

Artists, Rebels, Warriors:

Desh Pardesh's Legacy
and the Future of Radical South Asian Art

by Leah Lakshmi Piepznsa-Samarasinha

Now that Jay-Z is sampling Panjabi mc beats and Le Chateau's "body dots" (a.k.a. bindis) are so three years ago, it's hard to remember that being brown in the '70s and '80s 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 late '80s Toronto onward, Desh Pardesh was the answer to that suckiness. It was iconic, the Mecca for radical South Asian arts and activism. "There was nothing like it anywhere else," says Bushra Rehman, queer Pakistani poet and 2000 Desh alumnus. And there wasn't. Desh Pardesh got kicked off in 1989 with a one-day event, *Salaam Toronto*, produced by Khush, Toronto's pioneering lesbian and gay South Asian group. It went on to

become an annual global hookup for radical desi culture.

At least in theory and often in practice, Desh promoted a groundbreaking vision of the South Asian diaspora, one that went beyond North India and Pakistan, stretching to Jaffna, San Fernando and Nairobi. Rosina Kazi, frontwoman for the Toronto-based South Asian underground band Lal, remembers, "When I performed at Desh's Youth Stage in 1998, it was the first time I'd ever seen South Asians who didn't fit the mold. Looking out in the audience you had dark-skinned people, light-skinned people, Black folks, Asians. It changed my life." Desh was baratya nayam mixed up with hiphop, aunties in black-lace saris reading erotica, radical Muslim feminists and Sri Lankan community theatre about workers' rights and civil wars. Desh helped make a South Asian political scene in Toronto like none other — one about marching with other people of colour against police brutality and for First Nations solidarity, where queers were

in the centre as cultural workers and community leaders and you didn't have to check your sexuality at the door.

When *Desh* folded in 2000, a victim of funding cuts and debt, it was the end of an era. Along with *Desh* had gone much of the cultural milieu of '90s Toronto that surrounded it. I close my eyes and remember: At the *Crossroads* magazine, A Different Booklist (in its first incarnation as North America's only queer-of-colour bookstore), Press Gang and Sister Vision Press, Sistah's Cafe, Funkasia, regular queer people of colour nights at the Red Spot, an anarchist scene with arguably more people of colour than any other in North America, *Fireweed* and spoken word and DJ nights at 52 Inc. In 2004 most of them are dead, or significantly transformed. The ones that have hung on, like Toronto's SAVAC (South Asian Visual Arts Collective, still making groundbreaking, radical desi art), face a climate of diminished art funding, the funding that made it possible for our communities to

create them in the first place. Every cultural icon on the above list existed in a genuinely underground cultural milieu, before the '90s cultural monster ate up every underground movement and spat it back out to sell ads. Back then we had both the power and the disadvantages of being off the radar.

Although it's easy to look back at *Desh* as utopian, it was never without fierce internal debates. Putting together a festival covering everything South Asian in the West (in five days!) raised many difficult questions that often needed sorting out in order to proceed. *Desh* struggled with how to ensure that all parts of the diaspora — all the countries, dispersals, religions, classes, castes, genders and sexualities — could come to the table. How do you make a festival that appeals to second-generation youth who need to find a place where brown is cool and one that appeals to older folks whose issues are different? How do you bring together downtown artsies and working-class desis who live two hours away in Rexdale and Mississauga? How do you balance the need to create a queer-positive, radical South Asian safe without making it accessible only to a particular artsy and middle-class elite? *Desh* argued about these questions from its beginning to its end. What has changed is the idea that one space can serve all of us.

There was a particular career pathway for those of us who came of age as artists-activists in the '80s and '90s, inside a particular fragile but solid alternative cultural world of feminist small publishers, arts festivals and indie labels, low on cash and high on community involvement. It worked like this: do as many festivals as possible and do them well and you will have a career. All it took was enough important anthology publications and performances at demos and activist-run



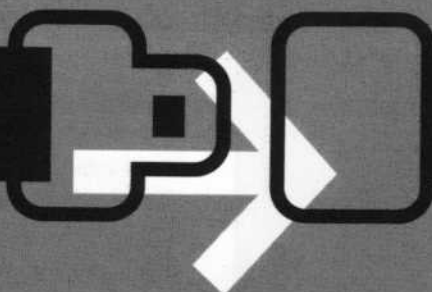
Invitation to the SAVAC Fundraiser, 2004, Courtesy: SAVAC, Design: Parth Uradhye

CREATIVE INSECURITY



Member Artists: Hamra Abbas, Heath Fashina, Kelly Jazvac, Afshin Matlabi, Sarina Khan Reddy, Amin Rehman, Fariba Samsami, Ho Tam, Alia Toor, Bill Wrigley

AN INVESTIGATIVE EXHIBITION BY SAVAC MEMBERS FOR MASALA! MEHNDI! MASTI!



For your safety, please read the following article by Tara Marshall: The notion of security (and its disconcerting opposite, insecurity) permeates numerous aspects of daily existence: from feeling safe from ridicule walking down the street, to feeling safe from starvation, war, and violence. This exhibition, *Creative Insecurity*, examines the politics of insecurity: how and why insecurity is cultivated through issues such as religion, terrorism, disease control, racial profiling, the oil industry, militarization and the media. The diverse contributions of the ten artists in this exhibition speak to how the global political economy depends on the nurturing of insecurity in the public imagination.

In *Bowling for Columbine*, (Michael Moore's 2000 documentary) the United States is described as a "culture of fear" created and fed by the media. Artists Heath Fashina, Sarina Khan Reddy and Ho Tam investigate this concept, examining how the American and Canadian media records history while fostering insecurity. In *Peter Mansbridge Sings the Blues*, anchorman Mansbridge is the mournful singer in Fashina's Blues composition. Fashina responds to Mansbridge's somber news-headlines with tight guitar riffs played with passion and seriousness while standing in a room adorned with Canadian beer posters and paraphernalia. This work humorously blurs the distinction between "slacker" popular media and "serious" news media, criticizing both for their role in creating a sound-bite culture that engenders consumerism, insecurity and fear – providing entertainment but not real information.

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Friday, August 6 to Sunday, August 8, 2004
At the Masala! Mehndi! Masti! Festival in the Marilyn Brewer Gallery,
Harbourfront Centre, Toronto, Canada.

Opening Reception: Friday, August 6, 2004 from 7pm – 11pm
Gallery Hours: Friday 7pm to 11pm, Saturday Noon to 11pm, Sunday Noon to 6pm

clubs. Being able to quit your day job was not an option most folks I knew considered, but the idea of becoming activist-famous — of being loved, needed and respected for doing work that served the people — was.

Many of us believed, for good reasons, that only at identity-specific festivals would anybody get what the fuck we were on about. "When I moved to New York and started doing spoken word at places like the Nuyorican, I won titles but I knew most of the time nobody had any idea of what I was talking about," remembers Marian Yalini Thambynayagam, queer Sri Lankan spoken-word artist and member of the all API women's performance troupe Mango Tribe. "Sometimes there'd be one guy in the audience who was also Lankan and would run up to me after I did pieces that talked about the civil war or other Lanka specific themes and be so grateful. But most people outside of the desi don't even know where Sri Lanka is." Thambynayagam started out performing at specifically South Asian spaces like Desi Q and at events attached to Youth Solidarity Summer, an annual activist camp for South Asian youth in New York. At the same time she also came up as a performer through pan-people of colour spaces like Austin's Drive By Players theatre troupe and just wrapped up directing *Descendents of Freedom*, a "futuristic queer hip-hop odyssey" written by Andre Lancaster. "What I find is that my alliances are not just about being desi, and even when translation is necessary there are some really powerful things about art that builds alliances between queer people of colour coming from different cultures."

Rosina Kazi has programmed the hip-hop/urban stage at Harbourfront's Masala! Masti! Mendhi! summer South Asian festival for the past four years. "It's

much more mainstream — it's Harbourfront — but in some ways that's a good thing. Harbourfront doesn't have an explicitly political mandate like Desh Pardesh, but we're reaching people from Mississauga who never came to Desh when

it existed." This year's programming featured plenty of food and a definite "celebrate our culture" vibe, but also included programming on the one-year anniversary of last summer's Project Thread raids on twenty-one Muslim men thought to be ter-

rorists, later cleared of all charges, and the vibrant community organizing of Toronto's "Project Threadbare" against it. Also featured was the Sri Lankan-front-womaned indie rock of controller.controller, up and coming brown hiphop acts from Mississauga and Rexdale and the "Creative Insecurity" visual-art exhibit that delved into notions of security and "terrorism."

DJ Zahra Dhanani had similar thoughts to Kazi when she took her monthly queer-positive Funkasia party from the Red Spot, a small queer club on Church Street in Toronto that often held queer people-of-colour nights in the late '90s, to Fly, a three-storey nightclub in the heart of gay clubland. The move brought Funkasia and Dhanani national media exposure and transformed the night from a locally beloved event to one with a much more mixed audience. "Desh and Funkasia both came out of a particular time and place. We thought there was safety in staying underground and sometimes there was. But there came a point we realized that no space is automatically safe, because there are so many different experiences, even among South Asian queers. I wanted to take Funkasia beyond those who were already converted. I moved from locating myself in identity politics to a politics of inclusion. Safety is not necessarily guaranteed through sameness. There has always got to be a glue, a sameness that brings people together, but that sameness lies in values, vision, joy, celebration — not necessarily skin color."

You could argue that Desh's passing was like a pomegranate exploding, a seed bomb from which many underground South Asian radical culture groups continue to flourish. Groups like ASATA (Alliance of South Asians Taking Action) in San Francisco, Third's pan-city radical South Asian video collective Diaspora/Flow in

★★★
Sisters in the Smoke
 July 17 - 19, 2003 at 8:30pm and July 19, 2003 at 3:00pm
HERE Arts center
 145 6th Ave. (between Spring & Broom)
mango tribe

Mango Tribe is an APLA women's performance collective that promotes multi-arts collaboration and encourages artistic activism through theater & education. Mango Tribe is a part of the Asian American Artists Collective.

A fusion of poetry, hip-hop, theater, dance, music, and more, made into a series of vignettes that are rooted on the issue of violence in the Asian Pacific Islander American (APIA) community.

www.mangotribe.com

MANGO TRIBE

This project was partially supported by a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation Multi-Arts Production Fund

Invitation to a Mango Tribe performance. Courtesy: Leah Lakshmi Piepznsa-Samarasinha
 Design: Mango Tribe Productions

Minneapolis and DRUM (Desis Rising Up and Moving) in New York create many local visions of radical South Asian arts and culture. Magazines like SAMAR (South Asian Magazine of Action and Reflection) document the movement and the global network of queer and feminist club nights like Toronto's Metro Desi and Besharam (run by former Funkasia DJ Amita) and New York's Basement Bhangra and Mutiny show no signs of dying out. In many cases the scene has exploded post-Desh, but with strategies that are unique to a post 9/11 world.

SAWCC (South Asian Women's Creative Collective), Minneapolis's DiasporaFlow and Mango Mic's Bay Area API poetry slam are current examples of how small collectives can produce shows without core funding. Other new pan-Asian creative collectives are springing up throughout the States, often connected to the Chicago Collective founded by the pan-Asian spoken-word group I Was Born with Two Tongues. With harder times and artwork that is often done (and needs to be done) at immigrant rights or antiwar rallies, there's a flourishing of Asian arts collectives that are run with little (or very creative) funding. Examples include the Asian American Arts Collective in Boston and the upcoming Kundiman pan-Asian writing conference that seeks to create a space for Asians similar to the annual African-American Cave Canem writers retreat. There also seems to be a growth in Asian/South Asian arts collectives and collaborations, including Toronto's newly formed Asian Artists Collective, founded by spoken-word artist Gein Wong, Jugular (a well known Toronto-based South Asian beatboxer) and Rosina Kazi this past spring.

The effect that post-9/11 crackdowns have had on artists' freedom of movement can't be ignored. Beyond being a basic human

right, crossing borders is necessary to build careers that reach globally. In March of 2004, Lal was enroute to a gig at Minneapolis's DiasporaFlow, a youth-of-colour arts collective run on a shoestring by Sri Lankan visual artist Chamindika Wanduragala and poet/dancer Pradeepa Jeevamanohan. DiasporaFlow is one of the most exciting South Asian arts organizations, using hip-hop and spoken-word culture to reach youth in public schools and building ciphers of radical people of colour and South Asian artists in Minneapolis — obvious folks for Lal to build with. Male members of the band were questioned extensively at US immigration, but eventually made it onto the plane and thought everything was fine. However, moments before takeoff, flight marshals entered the plane, announcing that the men were being removed "in the interest of national security." DiasporaFlow lost more than a thousand dollars it couldn't afford in unrefundable tickets and, needless to say, the gig didn't happen. There are many more stories like theirs. Before 9/11, for what now looks like only a brief moment, artists jetted across countries with relative ease. If you could afford the ticket or there was transportation money available, you could perform at festivals in London, LA and New York, build your career, and most importantly, reach a community that spreads globally.

With Bush 2's recent re-coronation, cross-border travel restrictions show no signs of improving anytime soon, forcing us to rethink how we do our work. Do we stop crossing borders? Do festivals and venues take this risk of fronting travel costs for folks who have been stopped before? There are no easy answers, but it seems likely that while no-fly lists may have a dampening effect, life still goes on and few artists are willing to stop flying altogether.

The time of the big cultural festival that tries to do it all may have passed, but that doesn't mean the end of a radically brown vision. Our community organizations are always fragile, but sometimes we take them for granted. Sometimes we forget how much sweat and blood and late-night meetings after work went into their creation. What never goes away is the need to create our own space and make the cultural revolutions we need. "People always make what they need," says Dhanani. "When clubs become too expensive to rent, house parties start happening. Where there is a gap, we find a way to fill it. That's always been true. That's how Desh started."

Doing so means creative strategies; dancing between the challenges of corporate funding and basement dwelling, being reviled as terrorists and beloved as the next hip thing. But when has it ever been any different?

I owe a lot to Bakirathi Mani's essay "Destination Culture: A Critical Look at South Asian Arts and Activism Festivals in North America," which appeared in samar magazine's Fall/Winter 2001 issue.

Resources

Lal: <http://www.ptmusic.com>
 SAWC (South Asian Visual Artist Collective): <http://www.savac.net>
 Funkasia: <http://www.djazhra.com>
 Masala! Mehndi! Masti!: <http://www.harbourfrontcentre.com/summerfestivals/masala.php>
 DRUM (Desis Rising Up and Moving): www.drumnation.com
 Thirdi: <http://www.thirdi.org>
 Artwallah: <http://www.artwallah.org>
 SAMAR magazine: <http://www.samarmagaizne.org>
 Diaspora Flow: <http://www.diasporaflow.org>
 Kundiman: <http://www.kundiman.org>
 Mango Tribe: <http://www.mangotribe.com>
 Asian American Writer's Workshop: <http://www.aaww.org>

Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha is a queer Sri Lankan writer and spoken word artist. Her work has been published in Colonize This!, Without a Net, Brazen Femmes, Bitch, Colorlines, Mizna and Lodestar Quarterly.