

A jammed revolver during a Californian turf war is the makings of a tragedy. But for Kosal Khiev it is nothing short of a divine intervention. At the time, the young Cambodian was 16 years old facing a 16 year sentence. Khiev holds no apparent grudge against the system that tried a teenager as an adult, one that treats refugees like dirt and feeds the growing anger and discontent of the youth born below the poverty line. Instead, Khiev recalls his grandmother, a palm reader. "She saw my hand and told me I have the Buddha Hand". The Buddha Hand, Khiev explains is one that will touch the lives of many. He had remembered this for the first time while in solitary confinement- the hole. "I was in the Hole for one year and eight months" he says. The day he realised that he needed to stand up for someone other than himself was the day he tried protecting his cell mate from being attacked and subsequently ended up in solitary confinement. The hole is where he discovered his gift for poetry, spoken word to be exact. "I felt so much anger and conflict. I had to write it down. I needed to express myself."

Art and Survival The Journey of Kosal Khiev

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He recalls how he was dangerously close to insanity but one night he woke from a nightmare so real he was in physical pain. He stared into his mirror reflection and asked the most difficult question: "Am I going to die here?" Trapped in such inhuman circumstances, Khiev saw the child inside him. The mental image of him as a boy holding his grandmother's hand, with aspirations of being a mechanical engineer like his brother, saved him from an imminent breakdown. And with that he started writing, not for anyone but for himself.

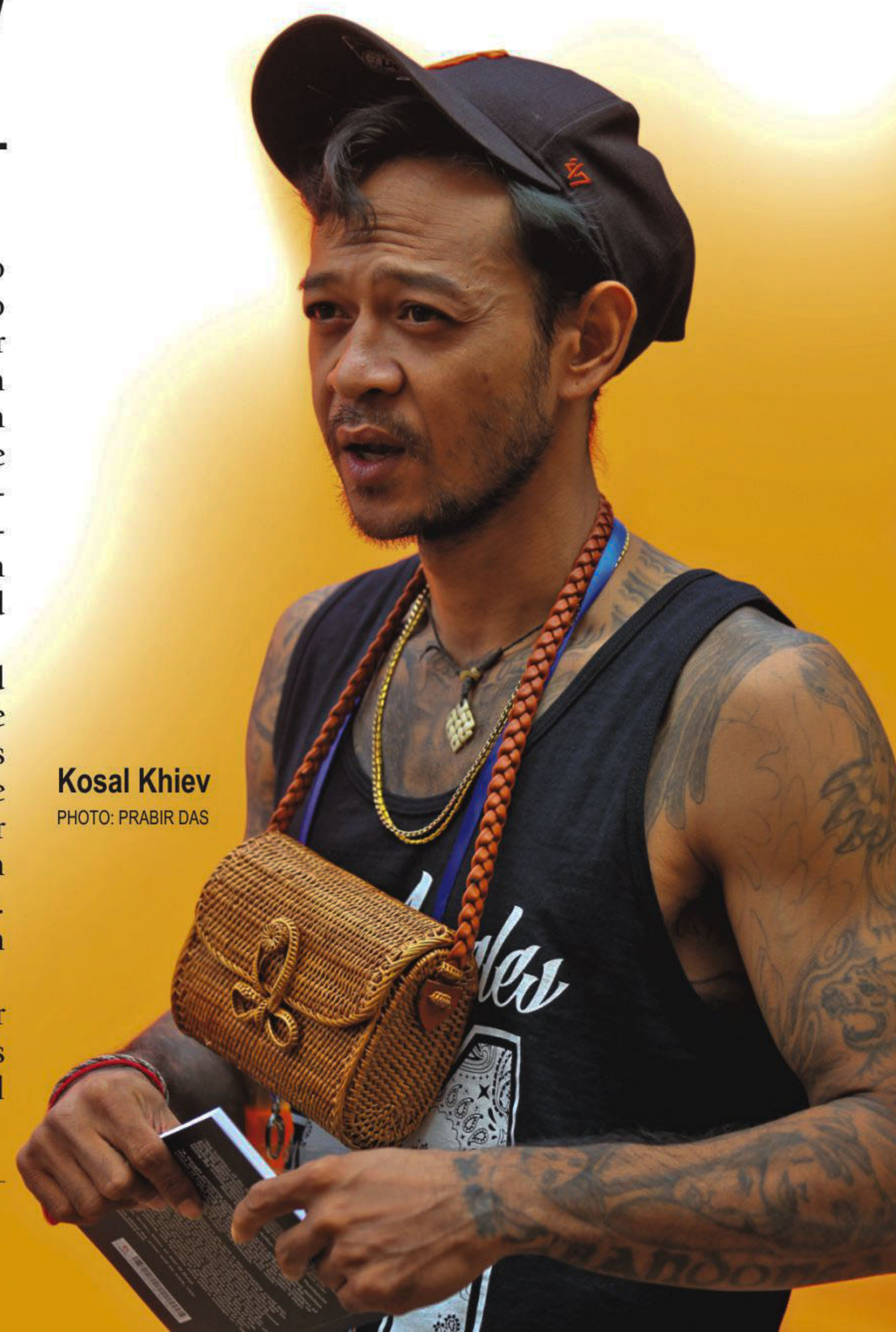
This year at the Dhaka Hay Festival, Khiev touched the hearts of many like his grandmother once predicted. The crowd cheered for him during his powerful performance and applauded when he shared his story. Khiev does not look like your conventional poet- a lean, heavily tattooed man with a West Coast dialect and warm smile on his face. When I spoke to him after his performance, he began a discussion that lasted an hour.

So what connection does he feel to a higher power as he has mentioned God in several of his poems? He explains that he has a deeply personal

connection with God, one that does not have to abide by religious dogmas. From being incarcerated at such a young age, he was treated like a "monster". Until his poetry shed light to an otherwise hopeless situation. His words not only helped him but others who have gone through a similar plight. He has turned to art in times of despair. From a young age he had a knack for drawing and soon became a much loved tattoo artist in his community. After his release, he was deported to Cambodia. Even though he thinks of Cambodia as a 'mother', his views on the actions of Immigration Customs Enforcement is justifiably negative. He spoke of a friend who, after being released from prison, had a job and a family for 13 years until he was deported. Khiev called it "human trafficking, kidnapping".

Like his friend, Khiev also felt that his dreams were being snatched from him. But some dreams he gave away by himself like when he exchanged his new Nike Cortezs, quintessential "gang shoes", for a worn out pair for shoes with another inmate. He became a new man with this minor change. He soon shed the anger as he turned to poetry.

He admits it has been an extraordinarily difficult journey but he had to travel down that path to be where he is now. Khiev's story is not just of survival in the face of hopelessness and injustice, but also of growth and creativity. He has used his art, from being a tattoo artist to a poet, as path of self healing and healing others. ■



Kosal Khiev
PHOTO: PRABIR DAS



PHOTO: RIDWAN ABID RUPON

Some Charms of Kolkata

SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

Every time I visit Kolkata, the city appears with a new look and meaning to me. In a way, I rediscover it. The novelties are just not about the changing landscape, tall buildings and expansive, glamorous billboards but about life-styles.

The very arrival at the state-of-the-art Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose International Airport (a regional topper in the engineering services category) bears intimation of a new vibrancy awaiting you as you drive into the city, especially the newly built spaces.

So much for the optical and material side to Kolkata today, turn now to some interesting add-ons to life-style

Park Street is lined on both sides by some famous restaurants and eatery joints. The Chapeli Kebab corner, a very inconspicuous – looking eatery on the outside but full up inside, has entered the Guinness Book of World Records for the sheer number of customers it caters for, daily.

Actually, Kolkata is a gourmet city for some obvious reasons. Demography is a strong contributory factor to its rich food culture. Cuisines of different states are on offer to suit the palate of people of adjoining states who have made Kolkata their home. The Bengalis who had migrated to West Bengal on partition of the subcontinent came with their cuisine which in some respects was different from that of the original West Bengalis. But in time

they merged seamlessly. The Muslims constituting between 27 and 29 percent of West Bengal population have influenced Kolkata's gourmet culture. The Mughal, Lucknavi, Kashmiri and Hyderabadi delicacies are popular.

Nostalgia seems to play a part in it. The second or third generation progeny of migrants from what was formerly East Pakistan are showing a craze for restaurants boasting Barisaler mach ranna, Goalandoeer Elish, Comilla-vintage Paturi mach et al. They are just taking cue from their grandfather or grandmother who wistfully ruminate over such long-lost dishes, so to speak and fall for the latest nostalgic rage, as it were.

There is also a surge of biryani shops in Kolkata so much so that Dhaka can perhaps no longer claim a monopoly over the delicacy.

Kolkata is multi-lingual almost in a sense that New York or London is. Bangla is subsumed in the cacophony of different tongues any assortment people speak in. West Bengalis are taking to English and Hindi in a way that Bangla may be confined to their homes only in the near future. One West Bengali lamented to me that someday Bangladesh will be the sole torch-bearer of the Bangla language. Is this a compliment, I wonder; for proficiency in different languages is a powerful vehicle for wider and more meaningful communication with the rest of the world. ■