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Not a Land of Street Magicians
A Study on Intergenerational Mobility among the Maseit Street Magicians of Kathputli Colony, Delhi[1]

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines intergenerational mobility among the Maseit street magicians of Kathputli Colony, Delhi. For centuries, these magicians have nourished and practised the art of street magic, passing it on from one generation in the family to another. However, in the face of changing times—including vectors like better education, governmental apathy, competition by stage magicians, and other forms of mass entertainment—there looms a pertinent doubt if this traditional performative art would survive for even one more generation. The Maseit have globally popularised their settlement, Kathputli Colony, for its dense concentration of street performers, but it is now being demolished to give way to a skyscraper. Furthermore, going strictly by the law, their act is no more legal than beggary. (The law, colloquially known as the Bombay Beggary Act, 1959, was repealed in August 2018.) Our research embarks on an ethnographic journey to explore the dynamics of the Maseit's performance, the equation of intergenerationality in the community, and the poetics and politics of inheritance, learning, and cultural expression.

[1] We would have never gained such intimate access to the Maseit's fascinating world without the support of Ishamuddin Khan. We are immensely grateful to him and his family, specifically his daughter Yasmin and son Zuman, for welcoming us wholeheartedly. In fact, we remain in unpayable debt of the whole Maseit community in Kathputli Colony for confiding in us. Dr Mani Shekhar Singh supervised this research, for which we owe him our sincerest thanks. His guidance and provocations throughout the ethnography and his comments on an earlier draft of the essay were instrumental in refining the manuscript. Finally, we thank the anonymous reviewer and the editorial staff of *SubVersions* for co-labouring with us in publishing this essay.

KEYWORDS

street magic, Maseit, Kathputli colony, performing arts, intergenerational mobility, Delhi Development Authority, traditional art, the Great Indian Rope Trick, Indian Street Performers Association Trust (ISPAT), Bombay Beggary Act, ostensible poverty, status abusers, stigma

WAYFARERS: STREET MAGICIANS AND THEIR LIFE STORIES

The murky slum dwelling, no larger than 13 x 13 feet, is too small to house both Fariduddin Khan's[2] family and his paraphernalia, and the lighting too dingy to complement the sparkle with which he speaks about his shows and feats performed abroad. The paint on the walls that are adorned with photographs, certificates, and the odd memorabilia is beginning to wear off, as though serving a grim reminder to the residents of Kathputli Colony that their temporary stay at the transit camp has far exceeded life in the narrow, lively lanes of Anand Parbat. As bulldozers threaten to ravage their old home in the Colony, promises of rehabilitation have despairingly stagnated into muddy, mosquito-infested puddles spread ubiquitously around the transit camp.

It is by combating this deprivation and poverty that Fariduddin Khan has scripted his career, illustrious abroad but little known back home. Having performed all over the world, from Japan to England, Fariduddin is trying his best to be humble about his achievements to us. Pointing towards a photograph with him and Penn and Teller in the frame, he unassumingly remarks how they had come seeking him all the way to his place. The internationally acclaimed duo had come to Kathputli Colony just to see Fariduddin perform his Great Indian Rope Trick, and perhaps to also transpose titbits of it to their stage back in Los Angeles—a remarkable exchange between the living tradition that street magic is and the mass entertainment that stage magic has become.

Fariduddin has carefully hung spotlessly framed envelopes from his eldest son Altmas, who is studying performing arts at a university in the north-eastern state of Assam. Pinned on the wall beside his bed,

[2] All names in the essay have been changed for anonymity.

those are epistles from a distant land frozen in time where no one from the community has ever ventured into—not Assam but the province of education, a hermit kingdom walled off from the community of street magicians. The rickety guitar, with more snapped strings than intact, does not escape our repeated glances, eventually prompting Maqsud, another of Fariduddin's sons, to bashfully speak of his failed attempt at mastering the instrument.

"Can you play the guitar?"

"I can strum the strings a bit."
It seems surreal. The privilege of having a guitar with broken strings is too closely reminiscent of our own teenage misadventures, so much so that seeing it on the *field* uncontrollably draws us more into the lives of our *subjects*. The longer we stare at it, the graver our reservations with *value neutrality* become. Yet, we do stare at it, lest we end up exoticising Maqsud's experience. Perhaps the guitar demarcates boundaries in our minds that are keen on trapping him in the fixed category of *research objects*. In this high-headed researcher's dilemma, little does Maqsud's own predicament have any space. For him, the guitar is a token of failure; for us, it is the link that threatens to turn us, the supposed *observers*, into misplaced *inhabitants*.

Street magicians have been known to use drums to allure the attention of a crowd. The auditory environment of the performance demands bold sounds that can distinguish the magicians in the sonic clutter of urban-scapes. Acoustics, therefore, do not quite patch well with their act. Another prominent presence in the room is that of the photographs. Framed and assembled on the wall like a discoloured collage, they are of all sizes and in all conditions, some still immaculate though most suffer from a torn corner, an ungainly stain, or countless strokes of timeless scratches. There are photographs of Fariduddin performing abroad, him being received at airports and felicitated by awestricken hosts, but the dinginess of the shanty and Fariduddin's own humbleness subsumes all the fame on those walls. Yet, his humility and blitheness fail to belie his frustration, occasionally debilitating into desolation as our conversation progresses. He has tried bringing about a change here in India for him and his people but to no avail. Fariduddin considers himself an accomplished magician but a failed activist.

Fariduddin, like the rest of the inhabitants of that narrow, crowded lane, identifies as a Maseit—a conflation of different communities of street magicians, from the Poonawalas in Maharashtra to the

Dakhins in the South. They lead a semi-nomadic lifestyle, performing as they move from one place to another in those months of the year when travel becomes convenient. Fariduddin himself leads a fairly itinerant lifestyle, though travelling more as a stage performer nowadays than as a street magician. The arrival of summer sets in motion their transit to the hilly regions of North India. A fair draws Wajeed every summer to Himachal Pradesh and, likewise, the picturesque valleys of Kashmir prove to be too irresistible for Taufeeq and his family to not rush to Srinagar every June. Both Wajeed and Taufeeq are street magicians and Fariduddin's neighbours. The winter months are spent in Ludhiana, Chandigarh, Mumbai, and other cities in the plains where a living is to be earned out of their centuries-old tricks and illusions. But these magicians do not have to their names even an hour of professional training; they have learned the art from their elders, who in turn had inherited it from their elders, and so has the art been perpetuated in the community. The streets are their classroom; the sunlight their spotlights; the passers-by their audience; their home their backstage; their families, their assistants; and magic their lifestyle. In this scheme of things, reducing magic solely to a profession is an unspeakable disrespect for them. Their negotiation of street life is an intemporal journey into the core of the Maseit identity, allowing the magicians to assume a treasured history by depriving linearity to the homogenous, empty significations of capitalist time that conspire to rob their heritage of its eclectic mix of the modern and traditional, the global and local, and the has-been and to-come. Their art is but an enduring tradition that has been running in these families for so long that the only trace of its antiquity can be found in the words of its performers and the marvel of their performances.[3] Yet, the act that we witness happens here and now, right in the present confluence where the past melts into a unitary neoliberal future. As with everything that endures, it stops after a point. Things are changing, so much so that the very continuance of the art is at risk.

This very threat is what our research, in a nutshell, focuses on—that is, intergenerational mobility[4] among the street magicians of Kathputli Colony. Here, intergenerationality refers to the continuity of

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[3] One of the first mentions of Indian street magic in the West was made in an 1890 article in the *Chicago Tribune*. The very provenance of the fictitious Great Indian Rope Trick, this article was rife with fabrications, as will be discussed in detail later.

[4] While using the term "intergenerational mobility", Giddens talks of two distinct interpretations. First, it may refer to a change in an individual's position in the socioeconomic ladder over the course of his or her working life, or as against the preceding generations. The second understanding of the concept, the meaning that is more relevant to

the art-form across generations of magicians in the Colony. About six decades ago, the Maseit had flocked from around the country, along with acrobats and puppeteers and other street performers, and settled in a place that later became famous by the name of Kathputli Colony. Today, the same Kathputli Colony, once renowned all over the world for its high concentration of street performers, stands in shambles.[5] The Colony has been demolished and its occupants shifted to a transit camp nearby in Faridpuri, Anand Parbat. The Maseit magicians, much akin to the rest of the street performers in the Colony, as Kazmin (1997) astutely writes, are a pit stop in the fragmented legacy of the art, stretched across ages and generations. The essay, accordingly, addresses the question of whether there is a disruption in the intergenerational continuity of street magic. The idea is to gain an insight into the poetics and politics of inheritance among the Maseit. In doing so, our attempt will be to investigate the various factors that construct their performance and illuminate the changing patterns of social organisation and cultural life in this community. In the end, we try exploring the attitude of the Maseit children towards street magic, probing the trepidatious notions of future and uncertainty in the community.

The research is set in Anand Parbat, Delhi, between September 2017 and March 2018. Our primary data has been collected through ethnographic interviews and a survey. Eight families of street magicians have been interviewed in depth, with each round consisting of a focus group comprising the performing members of the family and the children. The survey aids in obtaining quantifiable data, and so the questionnaire was designed majorly with close-ended questions. In total, we involve 35 respondents in the survey, all of them street magicians belonging to the Maseit community.

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this essay, evaluates whether one would take up the occupation of their elders. Although we eschew delving much into the former, a broad sense of the Maseit's socioeconomic conditions, and the changes therein, would persist throughout the piece. For more on intergenerational mobility, see Giddens (2009).

[5] The demolition of Kathputli Colony is a part of the Delhi Development Authority's (DDA) larger plan to revamp the entire Shadipur area. For this purpose, the DDA has partnered with the Mumbai-based Raheja builders. The first of its kind in Delhi, the project aims to construct a 15-storey building, where the now-displaced residents of the Colony will be allocated 2,800 dwelling units of 25 square metres each. In 2009, Raheja announced the construction of "Raheja Phoenix", a 54-storey skyscraper, also the first of its kind in the city. For more on the effects, politics, and technicalities of this massive project, see Banda, Vaidya, and Adler (2013) and Sikka (2014).

Traditionally, the Maseit have excluded women from their performance. Yet, their silence in street magic speaks glaringly of a performance-oriented political economy in the household. Their expulsion from the art rests on a history of repressed inclusions vital to the sustenance of street magic and its practitioners. Most evidently, without women, the supporting role of maintaining the magicians' costumes, making their petty paraphernalia, and facilitating their semi-nomadic movement would instantly collapse. An unmissable lacuna in this essay is a lack of discussion on gender. But this is a part of an ongoing project, and intergenerationality will be a launching pad to later delve into more nuanced aspects of the community's existence, including gender and patriarchy.

LETTERED AND JOBLESS: THE SHORTCOMINGS OF EDUCATION

Education supports mobility and such mobility is best metaphorised among the Maseit as a rope that might successfully pull them out of destitution by opening up several avenues for children to secure employment later in life.

"Magic is in one place, and education in another. We never got a chance to study, but our children must go to school. There is no doubt in that," Ashfaq, Fariduddin's brother, says solemnly.
"Then do you still want him to perform?" we ask.

There is a slight pause before Ashfaq answers, and we know that the problematisation of our research question has commenced.

We see education as a site of contestation. On the one hand, education fuels the Maseit's dreams for a better life. On the other, it increases the distance between the street magicians and their art by galvanising the lure of white-collar professions. Stuck in between is the future of the upcoming Maseit generation.

An impressionistic understanding of the nexus between education and the socioeconomic conditions of street magicians might suggest speedy upward mobility in the social hierarchy. The reality, however, departs significantly from this image of education as a liberator for the Maseit. It is, of course, a positive sign that all the children in the primary school-going age we encounter are enrolled in either of the government schools in the vicinity. This is precisely where deficiencies inherent in the Indian

public education system thwart further progress. Acquiring primary education may be possible for the Maseit children, but the access to secondary and tertiary education remains largely beyond their grasp. The ceiling renders the spoils of primary education rather pointless, for, at the end of the day, the job market does not have much on offer for someone schooled till the seventh or eighth grade and devoid of any specialised skills. At a more elementary level, ill-equipped public schools, with a quality of education notoriously below the mark set by private schools, disadvantage these kids right from the beginning. This system of unequal schooling impedes any uphill movement in the socioeconomic ladder, thus reproducing social inequality via the very sites that are supposed to capacitate the marginalised (Velaskar 1990). The child of a street magician might be educated way more than anyone ever has been in his family, yet the odds are in the favour of him ending up with no alternative means of livelihood, apart from that which his *forefathers* have been relying on for ages.

Fariduddin has provided his children with sound education. His daughter Yasmin has not only completed secondary education but also holds a bachelor's degree. His son Maqsud has passed high school. However, only his mother who periodically wipes the dust off his framed diploma acknowledges its worth; employers have mostly been dismissive of it. Unable to find a satisfactory job, Maqsud has taken to street magic. He performs not because he likes to but because he lacks any real options. Like Maqsud, a number of youths in the community, including his cousins, have embarked on this course and now find themselves irredeemably trapped. Once they start earning, their spending naturally increases, thereby binding them to their only source of earnings. Over a card trick that does not go particularly well on the first attempt, Maqsud tells us that he has recently bought a motorcycle and now must cater to its maintenance.

Maqsud errs when he pulls the first card from the deck. It is not the one we had chosen. Perhaps a dent to his hitherto jovial spirit would be counterproductive if we point out the mistake. On the contrary, maybe rectifying the error in time would save him from embarrassment in front of a less invested audience. That would be on the streets, but this is in his house. Then again, his art always has belonged in the streets. There, the audience might eagerly await results, while here we are cynically scanning through the process of the trick. There, he would be performing for himself, through his people, to earn a living; but here his community is performing through him, trying to legitimise its lifestyle before a set of vigilant eyes. Perhaps if we correct him, Maqsud would more expressively admit that street magic is not what he wants to do. But we cannot muster the heart to flay his half-

hearted triumph. So, we just stare at each other, while he makes another attempt, finally drawing the correct card.

Most street magicians never really had a choice in their lives other than taking up performance. Therefore, quite a few respondents seem baffled when ask what they had aspired to become in their childhood. For them, anything besides their traditional occupation is simply unfathomable. Even for those who did acquire some sort of education, their aspirations hardly materialised. We sense an unmistakable nostalgia for a past when these seasoned magicians were still children and when it was perfectly fine for them to yearn for a white-collar job, a respected position in the society. For instance, Asaduddin, Fariduddin's youngest brother, wanted to be a doctor when he was young. Fariduddin himself dreamt of becoming a pilot, settling on a doctor in the end. Such being the case, we see in most parents a desire to witness their kids becoming what they dreamt of or what they themselves never got a chance to become. Coming from the socioeconomic background that they do, they see in their children a shot at a better quality of life. The question of their art's survival, thus, takes a backseat when exposed to these pressing concerns and long-drawn desires. Those who still grapple with it, as will be illustrated later, either have grown indifferent to the performance—viewing it not so much as an art-form but as a means of livelihood—or have come to believe that street magic can survive independently of whether it is an occupation or not.

"IT RUNS IN THEIR BLOOD": TRADITION

In postcolonial India, Kathputli Colony is the site where the art of street magic has been nourished and passed on from one generation to the other. If magic is a living tradition of the Maseit's, then the Colony is where this life is embodied. The Colony is not just spatially relevant to the lives of the magicians but also serves as a sanctuary for them to interact and grow. Children, naturally, are also sucked into the processes and mores of this space. If nothing else, children are still expected to paddle the same wheels, learning the art irrespective of whatever they go on to do later in their lives. The environment a Maseit child is brought up in is conducive to learning the art. A father has a socialising effect on his children. A patriarch who thinks highly of his social status would imbue his children with a sense motivation to become high achievers in that field (Baker 1981). Hence, the kind of inspiration a child receives at home depends significantly on what the patriarch in the family makes of his social

status or, for that matter, that of his family as a whole.[6] As many as 62.85 per cent of the respondents in the survey, given the grim socioeconomic reality they confront, do not want their children to take up street magic. Keeping aside the indecisive 20 per cent, only 17.15 per cent wish to see their children continuing the traditional occupation. In the last category falls Ghishamuddin, another of Fariduddin's brothers, a man immensely proud of his art and his community's claim over it. He does little to conceal his smile, beaming with pride when his son pulls an egg out of the thin air, shoves it down his five-year-old assistant's throat, and finally collects it from his posterior as though he has laid it himself.

Another reason why children inevitably end up learning the art is again rooted in their socialisation. There does not appear to be any way for them to escape the consequences of an upbringing that finds in cultural production the predominant mode of sociality. As we gather from the interviews, children start accompanying their fathers to performances from ages as early as four. Being in such close proximity to street magic, it is very plausible that they will invariably learn something of the art. That being said, it is not necessary that the Maseit force their children into this line of work. Data from our survey rather lend themselves to the exact opposite. Taufeeq's case becomes pertinent here. He started taking his son with him as a *jummura*[7] from the age of four. Today, neither does he find anything respectable in this occupation nor is he much bothered by the decline of the art. Nonetheless, his son does know how to perform, though he does not want to perform either.

The ties of tradition, therefore, make up a crucial vector in introducing the art to children. The social and cultural setting that the Maseit live in—more on which is yet to come in the subsequent sections—

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[6] Street magic, as shall be explained in detail later, is banned by law. Most of the magicians, therefore, have had to spend time in jail and, if not that, at least face police harassment. How this contumelious treatment meted out to the Maseit by law and the state diminishes their standing in the eyes of their children is an extension that we are currently working on as a larger venture to understand the impact of law on the art and culture of the community. For more on the history of this socialising effect, see Maccoby (1992).

[7] *Jummura* is the term used for the aide that accompanies a street performer. Not a prerogative of the Maseit, even the dancers employ jummuras in their acts. Though the Maseit generally make use of their kids, especially boys, and at times even girls when it is not possible to tell one apart from a boy, the term has primarily been perpetuated in popular culture by the performers who make monkeys dance—with the monkey being the jummura here.

contribute to the furtherance of communitarian values within the family. Whether they would actively practise and nourish the art, make a living out of it, or turn a Nelson's eye to it can only be answered by looking into other factors that constrain their choices.

AESTHETICS AND SOCIAL AND CULTURAL LIFE

For many a street magician, the performance is so closely rooted in their day-to-day living that both become inextricable from each other. Right from his childhood, a *madaari*[8] sees magic in and around his house; he watches his elders perform and is himself taken out to the streets as an aide; he travels around the country with his community to perform and earn; he seldom longs for an alternative career apart from becoming a street magician himself, and a street magician he inevitably ends up becoming. Therefore, it is no surprise that the aesthetic space a madaari operates in deeply permeates his social and cultural life. However, this relationship cannot be studied in terms of unidirectional flows alone, for as much as changing circumstances have forced the Maseit to constantly rejig their performance, the dynamics of their enactments have equally influenced the community's cultural, psychological, and social well-being. The Maseit have always arranged their lifeworld around the performance. Even when it comes to kinship, the tendency is to marry within the community, or, to be precise, within the conglomeration of communities that the Maseit are.

"So, you people have already met Fariduddin?" Hasheem asks us in a different stint of fieldwork.

We are at Ghaziabad, and episodes from our time in Anand Parbat a year ago lurk recursively in our minds like the humdrum of the ceiling fan attached to a rusting iron pole in Hasheem's tented accommodation. The memories are a bit muddled but, like his tent, they survive. After all, Hasheem and his family have lived under this canvas, at the same place, for 20years now!

"How come you know about it?" we are taken by surprise.

"Magic! I know things through magic."

[8] Literally meaning "the one who tames" or "the one who controls the minds of others", "*madaari*" is a blanket term used for tricksters, monkey and bear handlers, and, as is relevant here, street magicians.

We just uncomfortably smile, for if we have learnt anything about the community, the unpredictability of their skills is a constant surprise.

"Do not worry," Hasheem laughs, "he is my brother-in-law. I remember him telling me about a bunch of researchers last September."

We are still unconvinced. It is indeed a wonder that almost all our respondents happen to be related to each other, even when the field changes location. Magic seems more believable than such strict endogamy in a relatively small community.

Though changing times would instinctively suggest different and newer patterns of social organisation and cultural orientation, and that genuinely has been the case to a certain extent, the Maseit still continue to cling on steadfastly to their performance, letting their lives organically revolve around it. For instance, the stringent code of endogamy continues to be a potent norm despite the incursions of modernity and globalisation. The sense of collectivity is so strong that after their relocation to Anand Parbat, they petitioned the higher echelons of the DDA and Raheja Builders to get houses allocated in the same lane. The grooming of kids in the art also happens within the community, if not at the hands of parents then with the help of one *chacha* (uncle) or the other. Yasmin, Fariduddin's daughter, did not learn the art from her father the way her brothers did. To become one of the first women among the Maseit to master the art and indulge in it professionally—though very briefly—Yasmin had to work as an apprentice with Fariduddin's brother Asaduddin, accompanying him to streets or to stages as need arose. Even when the Maseit set out for other cities, they coordinate the journey among themselves. It would be making a bit more than is due of the community's hold if we imply that the madaaris have no agency over their performance, for that is not at all the case. The community interferes minimally with the art, but individual magicians often count on the collectivity to consolidate their performance in hostile city-spaces. A couple of families tag along together, tot their luggage and paraphernalia on mules (now in buses), and set out for a place that they have been frequenting for a considerable number of years. The community is intrinsic to their spatial movements, but new travel routes and deviant itineraries are not necessarily detested. Whatever they manage to earn from a performance, earlier grains and now cash in fast-dwindling sums, the magicians divide it among the families engaged in the act. Simply put, where they live, whom they perform with, where they go and

with whom, and what they make out of it, everything is grounded in the community, which in turn is organised along the lines of their performance. How has the performance then interacted with the various facets of their precarious lives? The answer explains some of the significant changes that have occurred in the aesthetic and performative sphere of street magic over the years. Through this, we contemplate what all these shifts mean for the upcoming generation.

Street performance, like folk art, has a deep-seated ritualistic composition (Kepchan 1995). The affective impetus and narrative tools are profoundly ingrained in the community-based organisation of street performers. While some parts of their performance—like where to perform and with whom—are casually deliberated within the community, others come to be of great intimate value to the individual performer. For a madaari, there is a tremendous emotional factor attached to the tricks he performs and popularises as his specialties. It might be the Great Indian Rope Trick as is with Fariduddin or the Indian Flying Man Trick that Hasheem is renowned to be adroit in. These tricks have become a medium of cultural expression for the Maseit. From the paraphernalia used to the kind of crowd and setting the magician prefers, all these are minute aspects of a madaari's performance, very strongly embedded in his psychological conditioning. The struggle then is to concile the traits of the Maseit's performance with the demands of popular culture. While some have outright refused to even perform under lights, other have gradually begun to see the benefits of stage performance. More remarkably, the very nature and make of the paraphernalia have changed. Earlier the Maseit used to start their performance with a snake—very much living and very much real. Nowadays, the living snake has been replaced by rubber toys. Haider's father used to own a python till as recently as fifteen years ago, until he succumbed to the demands of wildlife activists and the forest department, eventually releasing Haider's beloved pet into the wild. With the last of the snakes, the community also parted with the livelier facets of their performance. This time, they let it lose while navigating concrete jungles and resisting the onslaught of neoliberal media.

"We used to feed it [the python] daily. Now we can barely manage ourselves," Haider regretfully remarks.

Usmaan and his vehement opposition to changes in the traditional way of performance is an illustration of resurgent pride and glory. Over a sleight of hand with coins, he makes his aversion to stage performance known to us.

"Real magic," he says, "is that which is performed under natural light with a crowd at a hand's distance or two,[9] not with props and retakes and artificial lighting."

For him, his crude tricks invoke a sense of cultural pride that is often played down by the masses with their fanfare for celebrity magicians. Yet, more than rivalry, what perturbs Usmaan the most is the worry that unless they firmly hold on to the way they have traditionally been performing, there would exist no difference between a madaari magician and any random stage performer. He believes that his children would learn magic through what "flows in their blood" and what circulates within his family as its legacy. Very optimistic about a generation that would still preserve the art to some degree, Usmaan is no less bothered about the diminishing numbers than any, albeit his concern regarding changing trends singularly stands out. He is anxious that the glory his ancestors have amassed over the ages would be lost in the grandeur of the stage and the glare of artificial lights projecting myriad shades and hues. However, his brother Farukh, sitting sheepishly beside him, remarks diffidently that he does not mind performing on the stage. Nor does he mind the money he makes out of it. He circumspectly adds that he performs in events and parties and that he would not mind trying out street performance, if allowed to, every once in a while. But regardless of their respective takes on magic as it happens in popular culture today, both Usmaan and Farukh speak nostalgically about the past, a feeling that resonates palpably throughout the ethnographic interviews.

The move towards stage performance is one of the many changes that the Maseit have embraced so as to cater to the globalised neoliberal appetite. The aesthetic space of street magic as a whole has undergone multiple changes over the years—some externally foisted, some gladly welcomed by the magicians themselves. Though a great many have begun taking to stage performance, most choose to combine street performance with stints on the stage, even merging the features of the two categories in their act. The reason behind this is not only that the stage is where the audience is but also because the streets are where law keeps vigil. Street magic is considered begging and thus is illegal in the eyes of law. A good many magicians insinuate in the interviews, and an equal number of them admit candidly, that bribes happen to be the order of the day. A quid pro quo situation where they pay off the police in exchange for about fifteen to twenty minutes is all that the Maseit get to arrange their

[9] Although the actual distance between the madaari and his audience happens to be at least five feet.

paraphernalia, gather a crowd, perform, and then wrap up by collecting whatever the audience might wish to reward them with. As a result, elaborate tricks are no more performed. Gone are the days when the Maseit would perform in peace for close to an hour-and–a-half, pull out a boy from an empty basket, hold a man afloat in the thin air, and the like. Nowadays, as we observe with the relatively younger performers such as Farukh and Wajeed, the usual sleight of hand—nothing too elaborate, nothing too captivating, the kind that is performed by most magicians on television—dominates the Maseit's performance.

Time constraints have also taken a toll on dialogue delivery. Earlier, during their hour-long performances, dialogue used to play an indispensable role in keeping the crowd amused and entertained. But there is very little that can be said and done in fifteen minutes, and so the dialogue delivery has also been reduced from complementing their performance—as a way of setting an exuberant aura about their act—to simply communicating with the audience whenever the need cannot be dispensed with. Aficionados like Fariduddin, Ghishamuddin and Taufeeq have managed to retain their command over communication with their robust and enchanting modulation, as opposed to the younger lot whose monotonous speech flounders to entertain us.

Given all these obstacles, the only way for the Maseit to put up with the restrictions and yet preserve their traditional art—which for many is the only source of livelihood—is to explore newer avenues to express it. But the moment street magic is transplanted onto the stage, the traits that set the madaari apart from his modern-day counterpart on television start getting clouded. Not hard to imagine, artificial lights take over natural lighting; the small, rugged sack containing all that the madaari could possibly require for his performance gives way to an extensive array of costumes and props; the dialogue delivery changes; the robustness in his voice that had captivated countless crowds becomes redundant before the microphone. Onstage, there is little traction that a sleight of hand can generate, and so the madaari for once gets to cut a man into half, make him fly, disappear, and whatnot. Essentially, he gets to perform those tricks which he never can on the streets. But the road to the stage is marked by cut-throat competition and is hospitable to only a select few.

As Fayez says, "I will love to perform on stage, only if I ever get to."

Yet, notwithstanding all the hardship, the madaari continues to cope, creating tricks if he must and forsaking some if the circumstances call for it. Back in the day, when Fariduddin had started performing, there was tangible excitement for the Great Indian Rope Trick. But the trick that had fascinated so many around the world, sported frequently as the cover image of an exotic orient that did not so much exist in the subcontinent as it did in the West's imagination, was an ingenious hoax (Trey 2011). Perpetuated for the first time by an 1890 article in the *Chicago Tribune*, the trick became an enduring myth attributed to Indian street magicians. On the contrary, the purportedly ancient trick was a much recent invention. Charming a rope like a snake and then stiffening it enough for a boy to climb all the way to its top: this routine was created by the orientalist discourse through mutated history. When Fariduddin asked his elders about it, he was ensured that no one in their community had performed such a feat for the last 600 years.

"Our elders had no idea about it. For the last 600 years, the trick had been never performed."

"Then what created the buzz around it?"

"The *foreigners*, they did. The *Angrez* [English] looted us, but they could not take away our culture."

Of course, this is too serious a claim to make without backing, so he immediately opens a scene from an old Bollywood movie on his laptop. The actor, no other than Amitabh Bachchan, portraying a bandit donning an oversized, rickety black robe, appears to be schooling a British woman about the depredations of colonial rule. Suddenly, his emotionally charged voice rips through the imperial mischaracterisation of certain communities as criminal tribes. Fariduddin simply wanted to foreground the rant on culture. But in passing, he perspicaciously makes a statement on the colonial understanding of criminality by birth, the category of communities socialised into habitual delinquency; that is, the so-called criminal tribes (see generally Nigam [1990] and Singha [1993]). Though there is no evidence or perception among the Maseit that they were ever notified as a criminal tribe, the state machinery in independent India seems intent on revoking that historical freedom. The postcolonial state and its civil society elites have indelibly stigmatised the community as a class of innate criminals.

Taking his elders' words for granted, Fariduddin grew so motivated by the enthusiasm around this figment of imagination that he worked for six years and invented the trick from scratch. Today, apart

from making the rope rise a good number of feet into the air, the spectacular act has propelled his prominence much higher.

All these changes in the traditional aesthetics and performance have struck different chords with children and the youth in the community. While 20 per cent of the respondents in our quantitative interview are positive that children would come to appreciate this art-form since "it runs in their blood", those from the upcoming generation whom we talked to present a slightly more nuanced narrative. On the one hand there is Sameer, Ghishamuddin's son, a seventh grader who performs for the sheer delight of it. Magic, in his understanding, boosts his popularity among his peers. But on the other hand, there is Kazim and his brother Taqdeer. Both are unemployed but are so disgusted by the idea of ever performing on the streets, attracting only apathy and law's scorn, that they rather prefer to squander their days idly. Kazim, however, regularly goes to the gym and desires to make it big as a bodybuilder.

THE RACE THAT TELEVISON WON: APATHY TOWARDS STREET MAGIC

In current times, the audience's perspective of street magic has degraded swiftly to that of apathy. In this section, we examine the possible ripples that the advent of mass media might have generated across the Maseit community and street magic. We are cautious of drawing a neat relationship here between the growth of mass media and the demise of street magic, but the severe impact of television does merit a separate discussion of its own. Earlier, when television broadcasts were not yet as commonplace as they are today, street magic was one of the rare sources of entertainment for the masses. Street performance, hence, brought sufficient income for the Maseit's sustenance. The coming of television has contrived a change in the patterns of consumption and in the forms of entertainment that the public demands (Newcomb 2005). In India, a decline in street performance as a viable type of entertainment was observed by late 1980s. Televised programmes provided exposure to motion pictures. Newer content was readily made available in living rooms, behind the windows of electronic shops, restaurants—practically, places that the Maseit could barely venture into (Sabbafh 1982). The televised content that the audience has become accustomed to is drastically different from street magic. Television has variety, while the standard charts of the Maseit, apart from the specialties, are similar across the board. Television shows, with all the rehearsal, direction, camera tricks, and post-production work, have a sanitised appeal, while street magic is characteristically known for its raw and

natural touch. The Maseit have failed to keep up with television in the race. Concurrently, a shift has occurred in the audiences' preferences. Television has come out as the winner in that race.

The performers, despite being lauded worldwide for their skills, do not receive the same recognition in India. Fariduddin Khan, with his performance of the Great Indian Rope Trick, has gained immense appreciation in several European and Asian countries. However, he fails to trigger the same amount of applause in India. His tricks are identified disparagingly as a way of soliciting alms. As noted, street magicians are viewed as mere beggars and treated with contempt by the masses and law alike. This apathetic reception of the performers has led to gradual disenchantment among the Maseit insofar as them making a conscious effort to take the art forward is concerned. A sense of futility seems to be building up; some of the Maseit have begun thinking that continuing the art that has shaped their identity and livelihood for ages would be in vain. This is evident as 51.42 per cent of our sample of 35respondents have not even bothered to teach the art to at least one child, while 31.42 per cent have taught it to only two or less. They believe that alternative sources of livelihood would be more feasible as street magic does not provide for the demands of the masses anymore. More importantly, it seems that today's viewers do not provide the kind of attention and recognition these artists rightly seek and merit.

This, however, does not mean that street magicians have given up on the art. Although indifference from the masses has disillusioned most street magicians, several still cling on to some optimism. Magicians like Usmaan, Asaduddin, and Mushtaq—Fariduddin's brother-in-law—believe that although street magicians may not be taken seriously in the country, they still garner affection from people; as they say, 'One may not be overtly respected at home and yet be doted on.' Such idiomatic consolation provides them with a ray of hope to continue with their performance. Nevertheless, one must not confuse their optimism as being a denial of the reality. The numbers are dwindling, the audience is shrinking, and the youth are shying away from the art. So worrisome is the future that none of them refuses to acknowledge its dangers.

ONE STEP FORWARD, TWO STEPS BACK: CONCERTED EFFORTS

That street magic has declined both in numbers and popularity goes without a doubt. However, some performers, within and without the community, are persistent in ensuring the survival of the art and

have put in consolidated efforts to preserve it. But these developments have always fallen short of fruition. Although they have set a noteworthy precedent, there is a lot to be desired in terms of building an enterprising community of street magicians that is conscious of its grievances and willing to toil for its redemption.

All the steps taken in this regard till date, one way or the other, have been aimed at breaking away from the traditional mode of inheritance within the family and propagating the art in untapped spheres. Magicians like Ghishamuddin teach magic in schools, gathering a learner base beyond the lineages within which the art has passed batons historically. He is also trying to begin a joint venture with a group of students from Delhi University, whereby he would perform in colleges with the intention of raising awareness. Similarly, Fariduddin and Yasmin plan on setting up a school where formal education and performance, from acrobatics to magic, would go hand in hand. Such cross-cultural propagation of the art moulds it malleably to fit the needs of popular culture. Although we cannot yet definitively determine if the children who attend Ghishamuddin's workshops or those who will be enrolled in Fariduddin's school are better poised to inherit the art than the Maseit children, it is certain that they would have greater independence to experiment with magic. Since they are vastly detached from the social and cultural weft that the Maseit children come from, they must intrinsically speak their own language, incorporate their own bodily vocabulary, and make their own selection of tricks while performing. While there is a code that that Sameer, Maqsud, and Yasmin would be expected to follow during the performance, tweaking the art is mere experimentation for Ghishamuddin's students.

The establishment of a non-government organisation (NGO) called Indian Street Performers Association Trust (ISPAT) in 2013 by Fariduddin Khan was an instrumental step towards the amelioration of the street magicians' woes. The aim of the organisation was to revive traditional street performances—such as street magic, acrobatics, singing, snake charming, so on—and to subvert the protracted derision that the performers have received from the state and the public. His organisation has been pivotal not just in popularising the art by raising awareness but also in liaising with the government and unequivocally championing the issues of subaltern artists. The NGO works with governmental authorities to designate areas where street performance can be done without infringing the law or fearing arrests. ISPAT conducts training programmes for magicians in order to help them acquire new skills apt for modern audiences.

But the bane of all these initiatives is the same old issue of damp enthusiasm and scanty contribution from the community. At present, ISPAT is suffering from a scarcity of resources—both in terms of finances and participation. In his own words, one of Fariduddin's gravest failures has been the inability to mobilise the youth. The instability of income in street magic has unleashed a decline in the number of people willing to associate with the NGO. Yet, the underlying story might be a bit more complex. While catching a word with us between the interviews, Fariduddin's wife says that though men would hate to admit it, the reason why the community has responded so feebly is internal jealousy. They feel as though people like Fariduddin are raising their voices just for personal benefits, and the relatively greater fame that he has amassed does not counter this perception either. All this while, Fariduddin's second daughter, Sabrina, keeps nodding reticently in agreement. ISPAT is perhaps the pioneer in standing up for the Maseit and advocating their cause. The route to its demise has created a vacuum, with no sign of any fresh undertakings to fill that void. Today, the decaying NGO is seeing the end of its twilight, bracing for a moonless night, so to speak.

THE ACT, STIGMA, AND ANOTHER ACT: CHANGES IN THE STATUS QUO

The final factor, within the scope of this research, that may notably influence the intergenerational bequest of the Maseit's art are prospective changes in the status quo. A pressing problem for the Maseit are the provisions of the Bombay Prevention of Begging Act, 1959,[10] also known as the Bombay Beggary Act. Applicable in Delhi as well, this Act criminalises the act of begging, which is what, unfortunately, law deigns to make of street magic. But more than sanctioning a blanket ban on street magic, the Act has imprisoned the Maseit in a legal cage; within a reified discourse of semantic closures , it has forced the performers to manoeuver through a juridical framework to make sense of their performance and their lives. Quite a few magicians recall that in the 1970s, they could perform in Connaught Place at the cost of small bribes. However, that option has vanished today, with the authorities clamping down harder on them, denying these magicians a performance on the streets due to reasons as far-fetched as the fear of possible "bomb blasts". This does not mean that the uptight police have begun enforcing the ban strictly; their impeded access to upscale neighbourhoods simply

[10] In the August 2018 case of *Harsh Mander & Anr v. Union of India* (AIR 2018 Del 188), the Delhi High Court has decriminalised begging, striking down several provisions of the Bombay Prevention of Begging Act, 1959 for being unconstitutional. What it means in effect for the Maseit is, however, yet to be gauged.

means that the Maseit must nowadays spend more in bribes and plead with the authorities even more flatteringly, only to be allowed to perform in the suburbs and low-key localities. A possible solution can be the Persons in Destitution Model Bill, 2016, which has provisions decriminalising the Maseit's presence in the public sphere. But how much of the damage that the Bombay Beggary Act has caused can the Persons in Destitution Model Bill undo?

First, there is the issue of awareness. Awareness among the Maseit is so inadequate that the number of people who have heard of the Bombay Beggary Act can be counted on the fingers of one hand. To this end, there will have to be a massive awareness-raising campaign to percolate knowledge about the Persons in Destitution Model Bill once it is passed; for that matter, a larger drive to apprise the community about the legal obstacles they face on a day-to-day basis is needed. Even if that is achieved, scars from the past would be tough to heal. Many report that the police would not only stop them from performing but would also arrest and rough them up. Even children are not spared: They get branded as child labourers. Therefore, while the street magicians may not know the law itself, they have certainly experienced enough to know what it feels like to have it relentlessly frown upon you. This chilling effect, this sense of fear that has become a part and parcel of their performance, cannot simply be soothed by enacting a new legislation.

But there surely is some will and enthusiasm at the Maseit's end. When we ask if they would like to bring their art back out on the streets, most answer positively, expressing an earnest desire, enshrouded by the exigencies of their tough lives, to see their children performing out in the open. But the Persons in Destitution Model Bill could well be too little, too late, for the damage has been inflicted nigh irredeemably. In addition to declining popularity, which no amount of legislation can help soar, mere legal changes cannot erase the stigma attached to these magicians. The Bombay Beggary Act, as Ramanathan (2008) illustrates, labels the Maseit as "ostensibly poor". By calling them "status offenders", the Act implies that these people perform for the sake of begging and that the act of begging itself is done to masquerade their true socioeconomic status. In simpler words, the law says that the Maseit pretend to be poor to be able to beg and that they do so under the disguise of being performers. Such stigmas that stem from legal misconceptions, which then posit the Maseit at a more pathetic situation than the lower rungs of the society that they already occupy, cannot just be effaced by the enactment of one more legislation, or, for that matter, any number of legislations.

The second major change in the prevailing circumstances is the relocation of the street magicians from Kathputli Colony to the transit camp in Anand Parbat, Delhi. When they were shifted to the camp, they were assured adequate housing within two years. Four years have elapsed and the magicians are still waiting for the authorities to make good on their promise. The tiny, dilapidated shanties in the transit camp, with one bathroom at the end of each lane for everyone, hardly qualify as appropriate conditions for human habitation. Furthermore, back in Kathputli Colony, their status as artists was still intact. Here, they have been clubbed together with other slum dwellers. In the transit camp, the Maseit are sucked into a homogenous group of residual populations that must be managed, governed, regulated, and perhaps even rehabilitated, but one that is never afforded the privilege of living without the token of death and deprivation.

The relocation has also spatially separated the Maseit. A few have been allotted flats in Narela, Haryana—a place situated at enough distance from Kathputli Colony to further erode the community's already crumbling social ties. Though the relocation may not affect their performance per se, it has taken a visible toll in terms of reduced feasibility in performing. Moving out of the Colony, at best, has had an indirect impact on the pragmatics of the art, in that it does not remain as practical as it was earlier to perform frequently. Transportation has emerged as a serious obstacle; given that the terrain on which the camp is set is rife with steep inclines, e-rickshaws and auto-rickshaws often refuse to traverse the distance. All in all, while the relocation features as a temporary impediment that is not likely to be resolved anytime soon, the Persons in Destitution Model Bill, albeit a significant change in the offing, cannot substantially alter the hegemony of the status quo. The enduring scars of legal violence and the social attitudes of an elite civil society that has readily rubbed salt on these experiential wounds are too unyielding to mend the structural suppression of the Maseit's art-form.

CONCLUSION: THE BEGINNING OF THE END OR A NEW BEGINNING?

If we go by simple statistics, the fact that the art would not sustain for another generation is apparent: a whopping 65.71 per cent of our respondents would concur. However, a more analytically honest understanding of the circumstances paints a different picture altogether. As established through the ethnographic interviews, it is conscionable to believe that the art would not be lost by the end of this generation or the next. The population of street performers would diminish further in the coming

years, but the factors identified previously will still retain quite a few in the profession. Probably not sizeable anymore, but the strength of street magicians will not be extirpated entirely.

There is only so much that education as an emancipator can accomplish. The flaws immanent in the Indian public education system will produce a generation of street magicians educated for the first time in the history of their community but still not prepared enough to succeed in the job market. The education that these children can hope to acquire, like its quality, is limited and insufficient. In sum, education can better be seen as a reproducer of the socioeconomic barriers that the Maseit are confined in.

While education is pertinent in evaluating the intergenerational continuity of street magic, primarily in the occupational sphere, the role of tradition sheds light on the patterns of inheritance in the community. For ages, the art has been propagated through the family and the community. The Maseit still continue to organise themselves socially and culturally along the tracks laid down by their performance. The art, therefore, becomes an important part of the upbringing and socialisation of children. The way one picks up the language that their parents speak at home, the Maseit children too learn the art as they grow up. This is not to deny the existence of exceptions, but that the art can survive even without its occupational role has been amply illustrated here.

There is also the whip of law that the street magicians have long been lashed with. Even though legislative changes are in the horizon, the effectiveness of such half-baked measures, declining popularity, and a host of other societal and perceptual harms raise serious doubts. We may have identified law as a contributing factor in the disruption of intergenerational continuity, but one must be cautious to note that the ambit of our research does not surpass this causal link. It does not gauge law's effect on the performance, and the cultural and social life of the Maseit within legal categories. Nor does the research aim to historically map how the Maseit have subverted their juridico-legal banishment and interacted with the legal framework to redefine their performative lives. However, the vice versa—that is, impressing upon the government the need for urgent legal changes and to highlight the ramifications of the state's indifference towards their plight—has indeed been attempted by the scarce and largely unsuccessful concerted efforts within the community. Nonetheless, comprehensive insights into how law has impacted the culture, social life, and performance of the

Maseit, and how the community has responded to these legal developments can be envisioned as an extension to this essay.

So, what is the conclusive status of the disruption in intergenerationality? On the one hand, there is the saddening picture of the present: dwindling numbers, apathy, insensitive law, frustration and indifference within the community itself. On the other hand, there are currents that have traditionally cascaded the art and continue to do so. Balancing these two sides, one can arrive at the conclusion, as we have, that the number of street performers is indeed plummeting and that there is a visible disruption in intergenerationality—a trend that will only worsen in the coming times. This compels one to ask something that we have asked ourselves throughout our research: What does magic mean to the Maseit? It surely is not just a livelihood. A livelihood does not emphatically invoke community ethos, it does not problematise patterns of inheritance. Nor does it "run in blood" or break down community ties. For the Maseit, magic is a life course—be it street magic or its rendition performed onstage. It constitutes the kernel of their Maseit identity. Therefore, in our study of the relationship between magic and culture, magic and the Maseit's social life, neither does magic figure as a mythic escape from existential conundrums, nor is it reduced to a prosaic act of everyday routine. Magic stages the event that births the Maseit out of their daily regimen. It operationalises an awesome spectacle of otherworldliness into an ordinary articulation of the community's identity. The Maseit's magic is a recursive praxis that singularly enacts a drama of dignity and dispossession, pride and prejudice every time it is performed. Such a firm position of magic in the Maseit's socio-cultural cosmos suffices to say that the art would not be expunged altogether, not at least in this generation, probably not even in the next. But the abysmally dark path ahead for the Maseit is a concern. With the onslaught of changes that the Maseit are compelled to reckon with, who knows, the kind of street magic we are writing about might well end up remaining only in dogeared memoirs and research papers.

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