



# Civil Society

## MUSIC FOR THE STREETS

A NEW RHYTHM BEGINS IN MUMBAI



Geet Anand playing his flute at Bandra railway station



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# MUSIC FOR THE STREETS

## A NEW RHYTHM BEGINS IN MUMBAI

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Mumbai

THE rains have started in Mumbai, leaving the ground wet, the air thick and the sky dim, but failing to slow the city's relentless pace. At 9 am on a Saturday, commuters still pour into Bandra railway station, a tiny fraction of the seven million passengers who ride the city's local trains each day.

Geet Anand has arrived under the Victorian-Gothic eaves of the station's Heritage Hall with a black plastic tube slung over his shoulder; inside, he carries a set of bamboo flutes in a variety of sizes, which he empties onto the covered ground near his feet in front of a pair of signs reading National Streets for Performing Arts (NSPA), a Mumbai-based NGO working to reintroduce musicians to the city's public spaces.

Watching Anand prepare, one wonders how such a small man on such a small instrument will have any effect in a space as large and bustling as Bandra station. But the moment he lifts his flute – playing in a classical mode learned in the hills of Madhya Pradesh – people stop: not many, and not all at once, but unmistakably. A few people standing on the platform back slowly toward the Heritage Hall to listen while waiting for their train to arrive. A woman in a pink salwar stops to film the music on her phone. A boy in a ratty Barcelona T-shirt stands just a few feet from Anand, frowning slightly, as if conducting an inspection.

At any given time, there might be people in a cluster under an archway, street kids gathered near the platform edge, passersby slowing down to glance over in surprise or pleasure or both. Save for a pair of shoeshine men who set up shop here, all the spectators are mobile, engaging for a brief while before moving on to continue their day. The audience is in flux, but Anand plays happily throughout. "I'm not concerned whether people stand and listen," he says. "The purpose of NSPA is to give peace and melody."

Later that afternoon, Byculla's Bhau Daji Lad Museum becomes the venue for another concert. The trees in the plaza behind the museum, gone brilliant green under the emerging afternoon sun, mostly block the traffic noise from the Lalbaug Flyover. Against the neo-classical backdrop of the museum, a small crowd of 40-odd people has gathered for another NSPA concert, this one of Uttaranjali folk and something called 'Kabir Rock'. Neeraj Arya and Nitesh More, the second act of the afternoon, sit in chairs facing an audience of families and well-off museum patrons. Seated in folded wooden chairs,



Commuters at Bandra railway station slow down as Geet Anand begins to play his flute

polite, attentive, still – this audience is something of a departure for NSPA musicians like Neeraj and Nitesh.

Though young and slight, Neeraj sings powerfully and intensely, hugging his guitar, as he juxtaposes Kabir's 15th century poetry with the musical idioms of western folk rock, accompanied by Nitesh – quiet, erect, alert – on the *djembe*, a west African drum. Behind Neeraj and Nitesh, where the museum's lawn backs onto the grounds of the zoo, another small crowd has gathered to listen. A group of workmen, having parked their bulldozer with a mechanical grunt, lean in against the gate as Neeraj sings about love and peace and equality of spirit in a centuries-old dialect just beyond understanding. Like railway audiences, the men behind the fence cycle in and out to listen to the music, as much out of curiosity as enjoyment.

The founder of NSPA, Ajit Dayal, initially conceived of the organisation as a mode for bringing music back to the streets of Mumbai while helping to support the livelihoods of musicians. When the organisation was launched in October 2012, it consisted of programme coordinators Shrishti Iyer and



Anisha George, both trained musicians, and a network of 11 musicians – mostly culled from their personal networks of friends and acquaintances – who played in three stations on the Western Railway line.

"In India, the attitude toward street performances is that it's akin to begging, so people have a mental block – particularly in railway stations," says George. "The first 11 musicians were mostly a young bunch who took a risk in terms of going against the mainstream notions and structures of music. Ever since then it's been quite organic."

In that time – just seven months – NSPA has grown via word of mouth to include 25 musicians performing in genres as diverse as Uttaranchalli folk, Carnatic and Hindustani classical, alternative rock and American folk in six railway stations

across Mumbai: Churchgate, CST, Dadar, Bandra, Borivali and Vashi.

By negotiating an agreement with the railways and providing musicians with a pay of ₹1,000 per performing hour, NSPA has begun to generate a new ecosystem for musicians in the city. "In a middle class family, there is pressure to become a doctor or engineer," says Neeraj, who moved to Mumbai from Delhi in order to work with NSPA. "Musicians are taking risks. But NSPA supports us, helps us to feel that we can do something as musicians."

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**THE LURE OF MELODY;** Among other things, NSPA's musicians have begun to reintroduce Mumbai's citizens to a mode of street performance that has, for the most part, faded from the city's crumbling pavements and disappearing gardens.

Among children and commuters at the station as among the workmen at the museum, perplexity is a common reaction.

From nine in the morning for two hours, the period set at Bandra, the three on-site coordinators, sporting yellow NSPA T-shirts and carrying pocket-sized foldout performance schedules, field constant questions from commuters passing by. At the pilot concert, held on 27 June of last year at Churchgate station, George says, "everyone was very curious, coming forward and asking 'Why are you doing this?' and 'What is the purpose?' and 'Who are you all?' and 'How long are you going to be doing this?' – the performers and the organisers were all bombarded with questions."

That first concert involved two 30-minute segments. "For the first half an hour we had someone doing Bob Dylan and Rolling Stones and Beatles songs in English, and for the last hour we had someone doing Uttaranchalli folk," remembers Dayal. "A Mumbai listener may not really know English or Dylan or Rolling Stones, and may not know Uttaranchalli folk, but people loved it. We knew we were onto something fun and exciting."

Seven months later, the questions have changed. Anthony Noronha, one of the event coordinators, says, "People more and more are asking for the specific musicians." According to Arvind Ekrupé, another of the performance coordinators, "There are people who follow the schedules now, who come to see particular musicians." After the museum concert, Neeraj and Iyer even joke that several of the musicians have received letters from admirers.

Questions, of course, are part of the point. "A lot of commuters have maybe never seen a violin or don't know what a *djembe* looks like. So, the idea is to have different kinds of musicians come and play," Iyer says.

"Our idea is to expose audiences to new art and thus give them a wide variety of musical genres from which they can develop new tastes," George agrees. "And a lot of the notions that we had in our heads about what kind of repertoire would suit what kind of station went for a toss when we actually got down to performances."

George recalls one musician performing original compositions in English in the early months who found his largest audience at Borivali station, where, as she puts it "most of the people did not understand what he was saying." Perhaps even more surprising was the Marathi folk singer whose largest audiences were Bihari labourers in Bandra. "The tension between Biharis and Marathis is extremely politicised in Mumbai," George says. "These guys wouldn't understand him, but he sang protest music and a lot of that would hark out to them, so he built a connection with them."

This is precisely the type of connection that has facilitated the organisation's growth. After those initial 11 performers, most of the musicians directly approached NSPA to inquire about auditioning, many of them after having seen performances in transit. "I was just passing through and heard a performance," says Anand, who works as an HR manager for a shipping firm.



Rock band Promise Land: Harmony at the frenetic Bandra railway station



Musicians from Uttaranchal: Suresh Singh singing with K.K. Singh

Anand performs on his flute only on Saturdays and sees performing with NSPA as being entirely about pleasure.

Dayal, who funded the musicians' salaries personally before Quantum Mutual Fund became the official corporate sponsor, imagined much the same thing when he first conceptualised the project. "You have a situation [in Mumbai] where commuters who use buses and trains really don't have any joy, so we said let's make people smile by at least giving them some music," Dayal says. "You have millions more people using trains and buses [than before] and you actually have many more kinds of music than 30 or 40 years ago. Yes, you've lost gardens, but you've got more railway stations, so we just said let's try to make this work."

**TRACKS AND TUNES:** The process of actually 'making it work' has devolved largely to George and Iyer, who together have developed a more comprehen-



Nitesh More and Neeraj Arya deliver Kabir Rock to a rapt audience at the Bhau Daji Lad Museum

sive mission for NSPA.

"NSPA has two primary goals," says George. "One is to bring art to the people and the current modus operandi is to reclaim public spaces to do so. The second is to support the livelihoods of musicians."

For a team working in a city as lacking in public space and as notoriously bogged down in bureaucracy as Mumbai, reclaiming public spaces is a complex procedure. Aside from offering crowds, the city's railway system also proved a more manageable starting point for the fledgling organisation than spaces that would require permissions from the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC). "The railways are a much more organised service. So, their bureaucracy is easier to navigate. They're much easier to approach and communicate with. The BMC is just humungous," explains George, whose previous work as an advocate for rural communities for the right to food, amply prepared her to work between a small non-profit and large government bodies.

While the railways proved easier than the BMC, managers there still needed convincing. According to Iyer and George, railway officials initially expressed concerns over security and additional confusion in already chaotic railway stations. The pilot performance at Churchgate last June was designed to address these concerns. Needless to say, the experiment succeeded once railway officials saw that "performances at the stations can actually help absorb some of the tension, can help calm some of the mad energy of these spaces," George says.

Having demonstrated the workability of the project in one of the city's busiest railway stations, NSPA began its scale-up, selecting stations based on their size and the availability of spaces adjacent to, but not disruptive of, commuter traffic. Having established successful morning and evening models on the Western Railway at Churchgate, Bandra and Borivali, NSPA added its Central Line sites at CST, Dadar and Vashi. Most recently, they have added a daily lunch performance in the Horniman

**'A lot of commuters may not have seen a violin or a *djembe*. So, the idea is to have different kinds of musicians come and play.'**

Circle Gardens, where, Iyer says, "you get mostly office workers from the banks who have come for a nap. It's a completely different audience."

Positive responses from all of these points have begun coming in, even if audiences only occasionally have time to stop and express their appreciation in person. Using social media and NSPA's website, audiences leave messages for specific musicians, inquiring about the initiative, and generally congratulating the team for work well done: "Great finding some fresh music in the city," writes an admirer. "Thank you for bringing back a little soul to Mumbai," says another.

On Facebook, a visitor expressed regret at not having time to stop to watch NSPA performers, while another posted six times consecutively, saying that hearing Pratyul Joshi was "juzz like finding oasis in a hot desert".

With the success at the railway stations established, George says, "We want to go to public spaces that are neglected and unused. At a larger level, we're part of a movement to reclaim public spaces in general." A new array of spaces will also allow NSPA to branch into other forms of the performing arts, introducing narrative arts like dance and theatre in locations more conducive to static audiences. "So our broad thought process when we began this about a year ago was that would need 90 musicians to cover much of Mumbai. As of today we've got about 30, so we've got a long way to go," says Dayal.

"And again," he continues. "This is only for Mumbai." The next stage in the programme's expansion will address the 'National' portion of its title by branching out to cities like Bangalore, Pune, Chennai, Hyderabad and Delhi. Though the initial goal had been to expand into new cities after the completion of one year, the team has remained flexible on timelines. "It will just sort of slowly take on a life of its own over time," Dayal says, "but we have to do it carefully, slowly to be sure we're doing it in the right way in every city."

**TOUCH OF FAME:** After the Bhau Daji Lad concert, it is time to return to Bandra to watch the final half



At Churchgate, Suresh Singh's Uttaranchali songs make people stop to listen



Neeraj strumming on his guitar



Tommy, the Churchgate dog, and two children with commuters watching Suresh Singh perform

hour of the evening performance by Mukund Ramaswamy and K. Dakshinamurthy, a Carnatic classical violinist and percussionist, respectively. Neeraj and Nitesh have come along. The rain has begun again, lightly, and the evening crowds disembarking from the northbound locals linger under the cover of the Heritage Hall to hear the pair play. The crowd is larger and more relaxed this time, standing closer to the musicians and smiling, one man lightly following the *taal* with drumming fingertips.

Sometimes, Mukund and Dakshinamurthy join with Neeraj and Nitesh to play Kabir songs. Together, these four represent an essential piece of the NSPA mission. "We have these meetings so the musicians get to hear each other. That's how collaborations happen. These four met through NSPA," Iyer

says. "They all come from separate traditions, but bring those to 15th century poetry in a way that is very contemporary."

Whatever other goals NSPA might have, the focus, in the end, is the musicians. Iyer's own Master of Fine Arts is in Bharatnatyam dance and 20 years of training in Indian classical dance and vocals makes her as much a performer as an organiser, though her responsibilities are more in respect to the latter. "NSPA's biggest assets are its performers," she says.

With institutional support to fund their work – however modestly – and to provide them with legitimate access to public spaces, these musicians have a greater reach and a sturdier platform for their work, whether they are full-time performers, students or professionals in other fields who perform as a hobby. With these musicians as its evangelists, NSPA hopes to spread public art across the city and finally withdraw.

"We hope that we're able to demonstrate this culture enough so that it begins to take organic root," says George. If successful, NSPA would have opened up the city to the possibilities of public art and created a robust culture of shared public life in an increasingly fragmented urban landscape.

NSPA will also measure its success through its musicians. A singer-songwriter, Pratyul Joshi, for

instance, was recently selected for nh7's Bandstand Revival Contest. "We start as facilitators," says Iyer, "but our musicians find bigger stages and better audiences until they don't need us anymore."

But it will be in combining these facets that NSPA has its most profound effect. "We'll help people reimagine art," George says.

In the meantime they will continue adapting to Mumbai's changing artistic and social topography. Their learning will be from experiences which are both organisational and at ground level – whether in the quiet of a museum or in the tumult of the railway station.

"A station audience is dynamic. Every 10 minutes the people change," Iyer says. "Every 10 minutes you have to reinvent yourself." ■