

Aditi: A Celebration of Life by Richard Kurin

Aditi: A Celebration of Life, a living exhibition in the National Museum of Natural History (June 4 to July 28, 1985), is linked to the Festival of American Folklife both administratively and conceptually. Celebrating the life cycle of traditional India from the perspective of the growing child, the exhibition is organized in 18 sections, beginning with the coming of age, and proceeding through betrothal, marriage, pregnancy, birth, infancy, childhood and maturation to the stage when the child is ready to move out beyond the village to begin yet another cycle. The last section of the exhibition is devoted to festivals and fairs (*melās*) – events which integrate the child into the larger social and cultural community of which he is part. *Melā* An Indian Fair at the Festival of American Folklife is, in effect, an enlargement of this section and a living demonstration of its message.

Aditi combines some 1500 contemporary and ancient artifacts with 40 craftspeople and performers in a setting suggestive of an Indian village. Throughout the sections of the exhibition, objects associated with the particular stage of the life cycle are presented together with the folk artists who give them meaning – the dancers, singers, musicians, puppeteers, painters, potters, jugglers and acrobats of India. The juxtaposition of artists from diverse regions of the country with objects of varied temporal and geographic provenance suggests thematic unities as well as continuities of form and function. Thus Aditi views Indian culture not as an atomistic collection of catalogued objects and traditions, but as an integrated and vital pattern for living.

The exhibition derives its name from the ancient mother goddess extolled in the Rig Veda some 3,000 years ago. The Sanskrit word *aditi* denotes the original creative power – abundant, joyful and unbroken – that sustains the universe. This creative power, which implies the joy of doing – the joy of a mother nurturing her child or of a craftsman imparting form to a lump of clay – is demonstrated by the folk artists who give life to the Aditi exhibition.

Abundance is illustrated in the hundreds of terra cotta Aiyamar horse figures sculpted by M. Palaniappan to be used as guardian deities in the villages of Tamil Nadu. Joy is obvious in the serious yet glowing face of Balraj Shetty, a juggler from Andhra Pradesh, who travels the countryside amusing children with his versatile manipulations, all the time conveying to them the graceful movements of the gods Krishna and Hanuman.

The unbroken nature of the original creative power is illustrated by the skill of Ganga Devi, who, like other women from the Mithila region of Bihar, learned to design the poignant wall paintings and paint their delicate lines from her mother and maternal grandmother. And the parallel between the nurturance of artistic skill and the family can be observed in the performances of *Bhopā* scroll balladeers from Ra-



At Shadipur Depot, outside Delhi, Bhopa balladeer Ram Karan, his wife Gotli Devi, and his sons Shish Ram and Kailash, and Harji Lal perform before a scroll that depicts the story of the Rajput warrior, Pabuji. Photo by Daphne Shuttleworth.

Langa musicians from Rajasthan traditionally sing at births and weddings. The two boys, here pictured with their uncles, were trained by Ala-ud-din and Siddque, participants in the 1976 Festival of American Folklife. Photo by Richard Kurin.



Suggested reading

Jayakar, Pupul. *The Earthen Drum*. New Delhi: National Museum, 1980.

Kramrisch, Stella. *Unknown India: Ritual Art in Tribe and Village*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1968.

Mark, Mary Ellen. "Sidewalk Sideshows." *Geo*, January, 1981.

Sandal, Veenu. "India's Traditional Folk Artists Fight for a Place in the Future." *Smithsonian Magazine* 16(3)(1984):44-53.

Aditi. *The Living Arts of India*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1985.

Suggested films

Aditi. 30 min. color sound. Inter-London Educational Association.

The Magical Road Show. 58 min. color sound. BBC Enterprises.

The Sacred Horses of Tamil Nadu. 30 min. color sound, BBC Enterprises.

jasthan: against the backdrop of a hand-painted scroll whose panels illustrate the epic story of the medieval Rajput hero, Pabuji, Ram Karan plays the stringed *rāvanbatta*, sings and dances. His wife, Gotli Devi, sings and illuminates the relevant scroll panel with her lamp, while his nine-year-old son, Shish Ram, looking up at his father in an effort to imitate his movements and learn the songs, in turn directs the dance movements of his younger brother, Kailash, age four. No scholarly treatise could better illustrate the means by which knowledge is traditionally transmitted and the role of family relationships in that process than the look on the faces between father and son, between older and younger brother.

Indian society has undergone dramatic change in this century and will continue to do so at an accelerating rate. To folk artists such changes pose great challenges, for the traditional patron/client relationships of India's *jajmānī* system, upon which so many folk artists depend, have been disrupted. For some, like the Langa musicians of Rajasthan, this has spawned a search for new patrons, particularly institutional ones — schools, hotels, radio stations and government agencies. As the century progresses, demand for more technologically sophisticated products strains the economic viability of traditional enterprise. Where Krishnagar toymaker Subir Pal may take hours to complete a realistic clay model, modern commercial machinery can turn out thousands of plastic mold figures in the same amount of time. Such changes not only mark challenges for the folk artists themselves but signal the disruption of the social order and culture upon which they traditionally depended and which, through their art, they perpetuate.

While the Aditi exhibition raises the question of how traditional folk artists adapt to contemporary circumstances, by its very existence it suggests one answer. Many of the performers in both Aditi and the Mela now reside in Shadipur Depot in New Delhi and are members of a cooperative called the "Forgotten and Scattered Artists." It is a tribute to their collective talent, skill and fortitude, as well as to the genius of Aditi's creator, Rajeev Sethi, that these artists are neither forgotten nor scattered. With dramatic, yet dignified resolve, they raise the problems faced by folk artists not only in India but throughout the world today.