



MANTEJ SINGH

# Indian home diner

Mantej Singh explores culture for development practice in India, through a culinary examination of two Indian/Australian projects, Suburban Masala and Tramjatra.



## Indian Home Diner and the ccd cuisine

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ommunity *naan* (traditional Indian bread), a combination of cultural curries sprinkled with collaboration spices ... that's become a popular takeaway meal to satisfy the developmental and social change appetite. During the last few years I have seen different styles of cooking, showcasing and serving this meal from developmental sector food joints in India to community cultural development (ccd) restaurants in Australia. The terminology menu at all these community-based outlets is varied: people's art, folk art, participatory arts, community arts, community-based arts, collaborative arts, ccd, arts therapy, art for social change, popular education, and the list goes on and on. There is no point in aiming for common names to describe what we practice because the menu has to be designed for the socio-cultural contexts and the people we are targeting. Nevertheless, as our ingredients are the same and objectives are quite similar, we should constantly endeavour to learn from each other's recipes. In this article, I am comparing and analysing some of these recipes from India and Australia.

In Australia, ccd is generally understood as being directed at 'expressing identity, concerns and aspirations', 'facilitation of interactions between and within cultures, [developing] tools for economic development, reclamation of public space, social change' ... through [linking collaborative processes with] the arts and communications media.<sup>1,2</sup>

This style of cooking is largely practiced within the arts and cultural sector 'kitchens' in Australia; whereas in India it is the developmental sector *Rasois* (Kitchens) that are largely engaged in achieving comparative aims using similar

Photos clockwise top left: Tramjatra tram canvas, Kolkata: ticket girls, Kolkata (photo: Roberto D'Andrea): festival tram, Kolkata: Roberto D'Andrea and Prabir Kumar, Melbourne: distributing tickets, Calcutta. Images courtesy Michael Douglas



## and the ccd cuisine

approaches. The reason is that Australia has had a robust arts and culture kitchen. The state has been funding institutional utensils and 'information exchange' cutlery, as well as the ingredients for the meals. The arts chefs as a result have not only been able to make sumptuous 'art-for-art's-sake' meals but accessible, engaging and meaningful ccd food for its communities.

On the other hand, the arts sector in India is predominantly concerned with arts for art's sake. There are three important reasons for this. Firstly, the State-supported arts sector has not been assigned the role to be relevant to its communities and audiences, apart from a few income-generation models of folk arts and crafts. As a result the sector is largely devoted to developing, showcasing and serving the skills of artists and artisans, and promoting the diverse flavours of Indian arts and crafts. The authentic, Indian meal is no doubt rich in aroma but there is lack of public ownership. Secondly, very few arts community members are interested in such social change and developmental objectives. Thirdly, there is very limited knowledge and expertise about ways in which artists and arts institutions can engage with communities.

In India the recipe of arts and communication media for development was firstly cooked by grass-roots social change and community education organisations. Developmental workers from these organisations worked with rural/illiterate/poor

communities to empower them about their rights, resources and responsibilities. The communication media and the arts and cultural outcomes that were developed drew upon local materials and knowledge. The agenda was impartation of life skills, literacy, numeracy and sustainable development education. Vandana Ram, Cultural Diversity Program Manager at CCDNSW suggests that 'such a concept of grass-roots development work is a top-down approach to raise the awareness of communities on issues using processes not necessarily generated by the community itself.'<sup>3</sup>

Jaya Iyer, a recipient of a UNESCO Bursary, Theatre for the Oppressed, Brazil, agrees that such an approach can be 'extremely disempowering [for the community] in the long run as it is an outsider telling something, sharing a problem and giving a solution.'<sup>4</sup> Nitin Paranjpe, Director of Abhivyakti Media for Development, Nashik, Western India, also raises similar concerns and suggests that developmental workers need to become facilitators and should start respecting the knowledge of community members themselves.<sup>5</sup> Just as community arts have transformed into ccd in Australia, grassroots awareness campaigns have also had participatory and collaborative spices

sprinkled on them. Development now implies community collaboration and there is no need to emphasize community participation as a separate criterion.

The methodology of Abhivyakti Media for Development, located in Nashik, Western India, provides a significant example. Abhivyakti was one of the two organisations invited to participate in an international meeting of ccd practitioners, convened by the Rockefeller Foundation in Bellagio, Italy, in May 2001. The organisation facilitates the learning of grass-roots groups and marginalised communities through diverse media forms and messages: video, posters, puppets and booklets. Like earlier grass-roots developmental campaigns, Abhivyakti draws upon elements of community culture (traditional arts and crafts, folklore, and local materials and knowledge) to develop these communication media. The rationale is that if the content is based upon community culture then the community can easily relate to both the process and the product. The organisation engages the community in developing and disseminating these developmental communications or alternative media, as it calls them. The outcomes are not, however, about 'art' or

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Suburban Masala theatre workshop. Photo courtesy Vandana Ram

'media work' but instead are communication media and cultural outcomes designed for facilitating grass-roots development. Such a practice can therefore be more appropriately described as 'community culture *for* development' as opposed to community cultural development. Nevertheless both community cultural development (ccd) and community culture for development (ccfd) are similar approaches.

A cultural 'curry' which has been popular in all kitchens, whether they be urban or rural, developmental or cultural, is performing arts, particularly the theatre. The main reason for this is that the recipe for making this 'curry' is easy to understand and allows for experimentation. The cooking process itself is very entertaining and seductive. Recently, I had a taste of this theatre 'curry' in the suburbs of Sydney. The project was aptly titled *Suburban Masala* and looked at what it meant to be an Indian and Australian at the same time. It was a first of its kind community collaborative project that attempted to engage with the Indian community in Australia. Young people who identified themselves with being Indian were invited to participate in the project over a four-month development phase. These were not only people of Indian origin but second generation Indians (born in Sydney) as well as the Indian Diaspora from Singapore, Fiji and Malaysia. After sharing numerous personal experiences and heated discussions, the participants decided that they wanted to talk about issues of identity and migration, similar cultural background, expectations from parents, education and status, and their relationship to India. The

outcome was a fantastic theatre performance, which held three sold-out shows in Marrickville, Sydney in December 2002. The audience remained a spectator to a large extent as the issue-based dialogue took place only 'for' and 'while' developing the outcome.

*Nukkad Nataks* (street plays) or theatre in the community as opposed to community-based theatre is a cultural 'curry' where according to Ashraf Patel, an Ashoka, Innovators for Change Fellow in India, 'the boundary between the artist and the community is blurred'.<sup>6</sup> Being personally associated with Pravah, a Delhi-based NGO in India, I have closely observed the way in which it uses theatre as a methodology. Pravah engages with young people aged 14-25 predominantly on issues of religious tolerance, cultural diversity, stereotyping, war, pollution and sustainable development. It brings theatre professionals and young people together to develop street plays and proscenium productions, apart from arts and cultural events in other mediums. The young people engage in a dialogue 'for' and 'while' developing these performances and as a result become sensitised towards the issue. When these plays are performed in the community, the performers engage in a dialogue on the related issues with the audience and invite them to participate. This is a participatory form of theatre, which has impromptu collaboration embedded in it. According to Jaya Iyer, CEO of Pravah, it is based on the Theatre for the Oppressed methodology. According to Jaya the approach 'breaks the dichotomy between the actor and the audience, artist and the spectator turning both into each other ...

[and] ... allows for multiple endings to one story.'<sup>7</sup> In the truest sense, community collaboration takes place in such a participatory form of theatre as the dialogue even continues after the product.

In contrast to Pravah's approach of engaging with broader issues *Suburban Masala* dealt with the issues that were important for a particular community that had a shared cultural background and history. In Australia, the State's funding criteria and policies of multiculturalism have encouraged the ccd chefs to bake ethnic, refugee and migrant community *naans*. All issues whether they be about human rights, justice, peace, local issues related to particular geographical areas and age groups are being seen through lenses of cultural background, country of origin, languages spoken, etc.

Consequently we have been witnessing many projects with cultural groupings in Australia for example Greek, Vietnamese, and Chinese. In fact the Indian community itself is so diverse, with so many sub-cultures within it, that ccd projects can be developed with each one of them. Such activities have more to do with preservation of culture and heritage of these communities as opposed to community development. There is a predefined agenda of cultural and historical maintenance and development operating here. In some situations such ccd projects can be a privilege to particular communities, as similar issues may exist in other communities as well. *Suburban Masala* was, however, a much-needed project for the growing and diverse Indian community in Western



IFA is the only cultural support mechanism in India, which has a dedicated funding in the arts sector similar to the Australia Council for the Arts.

Suburban Masala performance. Photo courtesy Vandana Ram

Sydney, according to Vandana Ram, the project co-ordinator. Vandana feels that 'there are already lots of cross-cultural and issue-based projects happening and it is important to engage ethno-specifically with communities as well.'<sup>8</sup>

In my opinion, *Suburban Masala* set a precedent within a community-based context as it questioned issues of cultural maintenance, ethnic stereotyping and generalisations associated with religions and regions. *india@oz.sangam*, which is the next stage of *Suburban Masala*, has been initiated by Vandana and Director, Cicily Ponnor in collaboration with Urban Theatre Projects and also involves artists from communities other than the Indian Diaspora. *india@oz.sangam* continues the exploration of diverse Indian identities in contemporary Australia. The meaning of the Sanskrit word '*sangam*' is the confluence or meeting point of two rivers – in this instance the coming together of two cultures. Perhaps *india@oz.sangam* or its next stage will include a proactive dialogue beyond the participants, with the broader community.

Thus, if ccd in this area is to grow as a challenging practice, in my opinion, it will need to develop the edges of cultural and social questioning apart from cultural and historical maintenance. The purpose of ccd should not only be to develop existing communities, but to develop communities of shared concern on issues of peace, religious acceptance, non-violence and sustainable development. It is difficult to decide the community we work with in such cases where, unlike ethnic, migrant refugee

and geographical communities, there are no clear boundaries. We have to develop strategies alternative to just cultural ones for selecting collaborators and stakeholders in a project; otherwise ccd will be a very narrow sector. According to Patel, 'the aim should be to bring [multiple] communities together across their many other identities and to develop a sense of identity around values of peace, justice, democracy and freedom with the idea of expanding the traditional definition of identity.'<sup>9</sup>

### Tramjatra

Everybody that I interviewed in relation to this article expressed the need for collaboration across sectors and exchange between socio-cultural contexts. The need, in the words of Iyer, 'is to expand the scope of these interactions beyond seminars or conferences to the possibility of actually working together and sharing skills.'<sup>10</sup> Such ideas have already been implemented, and the *Tramjatra* project that took place in Melbourne and Calcutta in 2001 is a perfect example of this. It was perhaps the first project of such a collaborative nature held in India.

'The term *tramjatra* brings together the English 'tram' with Bengali word '*jatra*', meaning '*journey*' – a hybrid joining of cultural sources.'<sup>11</sup> *Tramjatra* is too big a project to be fully described within this article so I am only looking at some aspects of this project. In the *Tramjatra* project artists from both cities developed collaborative artworks in each city in a way which interacted with

a) tramways communities: tramways

workers (conductors, drivers & depot staff), tramways users/activists/enthusiasts, tramways management and/or manufacturing companies; and b) issues: public transportation & urban infrastructure issues, sustainable urban transportation, transculturalism and public art. Artists and collaborators developed their own unique approaches in this process.'<sup>12</sup>

Outcomes ranged from pigment drawings on ground surfaces and tramtracks, participant photographs turned into collectible stickers, common-language story and image posters in consultation with *patuas* (scroll painters) and tramways users, to hanging decorations from Kolkata's tramways overhead wiring, art workshops with school children and exhibitions in numerous forms.<sup>13</sup> According to Michael Douglas, *Tramjatra* curator and artist, 'the project can be described as an arts project, arts activism project, public art project and tramways project.'<sup>14</sup> Such project recipe descriptors can fit very easily into the collaborative arts category of India Foundation for the Arts (IFA), Bangalore, Southern India. To my knowledge, IFA is the only cultural support mechanism in India, which has a dedicated funding in the arts sector similar to the Australia Council for the Arts. IFA is not however, state-funded. The collaborative arts category of IFA is about collaboration between artists, resulting in 'arts', 'crafts' and 'media work'. The collaborative arts meal at IFA is not prepared for fulfilling social change and development appetites, at least in an explicit manner. The collaborative arts policy at IFA however does not underline collaboration between profes-

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School students presenting at a rural camp. Photo courtesy: Pravah, New Delhi

sional artists and community members. In not over-emphasising professional artists in the policy, IFA appears open to collaboration between artists and community members. There are, however, no mechanisms in place to bring artists and communities together.

The most innovative concept that I found in *Tramjatra* is of the way in which tram tickets were used as a device to facilitate a dialogue on the issues in the project and the project itself. Over 20 000 *Tramjatra* tickets in Kolkata and about 15 000 *Tramjatra* tickets in Melbourne were distributed. We need to embark upon more these dialogical *jatras* (Journeys) within visual arts projects because innovative examples of visual arts based methodologies are limited. Patel's point is valid that 'in the case of visual arts it often needs something outside of the artist in terms of materials unlike music and theatre, which only need human energy and imagination and little else.'<sup>15</sup> The understanding of visual arts is particularly rudimentary in India and is limited to paintings, sculptures, drawings, photography, all of which are fine arts-oriented. In Australia, on the other hand, temporary installations, public art, celebration/performance art and exhibitions are more established in the ccd sector. There is a culture of public programs, as well. In recent times, social and oral history approaches, which are elements of community culture, have also vibrantly emerged within visual arts outcomes in the ccd sector. Most cultural institutions have community curatorial/ reference committees to identify issues important to the community. It is in these areas that the Indian ccd chefs stand to gain from Australian models. On the other hand, in Australia, dialogical approaches need to adapt from the developmental sector methodologies such as Theatre for the Oppressed. The reason is that, as of now, the dialogue that takes place around outcomes across all mediums is normally based on the way the artists/participants have explored the issues through their skills and ideas. Facilitated, issue-based discussions built around the outcomes, which draw upon the experiences of the audience, are very rare.

In conclusion ccd practice is neither exclusive to Australia nor to other countries where it has been theorised and perhaps patented; nor is ccd limited to the arts sector. Australian ccd (community cultural development) practice is rich in the theory, policy and the practice; however, when engaging in international activities the Australian arts sector needs to learn more about *community culture - for development*. The hybrid cuisine after embarking upon this international recipe exchange *Jatra* (journey) may be 'community culture-for dialogue' or 'cultural collaboration-for development'. Though the process will always remain ccd ■

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