

Global India and Cultural Space in Auckland's Performance Scene

Introduction

This paper asserts that there has been a change in Indian performance content and production practices in the Indian cultural performance scene in Auckland. This change is perceptible in the types of advertised concert and festivals presented and the ways that they are produced, engage the virtual world and attract audiences. In this paper I track these changes and connect them to the changing identity of Indian cultural event producers. There have been notable shifts and flows from traditional understandings of Indian cultural performance and audience to a new cultural perception of "Indianness".

The findings I am presenting today are based on larger ethnographic research that forms part of my PhD findings in my thesis, *Performance Networks: Indian Cultural production in Aotearoa/New Zealand*, submitted to the Department of Music at the University of Otago. First I will discuss notions of Indianness and cultural identity, then compare and contrast production practices and I will conclude with a case study to describe recent changes in Auckland's performance scene.

Cultural identity creates community identity based on nationalism, regionalism, religion, and political affiliations. Age, gender and genre preferences also play an important role. These differing identity factors support different types of events and are promoted by a variety of types of producers. Identity is about "Who am I?" and community is about "Where do I fit in?"- These questions are particularly pertinent to new migrants finding their way in a new homeland.

The producers from within the Indian community (as opposed to government agencies like the Auckland Council who produce Diwali: Festival of Lights) fall into two general categories; cultural organisations, with their specific understanding of what it is to be "Indian", and commercial producers working alone or in teams who are motivated primarily for profit. The Indian community is split as to their attitudes to traditional values and the more modern manifestations of Indianess resulting in cultural purity vs hybridity in the process of supporting cultural events. The split is reflected in the diversity of performance preferences and event content in the local Indian event scene.

Cultural Identity

Musical Preferences

The traditional Indian performance producer and associated audience prefers Classical, Filmi from the long history of Indian cinema, and Non-Filmi (such as Ghazals) musical genres. For the “Global India” producers hip hop and rock are as much a part of Indian identity as sitar or bharatanatyam. They grew up in an India that was post liberalisation- when global popular culture entered India via radio, cassettes and satellite TV and since 1996, India MTV, a channel specialising in music, reality, and youth culture programming. Because of this orientation I refer to their cultural affiliation as “Global India”.

Since the changes in the New Zealand migration policies in 2003, creating the Skilled Migrant Category, the Indian community has grown as new opportunities for younger, skilled migrants opened in New Zealand and specifically in Auckland. The change in migration policy made it easier for applicants who are international students, or were offered skilled employment, had skilled work experience, tertiary qualifications, age and in some cases credit for a qualified partner. The new migrants have brought with them new ways of understanding Indian performance culture that challenge the more traditional concept of ‘Indianess’ practiced by the longer term residents. Many of their families and their friends’ families take a liberal approach to parties and relationships in strong contrast to this more conservative Indian community. The international students without parental guidance support these events as they are considered important elements to their social activities.

The majority of the migrants in previous migration waves were of very different socio-economic backgrounds. Emerging is the growing population of young, educated recent migrants from cities in India who are challenging the established cultural performance environment and the conventional notions of “Indian” cultural identity in Auckland. Many who listen to global musical styles such as hip-hop describe themselves as ‘desi’, a term that marks the inception of diasporic, racially marked, and generationally influenced consciousness adopted as an explicit declaration of Indian identity, often in contrast to the unobtrusive “fitting-in” attitudes of their elders. There has been a noticeable growing desi club and performance scene.

To gain an understanding of ways new migrants have affected the Auckland performance scene it is important to place migration in a historical and cultural perspective. The cultural majority in the Indian community are Gujurati Hindus who have the largest and longest established cultural organisations and temples. Cultural organisations produce opportunities to preserve the culture of their original homelands in

the cultural site of their new homes (DeSouza, 2011; Turino & Lea, 2004; Vertovec, 1997).

Cultural Organisations

This table identifies many of the Indian Associations found in Auckland divided by linguistic cultural identity. The statistics are not completely accurate as the source is taken from the 2006 Census. Thirteen different linguistic groups are identified spread through a population of over 94,000 people. In production practices, cultural organisations tend to rely on their members to produce events specifically targeted to their members. The concerts and festivals are imbedded within specific cultural affiliations that confirm specific cultural practices. Auckland hosts a wide variety of cultural organisations reflecting the diverse and rapidly growing Indian population. Most of the community organisations identify with specific regional and linguistic, identities and/or religious affiliations. Some organisations serve to unify a pan India Hindu identity such as the oldest organisation, Auckland Indian Association, established in 1938 or the Waitakere Indian Association. Many cultural organisations produce concerts and festivals reflect their specific linguistic or regional affiliations such as like the NZ Carnatic Society or the Auckland Marathi Association. At large public festivals the way Indian culture is displayed is a hotly debated topic. Cultural representation is based on notions of Indianness and how the producers views cultural identity.

“Indianness”

To clarify some of these differences I offer a short case study that compares production practices of three recent Holi celebrations. The festival producers all represent cultural organisations and have cultural identity roughly located in India, Fiji or in “Global India. These three different cultural identities are aligned with different performance preferences that attract different audiences.

Producing Cultural Festivals

Holi is a Hindu festival that coincides with the beginning of spring in India. It celebrates good harvests and the fertility of the land as well as being associated with the Hindu mythological tale of the immortal love of Lord Krishna and Radha. The coloured powder or gulaal used during the festivities is thrown and smeared on revellers, a popular village tradition.

Holi Festival: Festival of Colours

The top poster in the slide is promoting Holi Festival: Festival of Colours (Holi Mela) produced by the Waitakere Indian Association (WIA). WIA is a cultural organisation founded in 2000 with Hindu religious affiliations and with memberships reflecting the Indo-Fijian and Gujarati communities of West Auckland. They have funding support from the Human Rights Commission and sponsorship from the Indian businesses and media. Radio Tarana, a major sponsor, is owned and run by members of the Indo Fijian community and features Bollywood performers and broadcasts in Hindi.

This Holi celebration creates a unique cultural interface between the Indian population and other ethnicities residing in multicultural West Auckland. The event is designed to showcase the cultural diversity of the host community and reaches out to a culturally diverse audience reflecting the inclusive nature of the event content that includes Bollywood, Burundi drummers and Maori school performance groups. WIA has been producing Holi celebrations since 2002. The event attracted a wide variety of politicians from inside and outside of the local Indian community

Holi 2012 Festival of Colours

Holi Festival of Colours was produced for the first time in 2012. The event was co-produced by Bhartiya Samaj Charitable Trust (Bhartiya Samaj) and a newly launched radio station, Humm FM. Humm FM promotes itself as the first global Indian and Asian FM station in Auckland. Humm FM promotes itself as “a music brand that is young, exciting, upmarket, and modern and relates to the Global Asian. It is a melting pot of a new global youth culture and new sounds” (HUMM FM, 2012). Humm FM has speedily broken into the market, competing directly with Radio Tarana, the established Indian AM radio station that has monopolised the Indian market since 1996. Bhartiya Samaj is a not-for-profit organisation operating in New Zealand since 1995. It is the Indian community organisation with over 1,000 members with representation from those identifying as Hindu with having South Asian origin who are settled, and also those who have newly migrated to New Zealand. The festival was advertised as a family affair with live performances including bhangra, Bollywood and western music. The Holi Festival of Colours reflected the Bollywood radio station theme and attracted a wide variety of politicians from inside and outside of the local Indian community

Holi Hungama

This is in strong contrast to Holi Hungama, which was produced by NZ Indian Student Association that includes members across Indian religions and cultures, viewing India from a global, youth-oriented perspective. Holi Hungama was designed as a dance party recreating the raucous village tradition of this traditional springtime festival. The participants connected their event experience with friends, family and strangers through the virtual world by creating a YouTube video that went viral was shown on primetime news on an Indian TV station in Bangalore. The event revived little sponsorship and no politicians from inside or outside of the local Indian community appeared at the event. The fact the producers were able to receive support from Manukau Indian Association reflects their ability to create strong, cooperative production networks. It is this community approach that has had a rippling affect across Auckland's production scene and most obvious in the commercially produced concert sector. It is these producers that will be the focus of the rest of this presentation.

The Holi Hungama and the emergence of Humm FM is an indication of how the new "Global India" migration flow has brought a new perception of events that showcase India as part of a global, transnational performance scene. The new cultural spaces include a variety of performance genres ranging from DJ Mix dance parties to family oriented rock concerts. One common feature that unites these events is their use of the mainstream popularity of Bollywood repertoire. Nevertheless, the Bollywood repertoire is used in markedly different ways in attempts to attract different kinds of audiences at the same time presenting different popular genres.

Case Study: Unforgettable Music Festival

The Unforgettable Music Festival offers a case study in which to unpack the differences in production practices of some of the new emerging producers. The "Global" producers in this case study are young and educated and include DJs, marketers and IT experts. Some are international students and skilled migrants who arrived after 2003, while others came to Auckland with their parents between 15 and 20 years ago. In this case, the production networks were developed on the campuses of Auckland University of Technology and the University of Auckland, who share a precinct in the central business district where many international students reside.

The Unforgettable Music Festival featured overseas musicians and was linked and branded with an Australian tour. The main acts were transnational members of the Indian

diaspora based in Europe and the Middle East. The headline act was Imran Khan, a DJ from Holland touring with DJ Shadow from Dubai. Both are part of the transnational community of Panjabi cultural heritage. Local musicians from the DJ mix/hip hop community were also given a chance to perform.

2011 Unforgettable Music Festival Producer Network Map

Figure 1 illustrates the production complex set of networks established to produce this event. The co-producers, “RR” and “DC”, relate to being desis as do the target audience and performers at this event. This is indicated by the solid black lines in the production map. The co-producers share their previously established event production experience and expertise.

“RR” is an experienced “desi” producer who had recently arrived from Malaysia. “DC” is a Desi event production company that has been representing “Indian music and culture with our Kiwi twist” since 2000. The “DC” producers met as university students studying in Auckland where they also met “DJ” and “RG” who contribute to the event support.

“DC” represent are a team of two; with one arriving from Delhi in 1991 and the other arriving from Bihar in 1995 both with parents who arrived to take up professional employment. They grew up attending many Auckland Indian community cultural events as well as Indian classical and pop concerts. While at university they gained experience producing events through a student union Indian cultural club. Now they are in fulltime jobs, married and have full lives.

They self-ticketed the show ensuring control over distribution and avoiding ticket agent fees. Promotion was through their own networks in the real and virtual worlds as well as through the more traditional media. Local publicity was accessed through Radio Tarana and the Weekender who both heavily promoted the show. A website was created for the event but they discovered the time, effort and expense was not viable. For their target market Facebook was cheaper, easier and a more effective way to promote the event and sell tickets. A concert hotline telephone number was setup in order to sell tickets directly over the phone. They initially offered 700 tickets. Those tickets sold out three weeks before the show resulting in a viral marketing frenzy.

The producers doubled their expected ticket sales selling to maximum venue capacity. The audience were mainly under 25 in age, representing the diversity of Indian

cultural communities but also included an audience of East Asian and European cultural backgrounds.

According to the producers, The Unforgettable Music Festival was the most successful DJ concert in the history of New Zealand and Australia. Others who attended but not part of the production confirmed that they thought it was an amazing event. Imran Khan came with the expectation that “this was going to be a nowhere place”. He left saying it was “the best place ever”. He expected 200 people as the population was so small. In fact 1400 people attended. There many videos on YouTube that shows the whole performances and the audience.

Producing Commercial Events

Event production is a risky business and not all events are successful. This Table identifies the twenty-five commercially produced events during an 18 month period, January 2010- June 2012 that promoted Indian performers touring from overseas. All of these events received high profile advertising and publicity in the local Indian press. The success of the events, by comparing the size audiences they attracted compared to seats available is divided pretty evenly as a third made a profit, a third broke even and a third lost money. This is based on a 50% break even and indicative only. In most cases the audience pool for Indian events is limited by the size of the Indian communities.

Some of the more successful producers have established networks and have built solid reputations as producers in Auckland as well as overseas. In many cases, the least successful events were produced by recent migrants negotiating production practices from a traditional perspective. Many of the most successful events were produced by those with global outlooks. The red arrows indicate events that the global producers played important roles as producers, co-producers or part of the production teams. Rahat Fateh Ali Khan sold out a 5000+ venue.

Conclusion

Production practices are based on various cultural perspectives and on individual understandings of India. These are dependent on the places they have lived, visited or vicariously experienced through family and the virtual world. The successful producers feel that many of the new migrants are so desperate to make a profit, as well as promote themselves, that their events are bound to fail. They feel that when concerts are all about money it does not help the event business. The tickets become too expensive and no thought is goes into the sound and lighting or the event experience. Some of the least

successful of the events were produced by those without creative production experience working in the finance and/or insurance sectors.

When approaching production practices as an entrepreneur in a traditional; business model the producers are individually focussed and event seek support and audience from a specific regional and linguistic identity. This model in strong contrast to the team based cooperative production model practiced by the producers located a “Global” cultural community

The Unforgettable Music Festival demonstrated the production process practiced by this team of desi producers motivated by their desire to produce events that their friends they have grown up with; European as well as Indians will enjoy and support. They share hip hop culture and enjoy concerts, clubs and raves. They relate to being part of a global desi community.

These producers take risks and are able to see opportunities to present popular artists across genres. “Global India” producers have recently created successful events including Rahat Fateh Ali Khan, Asha Bhosle and Shankar-Ehsaan-Loy that have opened up the further worlds of possibilities including the first Indian event at Vector Arena. The recent the Bollywood show starring Shahrukh Khan is sold over 8,000 tickets and was produced by many of the same team that produced the Unforgettable Music Festival.

In these ways the “global” eyes, inside and outside of India and Auckland, add a new voice and flavours of India to the cultural melting pot of Auckland’s musical culture scene. Global India can be said to be alive and well in Auckland. The popular content is woven into memories for the producers, performers and audience alike.