

**INDIA FOUNDATION FOR THE ARTS
BANGALORE**

Memorandum

To : The Trustees

September 29, 2015

Via : Arundhati Ghosh

Arts Research and Documentation

From : Tanveer Ajsi

Subject: Jainendra Kumar Dost (2014-G-0-0015): Grant Monitoring

This grant supports the study of the development and changes in the *Launda Naach* performances in Bihar since 1990s. The project aims to explore various aspects including the influence of CD culture, films, and cassette industries on *Launda Naach* to understand the evolution and transformations of this art form with respect to its aesthetics, training, and audience engagements, leading to a book.

During the first nine months of the project, Jainendra has spent much of his time on watching *Launda Naach* performances across many districts in Bihar. Being already connected with the communities there, it did not take him much effort or time to reach out to the key resource people for insights into the dynamics of *Launda Naach* and the transformations it has undergone since its inception. Through his field work, Jainendra came across a diverse range of artists of different age groups who are associated with different repertoires. They all have individual

reasons for choosing *Launda Naach* as their profession and as a result have been labelled with this particular identity which is often seen as a derogatory one in society, especially by the upper caste and class. Skimming through the meagre archival and historical documentary evidence and scholarship available, Jainendra has so far only found conflicting narratives around the inception of *Launda Naach*. Sensing the danger of falling into a trap of chronological compartmentalisation of the art form, Jainendra has abandoned this strand of enquiry and become more focused on the technological, social and political ruptures that have reshaped the *Launda Naach* in Bihar since the 1990s.

Notorious for its obscenity and vulgarity – the reasons behind the artists of this art form being called prostitutes by the upper caste and class of society - *Launda Naach* is performed by the lower castes of the region. However, it is patronised by the same echelons of society who sees it with disdain – a paradox that Jainendra problematises in his project. Over the last three decades, the transformations that this art form has gone through, has given rise to an idiomatic shift that has not only changed it socially, but also reformulated its aesthetics in the public sphere. The changes, that reflect drastic and decisive shifts from the past by incorporating elements from TV and cinema into *Launda Naach*, have forged a new sensibility for the performers and the audiences.

One of the problems Jainendra was quick to identify in his field visits was the formal mode of asking questions and seeking answers from the artistes. As he reports, ‘after preparing a questionnaire, I started consulting the artistes and recording the conversations with them. After listening to the recordings, I felt that there was something missing in them, something that had gone wrong. Although I was getting proper answers to my questions, I couldn’t come to terms with the mechanical approach of the

conversation between me and the artistes. I stopped the interviews for some time to rethink my approach. After sometime, I decided to abandon the recorder as well as the questionnaire and started having open-ended conversations with the artistes without making them conscious of the device in my hands. This proved immensely helpful in knowing in detail about the lives of the artistes, the challenges they grapple with, the changes they see the form has undergone so far, and the ways in which they manoeuvre their needs as performers and social beings.” (Translated from Hindi)

So far Jainendra’s field visits have helped him deepen his understanding of gender identities, their social entanglements, their representation, polemics, subversiveness, vulnerability, and the dynamics of the community that play crucial roles in situating an art form within the broader milieu of performativity and discourse. His own engagement with the revival of Bikhari Thakur’s repertory – one of the very old theatre repertories of the region – has also contributed to this project in many ways. Because of it, Jainendra has been able to win the trust of the artistes who are key resource people in this project.

Jainendra has almost finished his field work. He is looking forward to watch the Launda Naach performances during Diwali and Dussehra, after which he will start organising his research findings and writing the book. It is recommended that the second installment be made.