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AICC general sec

Nation

Posted at: Feb 5 2015 2:10PM

## Professional mourner from TN exhibits grief show

New Delhi, February 5

Weeping, wailing and lamenting out loud, displays of the aching anguish felt at the death of a loved one, can also be a traditional art.

For Lakshmi R, who hails from Tamil Nadu's Tirunelveli district, weeping on command and often during funerals for strangers, is a profession she has been practicing for the past over 20 years

The 57-year-old professional mourner, a practitioner of 'Oppori', the ancient tradition of singing to express grief and lament, gave a live performance here recently.

The event was part of the finale event marking a show curated by the Delhi-based artist collective Khoj. Titled "Nameless Here for Evermore" it showcased art reflecting on global suffering and collective trauma.

"It was fairly disturbing", says Amitesh Grover, an Assistant Professor at the National School of Drama who was invited by Khoj to put up the performance.

Grover, also a theatre artist, says he landed on the idea after making shows on death for the past two to three years.

"I wanted to investigate what mourning means. I have been observing a lack of collective mourning in urban society. It is entirely absent in society. Nowadays we do not meet to mourn collectively," says Grover.

During his research Grover spent some time in Tirunelveli and among Oppori singers, of whom he says there is no correct estimate available.

"There are no correct estimates on the community. It is a dying tradition. No new women were interested or allowed to practice and existing Oppori singers are stigmatised by neighbours and not invited to weddings etc because they are thought to carry the stigma of death," says Grover.

Lakshmi, who ran away from her abusive husband provided an intimate autobiographical account of her life and sorrows to a select audience in Delhi, which was visibly moved by the performance. Some people even completely broke down into tears moved by the sheer force of her songs.

"The event was designed for her to see death not just as a private affair

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### CITY FOCUS

Chandigarh

### 16-year-old girl kidnapped

06 Feb 2015 | 2:11 AM

PANCHKULA: A 16-year-old girl was allegedly kidnapped by four persons in Morni village in the Chandimandir area here last evening.

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### HEALTH



but also a lament,” says Grover who found a young Tamil singer who expressed interest in learning the ancient sacred art form.

“Lakshmi has been singing for 20 years now and we set up a tutorial during event so that the young artist Janagi learnt to sing the Oppori repeating after Lakshmi,” says Grover.

When the younger artist found it extremely difficult and was scoffed at by Lakshmi. The performance in Tamil had live translated words beamed through a projector but Grover says the Delhi audience reciprocated.

“It was fascinating to see that after some time there was no need for a translation.”

The show was intended as a way to look at transference of the quality of mourning, to set up a dialogue with a traditional performative practice. “It is a deep experience,” says Grover.

“From my perspective I wanted to see how Lakshmi managed to produce tears. Everytime, I have seen her perform I have seen her cry and the tears are genuine. Sometimes she had to stop and wipe them away. She brings out the intimate sadness and to me that is mark of a true performer,” says Grover.

Lakshmi, says Grover, is paid every time she goes to mourn.

The intent of Oppari is to mourn the dead, and many performers of Oppari make a livelihood from the form, by singing at funerals. Within funeral spaces, Oppari is performed throughout the day.

“She has complex personality, her private and professional persona meet in a very complex world,” says Grover about Lakshmi who travels across Tamil Nadu singing at funerals.

The performer herself draws strength from the responses of the audience. She sings, wails and beats her chest and accompanied to the sounds of a beating drum she helps mourners bring their buried grief to the surface.

“I find strength from their sadness and it helps me channel my life’s experience,” says Lakshmi.

Meanwhile, the Khoj show has got together an exhibition of multimedia artworks by 10 international artists based on various incidents like the violence in Jammu and Kashmir over the last decade, the Punjab and Delhi riots of 1984, the occupation of Afghanistan besides others. — PTI



## Soon, a pill to cut your hunger cravings

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