

ARKO MUKHAERJEE : The Urban Gypsy

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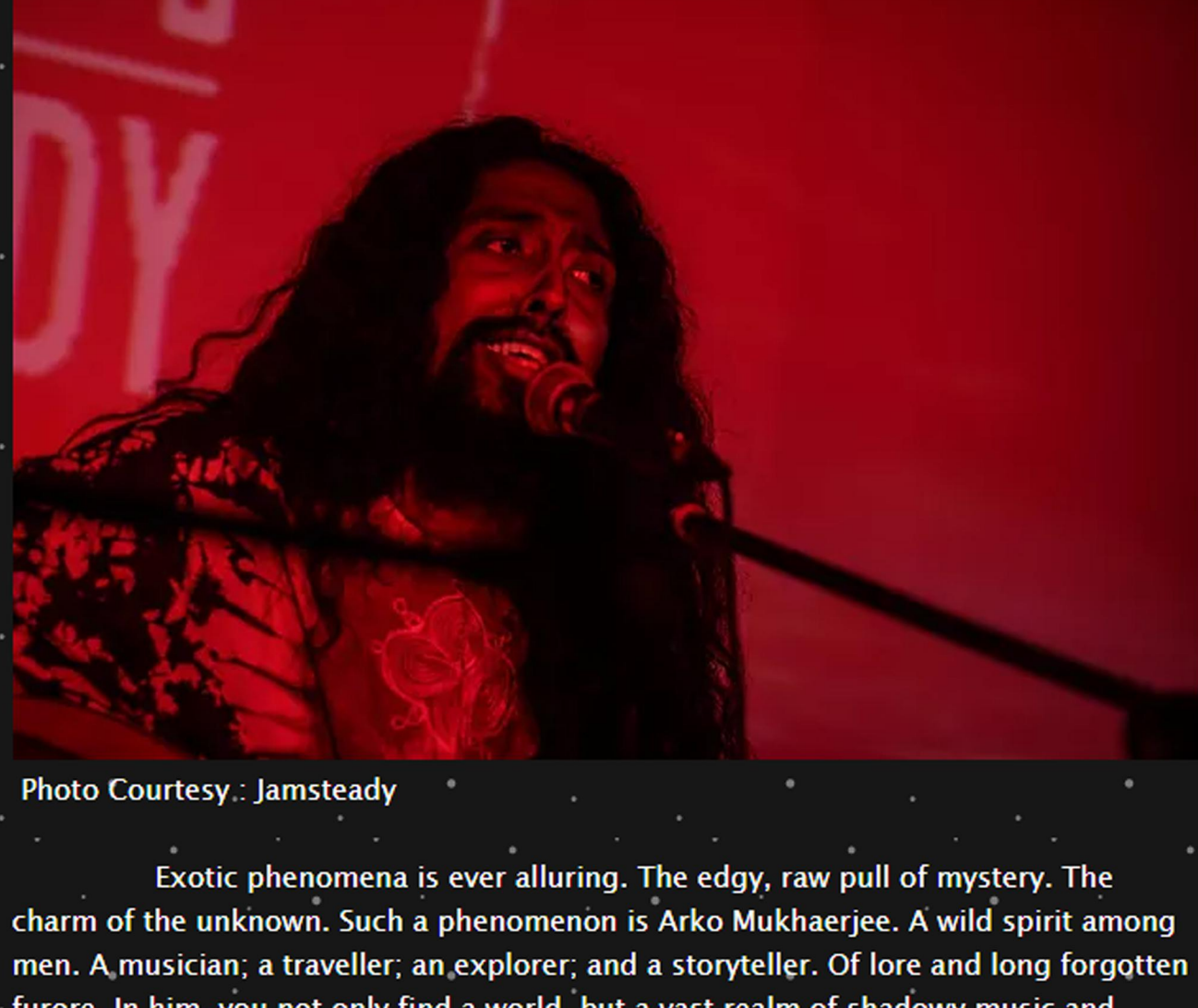


Photo Courtesy.: Jamsteady

Exotic phenomena is ever alluring. The edgy, raw pull of mystery. The charm of the unknown. Such a phenomenon is Arko Mukhaerjee. A wild spirit among men. A musician; a traveller; an explorer; and a storyteller. Of lore and long forgotten furore. In him, you not only find a world, but a vast realm of shadowy music and magic.

Born through the union of both parts of Bengal (his mother was a refugee from Bangladesh), he is part of the age-old tradition of migration. He grew up with the extreme leftist values inherent in the middle class background. As both his parents were musicians (his mother used to sing for All India Radio), from early childhood, he soaked up numerous forms of music ranging from Indian classical music, film songs, folk tunes of the Manbhum district, songs of coal mine workers, to songs of revolution and the IPTA movement. He realized he could whistle anything he could sing, and picked up whatever he heard quite naturally and unconsciously. "I do not like an institutional way of learning anything. Learning is quite an unconscious and organic process for me."



Photo courtesy : Karishma Siddique Roy

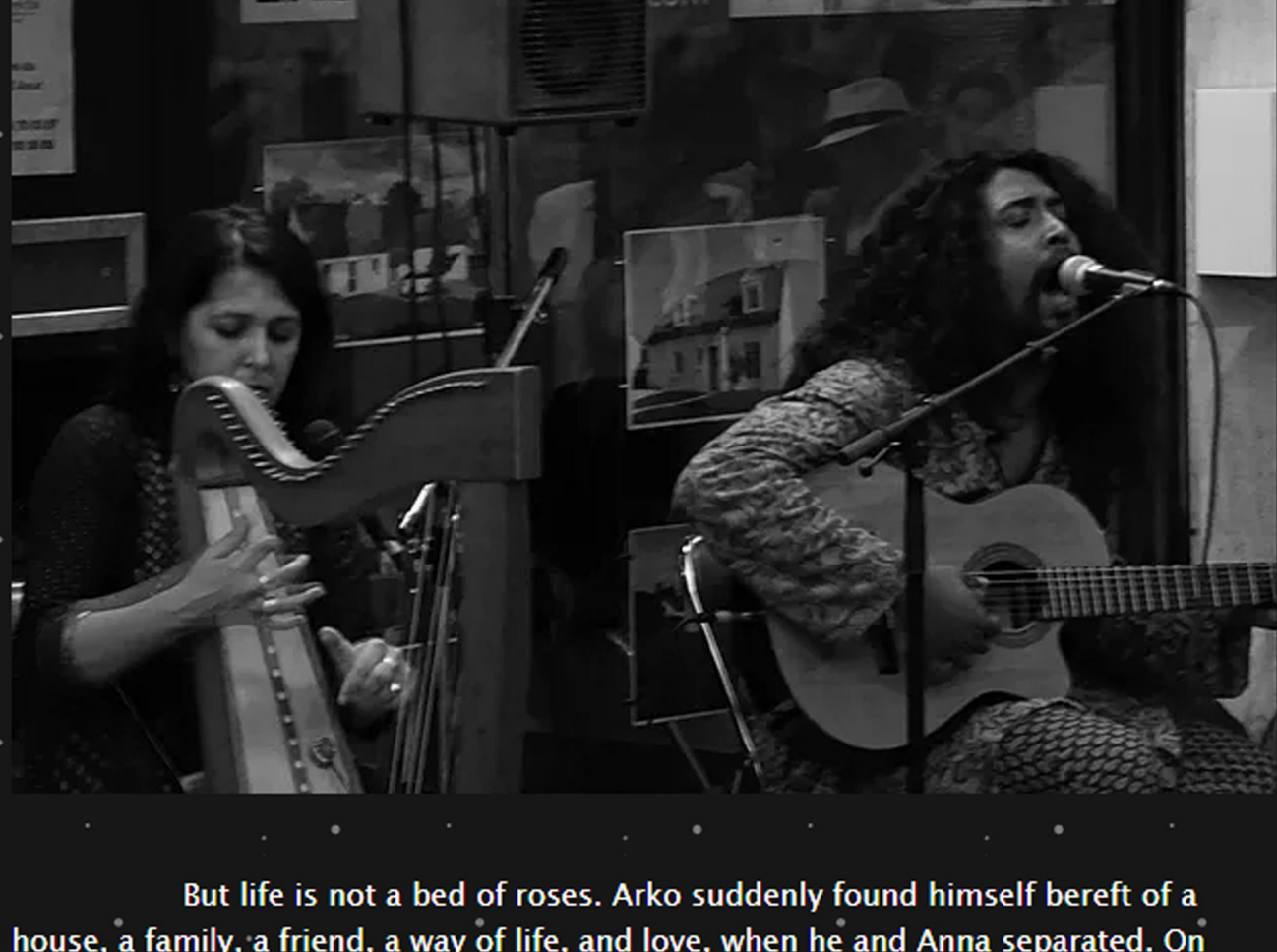
As he grew up, his musical psyche was continually shaped by numerous artists like John Denver, Bob Dylan, The Beatles, Deep Purple, as well as Anjan Datta and especially Kabir Suman (this, he describes as "a completely maddening experience"). Orient Express got him hooked to polyrhythms. He started going to different teachers to learn different things. By the age of 19-20, he was performing with several bands and entered a phase of massive exploration. He experimented with multiple genres through the likes of *Friends of Fusion*, an original bangla band *Rudraa*; metal band *Eclipse*; grunge band *Altered Karma*; jazz band *Stella*, and numerous cover bands. It was also a difficult time for him because a musician's lifestyle was not a very accepted way of living. Indulging in film studies and an internship with a cinematographer made him incredibly academic. Devouring movies by Andrzej Wajda, Sergei Parajanov, Andrei Tarkovsky, Ritwik Ghatak and reading books on Marxism, Che Guevara, The Communist Manifesto made him inclined towards leftist ideologies and Maoism. "There was a relentless wish to say, even protest, Almost feudal," he says, referring to what he gleaned from his massive intake of knowledge during that period. All this, combined with the turmoil of what he really wanted to do, and the shift in political powers in Bengal, instilled a lot of outrage and protestation in him, which was somehow left unexpressed. Seeing a guy perform Pete Seeger's "Where Have All the Flowers Gone" with just a banjo in hand, changed his perception. It made him realize that the way of expressing something need not necessarily be angry or anarchic.

Youtube had arrived by then, opening a whole wide world for him. He was listening to east African music, Jamaican music, Armenian music, Irish folk music and world music through films (special mention: 'Latcho Drom' by Tony Gatlif) and reading up on the history of music of those places. This made him understand the inter-relation between musical forms. Which is why getting Diptanshu Roy was a huge thing for him. "I realized I had a guy who plays bluegrass and Irish folk music, and thinks like that too. His response is bluegrass. So I could do a lot of songs in my own way." Through a tryst with Shamik Chatterjee and Nondon Bagchi as *Strange Factory*, he felt inside that he is not a poet, and his creativity is through compositions. "When it comes to my own music, I need to entertain myself first and then only I can think about the audience. And my entertainment is not easy, because something needs to be really simple to entertain me; which I've realized now is true roots music. Intellectual music does not impress me, even though I myself intellectualize it. The process of creating music is also intellectual, but the resultant output has to be simple. That is the dichotomy of my person." Explaining his disposition onstage, he says "Because of being exposed to so many genres of music and singing in many different languages, my thinking is not a conscious process anymore. It is an instantaneous feeling of that moment. If I have to play the same thing every time I go onstage, I will get bored. Hence, none of the shows are planned. I cannot work with a musician within a confining structure. I need to play with a musician who can correspond to my whims at that moment and I can correspond to his whims. There has to be a conversation which is not known." This way of improvised performing is influenced heavily by Ritoban Das, an Indian and Afro-Cuban percussion genius, who, besides expanding Arko's music listening horizons vastly, made him realize that playing music with other musicians is not all that complex, but a simple communication through one's instruments and hearts.



A turning point in his life came at a cafe, where he came across Anna Tanvir, the Irish daughter of Habib Tanvir, a trained and harp player, and Yann Beaujouan, a gypsy jazz guitarist, whose rendition of Jacques Brel's "Vesoul" blew him away. Anna invited him to attend a world music workshop at the Sahyadri School near Pune, and a fine romance blossomed. He then moved to France to stay with Anna, and attend and play in the Bourges Music Festival. They lived in Anna's wooden house (built by herself for 7 years) in a remote countryside in central France. In the five years that they spent together, they went through a lot. "In the summer, we were superstars, playing different festivals all over Europe and innumerable gigs. In winter, there were no gigs." For filling their and their family's (Anna, who is 23 years older to Arko, has 3 kids) stomachs with food, Arko had to resort to busking in the streets in winter in that freezing weather. Also, the psychological changes that he went through – being a father to kids not very younger to him, being a family man; living in a different land with different customs; facing the unbearable cold in winter; changes in food habits; living a whole different life; travelling to and fro from India – are something one cannot even think of grasping unless one goes through what he has.

Then again, France did something quite magical. "France opened up a whole new world for me, because I realized I could do what I do wanted very freely there. Language barrier was not a barrier because people there are interested in traditional music of different places." He started collaborating ruthlessly with numerous and varied musicians through different projects, expanding his repertoire exponentially. The results came in the form of *Crossover*, a project of Anna and Arko; *Barista* – a world folk music quintet consisting of Arko, Anna, Yann Beaujouan, Alexandre Voisin (double bassist) and Ritoban Das; *Ashram* – an electro-Indian root music outfit, with Kanishka Sarkar. *Ashram* toured eastern Europe in 2014. A memorable concert was at the blues night of the Bourges Music Festival, 2014, where Arko, Yann and Alexandre Voisin were joined by Lassy King Massassy from Mali, resulting in an improvised Indo-African jam with free form vocalization in two different languages. The biggest influence of France was however meeting gypsies and understanding their culture and their music; primarily because of Yann. This led him to the shores of Manouche jazz (through Django Reinhardt), and jazz, which musician friends of his in Kolkata were already learning and playing.



But life is not a bed of roses. Arko suddenly found himself bereft of a house, a family, a friend, a way of life, and love, when he and Anna separated. On returning to Kolkata after that, he fully understood the meaning and pain of migration. "I realized what it meant to be a gypsy, people who have to leave behind everything and move on. How incredibly difficult it is. I was used to way of life which was suddenly gone."

"I almost celebrate relentless mourning and loss because it allows me to express what is in my heart, very strongly and loudly. What I have to say is that there is a feeling of mourning about migration in my heart. Today it's in this way, tomorrow it maybe in another way," is what he communicates through his music. The music he listens to also has the call of mourning, like Indian, African, Persian, Arabic, middle Asian forms of music. As for a person who heavily inspires him, that person is Satyaki Banerjee. "I haven't seen a more perfect person for me. He has relinquished all the barriers of intellectualism. Understanding of true roots cannot happen otherwise." Currently, he performs with *Fiddler's Green* and *The Arko Mukhaerjee Collective*. He has also sang playback for quite a few films, though that isn't a really charming prospect unless the soundscapes are his kind. As a solo performer, he has released two albums, 'Ghater Kotha' (2013) and 'FIVE' (2015). The upcoming album, 'The Lion and the Hamster' is a story of two fictional characters (the Lion and the Hamster), meeting in an extraordinary way and their ensuing fairytale.

About gigs and the crowds who practically idolize him, he says, "You listen to me if you want to. Otherwise don't. I do not want to play in a lot of colleges. I want to play in places where I can play whatever I feel like, not heeding to crowd expectations." At the end of the day, he is just another Calcuttan who loves his beef and incredibly expensive, biodynamic, single malt scotch whisky. Then again, he is Arko Mukhaerjee. The spirit who does not belong to any one place. A realm of deep and vast knowledge of roots music of the world and their inter-relations. The person who brings all the influences of the various musical forms that he comes across, to create a world folk soundscape of the day.

