

Asian Arts in the 21st Century

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In these dark days of furious morality, when a war rages in our name though most of us did not want it, what seems the point of yet another conference on Asian Arts? If the 20th century proved one thing, it was the ridiculous claim of the Arts as a civilising force - a point gruesomely made by the Nazis when they made inmate musicians play the sublime music of Mozart as their fellow prisoners were being herded into the gas chambers. The Arts have no special claim to humanity; yet, paradoxically, it is precisely that humanising possibility of the Arts that leads us to spend life-times at it.

This conference is titled "DNAsia" - which I prefer to pronounce "DNA Asia". DNA theory unlocked a single blue-print for all humanity. Yet language, religion, colour, class have conspired through the ages to separate human communities from each other in an essentialist manner, belying the underlying biological similarity. It is within this paradox that all arts exists, and in which Asian Arts today finds itself. Current gene theory suggests not only that we are on average upto 6 steps away from connecting with any other human being on the planet, but also that we are only about 6 degrees apart from being related to another human being on the planet. In the context of these larger concerns, "Asian Arts" sounds like a peculiarly parochial concept; reminding me of the fictitious Indian village we invented in our adaptation of Gogol's classic play, *The Government Inspector* in 1989 - a village which did not know the British Raj had come and gone.

Like the villagers of this fictional India, Asian Arts seems to exist by itself, apparently unconnected with any other arts endeavour in this country. It seems to have been born out of Time, insensate to the ravages of history. More accurately, it has been beset with a peculiar Stalinist tendency: in each era, it is invented anew - as the recent hype around *Bombay Dreams* and *Midnight's Children* makes clear.

Since DNA is a chain of connected molecules, it suggests to me that the blue-print of humanity is connected-ness. And if history is any single thing, it is connection: how the past is connected to the present, how an event in far-off Iraq is connected to us in Hounslow, how the arts reveal connections between human beings. So let me first sketch a history of this beleaguered phrase "Asian Arts".

The history of Asian Arts is as that of a subset: not a trend-setter but an after-thought. More accurately, it is a construction legated by the colonial era. The term "Asian" is a particular invention of colonial administration in Kenya in 1948. Following the partition and independence of India and Pakistan, British administrators in East Africa coined the catch-all term "Asian" to define the peoples from India and Pakistan. An arbitrary coinage that was adopted wholesale by legislators and the media in Britain when East African Asians first began to arrive en masse in 1968. By the 90s, it was evident the word could not bear the strain of, on the one hand, communities that felt themselves invisible under it (eg., the Chinese) and, on the other, communities that sought to assert a clearer self-definition, based on religion. Post-September 11th this process has accelerated. An actor recently asked me, Is there any Asian Theatre in Britain that has an Islamic impulse? A telling question, for which I had no answer.

In the pre-CD era - i.e., before Cultural Diversity - there was Black and Asian Arts. And before then there was Black Arts. And before then there was Ethnic Arts. And before then... there was only Arts. The earliest record of Asian artists in England I've come across is during the Napoleonic Wars, at the latter end of the 18th century and the early years of the 19th century - a time when England was ranged against the empire of Napoleon in France (who famously described England as a "nation of shopkeepers" - I'd say an extraordinarily prophetic description of modern England!). Two English brothers brought an Indian performing troupe over to England - rather like their modern counterparts, the International Festival directors, who scour the world for exotic new performance delights to offer modern audiences. With this troupe the brothers toured all over the country, until they got to Liverpool. Here, they were declared bankrupt and imprisoned, with the Indian performers left stranded. Somehow, they made their way to London, to the docklands. There, they found lodgings in a stable, giving performances to the locals amongst the horses and the manure to eke out a meagre living. 9 months later, they were discovered by the authorities as vagrants and shipped back to India.

Who were these people? Where in India did they come from? What exactly did they do? No one knows. The only reference to them is in an obscure local history record that I came across in 1989. I always remember this story because I wonder whether their history will be our history: un-sung, un-recorded, forever trapped in the memory (and perhaps bile) of those who lived at the time, at best a historical foot-note when some future historian comes to write of modern England.

Towards the end of the 19th century, there is a fleeting glimpse of the first West End show by a theatre troupe from Bombay. In 1915, the great theatre director and designer - perhaps modern England's only visionary - Edward Gordon Craig, wrote to the Indian art critic, Ananda Coomaraswamy, "I dread the influence of the finished article of the East; but I crave the instructions of the instructors of the East". This was, of course, the time when Rabindranath Tagore was the darling of the English literati - having won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. (A footnote is useful here: 40 years later, when Tagore died, the English poet Philip Larkin was asked to comment on Tagore's legacy. He replied with a typically pithy telegram – "Tagore? Fuck all Tagore!") In the late 1930s the great innovative Indian dancer and choreographer Uday Shanker created a sensation when he visited London with his troupe, being a toast of the most famous ballerinas of the age.

This early history is sketchy, and not just because of the poverty of my knowledge: Indians were yet exotic and infrequent visitors to this island. Post-Second World War came the Great Flood: literally hundreds of thousands of Asians from the sub-continent and the diaspora in Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific. With their arrival, the potential grew not only of a continuity of arts activity but also, paradoxically, of a washing away of all pre-history. Modern Asian Arts opted for the latter potential. It is as if, with migrations from the Indian sub-continent, East Africa, the Caribbean, Fiji, all trace of a prior presence was deliberately wiped away and a new phenomenon forged by force of will.

For us, the direct descendants of the Great Flood, official, recorded history begins with the publication in 1976 of Naseem Khan's report for the Arts Council, *The Arts Britain Ignores*. If the pre-Great Flood generations were conspicuous by their relative invisibility, with the publication of Naseem Khan's report, we achieved a visible place in the public realm of the Arts. The debt to Naseem Khan cannot be under-estimated, for until then there was precious little recognition by any arts-funding body that the new Brits in the population had any interest let alone concern with the Arts. Naseem's meticulous documentation of African, Asian, Caribbean and other ethnic artists and arts organisations around the country made the existence of Carnival, Black Theatre, Indian Dance, amongst a host of other arts, an incontrovertible fact.

Naseem Khan's report sought to establish a parity of recognition for the arts practiced and produced by cultural and racial minorities with other arts productions. The project to seek equality of recognition, sadly, continues to the present day. The difference the past decades seem to have made is that now we have terms like "access" to mask the reality of a culturally divided kingdom. Perhaps that is as it should be, in a "multi-cultural" society. For anthropologists, multi-cultural societies often mean in reality plural societies: societies where a number of distinct cultures co-exist with each other, meeting only in certain prescribed situations - the work-place, for example (like this Conference!). Faiths, families, stories, moral values, even arts and entertainment rarely intersect. An observation I shall return to later.

Since the decades of large-scale migration in the 60s and 70s, the debate around the arts has been largely premised on the larger social project of integrating minorities into the majority. Social and political activists as well as artists have countered with the notion of parity... which today has translated into "diversity". This word attempts to neatly side-step the issue of majority and minority by a kind of pie-chart model: there is a cake called arts, which is cut into a variety of slices. The emphasis is that each slice, however tiny, is a vital part of making the whole cake. A soothingly mature idea for a 21st century democracy which aims at an inclusive society.

Beyond the rhetoric, however, how inclusive in reality is the Arts world and where exactly does Asian Arts fit in?

To answer the latter, I return to the image of the Great Flood and the collective choice to re-invent ourselves as a "new" phenomena, with no connection - and no desire for connection - with a pre-Flood history of Asian artistic presence in this country. This Stalinist determination to invent a history was inadvertently given succour by Naseem Khan's report. The report, perhaps to draw institutional attention to the hitherto invisible arts activities going on in the country, played upon the notion of Asian and other minority arts as victims: victims of an exclusive approach to arts, of inequality, of (as was later characterised) a Euro-centric approach to the arts of modern Britain. Since the Great Flood, this "victim-hood" has been the warm blanket we've both wrapped around ourselves and allowed to have wrapped around us, to find a way of negotiating cold England. Like a child's wet blanket, it has suckled us in our relentless drive for recognition. Its current manifestation is "new audiences". Venues and programmers, in an effort to be more inclusive, less Eurocentric, have made the search for "new audiences" a fetish. And Asian Arts fits the bill. *Bombay Dreams* is the newest West End musical, bringing-in "new audiences" to the commercial theatre. The Royal National Theatre is introducing novel ticketing methods for attracting "new audiences". The Royal Shakespeare Company prides itself for bringing "new audiences" through its staging of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*.

It is with the constant play of this fetish that Napoleon's description of England as a 'nation of shopkeepers' appears not just prophetic - after all, if there's one abiding image of the Asian in England it is that of the corner shop-keeper - but extraordinarily perceptive. It is not so much the Art but what it can deliver that appears to be of most value in the country today. How many different colours of bums can we attract through the doors to lend credence to our image of ourselves as an inclusive "multi-cultural" society, and make us money in the process.

The condition of being beggars, makes us more prone to service this fetish, which ultimately is playing on the strings of "victim-hood". Asian Arts as a body has no home: we're all - dancers, musicians, theatre-artists, visual artists - nomadic tenants, taking our begging-bowl from venue to venue in the relentless search for temporary lodgings. The logic of this search forces an accommodation - supplying the landlords what they need. Sometimes we achieve minor victories, priding ourselves in having hood-winked a venue to deliver a "new audience" through our work, though we know in our hearts it ain't a popular narrative we've weaved; only to find we aren't invited next time.

In the early-70s there was a popular TV series, *The Prisoner*, with a catchy opening sequence that ended with the memorable cry, "I am not a number, I am a free man!" The challenge for us today is to proclaim, 'I am not a victim; I am a creator!' The Arts, in all cultures and times, have had the special licence to reveal the human condition. The victim engine that has propelled Asian Arts over the past few decades, seems to have made us more chroniclers of the human condition - or, more parochially, our own condition - than to reveal its connection with other humans. Existing as nomadic tenants, perhaps it is unreasonable to look for creators rather than chroniclers.

And yet, there have been institutional instances where it has been possible to be creative; where Asian artists have wrested the space for creativity. This very space, Watermans Arts Centre, is a case in point. In its former avatar - pre-Stabilisation - this space managed the extraordinarily madcap scheme of being both populist and avant-garde. From Punjabi and Gujarati-language theatre to the cutting-edge (and for some, uncomfortable) performance-theatre of AjayKumar and Shakila's "Bhavni Bhavai". I'll never forget the comedy evening when Ravinder Gill strode on stage dressed as a woman - and a very beautiful woman he was too! - only to proceed to strip-off his sari and wipe-off his make up while carrying-on his comic narrative, revealing finally a young man clad in Y-fronts and bovver-boots!

Here I must digress a little: I was approached last week by the former Asian Arts programmer of Watermans, Hardial Rai - under whose stewardship this centre achieved its current image - to pull out of participation in this conference. His argument, detailed in a 9-page email, was premised on the feeling that the prior history of Watermans was being ignored. This is clearly a matter of on-going dialogue between Hardial Rai, Ravinder Gill, Parv Bancel, Parminder Sekhon, Neran Persaud, Arjun Rayat, Shakila Mann, Poloumi Desai, Bobby Friction, Amina Begum and all the other artists who so recently made Watermans into a creative space, and the new team at Watermans. For me, the crucial point in Hardial's missive was the assertion "Imagine, Philip Headley having an amnesia attack of Joan Littlewood's legacy." This assertion rang a number of bells and it is these bells which underlie the emphasis in my speech on history.

In the theatre, one of the oft-repeated phrases I've come across is "re-inventing the wheel". Every few years, there's yet another 'new dawn for Asian Arts'. Early next month, the Royal Society of Arts is organising a seminar on whether the staging of *Midnight's Children* marks a new high-water mark in the transformation of our notions both of mainstream and of 'high' culture? Presumably this is because the Royal Shakespeare Company has staged the production with an all-Asian cast. I am just waiting for the press to proclaim Adrian Lester's impending role as Henry V in Nicholas Hytner's production for the RNT as a 'significant moment' for Black performers!

When it comes to Asian or Black Arts, there is no History, only 'moments of significance'. So we lurch from moment to moment of visibility, separated by voids of invisibility. This seems to me the inevitable consequence of several inter-related factors:

Our lack of "homes", where we can creatively experiment

The victim syndrome

The desire to invent ourselves as new citizens without any connection to England pre-the Great Flood

England's dominant commercial attitude to the arts: where what the arts can deliver - new audiences, young people, ethnic minorities, etc. etc. - is of more value than the intrinsic revelation they offer.

"Multi-culturalism" - which means a set of parallel cultures that only fitfully intersect.

I began by observing that DNA suggests connected-ness. And wondering where in faiths, families, stories, moral values, we intersect. William Dalrymple's recent book, *White Mughals*, offers some startling facts in its foot-notes. Upto the 1800s, one-in-three wills of Englishmen who'd been in India named the Indian *bibi* and the children he had borne with her as beneficiaries. By the 1830s, this figure slips to one-in-ten. After 1858, the names of Indian *bibis* or the children that ensued from any co-habitation with them simply disappear from wills. Another wilful attack of amnesia, but one which has profound consequences on our understanding of ourselves in modern England.

The purpose of arts expression and of arts funding is to enable artists to engage across the borders of race, culture and class. History suggests routes to connected-ness, to a revelatory engagement beyond the barriers of language, religion, colour and class. In fractured contemporary England, there is an equally compelling need for re-dressing inequalities, for forging a new, inclusive, English culture. Which so far seems can only be achieved via a politics of difference. Such contradictory impulses within "Asian Arts" have plagued this sector for the last 3 decades. Are they to continue to do so? Or are we all confident enough now to countenance the disbanding of terms which seek to culturally or racially qualify "Arts"? Can we proclaim "I am a creator, not a victim"? Does the future beckon a time for just "Arts"?

One of my ruminations of late has been to ask myself, do Asians really need whites? I tend invariably to answer, not for faith, not for food or taste, not really for marriage, and only occasionally for entertainment. If I was to reverse the question, much the same answers are forthcoming, with the possible exception of curry, which may well have conquered white stomachs! Do we attend each other's mosques, churches, temples, gurudwaras? Participate in each other's festivals? Entwine in our imaginations each other's stories and histories, let alone languages? If not, what purpose the Arts?

In this moment of furious morality, it seems to me that the imagination is the only real front-line; the only war that is worth fighting, for the reward is - I know how I exist in you.

I will end with a story that I have often quoted, and never tire of. For it reminds me why I am in the arts and, what my status is as an artist in society today. The story is about the Origin of Theatre. A story that forms the beginning of the *Natya-Shastra*, the treatise on the art of performance composed sometime between the 4th century B.C. and the 4th century A.D. in India.

Once, during the time of the Immortals, the Gods found themselves descending into a state of sin: drinking, debauchery of every description, anger and violence – basically, drugs, sex and rock ‘n roll! Eventually, unable to bear this state of affairs, the three Kings of the Gods approached a learned man called Bharata and suggested he, *“construct a new form of knowledge - a form that would delight the eyes and ears, and - most crucially - instruct the Gods in a better conduct of life.”*

Bharata agreed to take on the commission. When he had completed his treatise on this new art, he passed on the new form of knowledge to his hundred children; and so they became the first theatre company in the world. Quite properly they had to inaugurate their first performance before the Gods. So all the Gods assembled in their majesty to witness this new form of knowledge.

For some reason (perhaps because they were children, or perhaps because they’d tapped into the inherent quality of performers), during the course of the performance the hundred children of Bharata began to lampoon and caricature the Gods. Predictably, the Gods blossomed in anger, stood up from their seats and boomed a curse: *“You are all banished to the earth, to ply your new-found trade before mortals for all eternity as perpetual outsiders.”*

Who are the Gods today of whom we are, or ought to be, taking the piss?

And, who but ourselves, those in arts, are the perpetual outsiders, even from our own communities?

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