yalta and some other important cities in Soviet Union for about three months in circus theaters and tents other than the Festival [to which they had originally been convened]" (2013:105). Champad notes on the same page that "[after] returning to India M.V. Shankaran discussed with Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru about the uplift of circus art in India with the help of Soviet Union. Shankaran submitted an elaborate plan. Nevertheless, nothing happened after due to non-cooperative attitude of Government Officials", suggesting the threats the circus was already facing then, as well as the indifference of the government with regards to these issues. Other features of Champad's account of the golden age are the mention of the extensive travels abroad of several companies, and their success in newly formed African countries and Singapore; the ascension of local notable and circus man Gemini Shankaran (I evoked his local fame in Chapter 1); the "great films based on circus life" (2013:111) "Parakkum Pavai", a Tamil film starring MGR released in 1966 featuring the National Circus company, and Raj Kapoor's "Mera Naam Joker" (Hindi, first released in 1970). The latter was "shot at Gemini Circus. So many Indian and Russian circus artists acted in this film. It [was] made with co-operation of Government of USSR." (2013:112).

In Champad's account, aside from the continuing ascension of his (not coincidentally) good friend M. V. Shankaran, the owner of Gemini and later Jumbo Circus as well, things start to go downhill after that, and a series of chapters and sections later – "Girls from Nepal" (119, whose arrival en masse in Indian circuses after 1965 decreased the quality of the show according to Champad), "Ban on Transaction of Wild Animals" (125), "Kamala Circus Fades Out" (130, relating the closing of the circus in 1976), "Everything Burn Down" (137, on the 1981 disastrous fire at Venus Circus, in

Bangalore, also widely covered in Malayalam newspapers of the time), "Vanishing of Prominent Names" (138), "Animal Lovers Turn Against the Circus" (145) – we arrive at "THE END" (153), where we still are at now. The popular and labor history of the circus, relayed selectively by Champad when it enhances a form of Kerala pride in the circus (but not when it places circus owners he is acquainted to under a bad light), also includes the foundation of the Circus Federation in 1954 and the prominence it gained around 1965 (sometimes mentioned by owners today as a failed attempt to secure the benefits they had hoped for their trade and an academy), and the histories of two circus unions established by Malayalis to address the many problems experienced by employees (a run-through this labor history was a fixture of all the Circus Employees Union meetings I had the opportunity of attending).

The contemporary episodes of Malabar circus history, which Sreedharan Champad, his friend the circus owner M. V. Shankaran and others conveyed to me in person during my first visits to Thalassery (as I evoke in the Introduction of this dissertation), converge around the idea that the circus has fallen on bad days: they include the demise of various circus companies since the 1980s, the problems caused to the circus by Maneka Gandhi, metonymically standing (and indeed, indeniably, an instigator) for all actors determined to remove animals from the performance ground of circus companies (cf. Chapter 2); the closing of the unsuccessful "Circus Academy" (2011-2017) established near Thalassery, which constituted for a time the industry's hope of addressing human rights concerns about the lack of formal education among circus trainees; Kailash Sathyarthi's media-covered battles against the presence of underage workers in the circus (locally perceived as glaringly disingenuous) and how it "fooled Westerners" into granting him a Nobel Peace prize in 2014 (this is also evoked in Chapter 3).

These elements of the 20th century history of the Indian circus, relayed by Champad as author and by many others textually or orally, are the source of frequent conversations, allusions, and concern for members of the community. Although not all circus professionals take equal interest in the history their personal and biographical recollections contribute to sustaining, this knowledge circulates in Thalassery through commemorative events (for instance, annual gathering near the tomb of Keeleri Kunhikkannan on his death anniversary, organized by the Circus Employees Union), press coverage, union meetings citing elements from this history and questioning its silencing of circus artists and workers, and occasional interviews with journalists or scholars like myself, who have come to elicit this knowledge from people with circus experience, and who thereby render salient the articulation of their recollections with the History of Circus. Circus owners and successful artists, their distant relatives whose connection to the circus is common knowledge, take great interest in this history, and contribute to its sagas through the production of writings, the preservation of documents, and their evolving commentary on the existing works that have been written about the circus in India and in the world. Their narratives are both historical and, more importantly, historiographic. For instance, during the conversation with circus owner Ranjit I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Ranjit took issue with the writings of Sreedharan Champad when it became clear we had both read several of his works. To Ranjit, Champad's 'field' experience was not enough for him to write extensively about circus life in his memoirs, and his historical scholarship also presented a bias: "[I]f you listen to him, you believe the circus is fully Malayali. But it's not! The Marathi circus was there first." Ranjit, who has had Marathi business partners and whose brother spends much of his time in Mumbai, insisted, perhaps for my ears, that more attention needs to be paid to this era of circus history, when the (Marathi) Indian circus focused on animal taming. In an attempt to confirm that I was familiar with the episode, he alluded

to the early days of Chatre's circus and the former profession of its owner (stable chief intendent for the princely state of Sangli), an episode I had in fact partly learned in Champad's works.

Ranjit's criticism had more to do with the way Champad wrote history – and the fact Sreedharan Champad's position on history was more closely informed by the accounts given by some of Ranjit's competitors – than about the way the narrative had stabilized in Champad's writings and more broadly. His critique evidences the *liveliness* and the contemporaneous character of the issues which animate circus history. In other words, the metanarrative that has crystallized, by which the Indian circus is born out of Chiarini's challenge, brought to its golden age by the excellence of Thalassery-based training, and enters a state of steady senescence in the 1970s, is overall not at stake, but it is continually animated by recollections and the individual emphases placed on certain facts by members of the circus community, which can, and must, be brought into alignment with the overall narrative for the Malayali Indian Circus (and its disappearance) to remain a consistent cultural form.

This makes circus history very porous to the specific memories of professionals – who are, often, potential figures in these historical accounts – while conversely, they can mobilize what has been established as circus "history" to narrativize their own memories. Both local histories and mnemonic practices illuminate the relationship between the circus as a social form and the lives that it comes to envelop as a social form.

Timeless Traditions in decline

The historicized timeline of circus decline that can be inferred from local historical accounts, and by which the circus disappears, is frequently completed by a longer timeline of the circus' origins which

weaves it into the phylogenetic development of human activities at large, or the immemorial kinetic traditions of Hindu India (and sometimes both). It is noteworthy that such accounts are not only found in the works and oral accounts of circus professionals in Malabar. French circus semiotician Paul Bouissac, for instance, presents the circus as a "timeless" tradition in some of his works, on accounts of its "firm grounding in the very deep time of evolution as opposed to historical time" and "the playing out [in circus skills] of the primal repertory of human survival behaviors" (Bouissac 2010: 180 and 184). As the Thalassery circus owner "Prof." K. Damodaran also wrote (1965: n.p.), prudently assimilating the circus with what he calls "physical culture," "[p]erhaps this art dates back to the evolution of the human race. Who does not want a healthy and strong body as a protection against external dangers and pernicious ailments?" Observers point to the mimetic resemblance between the kinetic form of items andseemingly similar movements fulfilling a function of daily life. P. M. Raghavan, a circus enthusiast and amateur historian from Dharmadam seems to have aerial items in mind (silks, solo and group trapeze, rope, etc.) when he writes: "Circus feats […] were existing in one form or other in many countries even in those days when men and women were in their primitive stages. The primitive men might have learned to perform some feats of circus in their pursuit of food and for defending themselves from wild animals and other such enemies. There might have been occasions for them to learn to swing from tree to tree by the use of vines or other means and to cross a small deep stream or canal they might have learned to swing from one bank to the other by means of ropes or vines tied on the branch of a tree on the opposite bank" (1966:1). Circus owner Ranjit deployed a similar line of thinking when explaining to me that the circus developed in Malabar because the inhabitants of Kerala were directly engaged with nature in their daily lives. They had to pick coconut and mangoes from the trees, they learned from early on how to swim because the constant need to cross rivers made it a hazard not to know swimming, "and if you know swimming from early childhood," he added, "you naturally get strong." The lushness of

Kerala's tropical environment, in these accounts, often seems to implicitly be assimilated with the conditions of people living in an ancestral, prehistorical past. And it is perhaps a sign of a circus-specific professional ideology that distinguishes the kinetic labor of circus artists from the item's aesthetic envelopment (cf. Chapter 3) that the transition from instrumental movements accomplished for a purpose to an artistic rendition of them for the purpose of aesthetic spectacle is not considered as crucial in such narratives.

By evading this consideration, they also evacuate the problem of the narrower definition of the circus by which the claim can be made that the "Indian circus" is *from* Malabar (where the natural environment brought people to "naturally get strong"), the social practices of transmission and learning that account for the continuous existence of circus items as genres of practices, and the economic relationships that have made the circus performance possible. Instead, they focus narrowly on the kinetic dimensions of the movements seen in the circus to chart out their natural history, establishing the circus as timeless by virtue of being the sublimated or culturalized byproduct of kinetic evolution. If these incomplete accounts can nonetheless substantiate claims that the circus is ancient in Kerala, it is because they operate differently from the historical timeline of circus decline mentioned in the previous section. Their purpose is not to establish a distinctive connection between the circus and Malabar, but to evince the universal and "timeless" character of the skills exhibited by the Indian circus, and endangered by its disappearance. This longer history of what is seen at the circus (humans dominating megafauna and predators (cf. Bouissac 2021), the agility of a healthy and youthful human body which could once be equated with survival) potentially entitle the circus to forms of recognition available to other social forms in Northern Kerala and India, which circus professionals experience as lacking for their industry. Since they are now retired

from the circus, and suffering from the stigma attached to the circus and the lack of local investment in its preservation, a fraction of circus professionals (the upper-middle-class, upper caste group of executives among them in whose communities and families such arguments have traction more generally) occasionally appeal to this more "eternal" framework of valuation that can put the circus on par with other, more legitimated or widely distinguished practices. It is by the same value framework, for instance, informed by readings such as Yuval Noah Harari's *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (2011) (a fairly popular and widely read book among Kerala's upper-class, upper-caste, English-reading public), that public attention and governmental preservation efforts towards Kerala's Adivasi population, perceived as the bearer of ancient traditions, animism and as closer to nature, are sometimes justified by the same group of people.

Another and similar modality by which the disappearance of the circus is sketched up as a form of cultural loss involves drawing its kinship to recognized traditional physical cultures, in particular yoga, ayurveda, the much celebrated Malayali dance form of *kathakali* (Zarri

lli 2000), and the Malabari martial art form of *kalaripayatt* (Zarrilli 1998). All these forms are widely respected as legitimate and longstanding elements of Kerala's cultural identity, which the state's tourist-oriented publicity perpetually celebrates. Prof. K. Damodaran, in a piece entitled "Vedic Origin of the Circus" engages in a not entirely seamless demonstration to establish the ancient character of the circus' physical culture. Asserting that Kerala distinguishes itself by the eagerness with which its people apply the "essence" of the "creed from the upavedas" in "daily life," it is "[n]o wonder [that] ninety percent of circus troupes and ninety-five percent of circus artistes hail from this wonderful land of Kathakali and Kalarippayattu." Similarly, in his *Interesting history of the Indian circus* (1966), P.M. Raghavan writes that "we find (circus) acts which are actually yoga-asanas." The

positions of the familiar contortion "boneless act," P.M. Raghavan explains, are *actually* yoga asanas (he identifies *chakrasana, vrikkshasana, shirshasana*) and ascetic routines. Surveying other circus acts for their yogic avatars, he also mentions "a performance called fish act i.e. a man first drinks a good quantity of water and then swallows three or four small live fishes and afterwards take them out one by one together with some quantity of water. Some people have considered this as a newly invented performance. But it is an act which was performed even before Christ and Buddha were born. In Hatha yoga it is called 'gajakarini'" (1966:5). This implicitly supports the thesis that what we see in the circus is authentically Indian, since "we see that some of the circus feats existed in India in their present form even in those far olden days" (1966:4).

Yoga's perceived antiquity is an unquestioned premise to this mimetic rationale; as Joseph Alter notes: "there is probably no tradition that has been construed as more timeless, more intrinsically authentic, more inherently Indian than yoga. It has become a kind of pristine cultural icon linking together, in a seemingly unbroken line, the past glory of the Indus civilization with the present and future possibility of modern, postcolonial India" (2004: 14). While these resemblances too can only be established through an incomplete portrayal of what the circus show consists in, they pave the way for a historical outline of the circus with a strong synchronic bias, which omits many of the transformations in Indian circus forms instigated by the economic aspects of this entertainment, suggesting that circus movements emerged 'naturally' from necessity or'culturally' from South Asian traditional propensities. As a form of pre-history for the Malabari social form that developed in the 20th century, they confer to the potential "loss" represented by the disappearance of the Thalassery Circus a gravitas and solemnity which the form, so often regarded with suspicion as I have argued in chapter 2 and 3, is perceived to lack by both its professionals and its publics. By collapsing the circus

as it was and *as it should be* to the circus *as it is imagined* by the ageing community in Thalassery who produce the demonstrations evoked here, these forms of legitimation also fix the legitimate definition of the circus into its past. It is noteworthy that these forms of legitimation are actually taken up. In 2016, for instance, Gopinath Muthukad, a successful magician and cultural activist, and the owner of the magic-themed pedagogical amusement park "Magic Planet", introduced a circus show at the park. On his website, he frames his initiatives in the fields of circus and street magic as interventions to counter some of the cultural losses occasioned by the disappearance of popular performances such as circus shows and street magic. His "Mission and Vision" are cast in terms that resonate with the legitimation efforts mentioned here; they include for instance being "a Platform for the neglected Indian street performers to earn their livelihood […], something which the benevolent stage magician [Muthukad himself] can at best preserve in his *conservatory* of street entertainment."

The interweaving of the circus with a phylogenetic past evoked by Kerala's abundant vegetation and streams, and with a national, Vedic, past, thus conjures up an actionable nostalgic idea of the circus. It must be noted that the circus, due to its aesthetic which contrasts dramatically with these accounts and the suspicion it inspires as a way of life, is only occasionally, and never durably indigenized by these references to broad and venerable *past-nesses* (by which I mean here, the diffuse and atmospheric reference to antiquities and pristine times). Specifically, the consideration of present iterations of the circus, the shows put up in contemporary Indian circus companies (even the Malayali ones) do not elicit these emanations. The circus which can successfully be related to honorable, eternal traditions, is itself a circus located in the past, a prelapsarian – truly time*less* – circus which is irretrievable and greater than the always-already 'corrupted' instantiations of the

circus in the present. Omitting fully any acknowledgement of the present state of the industry in 2021, for instance, Narayanan sir, the Kerala Congress Party politician cited earlier speaking at the Circus Employees Union meeting, addressed a crowd of retired circus workers, as if there were not a single touring circus company left: "[the circuses] were part of the beauty of villages in Kerala. But nowadays the art forms have shifted to Disco dance, DJ party and many such forms, which displaced our traditional cultural art forms, making our beloved Indian circus no more than the memory of what it was." The fact that earlier in the same discourse, he evoked the shadiness of child recruitment procedures in Malayali circus companies does not constitute an inconsistency for his audience. Instead, it atmospherically signals his acknowledgment of the fact the circus could be many things (some of them potentially exploitative to the audience members in their youths), inscribed across many temporalities – all deeply anchored in Thalassery, and (thereby re-inscribed as) all bygone.

Carrying on Disappearing

The tendency to perceive the circus as disappearing is in fact connected to and sustained by the nostalgia elicited by phylogenetic and indigenizing accounts of the circus in Malabar. Disappearance, in this teleological narrative, is generally charted out as the inevitable outcome of a historical process which follows these steps: 1. The circus is not yet in existence, because humans have not yet acquired the capacity for the physical and taming feats it involves; 2. The circus comes into existence through the proliferation and thriving of physical feats and animal-taming practices and reaches a golden age (the periodicity of this phase is not precisely time-bound, and conflates naturalized human skills and their representation in the 'modern' circus acts of the 1950-1965 'golden age'); 3. The circus disappears, or begins to disappear, much like a lost civilization. This later phase charts out a field of discussion in

which the reasons for the fall can be searched, asserted, regretted, or celebrated by individuals and groups invested in this disappearance. Consider for instance (in order of distance from the Thalassery-specific disappearance of the circus), how Narayanan sir casts the disappearance as a symptom of the broader problem of Westernization of Malayali entertainment; Champad's 'courte durée' historical account sometimes suggests, on the other hand, that the circus lost his shine because of the loss of its (Thalassery-born) visionary leaders. For the activists evoked in Chapter 2 and 3, the disappearance of the circus only confirms that this form of entertainment, along with the exploitative labor conditions it presumes, had become obsolete. Among loftier contemplations, it is a collateral effect of modernization that the kinetic traditions dating back to "primitive men" and preserved by the circus show, are disappearing as this entertainment form comes to an end. And for the Western circus theorist Paul Bouissac, as he has argued recently in his new work *The End of the Circus* which considers (and thereby stabilizes) the disappearance of the circus worldwide, it is because of the contemporary "age of inclusiveness and political correctness" (2021: 1) that shuns the circus, and because of the increasing "raw hatred for the ethnic minority" of itinerant circus workers (2021: 8) that "the traditional circus in many countries keeps edging toward its twilight zone" (2021: 5). These assertions do not position circus disappearance identically, but all dwell in a similar framework which projects and solidify the notion that the circus is located in the past.

Wittingly or unwittingly, the three-point historical arc embraced in all these perspectives collapses and overlooks the various contrastive grounds against which the circus is delineated and defined over time, and the socio-economic conditions in which circus entertainment emerged. For instance, it is only by premising that the Indian circus is a Malabar-based form, in which artists and executives are all from Northern Kerala, that the disappearance of the circus can be seen as imminent (occluding all the non-

Malayali circus artists and owners still on the circus routes). Only by conflating the itinerancy of circus professionals and that of other, distinct traditionally itinerant peoples can the circus be envisioned as disappearing because of "ethnic hatred" (occluding the ways in which circus people are different, and differentiate themselves from these other groups). Only by omitting the form of aesthetic enjoyment the circus is premised on (as a commodified spectacle, occluding the fact the circus is different from an instrumentally oriented technique of the body) can the circus be seen as heir to the instrumental movements of primitive men, etc. The teleology accounting for the disappearance of the circus is an effect of this omission. Only by omitting how the circus as a form is defined in its specificity does it become possible to read its continuous transformations as a disappearance. The organicist underpinnings of the dis-appearance metaphor (the circus as a being or form of life which must, like everything that lives, come to an end) further conceals the sleight of hand involved in this figure of thought, and retrospective recollection bias:[19] by pitching the circus as a natural or quasi-natural object, like an (already essentialized) civilization or a species, the need to define with precision what counts as the circus is evacuated. Corollarily, as I have explained in the previous chapter, this has effect on the aesthetic envelopment of actually ongoing contemporary circus shows: Malayali circus managers strive to minimize the intertextual gap between current instantiations of circus-ness, and what they gather is perceived to be the circus (circus-ness). This leads them to nurture aesthetic actualizations of the circus' disappearance: in their attempt to ignore the effective changes in the social group that animates the circus today (the absence of animal acts following the animal ban, the ageing of performers following the ban of underage trainees), the unchanging acts confirm the impression and reinforce the atmospheric notion that the circus is no longer what it used to be.

[19] I explore the mnemonic foundations for the impression that the circus was greater in the past in more details in Chapter 3.

As I have already mentioned in passing above, the rehearsed origin story for the Indian circus heard in Thalassery omits a previous era of the Indian circus, seemingly dominated by Bengalis, and in which the boundaries demarcating foreign and Indian circuses was not as clearly asserted. This is what Ghosh's dissertation evidences about Indian involvement with the circus in the period 1880-1940. Against the chronology according to which the authentic (i.e. Malayali) Indian circus developed after the dramatic encounter of the Marathi Chatre with an Italian circus in 1879 and subsequently with physical training in Thalassery in the early 1900s, Ghosh notes that "[l]ong before British circus companies started to arrive on Indian shores, there were [some] South Asian performers who [shone] in the theatrical circuits of England, especially London" (2014:4). His account, which shows that the circus in India was alive and well while the reality the concept covered was continuously shifting "within different modes" in the late 19th century, challenges the hegemonic definition of the circus given by Malayali professionals: "What was the circus? This would have been a difficult thing to address in the 19th century apart from the simple definition of different acts and visual displays under a single tent" (Ghosh 2014: 69).

The fact that *change* might be inherent to the continuation of the circus since "time immemorial" is paradoxically not featured in the discourse of Malabari professionals today. Arguably due to a specific demographic context, namely the simultaneous, generational, withdrawal of many of them from "active" circus life, and from the statewide withdrawal of Malayalis from this stigmatized line of work since the improvement of the state's economic situation in the 1970s, Malabari professionals have become averse to change. Or rather – to accounts of changes that do not equate change to disappearance. That the future of the circus in India is likely to be a question tackled by the Assamese, Biharis and Bengalis currently performing or buying the infrastructures retiring Malayalis are selling

off, likewise, falls outside the purview of the Malayali narrative on the Indian circus, in which the trajectory of the form continuously comes to die in Thalassery.

For the circus' disappearance to circulate in and beyond Thalassery, thus, the circus must always be defined selectively (e.g., *as Malayali*), leaving aside aspects of circus-ness in the past and the future that could contradict the arc of its formation and decline. In Marilyn Ivy's words, there is a way in which "events, rituals, texts, stories and performances [can] enact a difference from the past as they seek to reduce that difference" (1996:13). For a group of professionals predominantly older and with their working life behind them, this narrative is one in which they can easily present their own biographies as a broader phenomenon: the circus will, propitiously, die with them, giving the last generation of circus professionals a particular cachet in a political economy of rarefied cultural forms.

Reiterations of disappearance

That the younger and active circus professionals I interviewed do not speak much of disappearance is telling of the phenomenon's generational dimensions. Only through a retrospective outlook situated socially and ontogenetically (in a person's life trajectory), does this arc become actionable and subjectively meaningful to individuals: for a young artist still deeply involved with perfecting an item or preparing a new act, a new proprietor trying to figure out the best itinerary for his company, or a middle-aged trainer scouting for new trainees or advertising trained puppies to circus companies, dwelling in rationalizations of the industry's imminent ending does not provide much support.

But perhaps it is only a question of time? The disappearance so visible in Thalassery may be so clear there because of the demographic significance of retired professionals more advanced in their life course in the area. It remains to be seen, but the performers of today may be the tellers of the circus' disappearance in the future, confirming that the circus disappearance is transmitted from generation to generation, at a specific, advanced point in someone's life course. The consistent aesthetic envelope of circus shows (in spite of the social transformations of the social basis of the circus) evoked in chapter 3, and the fact that the disappearance of the circus in Thalassery is at least sixty years old, already suggest as much. At any rate, the retired Thalassery-based circus professionals' biographies, told from the perspective of having reached a certain age, actualize and animate the connection between the circus' golden age, and its disappearance: the experience of ageing situates in their own past the moment when the Indian circus lapsed from the former into the latter. The histories of the circus become conjugated in the present through discourses that assert the imminent death of the circus, and, synecdochally, through the elegiac tone local circus owners and managers use to speak of their professional activities as if they were the only authentic circus activities ongoing in India. This allows circus stakeholders to retain a subjective, and sometimes practical, agency over circus-ness, over the shaping of what the circus continues to be. When I began my fieldwork in 2017, the circus company Madras Circus had announced that it would celebrate its centennial anniversary and shut down the company permanently. When I happened to mention this information to a publicist familiar with the company, he laughed and dismissed the issue. "They are always making up stories like that!" he said, "Whiteway is a very old circus and it was owned by Ranjit's grandparents, but Madras can't date back farther than the 1950s." Meanwhile, after its announced centennial anniversary, the circus continued to tour with no further explanation. It continues to this day, even after two years of interruption due to COVID could have, logistically, brought the company to bankruptcy.

Dwelling in disappearance, as an ageing group of Kerala-native circus professionals does today,is conditioned by society's reinforcement of these kind of figurations for cultural objects. As the establishment of connections between the circus and the skills of "primitive men" and Yoga suggest, narratives of disappearance are a recognizable and legitimated discursive and aesthetic form, in India and elsewhere, frequently deployed – in scholarly research, documentary works and everyday life – to characterize the situation of traditional art forms and cultural objects. It is relevant here that testimonials recollecting a trajectory of disappearance are frequently elicited from senior individuals, whose life experiences grant them a recognized and valued form of expertise. As for the cases of Parsi theater, the endangered crafts of India's tribal groups, or traditional forms of puppetry, the elegiac invocation, in South Asia, of a cultural form's better situation (and typically, golden age) in the past conjures, as we saw, a recognizable problem space to which the Thalassery circus disappearance resembles: the gerund of disappearance rarely mandates concerted efforts bringing about a reversal of the presumed temporal trend of decline. Instead, it opens a space of contemplation, aesthetic enjoyment, nostalgia, closure, and in rare cases, for the collective appreciation of individual efforts directed against the grain of sweeping cultural changes (something resembling the respect Ranjit has earned from the circus professionals of the region for the way he has cared for the Madras Circus over the years). This problem space is not one which mandates a categorical pronouncement on whether the circus disappearing is a good or a bad thing, and therefore, it can be cultivated by a variety of actors, whose apprehension of disappearance can be contradictory. Because of the familiarity of disappearance discourse, the circus disappearance (or any other specific instance of something disappearing), finds resonance with a wide and varied unconcerned public, whose taste for the nostalgic enjoyment of such forms is already a broadly, collective, cultivated one.

This can begin to explain why the disappearance of the Indian circus has been an enduring, layered phenomenon, sedimented into an aesthetically distinctive form, which is reproduced by the aesthetic envelope of current big top circus shows, the historical processes which have given the circus its glamorous allure as well as the moments which have afflicted circus professionals. In the final chapter of the dissertation, I take a closer look at the ways the disappearing circus thus constituted finds its place among other frameworks of memory by which former professionals, once reinserted in the native places from which the circus only ever provisionally suspends people, recollect their lives in the circus through the media and archive in which the forms is fixated – in particular, photographs.

Chapter 5. Publicity Images and Photographic Memory: The plural shaping of the Indian circus' visual recollection.

Figure 33. Album page showing circus artist Sunitha (now in her late 40s and retired from the circus) and her siblings. (Photographed with permission, Kannur, 2019)

Sunitha was born and raised in a circus family. Her mother prepared this album for her, and she continued to preserve photographs in it even after she left the circus in her 20s.

Wear and tear in the circus' photographic corpus

Many of the photographs that have been taken in circus companies are worn out and damaged. Their existence has spanned several decades already, and they have existed in the paper-trying circumstances of a climate involving regular monsoons, constant heat and humidity. The developed

photographs I came across during interviews with circus professionals have had various uses since their production, some uses contemporaneous with the professional life they recorded, and many others revealed in the retirement years that followed. Some portraits or group pictures were purchased from a professional photographer who took them to remember the inauguration of a camp ("Every time we played in Madras, it happened… the photographer would come and take pictures"),[1] a pleasant holiday trip taken on an off day, a stunning costume worn for a performance. As they became evidence of times past, some were consolidated and treated as familial records (Fig 1). On occasions, for instance, in the context of the interviews I solicited with their owners, these photographs became documentary evidence, cases in point in a conversation. Sometimes, they were handed to a child to keep them busy as grownups were having tea and talking ("some people might still have some [photographs of these days]… I don't have any of mine, I gave my children the ones I had to play with when they were small, to appease them when they were crying… They spilled some pee on them. Now who still has any left?").[2] Others were displayed in the living room's showcase, and then, on a change of heart, stuffed back into a plastic bag containing old pictures, or an album.

Even if they were not always active or intensely mobilized, most of the printed images have had a long existence, considering the lifespan of non-archived paper, by the time I glanced at them. The most recent among them were developed in the early 2000s, a decade after which, seemingly, newly taken circus photographs would only be found as digital images on the phones of artists and their

[1] Interview with Kareem K., in Malayalam (Thalassery, 2020). "Madras-il ellaam kalikkunna samayattu ithu thane aayirunnu…"

[2] Interview with Kareem K. (Thalassery 2020): "ippo chilavarkkokke undavum… entheduttannum onnum illa… kuttikalkku itheduttu kalikkaan kodutthu, karacchil nirtthan… avar muthratthilum ithilum okke ittu."

relatives, and the reproduction of old ones be digital, contained by phones (like all of my own copies of the ones I could see). Even the paper photographs for which there exist multiple copies in one home appear challenged by the climate and circumstances. Some of them still show something to someone; others, because they have become very worn out and their image has faded, or because everyone has lost interest in them, do not show anything anymore but the evidence of their and their subject's fading. Even the photographs and the photographs of photographs saved in phones – a minority group among the images I come across – are liable to particular dangers: phone loss, memory damage, accidental erasure or intentional deletion to clear up memory space – among other occurrences endangering personal immaterial objects.

The circus as an art form and the lives of those who joined circus companies is well documented by such private sources in India at least since the 1940s, which is as far as the many personal collections I was authorized to consult go back in time. Judging from the photographs that have survived, a desire for publicity, an intention to use the evidentiary power of a photograph (Barthes 1981)[3] to affirm (*this happened! These wild animals were there! I, we, were there!*), motivated the production of these images. Elucidating *whose* desires these photographs manifest, incite, or provoke, however, is not always clear (if it ever can be); but it is part of this chapter's inquiry. As what follows hopefully conveys, elucidating the conditions in which these images live, wax and wane tells us something of the delicate balance of intents that shape the history of the circus, as profession, as cultural form, and as a popular form mostly disinvested by bearers and tokens of cultural cachet.

[3] In *Camera Lucida* (first translated in 1981), Barthes notes the indexical quality of photographs ("The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent" (1981: 34)) and the certainty that characterizes it as a form of representation ("the Photograph's essence is to ratify what it represents." (ibid.: 86) "Every photograph is a certificate of presence" (ibid.: 87)).

Older generations of circus artists (people past 40 in 2020, a majority of the people I talked to for my research project) report that on the occasion of openings[4] in new camps, the circus owner would hire a local or an itinerant photographer to take photographs inside the circus. Some portraits were also regularly taken in studios. In addition, many photographs were taken on touristic occasions. The photographs would be printed, distributed, or acquired by the people from a circus based on demand. One former artist, Kareem, tells me some photographs were distributed on behalf of the owner to the employees: this may explain why everyone who owns developed circus photographs, and many of the professionals who keep some on their phone, also have one or several pictures of a company owner (Figure 33). The owners, or the managers on behalf of an owner, also provided artists with pictures in which they were featured. As Kareem explains, the owner paid the photographer an overall fee for pictures and development. "You didn't have to ask… if there was a photograph with me in it, they would give it to me. They would do the same for all the artists."[5]

These regimented photographic practices mean that the lives of those who were a part of the company are unusually well documented, exceptionally so in fact, if compared to the norm in the localities and socio-economic backgrounds of the people the companies recruited from. Prior to the rise of digital photography, on-site photography remained reserved to a few and special occasions, and portable cameras never became the endemic commodities they were in other parts of the world.

[4] The first show given in a new place where the circus has installed the big top and the camp.
[5] Interview with Kareem K. (Thalassery, 2020)

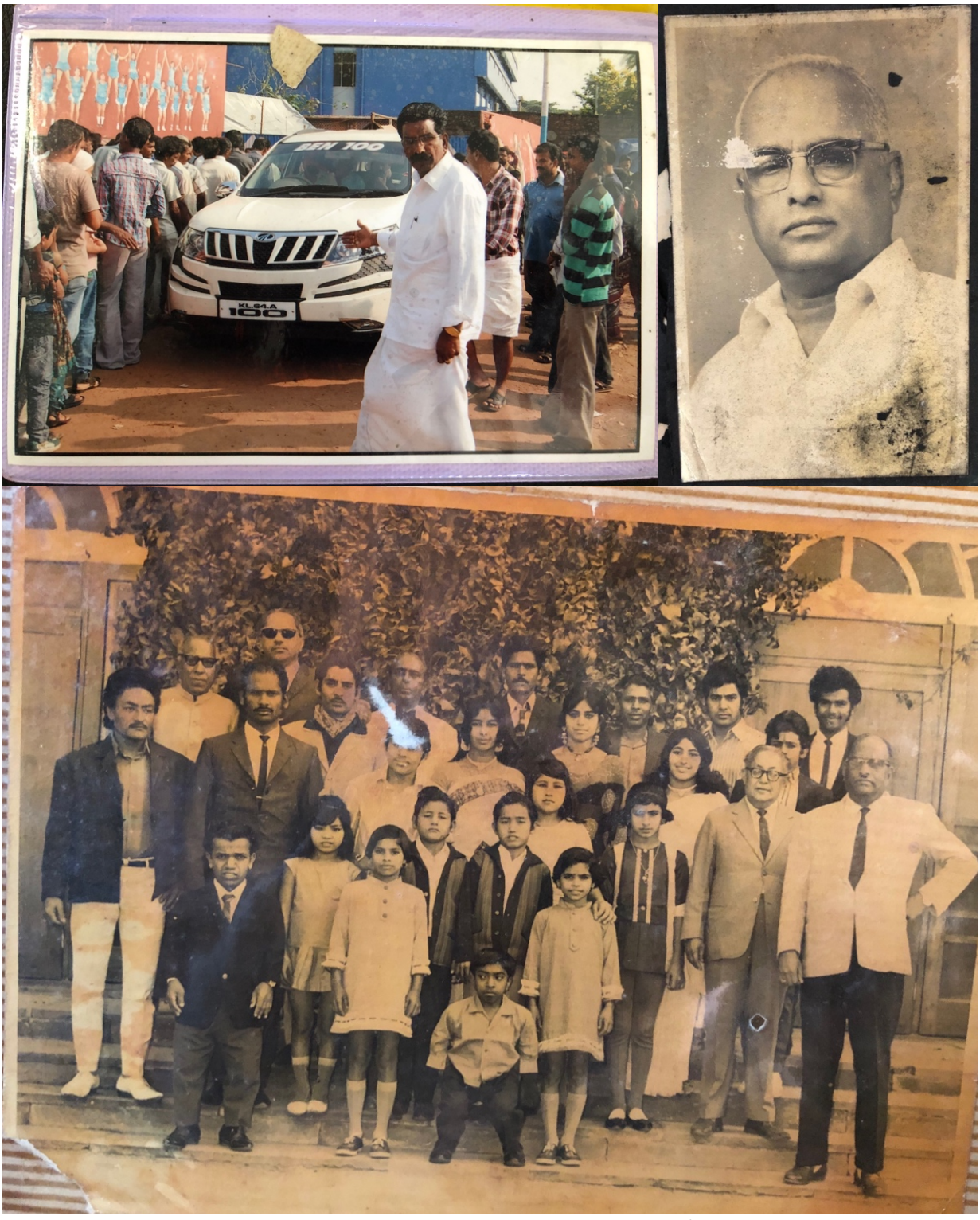

Figure 34. Photographs of owners (all wearing white shirts, munthu and/or jackets, formal wear evocative of the dress of officials, politicians, Kerala big men and actors; 1950 to 2000) seen in albums of circus professionals (Thalassery and Palakkad, photographed with permission, 2019-2020).

Note the different situations in which they were taken, representative of different contexts for circus images: the studio, the camp (as site for a 'function' hosted by the owner, who is seen here ushering in a politician who has come to inaugurate the circus camp in a new town), the circus (as worksite; the circus owner stands in the foreground, with a white jacket).

Figure 35. The Jumbo Circus seen from the street (place unknown; Mid-1960s). Artist's personal collection, Thalassery, photographed with permission, 2019.

The circus photographs owned by Kerala-based families, spanning eight decades, preserve the impressions of quotidian matters that would not have been captured were it not for the peculiar commissions of these businesses: the ageing of a person camp after camp, year after year, the birth of a tiger cub in a circus compound, the rise and fall of the bell bottom pants trend for gents between 1970 and 1985, what a busy street looked like midday in a North Indian city, in the middle of the 1960s (Figure 34).

The fact that circus photographs constitute a documentary corpus might seem to be just an artifact of my research method and interests. But their coherence as a material ensemble is also significant for those who have them, as is evidenced, for example, by the fact that people often keep more pictures than just the ones in which they are featured. It is part of being a circus artist, or former circus worker, to own photographs that also document *life in the circus*. Whether retrospective, or felt in the moment, the carefully assembled albums of some circus artists suggests that these material

Figure 36. A flood in the circus camp. Date and place unknown, Artist's personal collection, photographed with permission, Thalassery 2018.

impressions might have helped create something permanent in a period of their live otherwise fleeting, marked by the blur of continuous performances, camp life, movement from camp to camp. Ambudjam, a former artist now settled in Palakkad district, once showed me a set of ID pictures, dating from the time, in the 1960s, when travel documents were being prepared for the company girls of the Great Eastern Circus (including for herself). With their new passports and visas, the girls portrayed in the ID pictures traveled along with the company on a *two-year* tour to Malaysia and Singapore (five or six other photographs in her album commemorate this journey, at odds with her succinct, but poignant summary of the emotions this period calls back to her mind: missing home and the impossibility of communicating with relatives from abroad). The album where the IDs are kept also contains photographs of the owner of the circus where her husband was once employed, in which he is posing with a film actor and the circus manager of the time. Keeping photographs exceeding those of direct biographical significance is common among circus artists, so much so that it is expected of co-workers, of former colleagues also enveloped by the Malabari circus' collective framework of memory. During my conversations with them, circus professionals often took the initiative to refer me to someone else, who might still have images that they had lost, or who might be able to share photographs from before or after their time in a given company – evidencing their awareness that a corpus exists beyond each individual album and set of preserved pictures.

One striking aspect of this corpus is its elusive quality. One can never claim to have conducted an exhaustive survey of it, as its precise bounds and extent continue to change without any overseer: the owners and company clerks who might at one point have kept track of the photographs being distributed are long gone, and so are many who once owned the images. The disappearance of a photograph soon after the disappearance of those contained in them is a common occurrence. Even in the private collections that I was authorized to consult, the subject of many photographs has almost disappeared: the state of decay of many circus photographs, compared to other household photographic staples, is another feature granting them the integrity of a corpus. Because the photographs of the circus are scattered across private collections, they depend on, and express the consequences of the private modes of preservation people devised. As such, the decay of these photographs does not amount to a loss of information. It is, in fact, part of the information these images (and photographic objects), when considered as a corpus, contain. Decay plays a significant role in the practices of remembering and placing the past in relation to the present for the owners of these images. Practices of recollecting are bound up with material artifacts such as photographs, texts, or other objects, with the "prosthetics of the inside" (Derrida 1996:19) in which memory impresses. Among them, photography is particularly significant for professionals who are more proficient at visually perceiving things than reading about them. A large number of circus professionals (especially among the circus artists) have only benefitted from a few years of formal education. Some among them can read or write in Malayalam and sometimes Hindi, but their familiarity with literature produced from or about the circus is limited. Meanwhile, it is fair to say that as people who have performed continuously for many years, trained for and choreographed performances, designed and stitched costumes, conceived and built props for performances, most circus professionals possess sharp visual acumen and are often skilled at honing and perfecting the

materials they come across. This gives a particular significance to the decay of the photographs they have kept as souvenirs.

Figure 37. Examples of damaged photographs (1980s & 1950s). Artists' personal collection, Thalassery Municipality, photographed with permission, 2019.

Decay sets in in the various parts of the corpus through the ordinary causes that affect photographic images in tropical climate: the blurring and disappearance of the subject due to humidity, color fading, brown stains that appear on the paper and compromise the clarity of the revealed image, mold that consumes it *("puuppal adichu")*[6] folds in the paper that slowly tear it apart, etc. In some cases, these actual signs of decay lead to the neglect of the photographs by those who own them:

[6] Interview with the World Circus family, Thalassery Municipality, 2019.

what they continue to reveal is not enough to make them valuable to the eyes of their keepers. As such, they are liable to more neglect, and progressively, these parts of the corpus further deteriorate.

Circus photographs are not treated in the same way as other photographs commonly found in Indian households. Because of the specificity of what they represent, they rarely play the role of memorial portraits for a family's ancestors (almost systematically framed and hung in a public part of an Indian home). Such portraits ask for "a hieratic clarity – a full-face image with no shadow whose physical recognition is the starting point for the recollection of that individual's life." (Pinney 1997:200). The photographs taken in circus companies, while they are sometimes stern, almost always pursue other goals that distract from this commemorative function. They do not have the same symbolic significance as photographs taken during weddings and often compiled into an album; and they are not *adorable* like the studio photographs of young children that are sometimes kept loose in a living room showcase. They do not fit that well into wallets or purses either.

Sometimes they succeed in passing off in these ordinary photographic roles, for instance if a person or family has been in the circus long enough for significant family occasions to happen there (wedding, birth, funeral). Their usage in these more common functions effectively preserves them from deterioration. Then they may get framed, hung up on a wall, stored in photo albums, or laminated. In the tropical climate of Kerala, where photographs are continuously threatened by fast, but preventable degradation, this amounts to preservation. It is the case, for instance, of some pictures recording circus weddings. Parvati, a circus owner and former trainer, showed me such pictures, which have remained intact, preserved in a folded plastic bag. She saw herself as an important actor in fixing the wedding of a Tamil woman she had trained from childhood, and a

Nepali man, both artists in the circus she runs, and in a few of the pictures remaining from this occasion she and her husband could be seen posing on both sides of the couple, as parents might in such group pictures.[7]

Figure 38. Portrait of Professor Damoodharan, owner of the Kamala Circus, with Jawaharlal Nehru (My photograph, Thalassery 2020).

The *tharavadu* (familial compound or ancestral home) of the deceased Kamala circus owner Professor Damoodharan, who passed away in 1968, likewise still features a circus image used as an ancestor portrait. It is an atypical one, but it has the compelling asset of featuring the Professor,

[7] Interview with the Royal Circus family, Mahe, June 2019.

owner of the "second largest circus in the world" in his time, alongside Pandit Nehru, both men respectfully – hieratically – greeting each other.

Most of these photographs though, fail to find a space in the photographic imaginary that gives images significance and, in practice, the possibility to endure. Vicariously, this inevitable yet manageable process of deterioration reveals the unequal degrees of care with which different photographs are treated, and the extent to which people seek or avoid remembering and thinking with them.

The Hands of Relatives

The climate and the contingent methods of storage are not the main factors determining the uneven state of the photographic corpus that emerges during my visits to circus artists. On rare instances do people find themselves living alone at their home, that is, where paper photographs (and heirlooms to which they might be productively compared) are kept. The homes of Northern Kerala I visit host people related over two, if not three, consecutive generations. As Malayalis now very rarely join circuses, the people who have had circus careers all belong to one of the older generations. When they have preserved photographs, these collections, rarely integrated with other domestic photographic possessions, are nonetheless not usually kept secret or privately stored by the one they belong to.[8] Much of what pertains to the house belongs to everyone (to varying degrees) – especially

[8] With regard to digital photographs: the most contemporary ones belong to people who are currently working in circus company, and thus not at home. The status of these photographs is different as they commemorate events occurring in daily life (at the circus) rather than evidence of one's past life at the circus. Photographs of photographs kept on the phone are another matter, though: many artists in their 40s and 50s (2021-2021), whose circus careers have ended, preserve their favorite images in this manner, as a sort of more private record, that can be perused, or shared privately

the possessions of women. According to local norms regulating familial ownership, the state of circus photographs depends on familial decisions, conscious or not, concerted or not, on the curation and general management of these images.

Figure 39. Album page damaged by a child. Artist's personal collection. Thalassery, photographed with permission, 2019.

with close friends more tuned in with the uses and implications of photography mediated by texting platforms and social media than the family taken as a unit.

Therefore, the way the photographs are considered by a circle of close relatives, the way they come to be meaningful to them, often determines their physical condition. The time when images processed from films were the object of the suspicion that they contained the soul of dead people,[9] or when they were strongly associated to funeral practices,[10] has passed (in fact, it must have subsided particularly early among circus professionals). Nonetheless, as objects that express something of the character of the relative they represent, they deviate from the inter-ocular field formed by the typical pictures one finds in an Indian home, and are thereby potentially vibrant, troublesome objects for a family's biographical consciousness, reputation, and honor.

Since its emergence in India, the circus has not benefitted from a successful reevaluation that could have toned down its reputation as a dishonorably Western, presumably exploitative, promiscuous and altogether suspect socio-economic and artistic realm.[11] While there are things about the circus which are almost consensually pride-worthy in Kerala, and Indian, society – the physical feats achieved in the circus; the visits and association with famous actors and public figures; even the fact that the trade shaped strong women figures, who compete with men in surprising ways, is recognized as something noteworthy – none of these claims to fame equate to claims to respectability, and a relative's circus career is more often than not an unusual, potentially embarrassing fact that must be accommodated, along with its material artifacts, in a personal account of one's familial history. In a section of *A Middle-Brow Art* based on fieldwork with families

[9] In *Camera Indica*, discussing the time of D.G. Phalke's photographic work, Chris Pinney notes: "It was felt by many people that having a photograph taken was as inauspicious as insuring one's own life: both were intimations of and provocations to mortality." (1997:92). K. M. Madhusudhanan-directed film *Bioscope* (2008) also features some of the fears film technologies inspired in Malabar. Cf. also the Tamil comedy *Mundasupatti* directed by Ram Kumar (2014), which evokes some of the beliefs and fears associated to photography in a Tamil village.
[10] On post-mortem photography, cf. Pinney (1997:138) and Maniyarasan (2014).
[11] cf. Chapter 3 and 4.

working as peasants interviewed in France in the 1960s, Bourdieu expresses his interpretation of the aims of their familial photographic records:

> "The images of the past arranged in chronological order, the logical order of social memory, evoke and communicate the memory of events which deserve to be preserved because the group sees a factor of unification in the monuments of its past unity or - which amounts to the same thing – because it draws confirmation of its present unity from its past: this is why there is nothing more decent, reassuring, and edifying than a family album; all the unique experiences that give the individual memory the particularity of a secret are banished from it, and the common past, or perhaps, the highest common denominator of the past, has all the clarity of a faithfully visited gravestone." (Bourdieu 1996:30-31)

In India, where the trend of family albums has not spread as widely as it had in France by the 1960s, heirlooms, jewels, saris, official documents of various sorts, and photographs (often kept in a bedroom almirah), perform a similar role for families that have had the means to preserve such possessions. And circus photographs, in what they suggest of "the particular adventures that enclose individual remembrance in the particularity of a secret" also threaten the "lowest denominator of the past." In the interactions prompted by my research (explicitly presented as being about the circus), this often translated into a former artist's reluctance to show me old photographs in the company of their relatives (especially in the case of women), or a refusal voiced by the relatives themselves.

An acknowledgment that someone owns photographs but that they are not fit to be seen by a stranger would unfold more or less as follows. Upon a visit to the home of three women (two sisters and their cousin) who had been circus artists in a male relative's circus (let's call it World Circus), I asked whether they owned photographs of themselves at the time when they were performing. The son of one of them, also present, answered me that they had many, but that they would need time to sort through them before showing anything to me. "Performing photos, you need?" I replied that I would be happy to see anything they could show me that relates to the time when they owned

World Circus. The man then disappeared into another room. The atmosphere was tense. He re-appeared briefly after and declared: "these are old pictures, very old ones… the albums are filled with the mold that is eating them up…" In unison with one of his aunts, he concluded: "it's all gone now, all gone."[12] This was not the only time I was told that the photographs of circus were once numerous, but that they were "all gone now,"[13] or kept in an ancestral home,[14] or an almirah for which my interlocutor had lost the key.[15] These latter circumstances signal that the photographs were in some ways valuable, but that this very value placed them out of circulation, safely stored away from newcomers' glances.

The disappearance of photographs, or their state of advanced decay, also signal that circus photographs have shifting statuses within a familial trajectory. Vimala's collection is an interesting example in this regard. Other interlocutors had recommended that I meet Vimala, or "Hippo Vimala," as she is known locally, because she was famous for her item with a circus hippopotamus: everybody, it seemed, remembered the item by a picture of it, which had been featured in newspapers at the time, and then preserved in some people's image collections. The first time I met her, at a time when her son and his wife (pregnant at the time) were at home, she showed me a handful of eye-catching pictures that were displayed in her living room's showcase, including the hippo picture. She explained to me that she once had more photographs, but like Kareem whom I mentioned earlier, she had given the albums to her son to play with when he was a child. This would have been after she had left the circus and moved back to northern Kerala, to her in-laws' house,

[12] Interview with the World Circus family, Thalassery Municipality, 2019.
[13] Interview references: World Circus family; "Hippo" Vimala (Thalassery 2019); meeting with Rajani, Priya and Chandini (Dharmmadam 2019).Vimala
[14] Interview with former owner Jimmy (Ernakulam 2019)
[15] Interview with Geetha, daughter of a circus owner (Kozhikkode 2020).

shortly after getting married to a circus manager. Yet, I eventually got to see the rest of her remarkable collection. On my next visit, which happened to be at a time when her son was at work, she excavated a damaged album from an almirah in her bedroom. It contained an impressive collection that testified to her success as an artist and adhesion to the modernist aesthetic and values associated with circus life. There were numerous pictures of her, posing on an off day wearing stylish sunglasses and sari or near a recognizable North Indian monument, cross-dressing with another female friend from the circus, standing, in a fitted and sequined costume, on top of an elephant, leading a parade, among others.

On my first visit, the son had closely supervised our interaction, and the pictures I had seen were not indicative of the many years Vimala has spent in the circus, especially before her marriage. The son had made mention of his father's suicide, brought about by an unsolvable debt to the circus company he worked for after being swindled by wild animal traders in West Bengal. While Vimala's collection reveals nothing of the tragedy, I suspect that the periods of neglect it had gone through had something to do with the family, and especially the son (working at a small cement shop nearby, and married to a woman who worked as a schoolteacher – both very much uninvolved with the circus), putting this episode of his parents' life behind him. Undergoing the life of their owner, these photographs had lived as publicity, personal records, toys for children, and shelved reminders of a business that had become synonymous, in the perspective of this circus professionals' son, now in charge and about to become a father, with the disappearance of his own father.

Discomfort tied to the presentation of photographs to a stranger, when it surfaces (mostly in the presence of relatives) and when it dissipates, is an indicator of the ways in which the itinerant circus

life goes against ideal lower middle-class intergenerational histories, and of the way family values in Kerala inhibit the assertion of alternative narratives. This story also expresses well why one would be remiss to frame the reluctance to preserve or show photographs evidencing a connection to the circus as only a problem of honor. As the story of Vimala's son shows, what can be understood as a quest for respect is deeply entwined with a family's subjective experience of fortune and bad luck. Families that subjectively associate their relative happiness, freedom, wealth, etc. with the fact of having a relation to the circus profession behave differently from families who see their current misfortune, financial or social difficulties as interwoven with it. The lines that can be drawn in this regard have to do with individual trajectories for which there is no need to establish a typology. What matters is that these forms of self-appraisal and perceptions have an impact on the way people resort to photographs to speak of a moment in their lives, and on their willingness, if doubt lingers, to put their photo collections in the destructive hands of playful children.

Eidetic Memories of Labor

> "Industry first conquered the field [of photography] for itself with shots for visiting cards, whose first manufacturer, tellingly, became a millionaire. It would be no surprise if the photographic practices, which only now, for the first time, direct our attention back to this preindustrial heyday, stood in a subterranean connection with the paroxysms of capitalist industry."
>
> (Benjamin [1931] 2015: 60-61)

Figure 40. Trapeze artists posing. Late 1990s, place unknown. Artist's personal collection, Thalassery, photographed with permission, 2019.

Although circus images are more endangered than the portraits that are the deliberate production of a family's ancestry, there is a competing ideology to that of familial legacy and honor which also protect these photographs, even as they remain and must find purpose in a domestic realm in which they are not wholeheartedly welcome. Imagined in relation to a broader professional community, extending past the familial home, the narratives securing its worth and their keepsakes, these pictures colored by the glamour circulated by company advertisement evidence something rare and impressive about the people featured in them. As Bourdieu et al. note on the practices revolving around familial photographs in France in the 1960s: "photography, which substitutes to the fugacious uncertainty of subjective impressions, the definitive certainty of an objective image, is

predisposed to be used as a trophy."[16] Perhaps this is why, if unattended by relatives who might be burdened by these evocations, professionals also take pleasure in the display of their collection and, tellingly, in reminiscing about the moments when the photographs they have kept were taken.[17]

When I ask Margaret, a former artist in her late 60s, active in the circus from her birth in the 1950s to the mid-70s, about the logistics of picture-taking in circus companies, the very first thing she evokes is the excitement she felt when the photographer would come to the circus. "I remember those day –the big flash light! when they needed extra light, the big flash used to come you know, with the camera. I don't know: do *you* know? Not like today, [that was] ah, 60-70 years ago." She gives more details about the photographer's coming: "There was a time when circus people used to tell the photographers from the shop to come and take photo of all of us. And they used to come and take photo-photo-photo. There was always a cameraman everywhere [we went]." Margaret remembers the equipment of the photographers who would come to take portraits in the circus companies she used to work with between the late 1950s and the 1970s: the flashes that they used, and for which they needed to change the bulbs after each use. She also remembers their competence at doing touchups of the negatives "with little pens, little brushes." Although her father owned his own camera in those days, something exceptional at the time (especially in the circus profession), most of the photographs she has shared with me, as photographs of photographs circulated via Whatsapp, appear to have been taken by a professional photographer, which demonstrates her

[16] "[L]a photographie qui substitute à l'incertitude fugace des impressions subjective, la certitude definitive d'une image objective, est predisposée à servir de trophée." (Bourdieu 1965 :48)

[17] In Bourdieu (1965: 48): "Exceptionnelle, elle saisit des objets d'exception, les "bons moments" qu'elle transforme en "bons souvenirs." Rituellement associée à la fête, cérémonie familiale ou reunion amicable, elle aiguise le sentiment de la fete comme moment exceptionnel, en lui accordant ce sacrifice d'exception. Elle est déja vécue comme elle sera regardée et le bon moment s'apparaît mieux comme tel parce qu'elle le revele a lui meme comme bon souvenir."

preference for these "official," and often beautified photographs taken in the circus, on the initiative of companies.[18]

Perhaps because of the elusive quality of what the circus sells, the fact that it is an unusually mercantile performance form in India's cultural landscape, and at odds with the ideologies of transmission that form the backbone of many performance traditions in India, capitalizing on the evidentiary power of photography has been intensely sought-after recourse for circus owners to shape the public-facing representations of circus companies. The ideological conceit according to which photography captures reality models the imagination of the circus. The production of fresh images evidences ever-renewed spectacle, prompting potential audiences to buy a ticket to attend the show. This impetus for the work of studio photographers visiting circus companies generated a trail of images that are now found in (or filtered out of) the collections of performers and retired professionals.

Although they do not always represent the artists during their performance, in part because of technological limitations (tied to lighting, available shutter speeds), most photographs give the impression that they were taken right before a show: artists stand in their costumes, with smiles and makeup on their face, sometimes next to the animals who will perform with them. Alluring artist shots could serve as advertisement: they could be touched up, developed, reproduced, aggrandized,

[18] Phone conversation with Margaret, February 17,th 2021.

cut and pasted, arranged in photomontages for posters, or mounted alongside text in a brochure or a newspaper article.

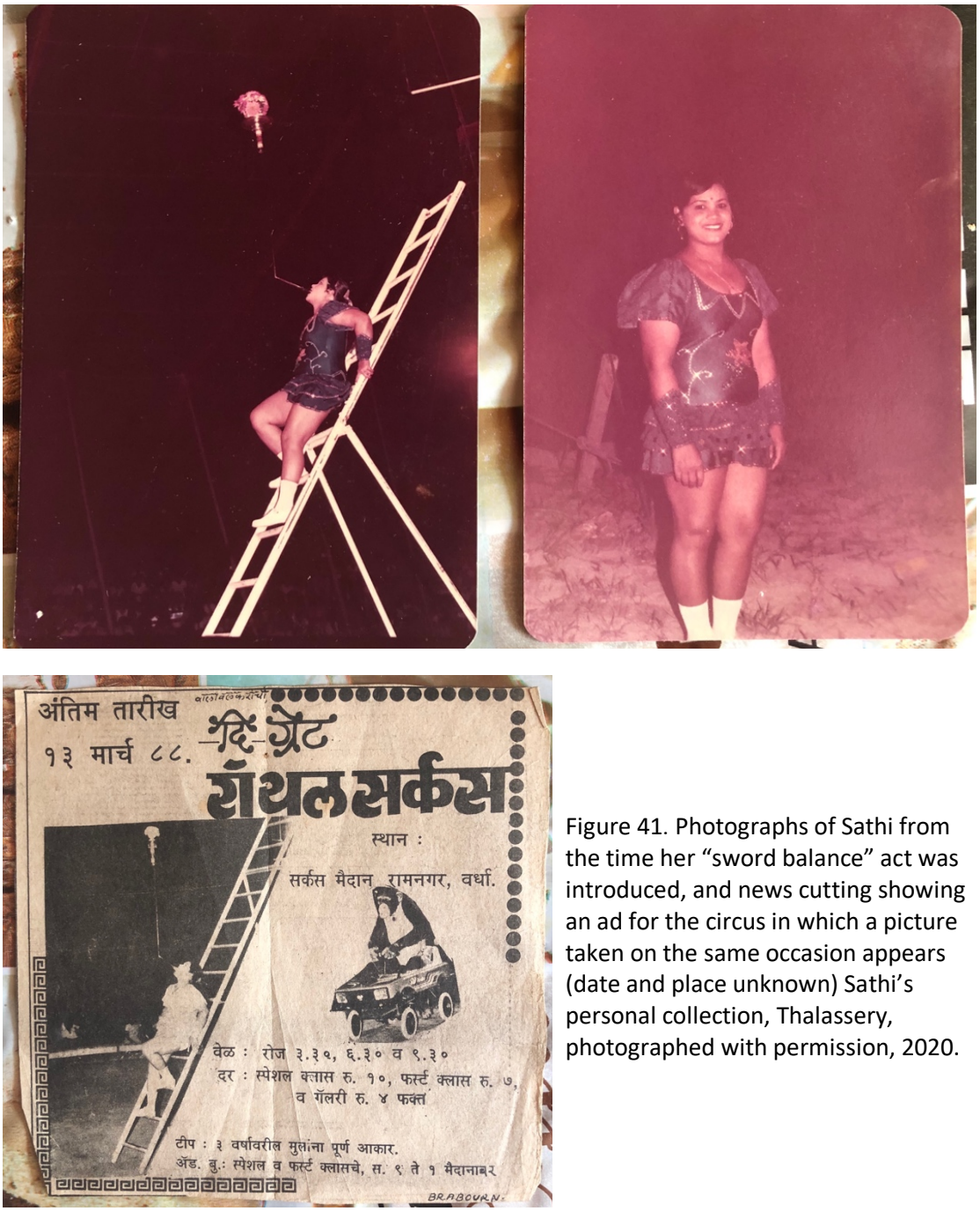

Figure 41. Photographs of Sathi from the time her "sword balance" act was introduced, and news cutting showing an ad for the circus in which a picture taken on the same occasion appears (date and place unknown) Sathi's personal collection, Thalassery, photographed with permission, 2020.

In the albums of circus artists (young and old) that become repositories of such images, photographs that are not actively working to promote the circus, or a specific circus company, are

exceptional. Not all of them achieve the attraction sought after for reproduced advertisement pictures. It is enough that they show artists, the compound, the troupe, the animals, to publicize, and thereby always promote, the circus company in other ways.[19] For instance, even a not-optimally framed or lit up photograph can evidence an artist's skill, or the lavishness of a costume used in the ring. At the time of their development, such pictures could be used to show others what was done, or the possibilities for training inside a company. Decades later, the *circus-like* quality of these visuals still dwells in the altered copies and draws in viewers, *spectators* from another era.

When privately owned by the person in the photograph, circus photographs serve to show potential employers what an artist is capable of. This is particularly true for animal trainers. Santhosh, an accomplished circus artist and animal trainer whose experiences range from being a circus tamer to working with dolphins in a water park in Malaysia to owning a pet shop, once explained to me that it is thanks to applications including pictures of him demonstrating his skills with the wild cats he worked with at a prestigious Indian circus company that he secured jobs requiring the same skills overseas.[20] Photographs buttress assertions of expertise, constituting a largely informal economic field, facilitating the circulation of workers across companies and businesses. This role in turn defines shared photographic conventions (of posing, of sartorial choices, of optimal depth of field and shutter speed) by which competence is exhibited.

[19] This does not mean that circus photographs cannot be framed in narratives that can undermine the ideology of glamour associated with the circus and denounce aspects of the industry. As I try to show in chapter 2 and 3, the aesthetics of the circus is particularly prone to moral inversion by external actors. In the context of the retired professionals' photographic reminiscences, though, the photographs always testify to the exceptional – more precisely, the distinctly *circus-like* – character of life in the circus.

[20] Interview with Santhosh, Thalassery, August 2019.

Other uses can be thought of: the photographs of company girls and company children, posing in front of their tents in the compound, well behaved, in their white Sunday dresses, could have been shared with families as an evidence that their children were being properly taken care of in the

Figure 42. A set of photographs shown to me by a former circus artist active in the circus between the late 1950s and the early 1970s. The photographs feature her as a young woman among the company girls (bottom left, top right); a younger cousin who was in the circus along with her (bottom right) and her future husband, employed in another circus, among circus staffers (top left).

Taken together, this circus artist's photographs paint a pleasant and dignified picture of life in the circus, evoking friendship among the company girls, performances in distinguished locations, and tourism. Artist's personal collection, Palakkad district, photographed with permission, 2019.

company. Group pictures, on the eve of a pilgrimage, or taken by a site photographer on a tourist visit, commemorate the places circus professionals visited; their diversity and number emphasized the cosmopolitan and exciting (but elegant, and respectable) life that circus people, in both high and

low positions, led. These purposes combined could justify the existence of a majority of the existing printed photographs owned by my interlocutors.

The way their usage might be read as professionally strategic blends with the way printed photographs are more commonly understood to display advantageously something about the photograph's subject. As writer and artist David Bate notes concerning family pictures, "such photography offers the (family) institution (…) a whole new reservoir for memories." (Bate 2010: 247). The existence of such "archives," which "often overlap or even conflict with public media archives" (247), while offering new support for histories and memories created from the bottom up, is however, also encased in economic and political logics that introduce external controls over the remembering practices of the people who remember by them. The restricted access to film photography, and the costs of developing photographs in India (let alone that of portable cameras), has meant both that photographs were taken on the managers' and owners' initiative, and that the occasions which were deemed worthy of being recorded were also mostly decided according to their interests. They also had a privileged access and potentially a power of censure, over the negatives owned by the photographers, in virtue of having commissioned them.[21] In fact, much like the uses of family portraitures analyzed in the 1960s by Bourdieu, professional circus photography appears to have been codified with an eye to the exceptional nature of situations worth recording:

> "Nothing *may* be photographed apart from that which *must* be photographed. The ceremony may be photographed because it is outside of the daily routine, and must be photographed because it realizes the image that the group seeks to give of itself as a group." (Bourdieu 1996: 24)

[21] There is possibly yet another use to keeping a visual track of all circus workers. As Kareem, very active with the circus union in its early days in the 1970s, explains, it was impossible for him to find a job in a company after the managers of the place he worked at had identified him, because "everybody knew who he was." To bust unionization efforts, the circulation of a photograph could be more useful than that of a name.

The fact that circus albums as they exist now are almost entirely constituted of photographs that represent occasions outside of everyday life, whether they are photographs of functions, or records of one's glamorous embodiment of a social role occupied in a company, has an effect on how the profession is remembered and generally conceived. David Bate, dwelling with the implications of *Archive Fever*, wonders: "how do we relate our capacity for natural memory to the function of photographs as "artificial memories", internalized prosthetic devices for memory?" (2010: 251). One of the conclusions that he reaches, relevant here, is that "the image is used as a space, a location for memory-traces." (2010: 253). That circus professionals are equipped with these photographs as mnemonic devices bounds the sort of accounts that circus professionals can tell about (their) circus life. It also influences the way photographs in the circus, both analog and digital are taken in the present. It over-determines this visual space. And as some artists evocatively phrase it: "circus life… it's beautiful from the outside, but it's not the same from inside."[22]

The tension between the intensity and dangers of the physical labors endured to produce the circus show and the seduction of the aesthetic and values this entertainment promotes seems condensed in the recollections of circus professionals, who use company-produced photographs to illustrate to others (but also, indirectly, over time, to themselves) what their careers entailed. The absence of accidents, injuries, unhappiness, and wreckage from the developed photos is, however, not specific to the circus profession, nor does anything indicate that it was consciously crafted by the circus' ruling class. The circus professionals I met, even the most politically active among them, have not pointed it out, nor have the few politicians who have made exploitative practices in the circus part of their agenda. The access to and control of photographic equipment, especially non-digital

[22] Said in English. Interview with the World Circus family, Thalassery Municipality, 2019.

equipment, especially in less privileged milieus in South Asia, has, for a long time, been reserved for special occasions, and it has been the privilege of those in a favorable social and economic situation to use these tools comprehensively. This conditions photographic production much beyond the confines of the circus industry. Since most people look at photographs to inform their recollections and share them with others, it gives these images an often under-attended disposition to passively select and filter the fleeting recollections that go on to define what things were, how they felt, and how a profession, a practice, comes to be collectively defined.

Curatorial Principles

> "The relation between the three parties involved in the photographic act – the photographed person, the photographer, and the spectator – are not mediated through a sovereign power and are not limited to the bounds of a nation-state or an economic contract. The users of photography thus reemerge as people who are not totally identified with the powers that govern them and who have new means to look and show its deeds, as well, and eventually to address this power and negotiate with it – citizen and noncitizen alike." (Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, 22).

Similarly to the ways in which photography-based accounts of one's life in the circus survive and occasionally escape familial policing, the company owners' initiatives and economic investments in producing the photographs does not amount to a univocal corporate control over individual's reminiscence or understanding of their life in the circus. In the absence of broadcasted documentaries, popular literature, continuous press coverage shaping a [general] stock historical narrative of the profession, a history of the Indian circus is primarily manifest in the aggregated accounts of those who worked in circus companies. In these accounts photographs constitute the shared milestones of as many different stories as there are "users of photography," primarily here, professionals who are willing to acknowledge, in any manner, their participation in this story, and those who attend to these assertions (romantically, scholastically, politically, nostalgically, etc).

Figure 43. Practices of curation and framing for circus photographs. On the left, a retired artist points at her younger self doing embroidery in the women's compound of a circus company (Photographed with permission, Thalassery, 2020). On the right, a reconverted circus trainer now working in the film industry features a photograph (of a developed photograph) of him with circus lions in a circus company he used to work for (Excerpted and anonymized from publicly accessible Facebook page, May 2022).

Albums and the practices that lead to their constitution – whether they are physical objects preserved from climatic conditions and the hands of relatives, or digitalized photographic bundles – foreground the curatorial agency of their beholders. Owning and maintaining a photographic collection, saving Xerox copies of a photograph published in the newspaper,[23] using photographs to evidence one's circus abilities – all these practices first presuppose, in the professional context of the circus, a determination on the part of the professional to obtain images. Margaret, a former item dancer and polyvalent artist, mentions that photographs taken by photographers had to be paid for, since the studios owned the negatives and charged for their development.[24] She explains to me that company girls, whose salaries were directly sent to their parents, had to bargain for the managers to get them photographs in which they were featured from the studio: companies wouldn't give them any picture, "unless one or two girls were clever, and said: 'yes we would like to have it to frame it and to put in our house.'"[25] Vicariously then, the photographs, promotional documents that have endured in the households of circus professionals signal an unwavering intention to own and preserve evidence of one's professional accomplishments, one's stylishness in a particular costume, a particularly good holiday in a city faraway from home.

[23] Photocopying technology has existed in India since the mid-sixties; Xerox is widely used as a synonym for photocopying in India. Shops offering photocopying services are a common feature of a town's layout. While this service is common, it requires an initiative to go and photocopy something which testifies to the interest of circus artists in the posterity of the newspaper articles that record their name or image, even in the context of a generalized lack of formal education among circus lower-ranking professionals.

[24] This scenario is confirmed by the archive of the STAR project, gathering negatives from Studios across the territory corresponding to the Madras Presidency (following an initiative by anthropologist Zoë Headley), and also by Chris Pinney's work with photographers in UP. (Pinney 1997).

[25] Phone conversation with Margaret, February 17,th 2021. That photographs typically had to be purchased is confirmed by the fact that many of the women who were company girls [as minors, whose salary went almost entirely to their families at home] in the 1980s have no pictures to account for their practice. Many other people have but a few photographs of their early days, especially those who were not part of family troupes – while they nonetheless acknowledge that there were many photographs taken of them.

The motivations for these archival efforts vary, but they are almost always sheltered by the divergent aesthetic ideology of the circus. This ideology exists because circus photographs are a corpus (all keepers are aware that there are other people who have such photographs too) and because there exists a community for which they are meaningful outside the family. Whether they are recording small feats (training a child to perform an item, acquiring a new skill, even one outside of the circus, like in the case of Sunitha, who has preserved pictures of the days when she got a tailoring degree and opened a stitching shop) or extraordinary ones (being the first performer of an item in India, being singled out to lead the parade in a large city, becoming distinguished with a prize for excellence at a particular item, being featured in a movie, or being active in the circus union), being part of a community of artists virtually conjures an echo chamber for these values which, while not being completely aligned with the ideology of the circus, derive from it. The history people choose to tell with photographs, in its repetitions, its implicit connections with the accounts of others, its elisions and wild divergences also, continuously reshuffles the "official" history of the circus contained by the commissioned camerawork, foregrounding how it could simply not happen without the subjects featured in the photographs.

The Art of Posing

Since smartphones became common household goods in India, the ability to take photographs in the circus has ceased to be the privy of photographers hired by circus companies. It is still complicated for artists to gather pictures of themselves taken during their performance, and they frequently asked me to take videos and photographs of them in the ring during my visits to circus companies in 2019-2020. But a majority of current professionals in circus companies routinely take pictures of themselves – alone or in groups – to share with their friends, relatives, on Facebook,

Whatsapp, Likee or other social media. The publication of photographs and images on such platforms has now become the most common form of circulation of images evidencing professional skills as well.

In the time I spent focusing on the biographical trajectories of professionals in the circus, no fieldwork visit went by without my interlocutors having us pose for a souvenir cellphone picture, commemorating for me the time when I met them and, for them, the time when a Malayalam-speaking foreigner interested in the circus came by. Now most often equipped with phone cameras, circus professionals do not waste an occasion to commemorate an encounter with a group portrait, even when the possibility to generate images is constant. Spending time and taking pictures of and with artists illuminated for me their agency in the framing of photographic images, even before any image is created.

On the occasion of a shoot I had organized with my photographer friend Anjali at a circus set near Thiruvananthapuram, we spent time with each artist and staff member of the troupe, discussing with them how they would like to pose. Their suggestions included remarkable specificity about how they should ideally stand, pose, in what clothes and with what makeup on. On occasions, they intervened directly with Anjali's camerawork, advising her to foreground the prop that defined their circus item, focus on a part of their body, or modify the lighting to better capture their expression. This experience evidenced that the genres of circus photography are co-constituted by the profession as a collective, manifested even outside of company incitements. Their conventions were certainly instigated by company owners, perhaps under the influence of other companies locally and overseas. But they are taken up by the circus artists. It is through these co-constituted stylistic and regulatory

choices concerning the way they are featured in photographs at or about the circus, that an image of the circus is formed. The hardly distinguishable overlaps between circus photography and other photographic genres of portrait photography in India (under the ongoing influence of studio photography, marriage albums and ancestor portraits) shape the ways the photographic imaginary figures an individual. This representation frequently veers toward a consensual image of the individual at his or her best, evoking through an object or clothing their profession, the talent or event that has occasioned the photograph, as good-looking and dignified as they can be while mindfully and subtly indicating their age.

The aesthetic control of photographic opportunities by those they feature also borrows from other pervasive canons, evidencing, vicariously, the sheltering character of circus photography as a standardized set of tropes and conventions. In a now permanently closed circus where I briefly stayed in 2019, I became acquainted with 'Rita from Goa,' a circus cyclist in her early forties who used to perform the finale of the show, a solo cycling performance. In between two shows, as we were spending time in her personal tent, she unlocked one of her trunks for me, and started laying out on her bed the brightly colored collection of circus costumes (all sequined leotards meant to be worn with legs bare, some of them adorned with tulle or gauze, many of them sleeveless) that she has acquired over the years. She had designed all of them, sewn some, and had others stitched according to her directions by tailors in the cities and towns the circus visited. Impressed by the 15 or 20 costumes she allowed me to see, I asked her if I could take a picture of the leotards. Unfortunately, as I did not know enough words to ask this in Hindi, she misunderstood my request, thinking I wanted her to change to take a photograph of how the leotards looked on her. Suddenly made shy by my request to photograph the costume outside of the public context in which they are

to be worn, she pulled out her phone and showed me several pictures and videos of her wearing some of the leotards during past performances. As if to console me for not accommodating what she thought was my request, she added that she would be wearing others today for the shows. Following this thought, and perhaps eager to show me that there was nothing personal in her refusal, she asked me to shoot a video of her during her evening show performance. She insisted that I take a good video, illustrating what she wanted with a home video montage her son had made about one of her performances a few years before as a model. I should take a video that she could, likewise, share with people.

Figure 44. Rita posing during her cycling act. She asked me earlier on that day to take pictures of her performance and to share them with her. (Geo Circus, Kunamkulam, January 2019, my photograph).

I still wish I could have taken a photograph or drawn a quick sketch of Rita's collection laid out on her cot. But the misunderstanding usefully highlights the fragile dispensation in which Rita in a leotard is a desirable image for her. That her costumes can only be seen worn in the ring,[26] or in

[26] This coding of spaces in which it is suited to wear a costume meant to be worn in the circus ring is implemented beyond photographic practices: women circulate with a shawl or sweater on top of their costume, draping their chest and legs until they enter the performance tent.

photographs evocatively representing a circus performance in which the body's free form is a central element of the spectacle, highlights that circus representation ought to be understood in context, a context which the image strives to invoke by respecting certain genre conventions. It is all the more so for those who are in dominated positions in companies: women, youths, dwarves working as clowns, ageing performers, non-speakers of the company's lingua franca… What is allowed to be visible of people's lives in the circus – what meets the delicate compromise between broad conceptions of propriety in India and what the circus' aesthetic assertiveness shelters of individual divergence, stardom, transient glory – is primarily in the hands of those who work or once worked in the circus companies. The photographic imaginary of the circus (more strongly construed and applied through conventions and rules proper to context by those with less control over the industry) and its diverse logics illustrates well this fragile compromise, of which any work on the matter must be mindful.

Epilogue

One of the most significant encounters I made during my fieldwork was that with the circus performer Gloria. I met her in the early days of my research on the Indian circus, by the intermediary of the circus historian and writer Sreedharan Champad, another figure that came to have significance for my research, as I mention in the introduction and Chapter 4 of this dissertation. Champad had arranged for us to meet, struck as he was by the amusing conjuncture by which the Indian circus could occasion the encounter of two Malayalam-speaking *madammas* (as white women are referred to in Kerala) in a small hamlet of Thalassery. Foreigners are not numerous in Kannur district and even less so in the social circles of former circus artists.

Gloria was born in 1942 in China and into an itinerant European familial circus troupe (from an Armenian mother and a Belgian father), which, shortly after she was born, through a series of advantageous contracts signed with Indian circus companies and by the marriage of her siblings, entangled itself durably in India and with the Indian circus. As decades passed, Gloria's parents passed away in India, as did her brothers later, while her sisters moved away from the circus and settled into other professions, in Indian cities and in Belgium. Gloria stayed on in the Indian circus industry, and remained a celebrated foreign circus artist for around sixty years.

This unusual trajectory and the length of her circus career have made Gloria Thalassery-famous. Given my own unmistakable foreignness, I never had a conversation with a circus professional in which Gloria was not mentioned as someone I must meet.

Our common experience of foreignness, and that two countries – Belgium and France – in which we both have families are neighbors, sparked an instant connection between Gloria and me.As I continued to pay her occasional afternoon visits, during which we would eat Thalassery cake, drink 'soft drinks' (or, soda, as we would have called it if we were in the US), and reminisce about her circus days, we became friends. In our interactions, Gloria reflected about aspects of her life which she experienced as foreign to the life she had settled into in the early 2000s, when she had retired to the small locality of Kannur district in which her brother had built a house with some of their family's savings. Living with her sister-in-law and her brother's son, Gloria (whose husband had died young) now lived the regular, mostly home-bound life of an elderly Malayali auntie.

During our meetings, Gloria showed no interest in delving into the circus's disappearance. Several of my early visits prompted her to set up on the living room table the photographs of her circus life which we would look at, and potential onlookers did not disturb her in the least. She proudly curated and commented upon her circus life, a contemplation occasioned by leafing through these stacks of photographs. As one of her sisters once told me, their family had had a camera for as long as she could remember (at a time when portable cameras were uncommon in India), and their father, and later all their siblings, had been keen on recording their continuous travels as part of itinerant circus companies– their daily lives, and the prodigiousness and glamour of the circus acts performed by the family troupe. Gloria has hundreds of photographs to remember the circus by, and during my visits, her unbound enthusiasm for the atmosphere of the circus, and the regular life of a circus artist, was as palpable to me as the photographs that had summoned it. She would report on the occasional visits of active circus professionals and former colleagues she received now with apparent joy, on how kind they had been, and how much they had enjoyed seeing her collection of

photographs. It was as if everything about the circus – for as long as she was able to stay in it – had been wonderful.

By contrast, Gloria expressed, occasionally, how trapped she felt in her present situation. The current days, whenever she talked about them, mostly when I would call her on the phone, were marked by the vanishing agility of her once-athletic body. She expressed the feeling of being "stuck" in an environment in which she was perceived as foreign, the loss of the itinerancy which had always brought new sights and new people to the gates of the circus compounds in which she used to work. She conveyed this sense of crippling sedentariness with increasing intensity as our friendship became more intimate – it continues to be in my thoughts, in our occasional phone conversations, and among the concerns Gloria's sister often shares with me (unlike Gloria, she embraced a more sedentary life early on in her late twenties, by leaving the family troupe around the time when she got married, and retraining to become a beautician).

I wanted to end the reflection consigned into my dissertation by mentioning Gloria because her experience conveys strikingly, and somewhat tragically, the loss of mobility brought about by the ending of an itinerant circus career and the circus professionals' settling into sedentary life. Her lack of interest for locating the circus in the past, her pleasure in animating the circus with her recollections, and her discomfort with the stillness of her old age point to another sort of loss associated to the circus, one which is occasioned when individuals transition from itinerancy back into a settled world, as if itinerancy were a brief or long hiatus in the rhythms of life whose natural home is the settled world.

Her account brushes against the grain, ever so lightly, of the concerted effort that sustains the circus as permanently settled and disappearing in Thalassery. From what I could see, Gloria strives, whenever she can, to maintain the connection between the circus as it existed when she was a circus artist and the circus as it is performed today, with little concern for how the latter may be different from what she experienced during her unusually long career as a performer. During the time I spent observing circus shows and speaking with active performers, I learnt that she had given several of her circus costumes, some of which she still carefully preserves in one of her almirahs, to Monica, an active "ring dancer" and "foot juggler" who performs in the small circus troupe of Circus Castle. When she realized we both knew Gloria, Monica, who was in her forties at the time, mentioned how inspiring her long career in the circus was to her and to some of the other female performers in the company, and how honored she had been by Gloria's gift of a sequined vest.

Gloria's trajectory inside and outside the circus suggests how fraught the subjective experience of the transition between itinerancy and sedentariness can be. It also suggests that for the lives of individuals that straddle both, the phenomenon of circus disappearance can facilitate one's settlement into settled living – much like, for other mobile Malayali workers, the relative opacity and removed character of the work performed abroad, by focusing their family's attention on results and income, can do as much (Osella & Osella 2000). Indian Circus professionals rarely 'run away with the circus' without a reason traceable to their native home, and the collectively sustained sense of the disappearance of the site where they did some work, performed items, and very often, experienced some physical pain, disappointment and sorrows, smoothes the dents a passage into the circus leaves in the biography of a person and a family.

Yet, for the time they were in it, it was the monotonous and absorbing routine of the circus which made everything else disappear, and which muffled the unsettling din of the points of contact drilled by the daily circus shows on ever-changing, undistinguishable locales. In hindsight, from the position of a stillness regained, it seems almost impossible for circus artists to remember how daily life felt in the circus, and their attempts at recollecting the subjective sense of time passing in the circus merely communicates, from their minds to mine, a few details fixed by a dated photograph or the mention of a site of performance in a preserved paper notice. The Malayali disappearance of the Indian circus therefore, also illuminates how hard it is to grasp anything without a firm anchoring, how elusive objects which are continuously moving are – not just physically, but also conceptually. It painfully highlights the perhaps irreconcilable and seemingly mutually exclusive possibilities opened up by settling down and moving about.

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