

More than Just an Arts Festival: Communities, Resistance, and the Story of Desh Pardesh

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Abstract: Desh Pardesh was a Toronto-based arts festival that strove to bring forward the voices of those who are most silenced inside the South Asian community and society at large: gays, lesbians, bisexuals and trans-gendered people. This article tells the story of Desh and discusses the impact of the organization/festival through a focus on three themes: the building of alliances to foster community resistance through the arts, the link between cultural and civic participation, and the notion of “home away from home” belonging. In putting together this case study the author draws on mainstream and ‘alternative’ print media sources, post-colonial theory, her own experience and solicited observations from individuals closely involved with Desh Pardesh throughout its 13-year existence.

Resume: Desh Pardesh est un festival des arts, situé à Toronto, dont le but était de donner une voix aux membres de la communauté de l’Asie du Sud et du grand public qui sont particulièrement aphones : c’est-à-dire les personnes gaies, lesbiennes, bisexuelles et transgenres. Cet article raconte l’histoire de Desh et analyse l’impacte qu’ont eu l’organisation et le festival, en se concentrant sur trois thèmes : la formation d’alliances susceptibles de favoriser un esprit de résistance communautaire à travers les arts, le lien entre la participation culturelle et civique, et la notion d’appartenance « home away from home ». Dans l’élaboration de cette étude, l’auteure utilise les ressources suivantes : certains textes médiatiques dominants et alternatifs, la théorie postcoloniale, ainsi que sa propre expérience et ses observations recueillies chez certains individus intimement impliqués avec Desh Pardesh pendant les treize années de son existence.

Keywords: South Asian community; Resistance; Gay and lesbian history

The act of creation is an act of solidarity.

— Eduardo Galeano, 1992

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Introduction

Desh events were one of the few places where I felt I could bring together the fullness of who I am—I didn't have to select one or the other. At Desh I could be an anti-racism activist, a student of art, a lover of dance, a social animal, a proud South Asian who actually blended at a social event, and be attending a major event in Toronto, all at the same time! In terms of social change, I think Desh was a place where the complexity of South Asian identity became apparent. It was also a site for White Canadians to be at an event which was sophisticated about arts, racism and politics that set a new standard for how these three spheres could be brought together. I remember speaking to a couple of people who were thinking differently by the end of the evening, and who saw themselves as learners in a way that was new for them. (Tina Lopes, educator, facilitator, and organizational change consultant, personal communication, Toronto June 6th, 2005)

The history of radical political activism of Canadian South Asian communities is relatively young and poorly recorded. In telling the story of Desh Pardesh—a diasporic arts and cultural festival that had its roots in the South Asian gay and lesbian communities of Toronto—my aim is to both address this gap and highlight the importance of these “stories from the margins” to all Canadians, and to this country's collective understanding of what constitutes “our” history. In suggesting that Desh Pardesh was prescient in creating the conditions for the integration of diasporic subjectivities through its active encouragement of pertinent cultural participation in Canada, I also want to highlight how a history like that of Desh Pardesh's —a history that comes from the youthful radical margins, rather than from a staid and established centre—offers us the rare opportunity to gain insight into a daily life imperative of cultural and artistic activity. Such an imperative, I argue, is not based on privilege, but is driven, rather, by a human desire to bridge isolation, interact with others, and use creative expression to actively fight prejudice in its many guises and forms.

Equally important to the story of Desh Pardesh is that it was a festival rooted in the perennial quest of immigrants for inclusion—to feel at home in Canada. Its very name reflects this concern, *desh pardesh* being a Hindi expression that translates as “home away from home” or “at home abroad.” Later on in this paper I will discuss some of the implications of a “home away from home” sense of belonging. For now, what matters is that Desh Pardesh was a Canadian festival produced and imagined by a South Asian diasporic community invoking connections across the globe, from roots in the Indian subcontinent to transnational settlements in Malaysia, the Middle East, Africa, the Caribbean, the U.S., and England. If art and activism were the guiding arms that reached out across the world to embrace the cultural viewpoints of diasporic South Asian arts communities and to extend local and collective thinking, creativity and politics were the catalysts for making associations to this wider world. Broadly speaking, the festival proactively sought to break down barriers and identify what capacity benefits were needed for its multiple communities. It also set out to challenge a number of stereotypes and misconceptions. In the words of former Desh co-ordinator Arif Noorani:

We come out of a reaction to saying there is a static traditional South Asian culture, that it's about saris and food. We're saying no, it's actually a lot more complex than that—we come from all over the world now. We come from the Caribbean, we come from East Africa, we come from Sri Lanka and we come from Britain and the US. So the kind of culture that South Asians are living in and creating can't be generalized—it's all over, it's contradictory and it changes year by year. What we try and say is we always have to remain dynamic and always be changing and be open to new ideas and new direction. (Fernandes, 1997)

In this paper I document a rationale for the kind of cultural production that is intrinsically linked to the everyday dilemmas of minority communities and immigrants in their interactions with dominant Canadian society and their attempts to find a place for themselves within an often hostile environment. In the first section I map the story of Desh Pardesh, tracking its journey from a small one-day event held in a Toronto community-centre auditorium in 1988 to a festival that, by the mid-1990s, was enjoying almost mainstream status in its celebration of “five days of living, loving and left culture” (Desh Pardesh Festival, 1995, cover page). I then examine the organization/festival from two different perspectives: building alliances to create community resistance through the arts, and the links between cultural participation and civic involvement. I conclude this paper by briefly speculating on Desh Pardesh's demise in 2001 and use this “ending point” to open up a discussion on how this festival, among its other contributions, helped us to rethink the meaning of diasporic belonging.

In order to tell this story of Desh Pardesh, I draw on mainstream and “alternative” print-media sources, on literature oriented around the social effects of culture, on critical race and postcolonial theory, and on solicited observations from individuals closely involved with Desh Pardesh throughout its 13-year existence. With regard to these latter voices, it must be emphasized that though the history and legacy of Desh Pardesh has not yet been seriously documented or archived, it lives on in the collective memory of those who participated in it. For these people—and I count myself among them—Desh resonates with a vibrancy invoking a singular and treasured public platform that called into being a collective repository of cutting-edge cultural works amid the heady mix of extravagant soirees, heated discussions, and avant-garde workshops. This was a risky and politically charged place where intersecting diversities and multiple identities collided for the first time; a place where racialized minorities who had until then hovered on the outside edges of progressive social and cultural scenes became ground-breakers, initiating self-determined interventions that resisted exclusion and negotiated social change in the arts—the kinds of interventions that are taken for granted in the Toronto of today. As for my own role in Desh, it was—like those of most South Asian cultural activists of that period—multiple: from original attendee and volunteer in 1988, I went on over the next 12 years to serve variously as a producer, programmer, graphic artist, workshop leader, emcee, sponsor, artist participant, community capacity development advocate, and arts funder. This experience informs my understanding of Desh Pardesh, and it is from this

involved and engaged standpoint that I recount the history of this unique festival and provide the analysis that follows. It is my hope that in documenting stories like those of Desh Pardesh and making them part of a broader Canadian consciousness, we can convince people of the strength and joy that lie in collectivities, and of their power to move us in transformative ways.

The story of Desh Pardesh

Desh Pardesh began back in 1988 as a one-day cultural event entitled “Salaam Toronto.” The brainchild of Ian Iqbal Rashid, who would eventually go on to write and direct the gay feature film *Touch of Pink*, 2004. The event was organized by the group “Khush: South Asian Gay Men of Toronto” and took place at the 519 Church Street Community Centre—the bastion of Toronto’s gay pride activities and politics, located in the heart of Toronto’s gay village. Organized as an informal celebration of South Asian fashion, food, and culture, this first incarnation of Desh was designed primarily to raise awareness about the South Asian gay and lesbian community in Toronto’s wider gay community. As Nelson Carvello (1999) of Khush recounts:

We wanted to expose our families to our realities as queer South Asians and at the same time we wanted to expose the white gay and lesbian communities to our lives in more than a tokenistic fashion. There was so much creativity and we had a lot of fun, but the vision was always about outreach—outward and inward. (n.p.)

In retrospect, it is not surprising that it was Khush that took on this task of outward and inward outreach. In 1980s Toronto, gay South Asian men were more collectively visible and organized around South Asian-ness than were South Asian lesbians and/or women activists. As for the handful of South Asian women activists who were visible, they tended to be involved with groups in which collective identities (such as women of colour or Asian women) took priority over singular identities, in large part due to the lack of a critical mass within activist communities at that time. Resonant with this is my own journey as a grass-roots women’s-rights activist—a journey that was nurtured by the vibrant alternative social movements of the late 1980s, particularly those that emanated out of the Black feminist communities of Toronto and the U.S. and that flourished in a variety of women’s cultural landscapes such as the Toronto Women’s Bookstore, Fireweed, Women’s Press, Kitchen Table Press, and Sweet Honey in the Rock. That said, a few of us female activists did attend Khush social events and participated in the launching of Desh.

Another important aspect of the historical context from which Desh emerged concerns the systemic exclusion experienced by communities of colour involved in the arts in the late 1980s. At this time, opportunities to participate in the larger mainstream cultural sector were minimal, and on those odd occasions when these communities did get their feet in the door, their art tended to be treated with indifference, and they themselves were more or less rendered invisible (Baeker, 2000; Gagnon, 2000; Philip, 1992; Smith, 2002; Tator, Henry, & Mattis, 1998). As for how young South Asians fared in the wider Canadian society—they faced a world

that was tolerant, if systemically inhospitable (Foster, 2005; Philip, 1992). If that tolerance was less guaranteed when South Asians stepped outside hegemonic societal norms—if they were gay, for instance, or worse still, gay activists—being caught between two cultures presented yet another challenge. As Leah Piepznsa-Samarasinha (2005) explains:

It's hard to remember that being brown in the 70's and 80's sucked. It meant feeling like you were from another planet—one where your food stank, your parents were “weird” and you were trying to balance traditional culture with the realities of growing up second-generation. Things were even worse if you were a girl who wanted to avoid marriage, a boy who wanted other boys, a time-expired Indian from Trinidad, a desi bent on revolution. In the late 80's Toronto onward, Desh Pardesh was the answer to that suckiness. (p. 11)

If, as Piepznsa-Samarasinha suggests, Desh was the answer, then it was the complex histories of self-determination and resistance on the part of North America's feminist, civil rights, lesbian, gay, and Aboriginal movements that created a climate in which Desh could flourish. Riding on those waves of activism and progressive left politics that had shaken Toronto out of its White, middle-class complacency in the 1970s and 1980s, Desh made the most of the resulting ideological openness—climbing through this window of opportunity to fight for the inclusion of marginal communities in Canadian cultural life.

From 1988 to 1995, Desh's popularity escalated. The obvious need that it filled for young South Asian gays and lesbians resulted in it growing from a one-day event with an audience of 200 and an operating budget of \$600 to an annual five-day conference/festival that, at its height, attracted audiences of over 5,000 and had a budget of \$150,000 (Ansari, 1995). In 1991, Desh became a non-profit organization, dedicated to creating a public and civic space in which to develop a progressive South Asian identity. By this time, the festival was holding its five main-space multimedia evening events at the Euclid theatre—a venue that was large enough to accommodate participants who came from across Canada, the U.S., the U.K., and India. These events brought together a mix of film, video, poetry and prose readings, dance, and musical performances, and they were often followed by question-and-answer sessions in which audience members interacted with the artists. At each festival, one evening out of the five would be dedicated solely to lesbian and gay programming. In addition to these main-space events, locations such as artist-run centres, cafés, and repertory cinemas played host to a wide range of activities, including discussion groups, exhibitions, workshops, discipline-specific networking sessions, receptions, and huge dance parties. During this period, Desh also went from being co-ordinated from church basements, volunteers' apartments, and borrowed community spaces to sharing an office space (along with five other cultural organizations) in a building that also housed the Toronto Arts Council. In 1992, the latter took a lead role in supporting Desh, through a program called Cultureworks.

As Desh grew in size, so too did the scope of its outreach. By 1993, Desh's ambitious mission was to break down boundaries between sexual orientations,

cultures, disciplines, genders, classes, religions, languages, the marginal, and the mainstream, as well as to give voice to the most silenced in South Asian communities. Speaking about this period of explosive and optimistic expansion, Raghu Krishnan (2003) has suggested that, “At its height in the early 1990s, Desh represented an outward-looking and subversive brand of identity politics rooted in local realities” (n.p.). As for how Desh saw itself during this period, its formal mandate was outlined in the 1995 Festival Program Book as follows:

A non-profit community-based organization of artists, cultural producers and activists of South Asian origin committed to facilitating new expressions and encouraging the development of diasporic South Asian arts, culture and politics in the west. Desh Pardesh focuses on the perspectives, issues, artistic and cultural expressions of women, working class people, people with disabilities, lesbians, bisexuals and gay men, seniors and other progressive independent artists, thinkers and activists. It strives to forge links and work with other communities with compatible progressive objectives. (Desh Pardesh Festival, 1995, p 34)

What emerges from Desh’s mandate is just how fundamental this sensitive interplay between creative expression, public participation, and the empowerment of the communities involved was to the Desh organizers. This deep commitment to and interest in links and relationships at numerous levels helps to explain how out of a fringe identity-based support group in Toronto, a multidisciplinary celebration that would spread across the country and eventually the globe was initially imagined and subsequently realized.

In spite of this far-reaching mandate, however, Desh remained a very practical project with social change at its core, and it is this mix of grass-roots groundedness and an ability to embrace the new—as community member and former Rutgers professor Natasha Singh points out in this textured description of Desh—that made it such a good place for artists and activists to politically “come of age” in the 1990s:

The throngs of people buzzing with anticipation, political squabbles, active debate on the floor between artists and community members, the excitement of seeing established and emerging artists, multiple genres, the numerous caucuses, the ever-present commitment to lesbian/gay roots/politics, the influx of new people year after year, the increase in representation from other countries both in programming and in audience . . . Desh politicized my generation; it was a place where many of us “came of political-age.” It was a battleground as much as it was a refuge. Identities and acts of identifying were contested, corroborated, formed, checked and challenged, broken down, rebirthed. . . . It was a training ground for future activists and artists. Many artists were birthed here, or received tremendous support at Desh. (Natasha Singh, English, Prufrock Advisor, New York Collegiate School, August 9th, 2005, Ottawa.)

At an organizational level, a review of core festival programming indicates that in addition to the artists, an average of 25 civil-society organizations (such as policy institutes, women’s shelters, AIDS research groups, and universities) were directly involved as participants and co-sponsors over the years. Each year there

were also 30-35 paying advertisers sponsoring the festival programs, ranging from local restaurants to larger institutions like Downtown Toyota, Metro Credit Union, YMCA, Oliphant + White, Seneca College, Caldwell Banker, Canadian Women's Studies, Rogers Media, and CFMT International. Due to the high quality of artistic programming, Desh attracted a lot of positive media attention. Cameron Bailey (1993), writing in *NOW* Magazine, put it this way:

In only its third year, Desh Pardesh has become an object lesson in politicized culture. Diasporic by necessity, progressive by design, this festival bypasses both multiculti minstrelsy and fossil nostalgia for something more rewarding. (n.p.)

This kind of "glowing" press coverage not only helped to bring in the crowds, but also contributed to Desh's integration into the broader community.

At the individual level, many of us supported Desh's evolution. Drawing on the richness of our hybrid cultural traditions and motivated by our political activism and desire to share our stories openly and widely, we worked hard to reach out to diverse South Asian communities and intergenerations, as well as to those in the wider community. At any given time, 40 or so core volunteers worked together to vision, shape, or reflect upon the five-day festival. During the festival itself, this number rose to as many as 200 volunteers, drawn from a database of 2,000 individuals. In terms of actual structure, Desh at this stage consisted of two full-time staff and eight board members; these were a mix of artists and community activists. When it came to planning each annual event, several disciplinary committees worked alongside board and staff members to collaboratively select and program the festival content. In addition, there was support from the gay community at large, from anti-racist groups, from progressive city councillors, from AIDS groups and people living with HIV, from youth and student groups, from college and university community radio stations, from labour unions and feminist organizations, and from those working in community centres, restaurants, local newspapers, social services, immigrant agencies, and crisis centres.

This collective process meant that a great breadth of perspectives emerged, and this in turn contributed to the vitality of the festival. If all of these individuals and groups were an integral part of Desh's formative years, it was the resulting blend of edgy subversive art and streetwise politics that enabled Desh to tackle head-on the criss-crossing pressures experienced by lesbian and gay and immigrant communities, particularly those who were part of the South Asian diaspora. That said, the polyphony of voices involved in shaping what Desh was and should be also resulted in Desh being pulled in many directions, and this, many argue, was a factor in Desh's eventual demise—a point I will pick up on in the conclusion of this paper. For the moment, though, I want to focus on how this wide range of voices and perspectives contributed to Desh's growing popularity and success as an arts festival in the 1990s. In the section that follows, I will demonstrate how the relationships that were established within and across a number of progressive sectors served to jettison Desh from the shadowy subversive margins into a place where it enjoyed almost mainstream status. I will also show how extensive Desh's

relational network was: a local (Toronto) phenomenon that became a diasporic phenomenon connecting South Asian lesbian and gay activists and artists, along with liberal-minded academics and organizations, with progressive movements everywhere. In all cases, art was used as a vehicle to express the distinct needs of marginal communities: from abused women to youth at risk, from the disabled to immigrant workers. Once it had been mobilized in this way, art—and by extension, *Desh Pardesh*—became a platform for reaching out interculturally and fostering collective activism and resistance.

Building alliances: Community activism and resistance through the arts

We have made a conscious effort with this year's program to bring forward the views of South Asians who originate from all over the Sub-Continent, the Caribbean and Africa. And I think what this speaks to is a real conscious movement towards unity for progressive social change in the world that we actually live in. It is moving away from romantic notions of nostalgia towards a forum within which we speak from our real memories, without any kind of shame or apology; within which we can begin to organize against racism, sexism, homophobia, and from which we can extend genuine solidarity to our other sisters and brothers, people of colour communities around us who also know in their bodies the experience of racism and, in North America in particular, the First Nations Peoples. (Khosla, 1991, p. 5)

If this quote, taken from Punam Khosla's opening address to the 1991 *Desh Pardesh* festival, captures a general sense of what its organizers had achieved three years into *Desh*'s existence, it remains that from the start, *Desh Pardesh* embraced an integrative multidimensional framework for community development through the arts. Such a framework is characterized by an inter- and multidisciplinary clustering of knowledges; the facilitation of the margin's ability to re-shape the centre; a celebration of ambiguity, multiple identities, and hybridity; the recognition of permeable boundaries and diasporic communities; an active embracing of differences; and the dismantling of hierarchies. Dialogue is not only highly encouraged in such a framework, but is seen as the means through which these other goals are achieved. An acceptance that such a dialogue will naturally lead to moments of confrontation means that contested stories and rivalries are not seen as obstacles to community-building, but rather are treated as part and parcel of the struggle undertaken by those who share a common civic desire for a better world (*Desh Pardesh Festival*, 1995, p. 34).

Though participants continuously broke down *Desh* in order to build it up anew, they emerged from these battles refreshed and prepared to re-invent *Desh* yet again. Zygmunt Bauman (2002) argues that there is no possibility for social change without self-scrutiny and reflection. The powerful energy of the arts provided *Desh* participants with the tools and the occasion to both self-scrutinize and reflect, and in so doing they found a means to forcefully fight back against discrimination and dominant assumptions. In line with this notion that community-building through the arts must shake up in order to affect social change, Ananya Chatterji, a dancer with the "Women in Motion" dance company and a professor

in the Department of Theatre Arts & Dance at the University of Minnesota, saw Desh principally as a forum “to radicalize the South Asian community out of” what she describes as its “comfortable immigrant politics” (quoted in Gombu, 1997, p. G8)—that is, out of a politics that represses any talk of women’s rights or lesbian and gay rights because of the tensions such talk will inevitably create in a community that holds on tight to so-called “traditional values.” In other words, Desh used film, the visual arts, spoken word, literature, new media, and video, as well as conference-style forums, panels, and workshops, to simultaneously inform and challenge the assumptions of local and diasporic communities.

Amidst the plethora of activist concerns that were important to Desh, however, what remained central—at least in those early years—was its commitment to lesbian and gay issues. It is from these queer roots, in fact, that Desh was able to take on the broader social climate. At every festival, over 50% of the programming was devoted to lesbian and gay artists or revolved around this particular community’s interests and concerns. Queer artists like Shyam Selvadurai, Pratibha Parma, Sunil Gupta, Shani Mootoo, Atif Siddiqui, Kalpesh Oza, Urvashi Vaid, and Steve Pereira all participated at Desh. Typical of the kind of fare on offer was a video produced by Friday Nite Productions entitled *Re-writing the Script: A Love Letter to Our Families* (2001), which originated in a 1998 festival workshop called “So I Came Out to My Mom at the Dixie Mall Food Court,” and which was designed to help South Asian families in their journey toward understanding and accepting their lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, and/or transgendered children, siblings, and other relatives. Sponsored by the organization Supporting Our Youth, *Re-writing the Script* was a good example of a cultural product that succeeded precisely because it was collectively created by, for, and about South Asian queers and their families. This formula of involving whole families in the creative process, especially within the context of a festival that had, by this time, gained a fair amount of legitimacy through its increasing popularity among mainstream audiences, was effective in breaking down traditional mindsets and creating an atmosphere of greater openness. That said, the gradual mainstreaming of the festival over time also meant that it became progressively less radical—a pattern that, if ironic, is also characteristic of what happens when marginalized groups start moving toward the centre.

This gradual “trendiness” of Desh can also be attributed to the way other social and political issues moved into the media spotlight, and hence to the forefront of popular and public imagination, as the 1990s progressed. This sense of a constantly shifting emphasis in Desh’s priorities, and hence in its self-definition, is reflected in this excerpt from an article written by Peter Goddard that appeared in *The Toronto Star* in 1994. Desh’s move into the mainstream is also in evidence here:

To some Desh is issue-driven—and the paramount issue is racism. To others, Desh is about individual identity, not any groups. But matters other than racial are heard in Desh too. And to movie marketers looking to reach a core audience, it’s the perfect opportunity to premiere more commercial properties. But

all this together doesn't quite define Desh, or at least, does not fully explain what I've gleaned from what I've seen from its film and videos and have heard from its organizers. It has an attitude other broad-ranging "events" don't often have—or rather, I should say it has an Attitude. (Goddard, 1994, pp. C1, C3)

Certainly, racism as an issue had been "paramount" two years earlier when, in the summer of 1992, the Yonge Street "riots"—precipitated by the Rodney King verdict in Los Angeles and a spate of police shootings of local Black men—took place in Toronto. Following the shooting death of Michael Wade Lawson by police in Mississauga—making him the eighth Black youth to be shot in the Toronto area in a space of four years—and a rise of violent acts directed at Tamil immigrants by neo-Nazis, Desh Pardesh formed an alliance with the Toronto Coalition Against Racism (TCAR). TCAR—a coalition of 50 community-based anti-racist and social-justice organizations—had been created after the near-fatal skin-head attack on Sivarajah Vinasithamby, a Sri Lankan Tamil refugee and restaurant worker, in 1993¹.

In addition to joining this Toronto-wide campaign, Desh had—by the early 1990s—become an invaluable resource and referral service for those communities directly affected by racism. Out of regular features of the festival program like the "Brick by Brick Community Forum" and conference panels with names such as "Breaking Down the Barricades," "Activism by Any Means Necessary," and "APEC: Globalizing our Responses," a number of "unity in adversity" coalitions across cultures were created, and this in turn led to greater solidarity among and across racialized communities. For example, from 1992 to 1998, Desh worked with the Native Canadian Centre, Native Women in the Arts, De-Be-Jeh-Mu-Jig, Stoney Point First Nations, and ANDPVA (Association for Native Development in the Performing and Visual Arts), and it supported protests by the Native community following the 1995 police shooting death of Dudley George. At the 1998 festival, a panel entitled "North America—Land of the Free, For Some But Not Me: The Long Term Effects of Immigration on First Nations Communities," organized from the perspective of indigenous peoples, helped to awaken participants to the particular plight of First Nations communities, and in so doing, to build bridges between Canada's original inhabitants and those who had arrived much later.

Those issues particular to immigrants trying to make a living in Canada also made it into Desh festival programming. At the 1997 festival, for instance, a play collectively written by a group of Sri Lankan Tamils living in Toronto, called *Dishwashing Machine Operators*, explored this immigrant working-class experience. The play was followed by a panel discussion on the drive by workers at Peerless—a Montréal garment factory that was, at that time, the largest producer of men's suits in North America and in which 80% of the workforce were immigrants—to create a union to counter poor working conditions and workplace harassment.

Domestic and state-supported violence against women was equally explored in Desh's artistic programming. For example, in the 1997 *Women in Motion* dance

company's performance, *Unable to Remember Roop Kanwar*, the traditional Indian practice of sati was painfully exposed and strongly condemned. Other groups created theatrical dramatizations to teach audiences about sexual-assault prevention or used video documentary and creative writing to recount personal stories of rape and other violent crimes against women.

Desh also responded to global issues—as evidenced by its participation in a demonstration against the nuclear tests being conducted by India and Pakistan that took place on Hiroshima Day at Nathan Phillips Square on August 9, 1998—as well as showed its ability to move with the times. For instance, in 1998, in association with the InterAccess Electronic Media Arts Centre and CyberStage Communications, Desh launched “Communities Virtual”—a new media initiative focused on virtual communities, their politics, and their potential for building intercultural alliances. A number of panels and presentations emerged from this initiative, and—in keeping with Desh's mandate to reach out wherever and whenever possible—these were published online to allow for wider access.

In terms of popular culture, dj Zahra's “Funk Asia”—a monthly South Asian music and dance event that celebrated diverse roots and cultures—was just one among many youth-oriented cultural events that were inspired by Desh Pardesh that attempted to make up for the paucity of places that young South Asians living in Canada could go to experience their own music in a nightclub atmosphere. Himani Bannerji—a professor of sociology at York University who came to Canada in 1969—insists that this particular demographic's participation in a music and dance event of this kind should not be seen as an “escape.” Rather, it constitutes “a head-on examination by our younger generation of where we came from and sometimes even of where we are going” (quoted in Gombu, 1997, p. G8). Though Bannerji suggests that Desh “may be considered by some to be a trendy downtown festival, its participants are still the kids from the malls of Malton, Rexdale, Mississauga and Scarborough.” These kids, she goes on to say, “come downtown to critically examine their roots with an ownership over citizenship which their parents never had, and [this ownership in turn] compels them to fight any attempt to make them second rate” (quoted in Gombu, 1997, p. G8).

In all of the initiatives discussed above, the multidimensional interplay between excellent arts, radical politics, and transgressive community debates was in evidence, helping Desh to grow within a decade into a significant local, national, and international presence that generated a sense of legitimacy and a feeling of pride in the South Asian community, as well as within a number of other progressive communities. In short, Desh was many things to many people, and the range of its involvements and commitments within and across racial and cultural frontiers was extensive. Most importantly, perhaps, Desh excited people—it made them feel a sense of optimism about the future. This feeling that Desh could be anything and do anything is well expressed by community member Sheila James:

Who knows, a theatre company can spring out of Desh, a political party can spring out of Desh, a revolution could spring out of Desh. That's what I'd like

to think, that it can lay the ground for more change to occur. (Theatre Officer, Canada Council for the Arts, Ottawa, personal communication, June 6th 2005)

In a period in which activists from all sectors were busily working to push onto the public agenda a number of pressing social and political inequities and to create widespread awareness around such issues as immigration laws, workers' rights, and HIV/AIDS, such optimism was indeed necessary. In the section that follows, I will discuss how cultural events such as Desh helped convene community solidarity to effectively protest against the exclusion of immigrant and minority communities from established local networks of civil society. I will also discuss how such events helped push these communities into mainstream spheres of power and influence so that they could fight back, as well as establish a sense of belonging in Canada.

Linking cultural participation to civic involvement

I would have to say that for me, the optics of progressive arts and social practices changed for me—as I'm sure it did for others inside and outside Desh—in that racialized people were front and centre of the scene. Till that moment, at least in most Canadian venues, the large movements of such work were largely driven by progressive white groups. All of a sudden, not only were people of colour leading the work, we were doing the programming, we were performing/presenting, we were doing the backstage and admin, we were doing everything. This was a significant moment for those of us who were used to being in the minority in such movements, and it was eye-opening as well as liberating. (Ashok Mathur, Desh community member, Canada Research Chair in Cultural and Artistic Inquiry at Thompson Rivers University (Kamloops, BC); author, and professor, Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design, personal communication, June 7th 2005, Ottawa)

The growth of Desh's audience from 200 to 5,000 is, in itself, a clear indicator that the participatory cultural activity as that was on offer at this intense annual celebration, not to mention at other Desh activities throughout the year, was a key draw for people who felt excluded from more mainstream events. Discussing the nuances inherent in minority cultural participation in general and in the performance of her afore-mentioned dance, *Unable to Remember Roop Kanwar*, in particular, Ananya Chatterji (2000) stresses how cultural products are always transformed by the spaces in which they are performed:

A performance [of my dance about violence against women in India] inside a women's shelter generates entirely different energies from a performance in a regular auditorium. It reads differently in contexts built upon mainstream ideologies of diversity. These ideologies may not be accompanied by an understanding of cultural differences. In this setting, some members of the audience are likely to generalize that act of violence and castigate all Indian culture as 'barbaric.' This was my experience in presenting the piece at the Museum of Natural History in New York City for instance. (n.p.)

As Chatterji goes on to explain, however, presenting her dance to a grassroots audience of social workers and activists at Desh Pardesh elicited quite a different response, and was yet another kind of experience:

Their response appeared to be predicated on a belief in the activist potential of art and a conviction about the global nature of violence against women. I perform with humility in such a space—energized by the courage to leave oppressive situations, by hope for a better life, and by the demand for dignity. (n.p.)

Chatterji's reflections on the activist potential of art, and on the civic strength that seemed to quite literally pour out of art in a context like Desh, sheds light on why the dominant cultural and political mainstream would seem to have no compunction to proactively seek out "others" who are culturally different from themselves when it comes to "producing" culture. However, I would argue that their the mainstream's nurturing of exclusive cultural practices and their almost "absolutizing" sense of themselves does not spring from complacency, but rather, from a sense of vested entitlement and control that is anxious about the transformative power of art in the hands of those who might challenge their authority at other levels beyond art. This is the kind of fear that transforms them into passive bystanders when it comes to recognizing the wider social contract that tries to meaningfully include the realities of Canada's multicultural communities in our nation's artistic and cultural life. Monika Kin Gagnon and Scott McFarlane (2002) suggest yet another reason behind this apparent passivity:

Being open to cultural difference entails the inherent risk of radical transformation of the language and structures by which we recognize ourselves. We risk losing the vision of ourselves in the mirror of our cultural organizations and ministries. But perhaps the risk to being open to the views and sites of "others" is the ethical origin of democracy. (p. 71)

If, as Gagnon and McFarlane suggest, the roots of democracy lie in the ability of those at the centre to open themselves to the ideas and issues of those on the margins, then it also follows that marginal groups—and this includes South Asian gay and lesbian artists—need to look honestly at how they, in turn, are dealing with differences within their own ranks. By engaging in such a process of critical self-evaluation and by practising an internal politics of tolerance and acceptance, they lessen the risk of being co-opted by those national and global forces that only embrace homogeneity. As Bhikhu Parekh (2000) argues, "a culture cannot appreciate the value of others unless it appreciates the plurality within itself" (p. 337). Other scholars (Bauman, 2002; Kymlicka, 1995; Taylor, 1994) see cultural identity as "an anchor" that builds self-esteem and gives individuals a sense of self-worth. It follows that these individuals' ability to self-realize will be largely dependent on the extent to which their culture is valued and respected by the wider society. Desh, of course, came of age in an era when the link between cultural identity and political and social recognition was being questioned—especially by resistance movements that were organized by people of colour. Susan Cole, previewing Desh's 1996 line-up in *NOW* Magazine, sheds light on this interrogative process and probes its limitations:

In an age of identity politics, the Desh Pardesh festival of South Asian culture, politics and activism in the diaspora—and such participants as actor Sharon Lewis—act as a thorn in the side of folks who like things simple. The fest

accomplishes this by asking hard questions. How can one label adequately embrace the many dimensions of personal politics? (1996, n.p.)

In other words, and as Cole suggests, it is tempting—because it is easier—to reduce identity to a single label. However, by acting as a “thorn in the side” of those who might see identity politics in such simple terms, through its active embracing of a transcultural approach to the arts and activism, Desh actually “walked the talk” with regard to the notion of intersecting identities, rather than merely paying “multiculti”-policy-style lip service to it. Out of this inclusive and web-like approach to politics, the need to be seen, heard, and taken notice of at the civic level grew among Desh participants. As they became more self-assured as artists and performers, so too did their sense of being equal when it came to representation and rights as Canadians. In addition, the ideas generated at the festival gave participants the wherewithal and means to challenge mainstream myths, stereotypes, and (mis)conceptions about “the other.”

I would argue that in contexts of marginalization, it is only through the synergistic solidarity of collectivity that this fight for cultural recognition and political clout can begin. Furthermore, I would venture that without a cultural infrastructure, and without equal access to the means of cultural production, minority communities are likely to remain permanently on the outside of the nation’s story/stories, as consolidated through a nation’s collective memory and shared sense of identity—even if this identity is, by necessity, multiple and fragmented. Such an outsider positioning, I maintain, only serves to further diminish these communities’ capacity to participate as actors in a wider social contract. A festival like Desh Pardesh, on the other hand, creates a whole new sense of what it means to “belong” or to be “at home.” In so doing, it not only gives people the impetus they require to demand that they be considered as actors in society at large, but also challenges the very notion of an “outsider” positioning. I conclude this paper with a short discussion of Desh’s demise, followed by a reflection on how, among its many lasting impacts, Desh shed important light on what it means to “diasporically belong.”

Concluding thoughts: The end of Desh Pardesh; Toward a sense of “home away from home” belonging

The demise of Desh Pardesh was also an end of an era in community-oriented activism within the South Asian Canadian community. For the decade of its existence, Desh Pardesh was a monument to the possibility of creating diasporic communities that worked through national, linguistic, and religious differences in order to create a queer, anti-racist, and activist South Asian collectivity. Yet as the final public letter from the executive board stated, Desh Pardesh closed with the hope that “Desh’s presence has and will continue to inspire the development of new forums and venues for artistic and political expression” (Mani, 2001, n.p.).

Throughout the nineties, Desh rode with the times: constantly adjusting and adapting to shifting political agendas, new social trends, and evolving community needs. In so doing, it—like its original constituencies—also changed. Some

attributed Desh's demise to its steady growth in popularity throughout the 1990s: in 1994, when it moved from the Euclid theatre to the far more institutionalized space of the YMCA, a new feeling began. Others put Desh's demise down to Mike Harris and his Conservative party, seeing in their massive funding cuts to the arts and other social programs in the late 1990s a financial deathblow that Desh could not survive. There were also issues of poor administrative management that took Desh into deficit. For my own part, I see Desh's original success coming from a unique combination of three things: its grass-roots origins at the margins; very strong resistance impulses based on community needs; and the early activists' radical political vision that in synergistic combination shaped and directed its forcefulness. Within a decade, all three of these provocative dynamics had resolved, shifted, or moved on. This was an important element in its transformation. So much so, in fact, that by the time Desh closed its doors in 2001, its once subversive edges had smoothed over to the degree that it fit comfortably within a mainstream popular mould.

Though all of the reasons listed above no doubt contributed to Desh's eventual closure—and could, in themselves, serve as a fascinating starting point for a whole other paper on this unique festival—I would argue that what matters here is not that Desh ended, but that it made a significant impact during the time that it existed, not least in terms of how those associated with Desh began to re-conceive the diasporic will to belong.

Writing in *The Toronto Star* under the headline *Not Your Father's Ethnic Fest*, Phinjo Gombu (1997) explains how Desh participants negotiated a sense of being simultaneously a part of two (or more) cultures and managed in the process to lay a claim for “full” Canadian citizenship:

At the heart of the festival, true believers say, is a genuine in-your-face critical attempt by a diverse group to bring alive the very different cultures handed down to first- and second-generation Canadians through the accident of birth but without a cultural context to keep it alive and growing. Brought together by mainstream society's inability to include them fully because of the colour of their skin or skewed perceptions of origins, this band of first- and second-generation Canadians have forged ahead to create their own version of culture-jamming. It is, they like to say, “about being full citizens here, warts and all.” (p. C1, C3)

But this process of “forging ahead” in order to be recognized as “full citizens here, warts and all” does not, in itself, blur the distinction between an “outside” and an “inside”; between feeling like you are a permanent guest in a foreign country and feeling like you are well and truly at “home away from home.” In terms of breaking down this distinction, Sarah Spencer (2004) poses the question as follows:

How do we create the sense of belonging and mutual obligation? Education has a role to play. However, immigrants will not feel part of “we” unless treated as “we”—included, economically and socially, and treated as equals. Strategies to ensure equality of opportunity must be seen as one prerequisite of an effective cohesion strategy. (n.p.)

Such a cohesion strategy, one imagines, would also ensure that in retaining aspects of her own culture, a recent immigrant—or indeed a first- or second-generation Canadian—could still fit into, and be fully accepted within, “the hegemonic culture.” This, in turn, would create a sense of dual belonging in which the very idea of an “outsider” positioning would cease to make sense.

Unfortunately, we have a fair distance to go before reaching this point. True, Canada does have a framework in which multiculturalism is intellectually recognized. However, the terms of this recognition are defined and constructed to support a hierarchy of cultures that are securely maintained and properly managed by a dominant few (MacKey, 2002; Stevens & Hamlin, 2003). Furthermore, Canada’s framework of multiculturalism tends to view cultures as a set of static entities that can be boxed into enclaves and, in this way, better controlled (Hall, 1993). As Parekh (2000) points out, “The politics of culture is integrally tied up with the politics of power because culture is itself institutionalized power and deeply imbricated with other systems of power” (p. 343).

This might well be the case, but the way forward is not to sit back and accept such a state of (power) affairs, but rather to actively challenge it. This is what Desh did over its 13-year existence: continually re-imagining the terms of belonging to include those who were part of Canada’s racialized immigrant minorities and doggedly creating the conditions that were conducive to the nurturing of such diasporic belonging. Franco-Lebanese writer Amin Maalouf (quoted in Bauman, 2001) takes belonging, in this context, that one step further, suggesting that the more immigrants feel that their original cultures are respected and that they are not discriminated against and pushed out because of their different identity, the more they will be willing to open up to other cultural offerings and exchanges. This point is reiterated by Bhikhu Parekh (2000):

Commitment or belonging is reciprocal in nature. Citizens cannot be committed to their political community unless it is also committed to them. Belonging is about full acceptance and feeling at home. (p. 342)

Though I would argue that a number of Canadian policymakers have yet to wake up and smell the coffee, those of us who have played an active role in Canada’s evolving (multi)cultural scene and community resistance movements are well aware that the kind of reciprocity of which Parekh speaks will be key to cross-cultural understanding and the thriving of Canada’s diverse communities as, over the next decade or so, this nation’s so-called “minorities” become its majorities.²

Notes

1. TCAR was instrumental in many community actions, including opposing a regulation banning Filipino youth from entering a local mall, working with the Somali community to oppose harassment by security guards and landlords at a housing complex, mobilizing the public through forums and actions in defence of immigrant and refugee rights, and supporting the Tamil Resource Centre as it struggled to rebuild its library and office after a firebombing in May 1995.
2. A study of the March 2005 Statistics Canada report projects that visible minorities could account for 23% of the population by 2017. As Harroon Siddiqui notes: “The study shows non-whites,

most of them non-Christians, doubling to 7.12 million. That's seven Saskatchewans. Ontario will have 4.1 million visible minorities. That's more than all of Atlantic Canada. Muslims will number 1.45 million across Canada, Hindus 584,000 and Sikhs 496,000," (March, 2005).

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