

Events

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India’s first woman photojournalist meets a colonial jail in Fort Kochi Biennale

Photographs by Homai Vyarawalla, widely recognised as India’s first woman photojournalist, are on show in a colonial jail in Fort Kochi.

This has finished · 12 December 2025 – 31 March 2026

In this page

On view 12 December 2025 – 31 March 2026
Times 10AM to 6PM (Mon to Sunday) Till March 31st, 2026
Part of Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2025–26

Where

Jail of Freedom Struggle, Fort Kochi
Historic building · Not recorded yet

Drawn from OpenStreetMap, by its contributors.

You've just missed it — take it home anyway

The 2025–26 Biennale ended on 31 March 2026. The next is expected around December 2027. We made a book of all 72 exhibits, venue by venue, with the photographs — 76 pages, 9 MB.

Imagine it is 1947, a woman on a bicycle is riding through Delhi with a nine-kilogram camera strapped to her back. She photographed the first flag hoisting at the Red Fort, Mountbatten's last salute, and Gandhi's funeral.

Her name was Homai Vyarawalla, and most people have never heard of her. Now, inside a colonial jail in Fort Kochi where freedom fighters were once locked up, her photographs are on display. The irony is hard to miss.

Walk past the Fort Kochi police station and you will find a small compound most visitors overlook. This is the Jail of Freedom Struggle - a colonial-era prison where Indian freedom fighters like Mohammed Abdul Rahman, AK Gopalan, and EMS Namboodiripad were locked up by the British. Eight cramped cells, each just 50 square feet, with concrete beds and cast iron doors.

Today, this jail is one of the most powerful exhibition spaces at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2025-26. What is inside is just as powerful as the walls.

What is the exhibition?

"Re: Public/Staging: Delhi" is presented by the Alkazi Theatre Archives with the Alkazi Collection of Photography. It is part of the Biennale's "Invitations" programme, a platform that shares space with nonprofit and

artist-led initiatives from across the world. The exhibition has two parts that talk to each other in surprising ways.

Homai Vyarawalla and the Republic (part one)

The first part, "Re: Public" (2024), shows photographs by Homai Vyarawalla, widely recognised as India's first woman photojournalist.

Here is the short version of her story. Born in 1913 to a Parsi family, Homai learned photography from her boyfriend (and later husband) Manekshaw Vyarawalla. She was studying at the Sir J.J. School of Art in Bombay.

In the 1930s, when there were almost no women in the press, she started publishing photo-features. These appeared in The Illustrated Weekly of India and The Bombay Chronicle. Because she was a woman, her early photographs appeared under her husband's name.

In 1942, she moved to Delhi and joined the British Information Service. Picture a woman in a sari, cycling through the capital with a heavy camera. She showed up at political events where every other photographer was male. People did not take her seriously at first.

That was her advantage. She could get close and stay unnoticed. She took photographs no one else could.

She became one of the most important visual chroniclers of post-Independence India. She photographed Nehru (her favourite subject), Gandhi, Jacqueline Kennedy, Queen Elizabeth II, the Dalai Lama, Ho Chi Minh, and Clement Attlee. She captured both the joy of Independence and the pain of Partition. She retired in 1970, disillusioned with the rise of paparazzi-style press. In 2011, she received the Padma Vibhushan, India's second highest civilian award.

She died in 2012 at 98. The photographs focus on Rajpath (now Kartavya Path) and the Republic Day parades of 1950 and 1951, the first ones after India became a republic. The show also has staged images of diverse cultural groups, modern technology, and medicine. All reflect the Nehruvian dream of a modern, plural India.

Think of it this way. India had just become a republic. The parade was the new nation performing itself for the first time. Homai was there to record it.

Did you know? Between the Princess Street and Petercellie Street in Fort Kochi there was a tripod-like appliance called “Mukali”, for tying up offenders and whipping them.

Delhi’s Forgotten Theatre Spaces (part two)

The second part, “Re: Staging 1990s (Delhi)” (2025), takes a different direction. Yet it connects to the first part.

This section pulls together materials from the book “Delhi Modern: The Architectural Photographs of Madan Mahatta”. It also includes theatre brochures from plays performed in Delhi in the 1990s and theatre texts from that decade.

The exhibition maps out Delhi’s theatre venues. These are buildings that were never built as theatres but became them. Builders repurposed colonial government buildings. Workers carved open-air amphitheatres out of lawns. The fan-shaped proscenium and the intimate black box were experiments in a young nation figuring out what its public cultural life should look like.

These are some of the venues mapped in the exhibition.

- Kamani Auditorium, started 1971, Copernicus Marg
- Little Theatre Group auditorium, founded in Lahore in 1946, migrated to Delhi in 1947
- Meghdoot Open Air Theatre at Rabindra Bhavan, a mud-and-brick stage built by E. Alkazi himself in 1967
- Studio One at Rabindra Bhawan, an 80-seater mini auditorium carved from two rooms by Alkazi in 1964
- National School of Drama in Bahawalpur House, the former residence of the Nawab of Bahawalpur

One detail stands out. Rabindra Bhawan was built in 1961 to mark the birth centenary of Rabindranath Tagore, on the direction of Nehru himself. It

houses three National Academies. They are Lalit Kala (visual arts), Sangeet Natak (performing arts), and Sahitya (literature). The architect was Habib Rahman.

The 1990s angle is important too. That decade brought major economic and political changes to India. These include liberalisation, the Babri Masjid demolition, and new cultural politics. The exhibition asks how theatre responded. How did stage work become a form of cultural action?

Why you should not miss this

Here is what makes this exhibition special at the Biennale. It is not just about what is on the walls. It is about where you are standing.

You are looking at photographs of India performing its new nationhood, the Republic Day parades. You also see the buildings where India rehearsed its cultural identity, Delhi's theatres. You are doing this inside a jail where people fought and suffered for that freedom.

The venue is the exhibition's silent third act.

The Alkazi connection

Both parts of this exhibition come from the Alkazi Foundation for the Arts. It is a privately owned collection in New Delhi started by Ebrahim Alkazi, one of the most influential figures in Indian theatre. The Foundation houses the Alkazi Collection of Photography. It holds over one lakh 19th and early 20th century photographs. The Foundation also houses the Alkazi Theatre Archives.

These hold scripts, director's notes, brochures, reviews, and audio-visual material from post-Independence Indian theatre. The Foundation started the Theatre Archives in 2016. The Archives approach theatre not just as performance but as a social document. They are evidence of how a society thinks and argues. They also reveal how a society imagines itself.

Visiting details

The Alkazi Theatre Archives presents the exhibition with the Alkazi Collection of Photography. It runs at the Jail of Freedom Struggle in Fort

Kochi. It is part of the Invitations programme at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2025-26.

Venue Link Jail of Freedom Struggle, Fort Kochi

The Jail of Freedom Struggle is near the Fort Kochi police station. It is a short walk from the main Biennale venues. If you are coming from Aspinwall House, it is easy to include this on your route.

Aspinwall House Kochi Biennale 2025-26 guide

See our guide to the Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2025-26 and the full 32 things to do in Fort Kochi.

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Fort KochiPrincess Street
Street
Aspinwall House
Event venue