CIRCUS (सर्कस)
CENTRE FOR NEW ECONOMICS STUDIES
AN ENDANGERED CRAFT
Over the long course of history, art, culture, and entertainment have continued to serve as a true reflection of society. There have been countless art forms that have pushed boundaries of expressionism in their own way, while some of them stood the tides of time while some many of them were washed away. One such fading flair would be the “Circus”, long before digital media engulfed our attention, the exhilarating thrill of the circus was nothing less than a carnival of amusement. The circus industry has a long history in India, dating back to the late 18th century. On March 20, 1880, the first Indian circus, named "The Great Indian Circus," was held. Its creator, Vishnupant Chatre, traveled across India with his circus, establishing a number of circus schools that became training grounds for gymnasts and martial artists. This further sparked the emergence of a series of circuses that we know today - the Great Rayman Circus, the Whiteway Circus, the Eastern Circus, the Oriental Circus, the Rambo Circus, and the Great Bombay Circus.

Up until a few years ago, they were regarded as one of the most popular and cherished types of entertainment. The sprawling grounds used to be jam-packed with the audience, every time a circus would be set up. As part of their day's performances, brightly dressed passionate artists, clowns, gymnasts, and shooters would take turns performing, displaying high precision balance and daring talents. But, with the emergence of a variety of factors, like movie theatres and camera-tricked films, the adoration for circuses is continually dying down.

At present, the circus industry in India has come to the verge of extinction as a result of technological advancements and legislative reforms, and with the COVID-19 Pandemic things got worse, and the circus industry kept on shrinking.
CIRCUS IS AN EVER-CHANGING INDUSTRY, FROM ART FORM TO LAWS, EVERYTHING SAW CHANGES.

Circus use to look like a replica of Animal Kingdom, but the industry was badly harmed when the government outlawed the usage of wild animals. Another aspect was the restriction on working employees’ ages. The government did not allow any employees under the age of 18 to perform. Circus acts need extensive training, and those interested in learning the skill were taught from an early age. However, when the government issued these new regulations, many trained youngsters were no longer permitted to perform in circuses, which dealt a further blow to the industry.

While circuses in other countries have permanent structures connected to zoos, where animals return after performances, even circus schools exist to assist and develop new performers. There are no such amenities available to the circuses in India. Circus owners put in a lot of effort, artists need years of training and go through hardship, then such regulation comes in suddenly and changes everything. At a point in time circus staff was very skeptical about the future of the circus, and they left the circus and went on doing things like rickshaw pulling, etc., which they found to be a stable mode of earring.

When children as young as infants are adored in films, why are they banned from working in a circus? This is an art form like gymnastics.

Rajeev Chatterjee, Joker, Rambo Circus, India
In a 3-hour, pre-shot film, artists depend on the acts and stunts they perform, that too with multiple trials and camera tricks. In circuses, on the other hand, the 2-hour show put up by artists includes live acts perfected by years of practice. Artists take pride in the fact that everything presented on the stage is nothing less than authentic. That they fall, bleed, and stand back up again in front of their audience. Even though the reality is no secret, the response and plaudit are underwhelming.

Many of the performers live in circumstances in temporary tents with no modern amenities, and some are even separated from their families and children. However, the artists are content to play for their little crowds. They are happy to continue the legacy of age-old art.
Now, with the depletion of COVID-cases, the acts are back on the grounds, but the number of spectators remains a few.
The biggest motivation for the artists is public feedback. Before-COVID period, the members of the audience would approach the stage and make conversations, validating and appreciating the hard work. The artists would often understand the critique and response as an inducement to make their performances better.

When the general public's response is so inadequate that art is in danger of becoming extinct, the state, particularly in the presence of ministries of art and culture, should provide a boost. Regrettably, the truth is rather different. Apart from the ban on animals and minors, the government hasn’t extended any helping had to support and sustain the circuses. The circus set-up, the tents, and chairs and the transportation costs incurred take the huge cuts from the maintenance and potential salaries. In recent years, the ground problem has grown significantly. Large, empty locations are becoming increasingly scarce. Owing to the demand, private landlords impose exorbitant rents. The red tape around the process of getting a permit does not make it any easier. Circus enjoys no subsidy or policy support, above that GST is levied on the minimum ticket costs. During the pandemic, the number of circuses has closed due to a lack of financial support.
Circus is home to people from different walks of life, who learn, perform, and earn. Circus is not just entertainment it is a world in itself.
The number of Circuses has come down from a very few. Initially, during Pandemic, they depended on fundraising and donations, and few even organized online events to sustain themselves. One of the significant difficulties in the expansion and improvement of the state of circuses is due to the lack of artists. With the constant shutting down of circuses and fall of popularity, each passing day, the profession is attracting fewer and fewer individuals willing to participate in the rigorous training regime.

There is a need for Government to support the circus artists, provide them with the benefits of the labor and wages legislation. We have a film industry, we have other entertainment industries, an intervention is needed to bring circus into the ambit of industry, so we can save this art form, from extinction.

“Earlier there were around 300 Circuses in India, but now the number has come down to 30.”

Rajeev Chatterjee, Joker, Rambo Circus, India
To put up a show, a number of people are involved excluding the performing artists who don't come on stage but make it happen.
Years of practice and rehearsals make the entertainment-packed, thrilling show, happen.
Earlier we had a staff of 300-400 people, then slowly audience stop showing much of an interest, and that resulted in a decrease in the number of people working for circus, we have almost 150 people working for us till we stopped during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Sujit Dilip, Owner, Rambo Circus, India
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