I met Komal Kothari in a conference in Delhi only in 2000. But this brief meeting was to be followed soon by a much more intense interaction during a fifteen day workshop in Jaisalmer on Documenting Creative Processes of Folklore organized by the National Folklore Support Centre. Though the workshop was being conducted by well known academics in the discipline of folklore, Komal Da, a non-academic stood tall amongst them. Armed with his phenomenal knowledge of Rajasthan and its oral traditions, Komal Da would often intersperse his sessions with folk tales, personal memoirs and anecdotes. The breadth of his knowledge ranged from oral epics, folk instruments, puppeteers, folk gods and goddesses to women’s songs, water harvesting and cultural geography of Rajasthan.

At that time, I was working on a film on the Mirasans of Punjab, women of the Mirasi community who sing songs on life cycle rituals for their patrons. I was carrying a rough cut of my documentary film ‘Born to Sing’ and was looking for an opportunity to show it to him. When I mentioned this to Komal Da on the second last day of the workshop he insisted that he would like to see it that night. I was quite sure that he would have forgotten it all about it but when I went to his room that night, the VCR had been hooked up and he was waiting for me. Komal Da loved the songs sung by the Mirasans. We could see the similarities in the tradition of the Mirasis and the Manganiar caste musicians. Both were Muslim communities and while the patrons of Mirasis were Sikhs, that of the Manganiars were Hindus. I had worked on my film with perhaps the last of the Mirasans who could sing professionally. In Rajasthan too there was a retreat of professional women caste musicians from the public sphere.

I told him that what amazed me is the fact that none of the Mirasans are trained musicians and some of them often go besura yet their music is so rich and sounds so different from the music of other women. I had recorded songs sung by many non-Mirasi women during my field trips to Malwa region of Punjab. Sometimes the repertoire of the two overlapped but the Mirasans’ style was breathtakingly different. This was despite the fact that Sugran, the leading protagonist of my film had never received formal training. ‘It is the control over their breathing that makes all the difference to the quality of their music’ said Komal Da.

Komal Da’s sustained work with the Langas and Manganiars had brought them to the international festival circuits and he was keen to ensure the continuation of this tradition by organizing camps for the younger boys of the community. Interestingly, Langas and Manganiars did not follow any formal system of training for the younger generation. This is unlike the gharana tradition in classical music which is based on a formal guru shishya parampara. Despite this, the Langas and Manganiars have been carrying on this tradition for so many generations. ‘So, the transmission occurs in a strangely non pedagogical manner’. To illustrate this Komal Da gave me the example of Shamsu, who had learnt to play the Jadi ki Sarangi from the great Lakha Khan Manganiyar. Shamsu’s training was facilitated by a Sangeet Natak Academy Scholarship and the young Manganiar boy was to learn from Lakha by living with him for a year. But it was soon felt that this training would be a complete waste of time, for both the teacher and the pupil. Shamsu didn’t really turn out to be an ideal student and to add to his woes Lakha had no patience with him. He would often loose his cool and beat up the boy for not following what he was trying to teach on the instrument.

Many years later, a strange twist of events had a big surprise in store for Komal Da. He needed a Sarangi player for a program and the only person available was Shamsu. Reluctantly, Komal Da sent for him and asked him to perform. That evening Shamsu’s Sarangi played magic, and too in Lakha’s inimitable style! Shamsu had become Shamsu Khan Manganiyar, who would carry on.

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Here to Eternity, on a magic Jharu

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with the tradition of Lakha and pass on the baton to many more Shamsu’s in the near future.

Komal Da spent years trekking villages on foot with a meager budget documenting folk songs, oral epics, story tellers, oral genealogists and professional caste musicians. Most notable amongst these are the rare recordings with dalit and tribal musicians like the Meghwals and Bhils and the nomadic communities of Rajasthan. The Rupayan Sansthan boasts of five thousand hours of recordings deeply embedded in the cultural memory of these diverse communities. Through this rigorous process of documentation Komal Da was able to recover the narrative lore of the lower caste communities’ often carrying expressions of biting satire and irreverence towards the powerful ruling castes of Rajasthan, in a live per formative context.

Komal Da had spread the word that if anyone came across good musicians/performers in their region they should bring them to Rupayan with their instruments. But one of the instruments that Komal Da disliked immensely was the harmonium. For him the harmonium symbolized the demise of the traditional instruments heralding the onset of standardized, uniform musical expression. This was at a time when folk instruments like the Kamaicha, Jadi Ki Sarangi and Sindhi Sarangi were slowly getting eclipsed, only to be found in folklore museums and antique collectors. Those that were available were in a state of disrepair and skilled craftsmen who made these instruments were no longer available. He realized that his work with the younger Langa and Manganiar boys would hold no meaning without the revival of these instruments. This became a major concern and finally Komal Da was instrumental in getting together a group of skilled carpenters, musicians and musicologists to successfully devise the construction of these instruments.

Komal Da’s multi layered work in the field of folklore, ethnomusicology and social history was based on his deep understanding of people’s knowledge systems. I often noticed a certain anxiety he had for pedagogical learning. Even though he never spoke against the need for formal schooling or education, his experience led him to believe that formal education leads to a deep loss of a certain kind of knowledge based on cultural and ecological diversity. “You go to a village, ask a young school going lad to name the variety of grasses that one can find in his village. At the most, he will be able to name two or three. But in the same village, you ask a boy who has never been to school and he will be able to name at least nine or ten. My grand mother could identify about ninety-five colours while today we can hardly name about twenty with the seven primaries remaining as the core.” Perhaps these concerns led him to conceptualise the setting up of a unique ethnographic museum in Jodhpur.

In his last days, Komal Da was intensely involved in the setting up of this museum of his dream that aims to have objects of daily use rather than those of historic or exotic significance. The museum has been designed to relate stories of the creative ingenuity of the common folk by tracing the history of tangible cultural objects and the role they played in their daily life. The first object that is being explored in this unique effort is the jharu or broom stick. Komal Da’s eyes were smiling when he explained the concept behind this museum once again drawing connections between land, water, agriculture, objects, social hierarchies and forms of expression. He spoke at length about the different varieties of grass that the brooms are made of. What is the caste identity of people who make these jharus? What about the women? Who collects the grass and who makes the jharus in the family? What about the brooms that are used by the municipality sweepers? What are the tools that are used to tame the wild grass and mould it to the form of a jharu? Where are these jharus sold? How much time is required to make each jharu? Each question brought us to the social, cultural and economic fabric of Rajasthan. A simple jharu had created a fascinating labyrinth in Komal Da’s mind!

In January 2004, I heard that Komal Da was not keeping too well and wanted to see me. As his health kept deteriorating, he was shifted to a hospital in Jaipur. I decided to take the morning Shatabdi and visit him. His hospital suite had been turned into a virtual office. I could see that a DVD player had been hooked up to the television. There were six acrobat groups in Rajasthan and he was keen that the Rupayan Sansthan should make films on each of them exploring issues of patronage, transmission and performance in a public sphere. He wanted me to steer the project and showed me the video documentation of two of them that afternoon. “I do not have so much time, we should finish this by September,” said Komal Da. But September was too far. On April 20 Komal Da breathed his last.

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