



Circus Routes

Representing India from the Perspective of an Itinerant Profession

Indian big top circuses carry an ensemble of people, animals, and infrastructures over long distances. Interviews with circus managers and owners about their itineraries suggest their representations of India elude some regional conceptions of space that are widespread and prevalent in South Asian studies. While regions bind together nearby places with a history of exchanges and common practices, circus routes are one modality by which distant places and regions can be defined and connected through the history of the people traveling through them. This article surveys some of the spatial features that managers and owners consider when determining circus routes. Circus routes highlight dynamic and business-oriented ways of thinking about India's territory, factoring in monsoons and droughts, ground availability and prices, and competition with other itinerant businesses. Building on ethnographic material, I show that business acumen in the circus community is primarily defined by a reading of space that successfully factors in this information. Ultimately, the development of circus geographies that do not readily map onto national, international, or subnational scales demonstrates how time and space can be configured in a specific way by one's belonging to a professional community.

Keywords: Indian circus—*itinerant communities—migration—cosmopolitanism—Kerala*

Once asked Jimmy, a former circus manager, the son of a circus owner from North Kerala (India), how his company decided where the circus would settle its next camp. Explaining that the person in charge of this decision had varied over the years, he remembered: “Actually, my father was very good at that. He used a map of India: he would just pinpoint, with his hand like this [*he points to a place on an invisible map with his finger*], and he’d say: ‘this is the place.’”¹

While Jimmy’s gesture may be the product of rhetorical flourish or a kind of bravado, it does evoke a logic common to the stories of circus professionals. In their recollection of the way circus companies circulated, which not infrequently invokes romantic visions of the profession in its golden age, when it came to choosing their next destination “the sky was the limit,” as long as there was an opportunity for “good collection” (the term used by owners to designate the earnings generated by ticket sales). A finger dropped on an imagined map could, and can still, determine the migration of several hundred people, a parade of elephants and other large animals, and equipment that would require and fill several dozen lorries or train cars.

In this article, the “circus” and “circuses” refer to nomadic entertainment institutions that carry an ensemble of people, animals, and infrastructures—most emblematically among these, a “big top” tent in which the circus show is performed—over large distances. Circus companies cater entertainment to the place where they set up their camp in the form of two to three circus shows daily, open for ticket sales. In India, there are circuses of different sizes: while overall all circus companies have steadily dwindled in size since the 1970s, even a small circus today will require the rental of ten or twelve lorries for transportation, and coordination of the journey for sixty to eighty employees. The larger circuses can be two to three times that large. Many circus companies allow employees to take leave on a rotational basis so the show can perform throughout the year and the circus infrastructure tour continuously.

Indian circus companies plan their movements in India² in order to move from one camp to the next as efficiently as possible. Travel dates are fixed in advance, three to six months before, sometimes longer: dates in large cities and for competitive grounds can be agreed upon years in advance. Camps are chosen for their profitability as performing sites, and the choice is constrained by the availability and competition for existing grounds (called *maithanam* in Malayalam and *maidan* in Hindi). Overall, distance between two camps plays a secondary role in deciding a future location. Few



Figure 1: Opening nights at new campgrounds for three circus companies originating from Kerala. On such occasions, the circus companies' infrastructures are typically inaugurated by a local official at the beginning of the first evening show, and are fully illuminated. Photographs by Eléonore Rimbault, 2019, Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

of the managers and owners I have interviewed ventured to offer technical details or accounts about the traveling days, unless prompted: they have much more to say about the periods of promotion and camp construction that take place in the new site before the circus performance premieres.³ It is part of the circus's image to mushroom suddenly in a place, to create a sense of urban transformation through the mysterious appearance of its remarkable infrastructure: the big top (figure 1).⁴ Thus, although the circus is an itinerant institution, which by its own definition cannot settle, life on the road does not define it either. The circus is instead a site that continuously visits, and entertains, new places. This particular attitude toward traveling distinguishes Indian circus professionals I have spoken to from what is reported on other forms of itinerant entertainment and labor, in India and elsewhere. Itinerant sellers, or street performers, who move from place to place and are able to adjust to suddenly arising opportunities for business often seek to maximize the value of the distance traveled, either by minimizing their mileage or by flexibly seizing the opportunities a long journey generates.⁵

Circus routes (figure 2), the itineraries for travel from one place to the next elaborated by circus managers, inscribe the circus companies into the space they traverse and shape the temporality of circus life. They involve planned movement over long distances (by road or using the Indian railway network),⁶ minimizing stops and time until arrival at the next settlement. In my interlocutors' narratives, a circus route is configured through a selective mode of recollecting that emphasizes time *in a place* over time *between places*. Whether my interlocutors occupy high-ranking positions in the circus and enjoy the expertise and mobility one can draw from constant traveling, or lower positions (as staff members or performers) caught up in mobile but repetitive routines of performance, circus routes are always a central structure in circus professionals' relationship to space and time. Because they reflect a pattern of interaction between a business that moves to meet its audience and Indian society, circus routes can serve as an index of changes in India's spatial dynamics. The migrations of people who enroll in the circus and the itineraries fixed in each circus company reflect transformations in India's economy. And as this article shows, the circus routes are also shaped by several environmental, logistical, and economic factors. Thus, changes in these routes also signal the transformations underway in India's geography and economy.

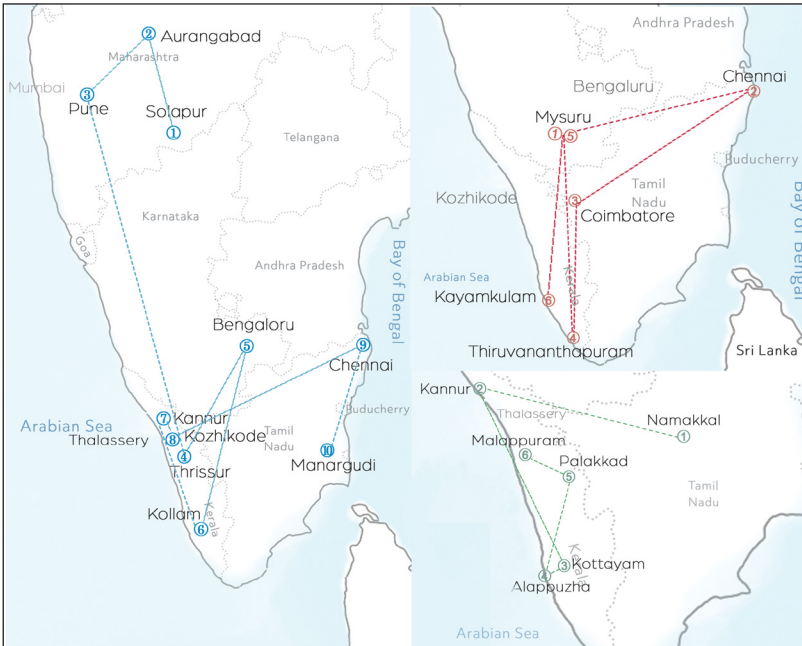


Figure 2. Maps representing the trajectories of three circus companies (2018–2020). These maps feature the sites of performance of three Malayali-owned circus companies (two circuses of roughly the same size on the left and top right, a smaller circus at bottom right). The lines represent schematically the order in which they visited various cities over the 2018–2020 period. Data collected and mapped by Eléonore Rimbault.

Circus routes express the professional acumen of circus managers and owners, who possess expertise in planning such itineraries; they embody the history of a professional group in continuous movement. I attempt to offer a description of these routes and the way professionals discuss them in part as a corrective for what I have experienced, in my ongoing education in the social sciences of South Asia, as a heavy reliance on a regional conceptualization of South Asia, even within India. While the division of South Asia’s “sub-areas” in India along lines informed by historical and present administrative divisions (e.g., the Northeast, Kashmir), cultural similarities (South vs. North India), and physical geographical features (e.g., the Deccan) is relevant to and often instructive for research work, the tendency to seamlessly reinforce areas of demonstrated cultural consistency can obscure how local and insider perceptions of space might be connected to histories that build up through travels and regular visits. Frank Heidemann and Philipp Zehmisch offer a reflexive evaluation of academic appraisals of historical time after realizing that “[the informants from the Andamans and the researchers] applied different strategies to reduce the complexity of historical narratives,” with Andaman informants placing more emphasis comparatively on the “spatial aspects” of history: “as memories of the past are to a certain extent spatially oriented, there is, consequently, a need to recognize that history is space-bound, too” (2016, 2). Here my argument concerning space offers some related insights, emphasizing ways in which my interlocutors’ perception of space departs from widely shared conceptions of space ordered by

subnational, national, and international scales and foregrounds instead dynamic connections arising while navigating a territory over time. I venture that such appraisals of space invite academics to consider other ways of perceiving, thinking, and talking about space.

In the first section of this article, I explain why the way circus routes are talked about in circus companies calls for an approach to time and space that departs from the regionalism that dominates South Asian studies and area studies more broadly. I argue that focusing on how a set of cultural practices relates to a broader regional canon can obscure the singular ways in which a community comes to think about space, movement, and time.

The circus profession is defined by its ambulatory engagement with space, characterized both by the migratory patterns that lead people to enroll as circus professionals and by the continuous and recursive movement materialized by the circus routes. Consistently with this experience, circus professionals express a distinctive relationship to space, premised on the dual experience of migration to join a workplace and of the continuous movement of their workplace. The next section offers an ethnographic analysis of the planning of the circus routes, which is the responsibility of managers and owners. Highlighting the geographical information circus owners and managers take into account to determine the circus routes, this section shows how navigating the Indian territory becomes intuitive for circus owners and managers. In the final section, I show how the particular appraisal of space and time in the profession, while locally valued, remains idiosyncratic and left out of subnational, national, and international histories my interlocutors sometimes aspire to be a part of. I conclude by evoking the changes in contemporary circus routes, and by summarizing the implications of this study for rethinking regions in South Asian studies.

Thinking space beyond regional scales

Numerous anthropological and historical studies of the Indian subcontinent identify themselves as contributions to the study of South Asia as a region, or as studies of a region within South Asia. This regional angle of South Asian studies can be credited for allowing the analysis of phenomena downplayed by nation-centered analyses (Murphy 2017) and has also led to the development of intraregional literatures that provide a heuristic fragmentation of the subcontinent meant to represent India's cultural and historical specificity. While both of these tendencies in regional studies are useful to elucidate a broad range of behaviors, traditions, and migratory movements, they do not provide much footage to understand the professional culture of my interlocutors. While various scholars have scrutinized and critiqued area studies for the epistemological divisions they operate informed by Western academic interests (Dirks 2015, 265–90; Rafael 1994; Hirschman, Keyes, and Hutterer 1992), here I make a case for thinking outside regional categories not so much because of this academic history, but because thinking with regional scales can fail to account for how groups that travel on a regular basis, particularly a multicultural group such as circus professionals, come to think about space.

Circus professionals constitute a diverse and strongly stratified professional group. In a circus camp, people with very different biographical trajectories, professions, and backgrounds cohabitate continuously. The local status of these professionals does not map seamlessly onto prevalent status systems existing in South Asia (Nisha 2017, 2020). While the circus is not necessarily the space without caste, class, or religion that it claims to be (Champad 2012), the importance of caste and religion as identity markers is locally overshadowed by the divisions and ranking of the circus's three sectors of professional activity: management, performance, and camp maintenance.⁷

No traditional or formal restrictions limit enrollment into these groups on the ground of one's place of origin or religious or caste background. In that sense, the circus community differs from other entertainer communities of India for which affiliation is based on language, kinship, or cultural transmission. The circus industry is molded and characterized instead by what Vinay Gidwani and Kalyanakrishnan Sivaramakrishnan have defined as labor circulation, "the movement of people whose livelihood strategies involve relocation, both periodic and permanent, but whose self-making strategies retain a significant involvement with places of origin, especially rural homelands" (2003, 341). Indeed, even if the status of circus workers is determined inside the company and through the exercise of their profession, they remain attached to their place of origin, culturally and linguistically. Distinct patterns of circulation can thus be identified in the ways people from different parts of the subcontinent engage with the circus industry, since the early days of the circus in India.

The history of Malayali⁸ engagement with the circus professions, which I have focused on ethnographically during the fieldwork conducted for my dissertation, is marked by a period of upward mobility between the 1920s and 1990. Throughout the history of the circus as a form of entertainment in India, and particularly in the second half of the twentieth century, many circus-owning families had their family homes (*tharavadu*)⁹ in the north of Kerala (Champad 2013). Between the 1920s and the 1990s, a large number of artists, performing trainees, and staffers were also recruited in the surroundings of Thalassery, in Kannur district. The circus was perceived as a comparatively profitable profession for men and women, and an opportunity to live a more comfortable life for boys and girls in an otherwise difficult economic context, where job pays were insufficient to feed large families (Mathew and Nair 1978; Menon 1994; Prakash 1978). The circus ceased to be a competitive profession to join for the generations born in Kerala after the 1970s. As Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella have discussed in their ethnographic work (2000a, 2000b), the economic boom within the Gulf countries in the late 1970s created significant job opportunities for Malayali men, and temporary, job-related migration to Gulf countries led to an increase in family and state-wide revenues. The structure of this form of distant employment also helped to "maintain one's prestige by concealing one's occupation and by splitting the moment and site of wealth accumulation from its moment of consumption, enabling and encouraging a focus upon the result, cash earned" (2000a, 121). The 1990s liberalization of the Indian economy also offered (comparatively more educated) jobseekers better-paid jobs that were not as notoriously high risk nor as costly in terms of reputation livelihood as a circus performer.¹⁰ Over these

decades, the economic situation of Kerala improved in comparison to other states, and the circus profession became less appealing locally. Professionals from other states began to outnumber Malayalis in the lower echelons of the profession. This corresponds to broader historical patterns of labor circulation that have brought workers to Kerala, a state now in demand of low-paid and informal labor. Today, the majority of South Asian artists who join the circus industry as performers have homes in Uttar Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Manipur, West Bengal, and Nepal. In addition, a small number of “star” performers are recruited abroad, in countries where circus training is conducted in specialized training institutions, facilitating the hiring of performers on the basis of annual or seasonal contracts. These artists receive visas for the duration of their contract, as well as higher (documented) wages. Since the 1990s, these performers have mostly come from Central Asian, post-Soviet countries (places with which there appears to be a longer history of collaboration) and African countries, in particular Ethiopia (Kendall 2017). Overall, the dearth of Malayalis and the demographic significance of performers from other states in Kerala-based companies are consistent with broader trends in migrations to Kerala motivated by its job prospects (De Haan 2002; Venkiteswaran 2017; Raj and Axelby 2019; Breman 2010).

While Malayali performers and staff members have become rarer, circus ownership has continued to be passed on in Kerala, from father to son, and these owners continue to hire Malayalis, mostly from Northern Kerala, to manage their circuses. Overall, this has resulted in the prominence and visibility of Malayalis in the circus industry’s management positions. Among the three largest circus companies now active in India, two have management positions entirely staffed by Malayalis, with most of these managers established in the northern district of Kannur. Among the six circus companies I have regularly visited, five of them also had managers who were from Kerala. Shifts in the labor migration observable in the Malayali-owned circus companies suggest that hiring trends in the circus profession are consistent with broader migratory trends across India. As such, circuses are places that index contemporary economic and spatial dynamics, as well as interregional migration patterns. The concentration of a diverse group of circus professionals, with distinct and yet not unusual histories of migration, contributes to the peculiar sense of space and time that the circus generates, both as a site hosting such collectives and as a site of entertainment for spectators.

Indeed, the coordinated movement of these professionals coming from different places as a circus company impacts insiders’ conceptualizations of time and space. Circus companies travel continuously throughout the year, most of them shifting their location every month or other month. They interact in limited ways with the places where they set their camps. Within the circus compound, the diverse origins of the performers and workers create a work environment that deviates from regionally situated, sedentary businesses. Circus professionals from Kerala-founded companies negotiate on a daily basis with a polyglot, multicultural group of coworkers: Malayalam, Hindi, and English are routinely used, in addition to the other languages circus workers happen to have in common (for instance, in the circuses I have visited, Assamese, Amharic—because of the large number of foreign performers

from Ethiopia that were hired from 2018 to 2020—and Tamil were also frequently used). Unlike industries relying on the services of intermediary staff managers (Raj and Axelby 2019; Sargent 2017), the scale of circus companies does not include mediator positions below that of the overseer of the camp and other managerial positions, frequently occupied by Malayalis. At most, a performer who was hired as part of an artist troupe may be assigned the role of negotiating with the camp manager, but this does not prevent others in the troupe from having to interact with and live alongside the other employees of the company. This necessary cohabitation renders all employees more versed than average in living alongside and interacting on a daily basis with people speaking different languages and belonging to different cultures and places of origin. Because of this, their outlook is characterized by the sort of cosmopolitanism Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan (2003) identify in their study of circular migration: circus professionals “straddle a world of difference . . . and come to recognize the political relations that secure and naturalize that difference.” They “[transmit] through movements in geographic space not just sensibilities and ideas, but also the materials and techniques that enable the production and transformation of the social space of multiple worlds (not merely the social space of the rural, but also of the urban, the regional, the national, and what gets inscribed as the global)” (2003, 361–62). For circus professionals, this definition of cosmopolitanism seems to take on an additional dimension: while cohabitation in the circus company leads to the production of a social world in which multiple origin narratives and visions of India’s regional constitution are expressed internally, the circus company is also a place that moves, where business is based on engaging with new places and new people. The reproduction of the circus as a performance exhibited to an ever-changing audience—namely the show, and its episodic installation and presence in sedentary spaces—engages and “transforms” the multiple worlds already contained by the circus as well as those of the places and people for which it comes to perform.

Because these spaces are often visited more than once, and because the circus routes have changed over time, there is a mnemonic and historical quality to the managers’ and owners’ navigation and descriptions of the Indian territory. This history is longer than the careers of today’s professionals. The first circuses that visited India, mostly European ones (British and Italian), played in trading posts and large cities where British officers and families sponsored such shows. They visited the subcontinent as part of longer world tours that were facilitated by European colonial presence across Asia especially. When the first Indian circuses opened in the 1880s, they quickly engaged along the same routes, visiting metropolises, trading posts, and foreign destinations where circus shows were in demand, while also visiting more cities and towns in the subcontinent. Indian-owned companies continued to tour internationally for a hundred years. From the 1940s, Indian companies occasionally toured Malaysia, Singapore, the Middle East, and East Africa, in addition to many sites in India and Sri Lanka. Up until the 1990s, circus routes also included many local festival venues within India annually, which means the companies changed their location more frequently than they do now. Current circuses tour strictly within India, and big tops focus on renting grounds in metropolises where they can camp for months at a time. Nonetheless, the generations of professionals who were active

in the 1990s carry with them the memories and nostalgia for the broader routes they used to travel.

The geographical perceptions of Indian circus professionals invite us to put aside the regional divisions of India's territory to consider other ways of navigating the same space. First, the regional diversity of circus companies generates itinerant sites of cohabitation in which the workers' different cultures, languages, and biographical trajectories are gathered and engage with each other through the close proximity of circus life. Second, the way circus routes connect distant and apparently dissimilar sites calls for an inquiry into the motivations and logic of these itineraries, which I take up in the next section.

Circus routes

Detailed, lively, and nostalgic observations about the geography or social composition of a place that the circus visited are the privilege of a minority in the circus, who can go out and interact with their environment with comparatively more freedom: men rather than women, families and troupes rather than company boys and girls, managers and owners over employees. Thus, it is mostly those among the highest echelons of circus society—circus managers and owners—who are able to engage with the places traveled with enough autonomy to become curious and knowledgeable about these places. From the point of view of those in this position, this compares positively in relation to people of comparable economic status in their places of origin. Aware of this privilege, circus managers and owners are often keen to share their knowledge of a place. The pragmatic aspects of circus management, namely, living alongside people of different social status, origin, and language, and handling their issues on a daily basis, makes them astute observers of the ways of life, desires, and aspirations of others.

Jimmy explains to me in an interview that it was the extended stay in a place and proximity with its residents that made him remember his former profession with fondness:

Now we go to a place and [when] we are there . . . Bengal for example, then we [get to] know the local culture, the people, what they eat . . . so closely we are involved, you know? For instance, we stayed in some place in Punjab. There are no hotels, so we stayed in somebody else's house. And then we get involved with their family and the culture of the family. Those are the memories that I miss actually . . . [when] we go for holidays, the show is running somewhere. My kids, my wife, my children, my sisters, the family—normally [when] we go for holidays, we stay and take a place for three days. We all hang out. But [in this case] we stay for a month, so one month we are in the same town, we go out and [discover the place]. . . . That's a big holiday, staying a month in one place.

He also noted that one of the perks of being a circus manager was the cultural and geographical knowledge one gains through such experiences: "how well we've seen the country . . . very few people have seen the country [in this way]." For managers and circus-owning families, traveling and staying in different places with different people constitute elements of their identity and inform their accounts of the places

they have lived at. The circus routes they describe are characterized by details on the sociological diversity of India, the cohabitation of speakers of different languages, and by their awareness of India's numerous festivals and pilgrimages—for which the circus can hope to provide a light but remunerative side entertainment. At once an affect-laden mnemonic feature and a form of business expertise, the knowledge gathered by being “close” to the people can be reinvested in making future decisions about where to set up a camp, directly shaping the future circus routes.

Because they are responsible for determining where it is best for the circus to go next, camp managers and owners must develop a sense of where a circus camp might be successful. To do so, they build on their past experiences and on the observation of the routes of other circus companies. They draw meaningful connections between towns and cities through their itineraries, which inform the way they continuously plan ahead to the next camps. Their curiosity and enjoyment of itinerant life and their business intuition blend into a noteworthy character trait remembered by their relatives outside the profession. As Shobha, the daughter of a successful circus manager (and founder of the large company Asian Circus)¹¹ who passed away in the 1970s, explains to me in an interview in October 2019,¹² her father “was a genius in circus.” Explaining that her father was “very, very cunning and very able,” managing up to four circuses at the same time at some point in his life, she adds that wherever he traveled, “his breath [was] always with the circus.” In her description, as in Jimmy's description of his dad pointing out the next location on an imagined map, the circus owner is the embodiment of his business, with a physical knowledge that enables strategic decisions that must be taken to ensure the success of the company. Jimmy, who learned the circus business directly from watching his father, clarifies that what may look like intuition in the moment of decision-making is in fact structured by extensive practical knowledge about the places that can be toured:

[Father] knew, he later developed it [that knowledge], [as he did] in Assam: what is the festival in that town, what is [the performance ground like] in that town, if it's raining there. . . . We know the geography of the country so well: the festivals, [the climate, etc.]. When it's raining, we play in Rajasthan, while in Kerala if it's raining you go to Tamil Nadu to compensate—like that.

Such accounts are useful to tease out concrete factors that weigh in the planning of the circus routes. Circus routes must consider the infrastructural needs of the company first and foremost. Circus life is organized around the tented shows that take place two to three times daily. The big top, as well as the rest of the camp, is installed outdoors, on an empty ground rented to the municipality or a private owner (figure 3). It is crucial that that ground stays dry and that it can attract enough crowds to cover what it costs to run the show with ticket sales.

Weather conditions are thus an essential criterion for selecting future destinations. Circuses must avoid areas affected by the monsoons and plan cautiously in areas with changing weather: strong rains can quickly damage the camp, the facilities in which the employees stay, and the tented ring; they can also compromise the performance. Cycling, bike stunts, and acrobatics can be visually less impressive, or pose greater danger to the performers, when they are performed in a ring where the floor is

uneven or wet. Unpredictable weather has made small circus companies particularly vulnerable to climate change in recent years. As another circus manager, Sajith, whose company Sun Circus has since shut down, explained to me during an interview in spring 2018:

The climate conspired against us. Previously, we used to spend the rainy season in Tamil Nadu, where it didn't use to rain. But now June and July are highly unpredictable months, even there. And December, November, which are usually relatively dry in Kerala, have been very rainy this year.¹³

Another major factor at play in the charting of circus routes is the rental prices of grounds large enough to accommodate the performance tent and the compound. *Maidan* prices and their variations according to local festivals and competition with other aspiring users (other circuses, *melas*, exhibitions, fairgrounds, and so on) are well known information among managers and circus owners.¹⁴ The price of rental grounds is indexed to the size of the city, the area in which it is located, and its local popularity as a place to stroll by, in addition to the actual size of the *maidan* and its connections to urban infrastructure (bus service, ease of access to water and electricity, etc.). Even in the current context, where many circuses have closed, one can distinguish circuses of various sizes and means, including a handful that can afford *maidans* that cost more than 30,000 Indian rupees (~\$406) daily, while most others seek less expensive deals.



Figure 3. Circus camps installed on *maidans*. The two top photographs show the public-facing, front side of two camps; the two bottom ones the backstage and back-facing side of the camps, where some of the employees live in private tents. Photographs by Eléonore Rimbault, 2017–2020.



Figure 4. A 1986 handbill for the Jumbo Circus company, advertising a show in Ernakulam (Malayalam and English). Document preserved by a former circus artist and photographed in situ by Eléonore Rimbault, Kannur, Kerala, 2017.

The evolution of *maidan* prices is an important element that explains how the trajectories of circuses have changed over time. The diversification of promoters with an interest in renting out a large ground, with the development of events such as music festivals, popular music concerts, book and film fairs, and massive political party events, has led to a steep increase in prices in some cities, and it sometimes put an end to the preferential rents that circuses were given in the past. The handbill displayed in figure 4 is a promotional document for a show put on by Jumbo Circus in the city of Ernakulam, the largest city in Kerala. While no large circus company has visited Ernakulam since the mid-2010s, it was formerly a venue included in the circus routes. Note that while the handbill states the show comes “in your town for the first time,” this does not need to be correct; it is a common marketing argument found in

almost all circus advertising even today. Thus, *maidan* prices and the climate chart out the sites where it is possible to perform.

Circus companies are further constrained by competition with other circuses, and with other forms of entertainment that perform on the *maidan*, such as *melas*. Competition issues among circus companies have been documented (and also featured in films),¹⁵ but those involved in them rarely venture information about the precise nature of events or the way these competition issues were dealt with. With hindsight, Shobha tells me the following story.

Once, when [our circus] was running in Pondicherry, Venus [another large circus, now closed] also came to Pondicherry. Real enmity, no, at that time real enmity! [She exclaims and laughs.] At that time I still remember my *amma* [mother] and everybody used to tell me: don't go there, that these people will kill you kill you kill you. I would say, why [would they kill] me? . . . Then one day [the owner] came to our circus to see the show and we also went there, finally it became friendly, haha! Everybody was thinking that we will have a very good fight. My brother was running it at that time, not my dad [the circus's first owner].

In this account, the owners of each circus alleviate the tension caused by the prospect of competition by visiting the other circus playing the same city. However, note that Shobha mentions it was her brother who was “running the show at that time”: by her own account, her brother, who was much more interested in making films than in the circus venture he had inherited, was a bad strategist in planning

circus routes and attendance. In Shobha's account, he eventually sunk his father's business, which shut down a few years after Shobha's father's death. The mishap of having two circuses playing in the same city that was avoided by two men of different generations making a concerted effort to be friendly toward each other could perhaps have been entirely avoided had it involved owners of the same seniority and caliber. As Jimmy, who happens to be the son of the competing owner Shobha mentions in this account, explains, large circus companies have set up patterns of collaboration among each other in the past, which might be perceived as collusion from the standpoint of the circuses who are not their "friends."

We plan six months in advance, so anybody coming in our way that we face, we try to stop them. . . . If [their] application comes to the office [*the office of the municipality where the maidan is negotiated*], we'll know that another circus is coming. If the other is our friend, we might say, "We'll come after six months." Because whatever we do, we can't come right after [*here the manager means that if they come too soon after another circus has gone, they won't be met by an audience*], that means that we can't come back. So we avoid it. So like that, we have small-small issues. Then, there's this understanding between the three-four companies of ours [*i.e., the group composed of Venus Circus and its "friends"*]. If somebody wants to play A, he plays town A. "B town you play, C town we play." Then they say, "You give me B town, I'll give you A town."¹⁶

Thus, circus companies of comparable status make alliances and use negotiation to fix itineraries that avoid direct competition with companies perceived as "friends." Compared to other circus companies, they do their best to spot the ones that "come in their way" and thwart their attempt to secure the rental of a *maidan*.

The price at which a circus ticket is known to sell at a given place can also weigh in the choice of a performance destination. A retired circus owner discussed with me why large circus companies now tour almost exclusively in Maharashtra, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu. He explained that in some other states, like Uttar Pradesh or Gujarat, it is not possible to sell a ticket for more than 15 (~\$0.20) to 30 (~\$0.40) rupees a seat. "How can you run a show with that kind of money?" he asked. "That's why [big circuses] tour in places like Kerala," where ticket prices in a small circus vary between 100 (~\$1.40) and 300 (~\$4) rupees depending on seat placement.¹⁷ While circus is by no means a popular entertainment form currently in Kerala, the budgets families can dedicate to entertainment there are still higher than in other states. This is seemingly a recent development that has resulted in more pronounced restrictions of circus routes along a North-South axis, with an understanding of the South limited to Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

Many factors weigh in the decision to "play" a city, with some of them being specific to each circus company and the recursive nature of their routes. Aside from competition avoidance, factors like specific histories of engagement with a festival, school vacations, or good or bad relations with the local police force can also play a role in shaping itineraries. Owners and managers come to envision space through these factors and through strategies that can maximize the company's collection.

The circus owner as itinerant diplomat

Over time and across generations involved in circus ownership, observations and memories formed while traveling become recognized as a business sense that is valued inside the profession but also in the broader communities that owners and managers are from. The practical knowledge that circus managers can gather by using their itinerant structure as a place of hospitality for the communities they visit and the local notables and politicians of each place, as well as their strategic assessment of the best publicity tactics to deploy in order to draw different kinds of crowds, can easily be converted into an expertise useful beyond the circus industry.

This explains the smooth professional pivot of Jimmy, the former owner and manager of Venus Circus mentioned earlier. When his father died, he sold the familial circus company to develop a remunerative business in hotels and tourism. Two other circus owners I interviewed were able to invest part of their circus revenue in other companies based across India and secure a steady flow of income (instead of the risky and varying revenue a circus company generates) by diversifying their capital.¹⁸ The Malayali owners I have interviewed are generally recognized businessmen among the society clubs and business meetings of the areas where they have their permanent residence, and their reputation sometimes extends to broader networks.

In some cases, famous owners succeeded in establishing themselves as more than businessmen. M. V. Shankar, popularly known in northern Kerala as Gemini Shankarettan (which combines the name of his most famous circus with his own name, to which the Malayalam kin term for big brother, *chettan*, has been added), owner of the Kannur-based Jumbo Circus and (now closed) Gemini Circus, has been especially successful, for instance in building a reputation as a diplomatic negotiator among circus owners, especially in the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁹ In a 1965 issue of *Big Top*, a magazine published by the Indian Circus Federation (a business association set up by leading circus professionals active between 1965 and 2015), M. V. Shankar describes his experience as “Leader [of the] Indo-Russian Circus Cultural Delegation,” which included M. V. Shankar, his wife, one business partner, and four young performers from Gemini Circus. The delegation was sent to the USSR in 1963 “to represent India in the International Circus Fair held in important cities in [the] USSR like Moscow, Sochi, and Yalta” on a 3.5-month itinerary. In his article entitled “Impressions of My Russian Tour,” M. V. Shankar notes, “everywhere [they] went [in the USSR] the Indian team was accorded great welcome and affection was showered lavishly upon [them].” He goes on to describe their return to Delhi, and the way he briefed Prime Minister Nehru on their visit to the USSR: “[o]ur late beloved Prime Minister Panditji was much interested in our tour and heard our experiences and listened to most of the suggestions I put forward to him” (1965, n.p.).

Released by the Indian Circus Federation, this account of Shankar’s influence must of course be taken with a pinch of salt. Nonetheless, it is useful in assessing how the leaders of the circus profession aspired to be portrayed at the time when this issue was published. It does seem like the image of the circus manager as a cultivated, well-traveled, and business-savvy character that this article conveys had credence beyond the profession, especially in political circles. To this day, the ease of circus owners and managers in navigating space and social milieus cannot be credited to the

circus alone—these men also typically come from families with economic capital and a relatively high caste status compared to other circus workers. But it is their habit of traveling constantly across their country, and the knowledge they have formed firsthand in the places they visited through the circus routes continues to shape their unusual careers, aspirations, and public image.

Yet even at the comparatively thriving time at which the Circus Federation published its magazine *Big Top*, it appears that narratives representing the circus businessman as an itinerant diplomat also serve as a palliative for the broader support the circus industry is lacking. In its editorial, *Big Top* (1965) states: “if the Indian Circus occupies a prominent position in the world arena, it is not because of any assistance or patronage extended to it by Governments, either at the Centre [India’s Federal government] or the States [India’s state governments], but entirely owing to a handful of persons interested in the existence of this art.” Conscious of and dissatisfied with the lack of patronage for their business since its emergence, circus professionals seize opportunities to dwell on their insertion in the “world arena,” framing their activities and their routes as part of an international circulation. References to Indian circus figures who have performed in distant places, and discursive emphasis on the international exposure of Indian circus companies, are frequently featured in the narratives of circus owners and of important circus figures I have interviewed, showing their desire to be connected to a global scale and history, rather than to the national and subnational scales that seem to disown them. For instance, on my first visit to Govindan S.,²⁰ director of the Union of Circus Employees, we spent most of our time together going over his collection of pictures of the acrobat Kannan Bombay, whose travels to foreign and distant countries and encounters with several world leaders (most famously Hitler and the Queen of England) were presented as evidence of India’s contribution to circus history. While these histories have remarkable currency in a place like Thalassery, which has a large community of circus professionals, they have not been taken up to the same extent by circus histories written outside the town, let alone outside India. In international circus festivals and in the specialized literature produced on the circus, references to the Indian circus and appreciation for its particular features are scarce.²¹ When it gets mentioned, it most often has to do with the negative coverage received by the Indian circus in the 1990s, rather than these earlier exchanges.²²

In a striking way, the managers’ and owners’ expertise and their difficulties in projecting the spatiotemporal framework defined by their profession beyond the realm of the circus make these professionals reminiscent of one of the social types Georg Simmel (1972) drew in his studies from the early twentieth century: the stranger. Like the stranger, they stand out as “an element whose membership within the group,” defined by “trade,” “involves both being outside it and confronting it” (ibid., 144). The interaction between the circus managers and the sedentary crowds is marked by “an attitude that does not signify mere detachment and nonparticipation, but is a distinct structure composed of remoteness and nearness, indifference and involvement” (ibid., 145). Through its travels, the circus remains a liminal institution, which slips into the scales and aesthetics of all forms of discourse (visual, cinematographic, political metaphors, philosophical figures of speech) but settles in

none. Its route can neither be said to exhaust regions nor to cover representatively India's main cities or the national population hubs. Today this industry is also kept out by its limited financial means from undertaking international touring circuits.

Conclusion: Withering routes

Sajith, a young circus owner, considers the life of his short-lived circus (the circus company he ran closed shortly after our conversation in May 2018) in the following way:

The first two years were really fine, but it went down from there. It was difficult to pay everyone, and the crowd lost interest in the show. And the climate conspired against us. . . . To top all this, demonetization²³ last year also made people less willing to spend for buying tickets.

As Sajith points out, current circus companies are facing many difficulties, and the routes taken by Kerala-based circuses are shortening due to the combined effects of a lack of demand, decreasing *maidan* availability, and stricter regulations of the circus performance. This has led several circuses to limit their routes to much smaller territories, sometimes confined to one state, or to dispersed cities where they have secured advantageous deals or where they know they will steer clear of changing weather. Circus performers, meanwhile, continue to come from places all across India. These current itinerary transformations will likely be generative of different practices within the circus community: they may, for instance, result in a deeper engagement with local communities if the number of places a circus company typically visits continues to dwindle; that may also change the patterns of competition between circuses and between circuses and other itinerant businesses. The accounts of space expressed by circus professionals will thus continue to be characterized by continuous adjustments and a flexible and dynamic relation to geography.

In this article, I suggested that thinking regionally can downplay the intensity of labor-induced movements within India (as well as movements to and from abroad), or give the impression that the depth of the cultural kinship between the regions delineated by existing literatures portrays a stable cultural homogeneity. By contrast, paying attention to the ways in which itinerant professional communities like Malayali-owned circus companies talk about their navigation of the Indian territory opens up new ways of thinking about space. It prompts us to consider the factors that are significant to these communities. One feature of the circus managers' and owners' geographical descriptions is their dynamic assessment of space, informed by the periodic visit to old and new sites of circus performance. While regions bind together histories through proximity in space, circus routes bind distant spaces through a history of traveling through them. This idiosyncratic weaving of time and space, which eludes well-established scales of geographical analysis (the national, the subnational, the international) serves as an important reminder that there are multiple counterpoints to hegemonic ways of thinking about space. While the biographical trajectories of circus professionals are atypical, they need not be representative of all sectors of the economy to remind us that labor-based

migrations and travels continually inform, expand, and transform people's discursive representations of space.

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NOTES

1. Interview with Jimmy K, Trivandrum, November 2019. The interviews with circus owners and their relatives cited in this article were conducted in English. A majority of the names of my interlocutors have been changed, unless their writing or written works about them are relevant and cited in this article.
2. These movements once extended farther than India, but today Indian circus companies do not venture abroad.
3. This perception seems shared among those who work inside the circus; the performers I have spoken to do not single out memories of what happens during the long journeys from one place to the next, and most do not own pictures capturing their life on the road. I have written more on the ways lower-ranking circus professionals remember and forget their experience at the circus in a 2021 article.
4. Carmeli observes that, in the British circuses he studied in the 1970s, "circus travellers consider the fast build-up (and pull-down) of the Big Top and its sudden and surprising appearance as part of the familiar attraction of the circus. The circus usually comes at night (after a performance in another town, pull-down and travelling)" (Carmeli 1987, 224–25). For more accounts of the work it takes to engineer this effect of suddenness, see Janet M. Davis (2002). For a visual reference, Govindan Aravindan's 1978 Malayalam movie *Thampu* ("The Circus Tent") begins with a segment showing the arrival of a circus company in a village in Kerala, and the build-up of the tent.

5. In the literature produced on South Asia, these other traveling groups have been more frequently featured than the circus. This may be because the slower pace of these communities' travels made their presence more likely to feature as a regional feature by colonial literature and classifications (Thurston and Rangachari 1909), and their engagement with police authorities more sustained (Zubrzycki 2018). Some other itinerant performers also have strong ties to their linguistic community (for instance, Tamil Special Drama performers; Seizer 2005), or to the festival traditions of a specific place (Freitag 1989). For a broad survey of the similarities between mobile groups of entertainers and traders in South Asia and worldwide, see Gmelch (1986).
6. "Circus special trains" and "bonafide Professional Circus parties" still benefit from a special status with the Indian Railways, although circulars from 2000 and 2007 limited the advantageous rates on these concessions that previously facilitated the long journeys of circus companies.
7. This article will primarily focus on the managers' and owners' points of view. My dissertation (2022) includes more descriptions and analysis of the way circus performers and people who are part of circus camps' maintenance staff talk about space and traveling.
8. In this article, "Malayali" is used to refer to individuals who are from Kerala. This is the common acceptance of this word.
9. While the *tharavadu* often refers to the ancestral home of upper-caste Malayalis, I use it here as my interlocutors have used it during interviews, to designate their ancestral homes regardless of social background.
10. For sociological and economic surveys of these periods of transformation in Kerala, see Ritty Lukose (2009) and F. Osella and C. Osella (2000a).
11. The name of this circus company has been changed.
12. Interview with Shobha, Kozhikode, October 2019.
13. Interview with Sajith, owner of Sun Circus, Kozhikode, March 2018.
14. Here are some examples of daily ground prices I could gather over diverse interviews for the state of Kerala in 2017 and 2018: Kochi/Ernakulam: between ₹30,000 (~\$406) and ₹60,000 (~\$813) daily; Thiruvananthapuram (Kerala state's capital): ₹14,000 (~\$190) daily; Kannur (largest city in the Malabar region, northern Kerala): ₹8,000 (~\$108) daily. A circus manager noted that some states, such as Maharashtra and Gujarat, offered much cheaper facilities (in Gujarat, ₹200 or ~\$3 daily) because state governments had policies to facilitate and sponsor circus performances.
15. For an example of competitive strategizing in a European circus company, one can refer to the French example presented in Jean-François Mehu and Jacques Letellier's short 1950 docu-fiction *Un Cirque Passe*, which narrates the everyday life of Achille Zavatta's circus in France.
16. Interview with Jimmy K, Trivandrum, November 2019.
17. Interview with Gopal, New Mahe, October 2019.
18. Interview with M. V. Shankar, Kannur, September 2019; interview with Santhosh K, Kozhikode, December 2019.
19. I was last able to interview M. V. Shankar in September 2019.
20. Interview with Govindan S., Thalassery, January 2019.
21. In his works on the circus for instance, Paul Bouissac acknowledges having done some fieldwork in the Indian circus for his international analysis of circus shows, but he does not

mobilize his experiences in India to support his theses on the symbolic aspects of the circus performance (Bouissac 2012).

22. I elaborate further on this aspect of the recent history of Indian circus in my dissertation (Rimbault 2022).

23. Sajith is referring to the banknote demonetization that occurred in 2016 throughout India. On November 8, 2016, the Government of India announced the withdrawal of two commonly used banknotes, the ₹500 and ₹1,000 banknotes, from circulation, and the issuance of new ₹500 and ₹2,000 banknotes. The government presented this decision as a policy intended to curb the informal economy. This decision led to significant cash shortages and disruptions throughout the economy, especially in domains where transactions in cash are common, such as the circus profession.

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