

Are we visible?

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"Visibility" is the theme of this conference, at a time when, thanks to the cowardly attacks of September 11th, "visibility" has become a key issue of national and international affairs. The Home Secretary, David Blunkett, announces today a new "citizenship" test, designed primarily to test the "loyalty" of Muslims in Britain. This is a typical piece of unspoken British racism, for it fails to deal with a key underlying question: how do you distinguish a Muslim from a non-Muslim? In the wake of September 11th, a Sikh was killed in the United States, an Asian cabbie left severely paralysed in south London, a Hindu temple was vandalised in the Midlands, and Muslim mosques targeted for attacks in Manchester. All this following in the heels of the British National Party gathering support of over 14,000 white people in Oldham and Burnley during the General Election and the subsequent riots fanned by nationalist extremists in northern towns. While we have all learnt a new ethnicity - Muslim - I ask once again, how do we distinguish a Muslim from a non-Muslim?

This question seems to me to expose the paradox of "visibility": we Asians are both "visible" and "invisible". Our specificity is rarely presented in any public media, while our generality is increasingly apprehended.

Let me first trace the contours of "visibility" over the past four decades, to consider how Asians and their arts have penetrated the national consciousness.

In the 60s and 70s, there were a succession of Immigration Bills, dominated by the stirring words of Enoch Powell. In his famous "rivers of blood" speech, there is one sentence that is worth recalling: "...it is when the Englishman looks into the eyes of the Asian that he sees one who will dispute with him the possession of his native land." Extraordinarily prophetic words, if we only consider how Asian food has "taken over" fish 'n chips as the staple diet! But I don't want to belittle the force of Powell's prophecy. So I will repeat it: "...it is when the Englishman looks into the eyes of the Asian that he sees one who will dispute with him the possession of his native land." Views such as this, and Acts of Parliament which reinforced a sense of second-class citizenship amongst Asians and Blacks, inevitably lent a sense of tentativeness to an emerging Asian culture in Britain: the myth of "going back" - of an Elysian land where one could instinctively feel "at home" - was a dominant theme. Asian culture, by and large, occupied a more limited, parochial sphere: weekend cinema houses hijacked from Hollywood fare during the week in many of the cities; bhangra and other music and dance nights in local community and school halls; occasional plays, most often performed in one or other of the dominant Asian languages - Urdu, Gujarati, Punjabi. In other words, Asian culture was essentially an urban sub-culture, known to few outside the community. Our "visibility" was essentially as unwelcome guests who'd been allowed into the country because of inept government policies.

During those same decades, there was a contrary cultural movement afoot: in popular music, the Beatles, along with others, were pioneering "fusion" with Indian music; and through this association, colour was making sporadic forays into the generally grey British landscape. Through their activities, and those of other musicians and artists, the possibility of a more inclusive world was being proclaimed in the wider cultural sphere. But, in this world, local Asians were invisible.

In 1975 and 1976, two events occurred that have reverberated down the years: the Grunwick Strike and the killing of Gurdip Singh Chaggar. The former, led by a diminutive Jayaben Desai, saw Asian women gain a public presence and voice. The latter witnessed the rise of a hitherto new phenomena - Asian Youth: articulate, angry, riotous and (in the main) British-born. Amrit Wilson, the political journalist and playwright, wrote a book in 1976 called *Finding A Voice*. Based on interviews with a variety of Asian women, the title of the book seems now to have summed-up that era, both as a proclamation and a process - the need for Asians to find a Public voice, to speak their speech, to walk their walk, to sing their songs in the streets of Britain rather than just within the confines of their homes.

The year-long - and ultimately fruitless - Grunwick Strike as well as the response to the racist murder of young Gurdip Singh Chaggar were large-scale issues of justice, on the backs of which the community as a whole achieved a public presence. Not coincidentally, the Asian and Black arts organisations that emerged in this period reflected that striving for equality. A spirit that found its echo in a seminal report by Naseem Khan for the Arts Council: *The Arts Britain Ignores*. This report proved hugely influential, making visible for arts practitioners and funders the range of artistic expression within the Asian and Black communities. The current policies of the Arts Council and Regional Arts Boards owes a huge debt to this report. It brought "Asian Arts" to the consciousness of policy makers, but as a homogenous mass, devoid of specific histories.

The 80s are bracketed by two sign-posts, occurring as if by design at the beginning and the end of the decade. The first sign-post was Salman Rushdie winning the Booker Prize for *Midnight's Children*. Crucially, this was not achieved as some patronising act of "political correctness" but simply because it was an astonishing novel: it introduced a new type of English; it had an epic canvass - no less than a century-long look at the birth of modern India; and it was gloriously imaginative. The art of this novelist took its deserved place with the best anywhere in the world. Aside from being unquestionably one of the greatest novels of the 20th century, Rushdie's win ushered a perceptible shift in taste in Britain. The Indian sub-continent, and by extension Asians in Britain, were no longer little more than bemusing "others": they took on a history, characters, humour and pathos. Interest in things Asian accelerated from all quarters - even, at times, hugely unexpected ones: like Ford advertising its latest car - XR3i Escort - as "faster than a vindaloo"!

Of course, *Midnight's Children*, however great it was, did not by itself create a more positive climate. Beneath the surface, a class of Asians was emerging, more articulate, self-confident and, above all, economically able, and prepared to exercise its economic power. The now forgotten Maharajah Club was a favourite Tory-ite gathering of Asian businessmen; and Amitabh Bachchan's sister-in-law was in demand as a select party organiser! Asian radio and cable TV stations were beginning to emerge. And Mrs. Thatcher had declared society 'dead' and promulgated the cult of the enterprising individual. That this class was predominantly Indian and Hindu and Sikh went largely un-noticed. That large sections of Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities were experiencing the highest levels of unemployment, of educational under-achievement, of poor housing in the country, also went largely un-noticed. As the hero in an ancient Sanskrit play, *The Little Clay Cart*, wryly observes, "poverty is a sin". A view Mrs. Thatcher's government echoed triumphantly. Above all these developments, in the cultural sphere, Salman Rushdie was a ubiquitous presence, challenging racism, critically examining cultural products, whether produced by Asians, Blacks or Whites, and partying wildly.

We all know how the 80s closed: with the fatwa that forced Salman Rushdie into living a closet life. The fatwa halted the possibility of a more pluralist society, hardening attitudes on both sides: white liberal opinion was shocked at the seeming intolerance of Asians; and Asians separated: non-Muslims kept their heads down or gleefully distanced themselves from Muslims; and some Muslims were vociferous in their condemnation of what they assumed was Salman Rushdie's blasphemy. Religion became the new dividing line, the wall over which each side peered at the other. Our collective - Asians' collective - single greatest failure was our lack of public opposition to the fatwa and the hounding of Salman Rushdie.

The Asian artistic community, by and large, remained silent. Our silence betrayed our complicity with the forces that were seeking to limit precisely that which, against the White establishment, we were fighting: the freedom to express ourselves, our Voice. In addition, our silence separated us, allowing more reactionary forces within our communities - often religious one - to dominate. Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Pakistani, Indian, Bangladeshi, Punjabi, Gujarati... our parochial ethnicities began to surface, as the collective fist of earlier decades splayed out to reveal individual fingers.

It was on the backs of the fatwa that that most demeaning and derisory phrase in modern English - "political correctness" - anchored itself within the cultural sphere. "Merit" and "quality" - words which in the 70s had begun to be questioned as being entirely subjective and therefore often readily used to exclude Asian and Black arts - were now once again to the fore. The twist, however, was provided by Mrs. Thatcher's government: quantity became the measure of all arts: if there were enough 'bums on seats', the quality was self-evident - people came, didn't they? By such reductive reasoning, Mrs. Thatcher found herself a soul-mate of the crassest Bollywood producers in India, who justified their embarrassingly imitative films with the po-faced reply, 'it's a box office hit'!

The 90s ushered a different meaning to "PC": the Internet Age, and with it, a rampant globalisation. Suddenly, the signs were multiple and confusing: Madonna and Cherie Blair in saris, bindis on the foreheads of white girls in dance clubs, Indian software engineers programming London Underground from the comfort of their homes in Bangalore, *Goodness Gracious Me* producing the loudest laugh on our television screens with their "going for an English" sketch and Tony Blair saying "Diwaali mubarrak" to a crowd of over 3,00 party-goers in Alexandra Palace. With Labour's victory, "cool Britannia" became the slogan and symbols of ethnicity the means by which to achieve quick fame and fortune. A sizeable Hindu and Sikh middle-class had developed, with money to burn. And the arts industry sought ways to embrace this class, to fill cinema and theatre houses that had begun to witness declining audiences.

The rise of Multiplex cinema houses is perhaps the dominant sign of the 90s: cinema houses which, in the major cities, regularly programmed Bollywood films alongside those from Hollywood. Asian economic muscle was self-evident, and with this economic confidence, there appeared a sense of equity, of the country enjoying its multiplicity of cultures. No longer were Indian films exclusive to Asian areas of habitation, snatching their moments in filthy cinema houses on weekends. Asians were prepared to buy taste: plush seats, brightly lit leisure palaces in the centre of town. Stephen Lawrence came and went and for the vast majority of Asians it was a minor blip in the cultural landscape - an embarrassed memory of the darker times of the 60s and 70s. Zahid Mubarek's brutal killing in Feltham Young Offenders' prison raised hardly a stir amongst Asian artists. And this too was in keeping with the times: since the fall of the Wall in Berlin, throughout the West, individual angst, introspection, had become the dominant trope in arts expression. Vikram Seth's hugely successful *A Suitable Boy* fitted-in with the needs of the times: albeit epic in scope, and completely devoid of any European characters or reference, this novel of 50s India concerned itself with the particular story of a woman and the choices of marriage before her.

That such individual myopia would not last was obvious: humanity is not a bunch of isolated individuals but an ever-shifting community, a family, a tribe, a nation, a cause.

As the new millennium dawned, one of the brightest signs on the horizon was Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*: astonishingly, still only one of a handful of first-rate novels exploring the twisting nature of multi-culturalism. In its epic sweep, it is one of the finest expressions of contemporary British urban society; in its characterizations of Archie Jones and Samad Iqbal, of Clara Bowden and her daughter Irie, Alsana and her twin sons, Millat and Magid, and of the Chalfens, Smith has created a loving portrait of a group of people - white working class and liberal intelligentsia, Asian and Black lower middle-class, who 'belong nowhere because they belong everywhere'. As she writes, "this is the other thing about immigrants ('fugees, emigres, travellers): they cannot escape their history any more than you yourself can lose your shadow."

'Losing our shadow'... the "cool Britannia" project of New Labour has contrived to lose our shadow. In the push for greater "visibility" of Asian Arts - a push from within the community as much as without - we have ignored one phenomena that makes Asian communities distinctive in Britain; a phenomena rooted in the turbulent 80s - faith. Religion is the pulse of Asian popular cultures. By subscribing to the dominant liberal British view that religion is essentially a private affair, an individual matter, we fail to take note of several trends that are current in our cities and which find no space in Arts provision. The most significant of these are the rise of local Council-funded language schools and the proliferation of religious institutions. The teaching of Gujarati, Urdu, Punjabi, Bengali - to name just the dominant Asian languages - is in the hands of religious institutions. We have today young people growing up who literally inhabit two (if not more) cultures: one English, white and faith-less, the other ethnic-Asian and intimately, communally religious.

Ironically, over-arching this "street culture" is a dominating Indian and Hindu trend - Bollywood. While most white people in the country have little clue as to what distinguishes a Muslim from a Sikh from a Hindu, many have begun to latch-on to one easy equation: Asian Culture = Bollywood.

In the search for new audiences, this has become the lowest common denominator.

For the vast majority of Asians, Bollywood still sets the marker for "arts": stardom, flashy costumes, loose women and morals generally, stirring songs, and a broad-brush sentimentality. Crucially, it also acts as a memory device: reminding us not only of lost home-lands but also our guilty relief at having left those home-lands to enjoy the trappings of modernity in the West. The more successful Bollywood becomes here, the more known outside the circle of Asian consciousness, the greater pride we feel by association, and the greater angst because we cannot be like the all-singing, all-dancing Indians!

Is Bollywood really the sum of Asian Culture in Britain? It certainly draws the biggest audiences of any art-form. News of the appearance of a star is still guaranteed to see Asian audiences splashing hundreds of pounds in tickets. References to it, paintings, dance, books and plays drawing upon it, are sure to tingle our appreciative glands. Our relationship with Bollywood suggests fun, glamour, and something - to use an old comedian's famous phrase - "naughty but nice"! I think this offers a clue to our own attitude, as Asians, to the Arts: not a source of illumination or reflection, not a value in itself, but a faintly illicit activity that can be indulged-in for a time if it is glamorous and fun to be seen partaking in and brings fame and fortune. The reality of an artist - as Guru Dutt famously portrayed in his last film, *Pyasa* - dirty, penniless, shunned by society, offends our collective senses because we cannot understand it: why doesn't he get a job?!

A question lurking within Cultural Diversity is, how equitable is it? I do not mean how much of the funding-pie Asians are getting - though that will no doubt always be a concern, and rightly so. I mean is Asian Arts for Asians or the whole mix of society? Equally, how much are Asian artists dialoguing with Britain itself - its history, its architecture, its painting, its predominant faith? Are we as Asians interested in the stories of Irish labourers who walked from Liverpool to Darlington in search of jobs? Or of crofters in Scotland turfed out and their homes burnt to the ground by English soldiers? Can we recognise the country Napoleon was talking of when he called it a "nation of shopkeepers"? It is good, deeply encouraging when one sees Asian audiences flocking to see Asian shows. But how many flock to see a show which is not Asian? Is one of the consequences of cultural diversity cultural apartheid? I have to admit as much when I go round seeing shows. And often I am struck by a remarkable irony: I often see white audiences "checking out", having a go, coming with genuine curiosity to see Asian work, but I rarely see Asians flocking to non-Asian work. Why? What is this lack of curiosity about the world under our noses, the world glimpsed from the corners of our eyes?

The answer often mooted is "the show does not relate to Asians". This to me is now a facile, if not glib response. Does a show become "relevant" only when it has an Asian theme? And what is that in any case? All-singing, all-dancing Bollywood pastiche? Of greater concern is the consequence of this trend towards cultural apartheid: judging ourselves not against the best but the mediocre. In the 60s and 70s, we were justifiably critical of Whites who at times earnestly and at other times arrogantly betrayed their ignorance of Asian cultures or made token references to cultural symbols without knowing their particular significance. Today, are we capable of criticising fellow Asian artists who at times earnestly and at other times arrogantly betray their ignorance or, worse, their mediocrity? Amongst BBC newscasters, more often than not white newscasters will get the pronunciation of Asian names right - though no one has yet got "Mazar-i-Sharif" right! - and Asian ones will fail. Why? Why is there a silence about getting them to pronounce the names right? In the theatre, there is a lazy development of "Indian accents" - what on earth are they?! A Punjabi-speaker's entry into English will be different from that of a Bengali-speaker. But who is taking the trouble to find out, and who is there to teach the accent? Producers often take on Asian actors with the best of intentions, assuming the performer is a sacrosanct expert on "his" or "her" culture. They are not necessarily so. And why should they be? Are white actors assumed to be experts in "their" culture?

To the response that these are British-born Asians and therefore should not be expected to be fluent in Asian languages, my reply is, so what? If they had to play a Brummie character or an Irish or a Cockney, they'd have to get the nuances of speech right. Why not for Asian characters? Our humanity is transmitted through language: if we cannot respect a person's way of speaking, we offer no respect to the person; and ultimately, none to our chosen art.

In the theatre, and by extension in Asian arts generally - with the possible exception of music - we still have a community of people who are strangers to the theatre as an art-form: except as wannabe "Stars". There are a pitiful few in administration and even fewer in production processes - stage hands, lighting designers, designers, production managers, prop-makers, costumiers, painters. And we have an audience of Asians which is still in a condition of being grateful for anything vaguely "Asian" that comes along, since it is far from general fare. This deadens that most important requirement of the artist and the most valuable ability of the audience: the facility to discriminate. Because discrimination is making a choice; discrimination is developing taste. Without taste, art is reduced only to entertainment.

Since the mid-90s, we have witnessed an increasing trend towards comedy and Bollywood pastiches. Comedy was an important mode for us: to laugh at yourself is a crucial facility in gaining some sense of our connected-ness to other communities. But comedy has rarely developed into satire; into a biting critique of ourselves. Equally, Bollywood pastiches have served to deliver up audiences into theatres but to what effect? Mediocrity, as far as I can make out.

I was recently asked a question by an actor: is there an Islamic impulse to Asian theatre in Britain? A question that shocked me into recognition that there is none. No Asian theatres I know of have taken Islamic tales as their inspiration. In that actor's question lies a possible role for Asian Arts post-September 11th: not Islam but, through what Art does best - share stories - the creation of imaginative bridges across communities. In our ability to imagine, to get into the head of, to empathise with the white working-class man or woman who voted for the BNP in Oldham, Bolton and Blackburn, lies our humanity. Enoch Powell had prophesied, to remind everyone once more, "...it is when the Englishman looks into the eyes of the Asian that he sees one who will dispute with him the possession of his native land." Can we understand this sentiment through the eyes of a person who's seen his world change dramatically before him? To understand is not necessarily to accept the sentiment. But it can go a long way towards recognising the human impulses of fear, uncertainty and the desire to hold on to a life that was.

"Visibility" extracts a responsibility: of discrimination (making choices), of observation (of the world around), of introspection (self-examination & research). The death-knell of Asian arts generally will be sounded when we make of "visibility" an end in itself. I do not have a right to subsidy, to support from funders and audiences because I am a victim of inequalities of distribution or because I am a minority within Britain. I have a right because I have something to say and I am good at it.

I have used the word "taste" often in this speech: it is merely the shadow of a word that beats constantly in my head - the Sanskrit *rasa*. *Rasa* is what our visibility ought to be striving towards: to contribute to the taste of a better world than the ashes the cowards in New York have left it in and the poor in imagination are currently perpetuating in Afghanistan and Britain.

We have, in conclusion, several challenges of "visibility" before us: (i) to open space for the "street" impulses within Asian communities - and that means at base both Asian languages and religion; (ii) to guard against the apartheid-trend within current culturally-diverse Arts practice; (iii) to develop a critical sensibility that can distinguish between good and bad. To David Blunkett's arbitrary assumption of "common British values", we have to identify and create those common values, rather than assume they are a given.

There is a history of this country that Asians have walked into over the past four decades; a history that has been brought alive by the events of September 11th - European Christendom's long Crusade against Mediterranean Islam. We cannot replay Richard the Lionheart's battles with Saladin, nor how the threat of the Turkish Ottoman Empire shaped modern Europe; but in this encounter of ideologies, some metaphors could be teased for the kind of "multi-culti" (to use an Indianism!) nation we need to build today. "Visibility" is essential and is a right; but the question surely is, To achieve what end? To live together or separately?

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